PILLAGE

ROBERT CASANOVAS

HISTORICAL NOVEL

SYNOPSIS

This historical novel, based on real events, recounts the Franco-British expedition of 1860 to China and the pillage of Beijing's Summer Palace. After military victories at Dagu and Palikao, the allied armies discovered the Summer Palace (Yuanmingyuan), an imperial residence holding millennia-old treasures. Faced with such riches, discipline collapsed: for three days, soldiers systematically looted porcelains, jades, and bronzes. The British then set fire to the palace. Shipped to France, the stolen objects were offered to Empress Eugénie, who created the Chinese museum at Fontainebleau. Victor Hugo publicly denounced this pillage, calling France and England "bandits." Chinese diplomat Pin Chun demanded the return of the treasures, prophesying that China would never forget this humiliation. The novel explores the tormented consciences of characters confronting the hypocritical transformation of pillage into "cultural preservation.

THE AUTHOR

Robert Casanovas, who has already published "The Stolen Room" and "The Will Was a Forgery," is an honorary professor agrégé and member of the Société des Gens de Lettres. A jurist passionate about the history of art collections, he has devoted many years to studying the appropriation of artworks by states. President of the NGO International Restitutions, he has published numerous academic works on the subject.

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WARNING

This novel is based on extensive historical research, including the rare Chinese testimonies that have survived, British and French military reports, contemporary journalist accounts, and European museum archives. Although some characters are fictional as individuals, their experiences and actions are based on actual survivor accounts. Details about objects, buildings, and events are as historically accurate as available sources permit. The Summer Palace was truly one of the world's architectural wonders, and its destruction represents one of the greatest cultural losses of the 19th century.

The original version, written in French, has been translated into several foreign languages. Translated versions may contain linguistic errors, misunderstandings, or approximations.

English Version

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PROLOGUE

Paris, November 4, 1859

The cobblestones of Rue Saint-Dominique glistened under a fine rain that transformed Paris into a tableau of greyness. General Charles Guillaume Cousin de Montauban stood before the window, hands behind his back, watching the passersby hurrying beneath their umbrellas.

Behind him, Marshal Randon, Minister of War, leafed through documents with a mechanical gesture. The silence stretched between them, punctuated by the creaking of the floorboards and the occasional rustling of a page. Randon raised his head, his bushy eyebrows furrowed.

"Montauban," he said in a grave voice, "the Emperor is entrusting you with a mission that far exceeds the scope of an ordinary military expedition."

The general pivoted toward him. His chiseled face, marked by campaigns in Africa, remained impassive. His blue eyes, of a disturbing clarity, settled on the minister.

"I am ready to serve the Empire wherever it may be, Monsieur le Maréchal. China frightens me no more than the Algerian deserts."

Randon sketched a smile. He rose from his armchair—his corpulence made each movement laborious—and approached a vast map displayed on an adjacent table. It showed the Chinese Empire in all its extent, an immense territory marked with strange characters and approximate tracings.

"It's not just about courage, Montauban. The English failed last year to force the mouth of the Pei-Ho. Their ships were repulsed, their dead numbered in the dozens. The face they lost gnaws at them like an infected wound. Lord Elgin burns to avenge himself."

The general joined the map in turn, examining it with the attention of a hunter studying his terrain. His finger traced an area from the coast toward the interior.

"They made the mistake of attacking head-on. If I've understood the reports correctly, the Chinese had time to fortify the mouth. We'll need to go around, strike where they don't expect us."

"That's what His Majesty expects of you," Randon replied, placing a hand on the general's shoulder. The familiarity of the gesture contrasted with his usual reserve. "Ten thousand soldiers will be allocated to you. Two brigades under the command of Generals Jamin and Collineau. Seasoned men who will follow you to hell if necessary."

Montauban nodded. He turned away from the map and took a few steps in the room. His mind calculated distances, delays, the innumerable variables of a campaign at the other end of the world.

"And the English? What will be the extent of their commitment?"

"General Grant will have twelve thousand men. More numerous, certainly, but less disciplined than ours. You'll be dealing with colonial troops, Indians, heterogeneous contingents. Coordination will be a challenge in itself."

The general emitted a low grunt. He knew the reputation of British armies, their efficiency tempered by a tendency toward pillage that officers struggled to contain. The idea of a joint campaign worried him, but he let nothing show.

"When must I leave?"

"As soon as possible. The ships are ready at Brest and Toulon. You should be in Hong Kong by February."

Randon returned to his desk and took out an envelope bearing the imperial seal.

"Here are your official instructions. The Emperor includes a personal letter. Don't disappoint him."

The general took the envelope with an almost religious respect. The weight of the paper, the gleam of the red wax, everything embodied the will of the Empire. He slipped the envelope into his tunic, against his heart.

"Your confidence will be justified, Monsieur le Maréchal."

Randon escorted him to the door. Before leaving, Montauban turned one last time.

"May I permit myself a question, Monsieur le Maréchal?"

"I'm listening."

"What do we really know about this Chinese emperor? About this palace everyone talks about so much?"

Randon's face hardened. He hesitated, as if weighing the opportunity to share a confidence.

"The Jesuits who stayed there speak of an architectural marvel. Immense gardens, dozens of palaces. Emperor Hien-Fung resides there more willingly than in the Forbidden City. They say this place contains treasures accumulated over centuries. But these are only rumors, Montauban. Your mission is military. To force the ratification of the Tientsin treaty. The rest... the rest will depend on circumstances."

Montauban went out into the dimly lit corridor. His steps resonated on the marble with a martial cadence. One thought gnawed at him: in distant wars, circumstances had an unfortunate tendency to escape all control.

CHAPTER 1 - THE ROAD TO INFAMY

The Farewells of Paris

Paris, November 10, 1859

A week after his interview with Randon, in the salon of the Montauban family mansion on Rue de Varenne, a very different atmosphere reigned. Heavy garnet velvet curtains muffled the sounds from the street. Bronze candelabras cast a golden light on the assembled faces. Louise de Montauban, the general's wife, presided over this modest circle with an elegance that poorly masked her anxiety.

Seated near the fireplace, she held between her fingers a Sèvres porcelain cup she had not touched. Her two daughters, Mathilde and Clémence, flanked her in an unusual muteness. Facing them, Captain Armand Delmas, a young artillery officer freshly promoted to the general's staff, endeavored to reassure these ladies with an optimism he felt only halfway.

"Madame," he began, choosing his words carefully, "the general your husband is a man of incomparable experience. His campaigns in Algeria have forged him a reputation that the entire army recognizes."

Louise raised her gaze. Her pupils, ordinarily gentle and benevolent, bore a disturbing intensity.

"Captain, I married Charles twenty-three years ago. I've learned to read in his silences what he never says. This expedition worries him more than he wants to admit. China is not Algeria."

The captain leaned forward, joining his hands between his knees. At twenty-eight, he retained that youthful fervor that drives men to believe in military glory. Yet, facing this woman who had lived through so many departures and waits, his assurance wavered.

"For this very reason, the Emperor chose your husband, Madame. Because he knows how to adapt, to anticipate. We won't be alone. The English..."

"The English," cut in Mathilde, the elder daughter, with a touch of acidity in her voice. At twenty-one, she possessed the composure of well-educated young women who read newspapers and follow world affairs. "The same English who were repulsed last year? Father says their Admiral Hope lost four ships and hundreds of men."

The officer searched for his words, but it was Clémence, the younger sister, who broke the awkwardness with the disarming frankness of her seventeen years.

"I've heard that the Emperor of China lives in a marvelous palace, with gardens that extend endlessly. Is it true, Captain?"

"Indeed, extraordinary things are told, Mademoiselle. Missionaries have seen this palace called Yuen-Ming-Yuen, the Garden of Perfect Brightness. It appears to be a city within the city, with artificial lakes, marble bridges, hundreds of pavilions. The Emperor had copies of famous landscapes from all over the Empire built there."

"And the treasures?" asked Mathilde with less innocent curiosity. "They speak of jade, ancient porcelains, precious objects accumulated over dynasties."

Louise set her cup on a pedestal table with a sharp sound that brought attention back to her.

"Mathilde, Clémence, these questions are inappropriate. Your father is leaving on a military mission, not to plunder palaces like a common adventurer."

The reproach, though formulated gently, made the two young women blush. Delmas, embarrassed, tried to salvage the situation.

"Of course, Madame. The general is very clear on this. Our objective is to force the Chinese to respect the treaty signed at Tientsin. The opening of new ports to trade, freedom of movement for our missionaries. Nothing more."

"Nothing more," Louise repeated, fixing him. "And you really believe that, Captain?"

The question caught him off guard. In those scrutinizing eyes, he read a wisdom born of years spent waiting, hoping, dreading news from the front. She had seen men leave with flowers on their rifles and return broken, or not return at all. She knew that conflicts always escape plans, that the unexpected dictates its law.

"I believe, Madame, that the general will do his duty with the honor that characterizes him. What will happen there... no one can really predict. But I give you my word that I will watch over him to the best of my ability."

Louise sketched a sad smile.

"You are a sincere man, Captain. I hope this sincerity will survive what you see in China."

That same evening, in the staff offices on Rue Saint-Dominique, activity was in full swing despite the late hour. General Jamin, commanding the first brigade, and General Collineau, who led the second, were bent over endless lists with Montauban. The smell of tobacco and cold coffee permeated the confined atmosphere.

Jamin was defining limits on a map with his pencil.

"The troops are at full strength. Five thousand men per brigade. Infantry, artillery, engineers. I've made sure we have mountain guns, they'll be indispensable if we have to move away from waterways."

Collineau, more massive and jovial, intervened.

"What worries me isn't the cannons. It's the bellies. Ten thousand men to feed for months in a hostile country. The English will have their own supply lines, we'll have ours. If we find ourselves separated..."

"We won't separate," Montauban cut in with an authority that admitted no reply. "I've warned Grant. Our troops will advance

together. The English paid dearly for their isolation last year. They won't make that mistake again."

Jamin put down his pencil and stretched.

"And if the Chinese refuse to negotiate? If we have to march on Beijing?"

The silence that followed carried all the implications of this question. Montauban went to the window and contemplated the Parisian night. A few gas lamps flickered in the darkness. He thought of his wife, his daughters, this comfortable life he was preparing to leave for months.

"Then we'll march on Beijing. And we'll do what must be done."

Collineau exchanged a glance with Jamin. Both knew this determination in Montauban. Once he had made a decision, nothing could shake him. This quality made him a formidable commander. It also worried those who knew him well.

"The men are ready," Jamin affirmed. "They'll embark at Brest in two months."

"Good."

Montauban faced his generals.

"Spread the word: absolute discipline. No pillaging, no excesses. We are the army of the French Empire, not a band of mercenaries. If we must confront the Chinese, we'll do so while respecting the laws of war."

Collineau approved.

"And the English? Their colonial troops are not renowned for their restraint."

"The English do what they want with their men. We will maintain our discipline. However, I have no illusions. Once an army has tasted blood and booty, containing it becomes a challenge. We'll have to be vigilant."

He returned to his desk and took out a blank sheet. In the flickering light of the oil lamp, he began drafting his preliminary

orders. His pen scratched the paper with regularity, tracing these words that would seal the fate of thousands of men.

Jamin and Collineau watched him work. They were witnessing a historic moment. In a few months, they would be at the other end of the world, facing a millennial empire that refused to bow before the West. What would happen there would doubtless escape the best-laid plans, the strictest orders.

Wars have their own logic. And this logic, Collineau thought while observing the shadows dancing on the walls, never respects noble intentions.

The next morning, in a room at the Tuileries Palace, Empress Eugénie was receiving Baron Gros, the plenipotentiary designated to accompany the expedition. The rococo gilding, silk hangings, and master paintings created a setting of an opulence that contrasted violently with the austerity of military offices.

Eugénie, in a pale blue satin dress that highlighted her porcelain complexion, stood near a window overlooking the gardens. At thirty-three, she embodied imperial elegance with a natural grace that fascinated the court. But beneath this delicate appearance lay a sharp political intelligence and an iron will.

"Baron Gros, the Emperor asked me to sponsor this expedition. I accepted, of course. But I would like to understand what is expected of this enterprise."

Baron Gros, a seasoned diplomat with an emaciated face and precious manners, bowed with respect.

"Your Majesty, the objective is above all diplomatic. To force the Chinese emperor to ratify the Tientsin treaty, guarantee the security of our Catholic missions, open new ports to French trade."

"And the English? What are their true objectives?"

A gleam of amusement passed through the diplomat's gaze. The Empress had touched the heart of the problem with her usual perspicacity.

"Lord Elgin is a... complex man, Your Majesty. Son of the famous Lord Elgin who brought the Parthenon marbles to London, he bears a prestigious name and an excessive ambition. Last year's failure humiliated him. He will seek to redeem himself through a brilliant victory."

Eugénie took her seat gracefully on a sofa and motioned to Gros to sit facing her.

"Which means?"

"Which means, Your Majesty, that we'll have to navigate skillfully. The English have their own interests, which don't always coincide with ours. The opium trade, for example..."

"Opium," Eugénie repeated with barely veiled disgust. "That infamous trade that the English defend with such ardor."

"Alas, Your Majesty. One of the reasons for this war lies in that. The Chinese want to prohibit its trade, the English want to legalize it. We French are caught between two fires."

The Empress left her seat and took a few steps in the salon, her petticoats rustling on the waxed floor. She stopped before a marquetry globe and spun the sphere until she found China.

"I've heard about this palace. The Yuen-Ming-Yuen. They say it contains wonders."

Gros stiffened. The conversation was taking an unexpected turn.

"Indeed, Your Majesty. The Jesuit missionaries who worked for the emperor report extraordinary descriptions."

"And if these wonders fell into our hands? If the fortunes of war led us to this palace?"

The baron chose his words carefully. Every word spoken before the Empress carried weight.

"The laws of war are clear, Your Majesty. What belongs to the vanquished enemy... becomes the property of the victor. But there is a difference between seizing goods within the framework of military operations and allowing savage pillage."

"Of course."

Eugénie returned to her seat, fixing the diplomat with a thoughtful eye.

"General de Montauban is a man of honor. I count on him to maintain the dignity of our army."

"He will do so, Your Majesty. I am convinced of it."

Eugénie gazed through the window at the carefully maintained gardens, these French-style flowerbeds that embodied order and mastery of nature. She thought of those Chinese gardens everyone spoke of, so different, where nature was celebrated in its apparent freedom.

"Baron Gros, I have endowed the expedition with medical supplies, equipment to care for our wounded. My duty as sponsor requires it. But I also expect something in return."

"Your Majesty?"

"If art objects should fall into our hands, I would like a selection of the finest pieces brought back to me. To constitute a collection. A testimony of this era, of this encounter between two civilizations."

Gros bowed, thus masking the trouble that invaded him. The Empress's words amounted to giving imperial blessing to the seizure of Chinese treasures. He understood that this expedition far exceeded a simple military conflict. It carried within it moral questions that would haunt him for years.

"It shall be done according to your will, Your Majesty."

When he left the palace an hour later, Gros walked at a measured pace, lost in his thoughts. The Parisian sky was a heavy gray that announced snow. In a few weeks, he would be on a ship en route to the other end of the world. He carried with him diplomatic instructions, official orders, and this implicit desire of the Empress.

He wondered how all this would unfold, how noble intentions would transform in the face of ground reality. History had taught him that distant wars always escape the control of those who order them from comfortable palaces.

That same evening, as the street lamps were lighting in the streets of Paris, General de Montauban was returning home. Louise waited for him in the private salon, a piece of embroidery on her knees remaining untouched. When he entered, she raised her eyes and smiled at him with resigned sadness.

"Is it decided? You're leaving?"

"In fifteen days."

He sat beside her and took her hand in his. For a moment, they remained thus without speaking, united in a silence that said more than all words. Outside, Paris continued its carefree life, unaware that events were preparing that would mark history and forever tarnish the honor of those who participated in them.

Preparations accelerated. Ships were loaded, men assembled, final orders given. And one misty morning in late January 1860, the first transports left Brest, carrying toward the Orient a French army that knew not what awaited it.

The Crossing

At Sea, January-June 1860

The frigate Impératrice Eugénie rolled on the Atlantic swell. Aboard, General de Montauban stood on the poop deck, gripping the railing, contemplating the gray immensity extending to the horizon. The salty wind whipped his face, bringing with it a smell of iodine and spray that reminded him of other crossings, other campaigns. But never had he gone so far. Never had the distance between him and Paris been so dizzying.

Behind him, Ship Captain Duperré approached with the swaying gait of sailors who have spent more time at sea than on land. A

man in his fifties, his face weathered by sun and salt, his eyelids creased from having scrutinized too many horizons.

"Mon général, we're making good progress. If the weather holds, we should round the Cape of Good Hope in three weeks."

Montauban approved without turning his attention from the ocean. The waves succeeded each other with hypnotic regularity, each similar to the previous one yet unique. He thought of Louise, his daughters, of Paris that was moving a little further away with each beat of his heart.

"Three weeks to the Cape. And how long to Hong Kong?"

"Two and a half months, perhaps three if we must make stops at Aden or Singapore."

Duperré waited a moment.

"You know, mon général, I've made this route a dozen times. The Indian Ocean can be treacherous. Storms arrive without warning, and when they arrive..."

"When they arrive, Captain, we face them like everything else. The soldiers I command do not fear the elements."

A fleeting smile passed over Duperré's lips. He had already transported troops, seen seasoned men on land turn green and trembling as soon as the boat pitched a bit hard. But he kept all commentary to himself.

"Your men are holding up well for now. A few cases of seasickness in the lower batteries, but nothing alarming. The chief medical officer is distributing his potions and advice."

Montauban faced the captain. His blue gaze scrutinized the sailor with intensity.

"Speak to me frankly, Duperré. You who know these seas, these distant lands. What do you think of the expedition? Of our chances?"

The captain hesitated. The question was direct, almost brutal. He wasn't used to a general asking his opinion on strategic questions.

But Montauban's voice, with its imperceptible crack, invited confidence.

"I think, mon général, that we're not confronting the Maghreb tribes. The Chinese are numerous, organized. Their empire has existed for millennia. We're going to strike them at the heart, and a wounded empire can react unpredictably."

"You speak like my wife. She too warned me. She has that feminine intuition that sees what military strategists neglect."

"Women are often wiser than us, mon général. They don't have our masculine vanity, our need for glory."

In the distance, other transports of the flotilla were progressing in tight formation, their sails swollen by the following wind.

"How many men are we transporting on our frigate?"

"Three hundred fifty soldiers, mon général. Plus the crew and your staff. We're loaded to the gills. The holds are full of ammunition, provisions, equipment. If we had to face a serious storm..."

"We won't sink, Captain. The Empire needs us in China."

"The ocean knows neither empire nor king, mon général. It takes what it wants, when it wants."

In the lower decks, the atmosphere was quite different. Crammed into cramped spaces where air barely circulated, the soldiers tried to adapt to maritime life that was foreign to them. The smell of sweat, tar, and vomit mingled in a stench that caught in the throat. Hammocks hung in tight rows, swaying to the rhythm of the ship.

Sergeant Beaumont, a forty-year-old veteran marked by a scar across his cheek, tried to maintain his section's morale. Sitting on his pack, he distributed advice and jokes with a gruff good humor that made him an appreciated leader.

"Come on, lads," he called out to a group of greenish recruits, "it's like a boat ride on the Seine. Except it lasts longer and the water's salty."

"Sergeant," moaned a boy who couldn't have been twenty, "I think I'm going to die. My stomach..."

"Your stomach will survive, Dubois. In three days, you'll be used to it. In a week, you'll go up on deck demanding your rum ration like a real sailor."

"And if I never get used to it? If I'm sick for the entire crossing?"

Beaumont leaned toward him with a paternal look.

"You'll be sick. But you'll still arrive in China. And there, believe me, you'll have something else to sink your teeth into besides seasickness."

Another soldier, older, intervened. Corporal Leroux, a man with broad shoulders and thick peasant hands.

"Sergeant, is it true what they say? That the Chinese have secret weapons? Powders that drive you mad, poisons that kill in seconds?"

"Nonsense, Leroux. Propaganda to scare us. The Chinese are men like us. They bleed like us, they die like us."

"But they're numerous. They say they can line up hundreds of thousands of soldiers."

Beaumont stood up, making his joints crack. He had survived three campaigns in Algeria, seen things these young men couldn't even imagine.

"Listen to me, all of you. Yes, the Chinese are numerous. Yes, we're going to fight far from home, in a country we know nothing about. But we have two advantages: our discipline and our weapons. The Minié rifles we carry can kill at three hundred meters. Our rifled cannons are the best in the world. And above all, we have General de Montauban. A man who has never lost a battle."

"There's always a first time," someone muttered.

"Who said that?"

Beaumont thundered.

"Who dares speak like a coward?"

Beaumont directed his attention over the tense faces, lit by the faint glows of oil lamps.

"We are not cowards. We are soldiers of the French Empire. In a few months, we'll enter History. Our names will be engraved in military annals. Our children will proudly recount that their father participated in the China campaign. Keep your head high and your rifle clean. The rest will come in its time."

A murmur of approval ran through the lower deck. Beaumont approved. But he wasn't as confident as he let appear. He had seen too much, lost too many comrades to blindly believe fine words. War was a lottery, and no one could predict who would return and who would remain there, in a foreign land, under an anonymous cross.

On the upper deck, in the general's cabin, a staff meeting was being held around a table cluttered with maps and documents. Montauban presided, flanked by Captain Delmas and Commander Favier, his artillery chief. The lamp swinging from the ceiling projected moving shadows on the concentrated faces.

"The last reports we received before departure are worrying," Favier explained. "The Chinese have reinforced the Dagu forts. They've installed new cannons, dug trenches, laid obstacles in the river."

Montauban studied the map attentively. His fingers established imaginary markers, calculated distances, evaluated firing angles.

"If we attack head-on as the English did, we'll suffer the same losses. We must find another landing point. Further north, perhaps. Go around these defenses."

"Mon général," the officer intervened, "the English will never agree. Lord Elgin wants to wash away last year's affront. He'll want to take these forts by force."

"He'll do so without us. I won't sacrifice my men to satisfy an English lord's conceit."

The gazes of Favier and the captain crossed. Both were aware that this position would put Montauban at odds with the British.

"We'll have to be diplomatic, mon général. We need the English. Their warships, their naval artillery, their colonial troops who know the terrain."

"I'll be diplomatic. But I won't be suicidal. We'll land at Peh-Tang, north of the forts. We'll take the defenses from behind. The only sensible strategy."

He leaned over the map, following with his finger the tracing of the coast.

"Peh-Tang is about twenty kilometers to the north. We'll have to march through hostile territory, without knowing what we'll find. The Chinese might be waiting for us there too. They can't be everywhere. And even if they're waiting for us, we'll have the advantage of mobility. Once on land, we can maneuver, choose our terrain."

The discussion continued for over an hour, examining every detail, every contingency. Montauban asked precise questions, demanded clear answers. His rigor made him a formidable strategist. He left nothing to chance, anticipated problems before they arose.

When the meeting ended and Favier had left, Delmas remained alone with the general. He hesitated to ask the question that tormented him.

"Mon général, may I speak to you in confidence?"

Montauban looked up from the map he continued to study.

"I'm listening, Captain."

"I'm thinking back to my visit to your wife before our departure. She said something to me that haunts me. She asked me if I believed our mission was only military."

The general straightened up.

"And what did you answer her?"

"That I believed you would do your duty with honor. But she saw something I didn't want to see. This expedition... it's not only a military operation, is it?"

Montauban went to the porthole and contemplated the black ocean extending beneath the moon. The waves sparkled with silver in the night. Somewhere, very far away, China awaited them with its mysteries and dangers.

"Wars have several faces, my friend. The official face, that of treaties and strategic objectives. And then there's the other face, the one nobody wants to see, but that everyone knows. Booty, pillage, riches that change hands."

"But you told your generals..."

"I said what a commander must say to maintain discipline. But I'm not naive. Baron Gros spoke with the Empress before our departure. She made him understand that she expected certain things from the expedition. Art objects, testimonies of this distant civilization."

The captain felt a chill creep into his veins. The idealism that inhabited him collided with the reality of power.

"Will we go seize this place? The Yuen-Ming-Yuen everyone talks about so much?"

"We'll do what circumstances demand. If war leads us to this palace, if the Chinese emperor refuses to negotiate, if his troops attack us... then yes, we'll take what can be taken. But we'll do it in an orderly, controlled manner. Not like barbarians, but as representatives of a civilized nation."

"And you think we can pillage in a civilized manner?"

The question was direct, even insolent. Montauban turned around, and in his pupils shone a gleam he had never seen before.

"You are young, Captain. You have illusions about the nature of war. You believe there's a clean way to fight, that military honor can preserve our soul from the darkness of combat. I envy you. I had these illusions too, years ago, before Algeria. Before having seen what men become when they're afraid, when they're hungry, when they've seen their comrades die."

"But you're different, mon général. You're a man of principles."

"Principles are like this ship's sails. They move us forward when the wind is favorable. But when the storm arrives, it's the Emperor's orders that count. And the Emperor wants a complete victory. He wants China to open to French trade, for our missionaries to be able to circulate freely. He also wants to show England that France is its equal. All this has a price."

The ship pitched, producing the familiar creaking of working wood. Somewhere in the lower decks, a harmonica played a tune that spoke of distant homes and lost loves.

"I'm not sure I can accept that."

"You don't have to accept, Captain. You must obey. The only virtue asked of a soldier. However, I promise you one thing: I'll do everything in my power to ensure we remain men of honor."

He left the cabin. On deck, he breathed the salty night air. Above him, the stars shone with an intensity he had never seen in Paris. Unknown constellations took shape in the sky.

Louise de Montauban's words resonated in his head. She had been right. This expedition was not what it claimed to be. Beneath the noble diplomatic objectives hid darker ambitions, less avowable desires. And he, Armand Delmas, captain full of ideals, was going to be complicit in something he deeply disapproved of.

The weeks passed with exhausting slowness. The ship progressed southward, hugging the African coasts, crossing waters

sometimes calm, sometimes agitated. The soldiers gradually got used to maritime life, their faces took on tanned hues, their bodies adapted to the constant rolling.

One morning, as the sun rose in an explosion of orange colors, the lookout cried from his crow's nest.

"Land! Land to starboard!"

All gazes turned toward the horizon. A dark mass took shape in the morning mist. The Cape of Good Hope. The end of the known world for many of these men who had never left France.

Montauban stood on the poop deck, observing the approach of the African land. Beside him, General Jamin, who commanded another transport of the flotilla and had transferred to the ship Impératrice Eugénie for a consultation, contemplated the spectacle with an indecipherable expression.

"We're halfway there. Just two more months and we'll be in China."

"If all goes well. The Indian Ocean is unpredictable. And we don't know what we'll find in Hong Kong. The latest news dates from several weeks ago."

"Do you think the English are there?"

"Grant was supposed to leave at the same time as us. With a bit of luck, we'll arrive together. That will facilitate coordination."

Jamin turned toward his commander. A pragmatic man, little inclined to soul-searching, but troubled from the beginning of the crossing.

"Montauban, have you thought about what will happen if we have to march on Beijing? If we have to enter this forbidden city the missionaries speak of?"

"I think about it every day."

"And?"

"And I don't know. It's the first time in my career I'm going to war without having a clear idea of the outcome. Algeria was

different. We knew what we were confronting. Nomadic tribes, courageous, but disorganized. Here... we're going to strike an empire thousands of years old. An empire that has survived more conquerors than we can count."

"You doubt?"

"I'm thinking. It's not the same thing."

A sailor passed near them pulling on a rope, humming a tune from his native Brittany.

"Do the men have good morale?"

"They're bored. Good sign. Men who are bored aren't afraid. But we'll have to keep them busy once on land. After three months at sea, they'll want action."

"They'll get action soon enough. I prefer soldiers who are bored to soldiers too eager to fight. The latter make mistakes."

The conversation drifted to tactical questions, to the organization of brigades, to ammunition and provisions needs. But both shared the same unspoken anxiety: they were entering the unknown, and no past experience could truly prepare them for what awaited them.

The Cape of Good Hope was rounded without major incident, although a storm had shaken them for two days, tearing away a sail and sending two barrels of provisions overboard. Then came the immensity of the Indian Ocean, this liquid void punctuated by a few lost islands where they made stops to replenish fresh water.

At Aden, a British port with an infernal climate, they stayed five days. The men could go ashore, drink lukewarm beer in smoky taverns where sailors of all nationalities mingled. Montauban took advantage of this to meet the British governor, an obese and smug colonel who confirmed that the English fleet was en route to China.

"General Grant is a determined man. He won't let the Chinese get away with it this time. We're going to show them what the British Empire is made of."

Montauban listened politely, but British arrogance annoyed him. The English considered themselves masters of the world, and their way of speaking about other peoples, with a mixture of condescension and contempt, revealed a colonial mentality that exasperated him.

"We hope, Colonel, that this campaign will be conducted with respect for the laws of war. France does not wish to be associated with excesses."

The colonel burst into a greasy laugh that made his triple chin tremble.

"The laws of war! Mon général, you'll quickly learn that Orientals don't know these laws. They're perfidious, cruel, unpredictable. You must speak to them in the only language they understand: that of force."

Montauban restrained himself from responding. He saluted coldly and left the governor's residence with a presentiment. Coordination with the English would be difficult. Their objectives weren't the same, their vision of the world was radically different.

Back on the ship, he convened his staff and shared his concerns with them.

"We'll have to be vigilant. The English have their own agenda. The opium trade, territorial expansion, the humiliation of China. We French must remain faithful to our objectives: the protection of our Catholic missions, commercial opening, dignity in victory."

"If there is victory," Favier murmured.

"There will be victory. Because we have no other choice."

Singapore was their last stop before Hong Kong. The port swarmed with activity, a mixture of Chinese junks, British

steamers, Arab dhows. The air was saturated with humidity and exotic smells: spices, incense, dried fish, tropical fruits. For most of the French soldiers, this was their first contact with the Orient, and they wandered through the narrow streets with the amazed eyes of children discovering a New World.

Montauban took advantage of this to meet French merchants established in the region. These men, who lived in Asia, had an intimate knowledge of the Chinese situation.

In a private salon of a colonial hotel, he conversed with a certain Monsieur Dufresne, a silk trader who did business with Canton.

"Mon général, you cannot imagine the state of chaos reigning in China right now. The Qing empire is being eaten away from within. The Taiping rebellion has caused hundreds of thousands of deaths. The southern provinces are in civil war. Emperor Hien-Fung is weak, manipulated by incompetent advisers."

"Which should facilitate our task, no?"

Dufresne shook his head vehemently.

"Don't be mistaken. An empire in decomposition is more dangerous than a strong empire. Because it has nothing left to lose. Because the usual rules no longer apply. I've seen dreadful things these past years. Entire villages massacred, families decimated. Violence has reached unimaginable levels."

"Will the Chinese fight?"

"Oh yes, they'll fight. Not in a conventional manner, perhaps. But they'll fight. And if you reach Beijing, if you threaten the heart of the empire..."

"Speak frankly, Monsieur Dufresne. What do you fear?"

The merchant crushed his cigar in an ashtray.

"I fear you'll unleash a force that no one can control. The Chinese have a tenacious memory. If you humiliate their emperor, if you desecrate their sacred places, if you pillage their

treasures... they'll never forget it. And we, French who live here, who do business with them, we'll pay the price for generations."

Montauban left this interview troubled. Dufresne's words resonated in his mind, joining his wife's concerns, Delmas's doubts, his own questions. But it was too late to turn back. The die were cast, the troops en route. All that remained was for him to do his best so that this campaign ended in the most honorable manner possible.

In mid-February, after more than two months of crossing, the coasts of Hong Kong appeared on the horizon. Green hills stood out against a limpid blue sky. The port teemed with British ships, their flags snapping in the wind. General Grant's fleet was there, imposing, threatening.

When L'Impératrice Eugénie dropped anchor in the roadstead, a British launch approached. On board, an officer in scarlet uniform who introduced himself as Major Worthington, General Grant's aide-de-camp.

"General de Montauban, General Grant presents his compliments and invites you to a planning meeting tomorrow morning aboard HMS Furious. Lord Elgin will also be present."

Montauban nodded stiffly. The moment he dreaded had arrived. He would have to collaborate closely with these English he didn't know, share with them the dangers and perhaps also the responsibilities of decisions he disapproved of.

That night, unable to find sleep, he wrote to Louise:

"My dear Louise,

We have arrived in Hong Kong after a crossing that seemed interminable to me. The men are well, morale is good. Tomorrow, I will meet the English to establish our campaign plan.

I often think of you, of our daughters. Of Paris which is so far away, so different from this Orient where we find ourselves. Sometimes, I wonder what I'm doing here, why I accepted this

mission. And then I remember that I'm a soldier, that my duty is to serve the Emperor.

You told me, before my departure, that you feared I would lose something of myself in this campaign. I laughed, with that masculine peculiarity that refuses to listen to feminine intuitions. But perhaps you were right. I feel that things are happening within me that I cannot fully understand.

Pray for us, my sweet. Pray that we remain men of honor, whatever happens. Your husband who loves you, Charles"

He sealed the letter, knowing it would take months to reach Paris, that Louise would read it when perhaps everything would be over. But writing did him good, created a tenuous link with this world he had left behind.

The First Battles

The next day's meeting was everything Montauban had feared. In the spacious cabin of HMS Furious, the British flagship, about twenty English and French officers crowded around a vast table where a map of the Tientsin region was displayed.

General Grant was a man of tall stature and curt manners. Lord Elgin, the British plenipotentiary, was shorter, rounder, but his piercing gaze and cutting voice revealed a dominating personality.

"Gentlemen," Elgin began in English before repeating in approximate French, "we are here to avenge the affront the Chinese inflicted on us last year. This time, there will be no failure. We will take the Dagu forts, we will go up the Pei-Ho to Tientsin, and if necessary, we will march on Beijing. The Chinese emperor will sign the treaty, or we will make him sign it by force."

Montauban politely waited for the end of the speech, then intervened.

"Lord Elgin, I believe a frontal attack on the Dagu forts would be a strategic error. The Chinese have reinforced their defenses.

They're expecting us. I propose we land further north, at Peh-Tang, and take the forts from behind."

The British officers exchanged glances where could be read their opinion of these French who pretended to give them strategy lessons.

Grant leaned over the map, studied the position of Peh-Tang, then raised his head.

"General de Montauban, your suggestion has merit. But it also presents risks. Peh-Tang is twenty kilometers to the north. That means a march through hostile territory, without naval cover."

"I know. But it's preferable to a frontal assault that would cost hundreds of lives."

Elgin intervened, his voice charged with impatience.

"General, we're not afraid of combat. British honor demands that we confront the enemy where he challenges us."

"Honor doesn't demand suicide. I won't sacrifice my men to satisfy an abstract principle."

The French and English measured each other with their gazes, each entrenched in their positions. It was Baron Gros who tempered the situation.

"Gentlemen, we are allies in this enterprise. Our objectives are the same: to force China to respect the treaties. The means of achieving this can be the subject of reasonable discussion. I propose that we study both options in detail, that we evaluate their respective advantages and risks, and that we make a common decision based on military logic rather than national pride."

Spirits calmed. The discussion resumed, more technical, less impassioned. Maps were unrolled, calculations made, scenarios envisioned.

After three hours of debate, a compromise was found. The allied forces would land at Peh-Tang, as Montauban wished, but part

of the British fleet would conduct a demonstration before the Dagu forts to fix the Chinese defenders' attention.

When the meeting ended, Montauban went out on deck with a mixed feeling. He had won on the essential point, but at the price of lasting tension with the British. Grant had looked at him with a new coldness, and Elgin hadn't even deigned to shake his hand on leaving.

Baron Gros found him a few moments later, an enigmatic smile on his lips.

"You made enemies today, mon général."

"I don't care. What matters is my men. Their lives are worth more than Lord Elgin's friendship."

"Noble sentiment. But we're going to have to live with these people for months. This coldness could complicate many things."

Montauban shrugged and fixed on the Hong Kong harbor extending before them, a human anthill where Chinese, Europeans, Malays mingled in an incessant commercial ballet.

"The English will eventually understand that I'm right. When we've taken the forts without excessive losses, they'll forget their resentment."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps they'll seek to make up for it later, to take revenge on our prudence through excessive audacity. The British sometimes have unpredictable reactions when their pride is wounded."

These prophetic words would mark Montauban for a long time. But for now, he had other concerns. Preparations for the landing, logistical organization, coordination with different army corps. The time for reflection was over. That of action was approaching.

Intensive preparations began rapidly. French troops trained on Hong Kong's beaches, simulating landings, testing their equipment in the stifling heat and crushing humidity. Many

soldiers fell ill, struck by tropical fevers or dysenteries that decimated the ranks as surely as a battle.

Sergeant Beaumont, with his section, participated in these daily exercises. The recruits had matured during the crossing, their features had lost that adolescent roundness. They were men, or at least what came closest to it.

One evening, as they bivouacked on a beach, Beaumont gathered his section.

"Listen to me well, lads. In a few days, we'll embark for real. We'll go north, and there, we're going to fight. It won't be like the exercises. There will be blood, fear, chaos. Some of you will die. That's the reality of war, and I'm not going to lie to you by saying otherwise."

The silence was total. Even the insects seemed to be waiting. Dubois, the soldier who had suffered so much from seasickness, asked in a trembling voice:

"Sergeant, how do we avoid being afraid?"

Beaumont stared at him before responding.

"We can't. Fear is always there. Even for me, after twenty years of service. Even for the general. What matters isn't not being afraid. It's doing your duty despite the fear. Staying at your post. Protecting the comrade next to you. That's being a soldier."

"And if we find ourselves face to face with a Chinese? If we have to kill him?"

"You'll kill him. Because otherwise, he'll kill you. There are no scruples in a battle. There's only survival."

Corporal Leroux, who had listened in silence, intervened.

"They say the Chinese mutilate their prisoners. That they cut off their heads and plant them on spikes."

"Latrine nonsense. The Chinese are men like us. They're afraid like us, they suffer like us, they die like us. Don't dehumanize

them by imagining horrors. That only serves to justify our own atrocities."

The conversation drifted to other subjects, lighter ones. The soldiers spoke of their families, their villages, what they would do when they returned to France. Beaumont let them dream, knowing that these dreams were sometimes the only thing that kept a man alive in the darkest moments.

But not all would return. Some of these faces he saw would soon disappear, carried away by a bullet, a disease, or by war's cruel chance.

The departure took place in early July. An imposing fleet of French and British ships left Hong Kong heading north. The troop transports were escorted by frigates, their cannons pointed toward the horizon like so many promises of violence.

On the deck of L'Impératrice Eugénie, Montauban watched the port recede. Delmas stood at his side, silent. Between them, a new complicity had developed, born of these nocturnal conversations where they shared their doubts and hopes.

"Are you ready, Captain?"

"As much as one can be, mon général. I've thought about what you told me. About the nature of the expedition, about what awaits us. I've tried to prepare myself mentally."

"And?"

"I don't know if it's possible to prepare for certain things. There are situations where all our principles, all our convictions are put to the test. I pray to have the strength to remain faithful to what I believe."

"We all pray for that. But sometimes, war changes us despite ourselves. I've seen good men become cruel, honorable men commit infamy. Not by choice, but because circumstances drove them to it. Be vigilant, Delmas. Stay conscious of your actions. That's the only thing I can advise you."

The fleet progressed northward, following the Chinese coast. The days succeeded each other in growing tension. The soldiers checked their weapons, sharpened their bayonets, perhaps wrote their last letter. The atmosphere was electric, charged with that waiting that precedes major events.

On August 1, 1860, the coasts of Peh-Tang appeared on the horizon. A deserted beach, bordered by dunes and marshes. No visible fortification, no sign of Chinese military presence. Montauban's plan seemed to be working.

The landing began at dawn. Launches went back and forth between the ships and the beach, transporting men, horses, cannons, ammunition, provisions. A complex ballet, orchestrated with precision by naval officers. The French landed to the north, the British to the south, each contingent marking its territory.

Montauban was among the first to set foot on land. His boots sank into the wet sand, and for the first time in months, he felt beneath his feet the solidity of earth that didn't move. This forgotten sensation reminded him that he had become a land soldier again, that his natural element was commanding men on a battlefield, not living in the confined space of a ship.

"Establish a security perimeter. Send scouts toward the interior. I want to know if the Chinese are waiting for us somewhere."

The following hours were a whirlwind of activity. The troops deployed, established a camp, dug trenches. Cannons were set up in battery, pointed toward the interior. A defensive line took shape, transforming this deserted beach into a fortified position.

Evening was falling when the first scouts returned. Their report confirmed what Montauban hoped: the Chinese had not anticipated a landing at this location. The Dagu forts, about twenty kilometers to the south, concentrated all their forces.

"We've won our first advantage. Tomorrow, we'll begin our march toward the forts. We'll take them from behind and take our first step toward victory."

The dawn of August 2 rose in a thick mist that enveloped the encampment. The soldiers emerged from their tents, numb from an agitated night. The heat was already overwhelming despite the early hour, and humidity stuck to uniforms like a second skin.

The general inspected the troops with a critical eye. Features were tense, but determined. These men who had crossed half the world were ready to fight.

Grant arrived on horseback, surrounded by his officers. His meeting with Montauban was cordial, but cold. The two men greeted each other stiffly, exchanged a few words about the weather and logistics, then separated to rejoin their respective troops.

"He still doesn't like us," remarked Delmas who had witnessed the scene.

"It doesn't matter whether he likes me or not. What matters is that he does his job."

The column set out around nine o'clock. Ten thousand French to the north, twelve thousand British to the south, progressing in parallel through a landscape of rice paddies and deserted villages. Chinese peasants had fled at the approach of the foreign army, abandoning their houses, their crops, sometimes even their livestock.

The desertion of the countryside created a troubling, ghostly atmosphere. The soldiers marched in relative calm, disturbed only by the pounding of boots, the clinking of weapons, the orders shouted by officers. In the sky, crows wheeled, black sentinels perhaps announcing the carnage to come.

Sergeant Beaumont marched at the head of his section, scanning the horizon with vigilance. His years of campaigning in Algeria had taught him to read the signs of danger: a movement in the

tall grass, a suspicious reflection, a too-deep silence. For now, nothing indicated an enemy presence, but he remained on guard.

"Sergeant, why are all these villages empty? Where have the people gone?"

"They fled. What civilians do when two armies prepare to confront each other. They know nothing good will come of our presence."

"But we mean them no harm. We're here for their emperor, not for them."

"You think the peasants make that distinction? To them, we're foreign invaders. Round-eyed devils who come from the other end of the world to sow chaos. And you know what? They're not wrong."

The conversation ceased when an officer galloped up the column, shouting orders. The march accelerated. Scouts had spotted Chinese troop movements a few kilometers away. The enemy knew they were there.

The first contact occurred in mid-afternoon. The French column emerged from a copse and found itself facing a plain where a Chinese army was deployed. Thousands of soldiers in colorful uniforms, banners snapping in the wind, drums beating a menacing cadence.

Montauban raised his hand, and the entire column stopped. He examined the enemy disposition with attention. The Chinese were numerous, perhaps fifteen to twenty thousand men, but their formation seemed disorganized. Compact masses of infantry, a few pieces of artillery of ancient design, Tartar cavalry on the flanks.

"They want to prevent us from reaching the forts. Vain attempt. They know they're going to lose."

"Perhaps. But desperate men can be formidable."

Montauban turned toward Favier.

"Deploy the artillery on that ridge. I want you to start showering them as soon as we're in position. The infantry will advance in waves, maintaining cohesion. No unnecessary heroics."

Orders were transmitted. The French army deployed with parade precision. Cannons were set up in battery, infantry battalions formed perfect lines, skirmishers took position in the vanguard.

On their side, the Chinese remained motionless, as if petrified by this demonstration of military discipline. Their drums continued to beat, their banners to flutter, but one could sense a hesitation, an uncertainty in the face of this war machine setting itself up before them.

Baron Gros, who had stayed back with non-combatant elements, joined Montauban.

"Mon général, perhaps we should attempt a negotiation? Avoid useless bloodshed?"

"They chose to bar our way. They know the consequences."

"But think of the diplomatic implications. If we can obtain their surrender without combat, it will facilitate future negotiations."

Montauban hesitated. The suggestion made sense. But he also knew the risks of temporizing. The Chinese might interpret this opening as a sign of weakness, reinforce themselves while negotiating, launch a surprise attack.

"Very well. Send an emissary under a white flag. Tell them we're not seeking combat, but that we will pass, one way or another."

Gros bowed and withdrew to organize this approach. A French officer, accompanied by a Chinese interpreter employed in Hong Kong, advanced toward the enemy lines carrying a white flag. Everyone followed this silhouette.

The dialogue lasted about ten minutes. Then the officer returned at a gallop, his horse foaming.

"Mon général, the Chinese refuse to withdraw. Their commander says he received orders to stop us, and that he prefers to die rather than disobey his emperor."

"He will die. Favier, you may begin."

The artillery chief raised his arm, then lowered it. The French cannons thundered in unison, spitting fire and smoke. The cannonballs crossed the air in a deadly whistle and crashed down on the Chinese ranks.

The result was devastating. The compact formations of the enemy infantry offered perfect targets. The cannonballs carved bloody furrows, mowing down dozens of men with each impact. The cries of the wounded rose in the hot air, mingling with the thunder of artillery.

Beaumont, who was observing from his position with his section, watched. He had seen battles, he knew the horror of war. But in this spectacle, a discomfort inhabited him. These Chinese dying by the hundreds hadn't even had the possibility to fight. An execution, not a battle.

"Sergeant," Dubois murmured, eyes wide, "look what we're doing to them. It's... it's a massacre."

"Modern war. Our cannons against their lances. Our technology against their courage. Welcome to the civilized world."

The French artillery pounded the Chinese positions. After fifteen minutes of this deluge of iron, the enemy army began to disintegrate. Groups of soldiers fled in disorder, abandoning their weapons and their wounded. The Tartar cavalry attempted a charge on the French left flank, but was met by the sustained fire of the light infantry. Men and horses collapsed in an entanglement of bodies and screams.

"Cease fire. Jamin, launch the pursuit, but with moderation. I don't want us to scatter."

The French infantry advanced at a run, bayonets fixed. But there wasn't much left to pursue. The Chinese army had evaporated, leaving behind a field strewn with dead and dying.

Montauban dismounted and walked among the corpses. The features frozen in death looked at him with varied expressions: surprise, pain, resignation. Young men for the most part, peasants torn from their villages and thrown into this battle they probably didn't understand.

The captain found him, pale.

"Our losses are minimal, mon général. Three dead, about ten wounded. The Chinese... there must be more than a thousand."

"Evacuate our wounded. For the Chinese..."

Montauban hesitated.

"Do what you can for the wounded. Those who can be saved. The others..."

One couldn't save everyone.

Night fell on the improvised battlefield. French doctors bustled around the wounded, administering opium for pain, amputating crushed limbs, stitching gaping wounds. Their white aprons were stained with blood, their features marked by fatigue and disgust.

Chief Surgeon Renaud worked with a mechanical efficiency born of habit. He had seen so many wounds, so much suffering that he had forged himself an emotional shell.

"Captain, come see something."

Delmas entered the tent dimly lit by lanterns. A sickly sweet smell of blood and burned flesh caught in his throat. On makeshift stretchers lay about ten wounded Chinese soldiers.

"Look at this one. A crushed leg, the left arm torn off. A few hours of life, at most. But see his face. He's smiling."

The captain noted with stupor that the doctor was telling the truth. The young Chinese, despite his agony, displayed a serene smile. His lips moved, murmuring incomprehensible words.

"What's he saying?"

"The interpreter translated for me. He's reciting a Buddhist prayer. He's preparing to die with dignity."

He felt an oppression in his chest. This young man dying far from home, mutilated by weapons he had never seen, faced his destiny with more courage than many men he had known.

"Can we do something for him?"

"Relieve him. That's all."

Renaud waited a moment.

"You know, Captain, I've spent my life treating soldiers. French, Arabs, and now Chinese. And I sometimes wonder if we're not all mad. If all this violence, all this suffering has any meaning."

"War has always existed. It will always exist."

"Which doesn't mean it's just. Or necessary."

The young man had no answer to that. He left the tent and walked through the encampment, seeking a quiet place to gather his thoughts. He ended up sitting on a rock, away from the fires and conversations. The starry sky extended above him, immense and indifferent to the human tragedies playing out below.

He thought of this dying young Chinese, of Louise de Montauban and her prophetic words, of his own naivety in having believed a war could be clean and honorable. He had seen nothing, he knew. This skirmish was only a prelude. What awaited them further on, in the Dagu forts, in Tientsin, and perhaps in Beijing, would be much worse.

The allied army continued its progression. The Chinese tried several other times to stop them, launching attacks that were all repulsed with heavy losses. The French and British advanced inexorably, their technical superiority sweeping away all resistance.

On August 21, they arrived in sight of the forts. Massive constructions of earth and stone, armed with cannons of all

calibers, defended by thousands of soldiers. But the French were taking them from behind, as Montauban had planned, while the British fleet bombarded them from the front.

The battle was short, but violent. French artillery opened breaches in the walls, infantry rushed through them. Hand-to-hand combat was fierce. The Chinese defended themselves with fierce courage, knowing they fought for their honor and that of their emperor.

Sergeant Beaumont found himself in the heart of the melee, his rifle useless, fighting with bayonet and rifle butt. Around him, his men screamed, struck, killed. Civilization and its rules disappeared in the fury of combat. There was nothing left but survival, the primal instinct that drives a man to eliminate the other before being eliminated.

Dubois, the soldier who had suffered so much from seasickness, fought with a rage one would never have suspected in him. His face was smeared with blood, his eyes shone with a savage gleam. He had lost all innocence in a few seconds of combat.

When the forts fell, late in the afternoon, the toll was heavy. On the French side, about fifty dead and more than two hundred wounded. On the Chinese side, several thousand dead. The survivors had fled toward Tientsin, abandoning their positions, their weapons, their honor.

Montauban stood on the conquered ramparts, staring at the battlefield extending below. Corpses littered the ground, smoke rose from burning buildings. A victory with a bitter taste.

General Grant found him, a satisfied smile on his lips.

"Fine victory, Montauban. Your strategy was the right one. I readily admit it."

"Thank you, General."

"Now, we can go up the Pei-Ho to Tientsin. The road to Beijing is open."

The two men shook hands, sealing this common victory. But in Montauban's gaze, Grant could have read something other than satisfaction at duty accomplished. He could have seen a trouble, a questioning, perhaps even the beginning of remorse.

But Grant didn't seek to read in men's eyes. A simple soldier, who saw the world in terms of victories and defeats, enemies and allies. Moral nuances didn't interest him.

While the victorious encampment celebrated the taking of the forts with extra rum rations, Montauban withdrew to his tent and wrote:

"My dear Louise,

We have won our first major victory. The Dagu forts have fallen, the road to the interior is open. The men are proud, the British respect us again.

And yet, I cannot help thinking of all these Chinese who died today. They were fighting for their country, for their emperor. They knew they were going to lose, but they fought anyway.

Each victory weighs on me a little more. Each death reminds me that behind our noble objectives hide realities I would prefer to ignore.

But I am a soldier. My duty is to obey, to conquer, to lead my men to success. Doubts have no place in a military campaign.

Pray for me, my sweet. Pray that I keep my soul intact in all this chaos.

Your husband who loves you and thinks of you every day, Charles"

He sealed the letter, which would not leave for several days, when a ship returned to Hong Kong. By then, many things could happen. Other battles, other deaths, other victories...

The March on Beijing

The next day, the allied fleet began to go up the Pei-Ho. The transports progressed slowly, escorted by gunboats. The banks of the river were deserted, the villages abandoned. A land of desolation extended on both sides, testifying to the violence that had swept through this region.

On August 24, the allied forces entered Tientsin without resistance. The city was empty, its inhabitants having fled at the approach of the foreign barbarians. Only a few old people too weak to leave and stray dogs populated the streets.

Montauban established his headquarters in an abandoned pagoda. The walls were covered with frescoes representing scenes from Chinese mythology, dragons and phoenixes in dazzling colors. He contemplated these images of a world so different from his own, trying to understand the mentality of this people he was fighting.

Baron Gros joined him in the evening, bearing news.

"Mon général, Chinese emissaries have presented themselves. They ask to negotiate. The emperor is ready to discuss the ratification of the treaty."

"Really? After all this resistance, he's giving in?"

"Our victories have convinced him. He knows that if he doesn't negotiate, we'll march on Beijing. And that, he cannot allow. It would be too considerable a humiliation."

Montauban reflected. The official mission was about to be accomplished. The treaty would be ratified, the diplomatic objectives achieved. They could return to France with their heads held high, having forced China to open to Western trade.

But he felt it wouldn't be that simple. The British wanted more. Lord Elgin spoke of "lessons to give," of "exemplary punishments." And Empress Eugénie awaited her Oriental treasures.

"Begin negotiations, Baron. But don't rush too much. We'll see where it leads us."

Gros bowed and left, aware that the real decisions would be made elsewhere, in meetings where he wouldn't be invited, between military men who had other priorities than diplomacy.

The negotiations bogged down. The Chinese emissaries proposed concessions, but not enough according to the British. Lord Elgin demanded astronomical financial reparations, the opening of new ports, extraterritorial privileges. Baron Gros tried to moderate these demands, but his voice was drowned out by the louder one of English diplomacy.

Meanwhile, the soldiers settled in Tientsin. The first inhabitants began to return cautiously, testing the intentions of these invaders. Improvised markets organized themselves, where French and British soldiers bartered their goods for fresh food, souvenirs, sometimes even favors from Chinese prostitutes whom poverty pushed to this trade.

Sergeant Beaumont tried to maintain discipline in his section, but it was a lost battle. After months at sea and weeks of combat, the men wanted to enjoy life. As long as it stayed within acceptable limits, he turned a blind eye.

One evening, while making his rounds in the streets near the encampment, he caught three of his men trying to force the door of an apparently abandoned shop. He approached, threatening.

"What are you doing, you idiots?"

The three soldiers froze, caught in the act. Frachon, Coulaud, and a third, Dambach, who had acquired a solid reputation as troublemakers.

"Sergeant, we were just looking for..."

"You were looking to steal."

Beaumont slapped them in turn, resounding slaps that echoed in the deserted street.

"How many times do I have to tell you we're not pillagers? That we represent the French army?"

"But Sergeant," Dambach protested, "the English do it. We've seen them return to camp with crates full of objects."

"I don't give a damn what the English do. You're under my orders, and my orders are clear: no pillaging. If I catch one of you stealing again, I'll have him flogged in public. Understood?"

They nodded, sheepish. But Beaumont saw in their eyes that the temptation remained strong. Discipline was eroding, little by little. And he was aware he couldn't be everywhere to maintain it.

In early September, negotiations suddenly soured. The Chinese emissaries, pushed by conservative elements of the imperial court, hardened their positions. They refused several British demands and requested the withdrawal of allied troops.

Lord Elgin, furious, ordered the arrest of the emissaries. It was a catastrophic error. In the confusion that followed, Chinese soldiers also captured lower-ranking diplomats, interpreters, even a Times journalist who was accompanying the expedition.

These prisoners were taken by the Chinese to Beijing, where they disappeared into imperial dungeons. For several days, there was no news of them. Then, gradually, rumors began to circulate. Horrifying rumors that spoke of torture, of mutilations.

Montauban learned the news during an emergency meeting convened by Grant. The English officers, their faces closed, spoke in low voices. Elgin paced back and forth like a caged beast.

"These barbarians dared to capture British diplomats!" he thundered. "Violation of all international laws! An intolerable affront!"

"What do you propose?" Montauban asked calmly, contrasting with the ambient hysteria.

Elgin looked at him, eyes bright with rage.

"We're going to march on Beijing. We're going to free our men. And we're going to make these Chinese pay for their treachery."

"A march on Beijing is a risky undertaking. We're far from our bases, our supply lines are stretched..."

"I don't care about the risks!" Elgin cut in. "Our dignity has been trampled. It will be avenged, whatever the cost."

Baron Gros tried to intervene.

"Lord Elgin, perhaps we should first attempt to obtain the release of these men through negotiation..."

"Negotiation? With these traitors who violate their own promises? Never!"

The meeting continued for over two hours, but the decision was made in Elgin's mind. The allied armies would march on Beijing. They would crush all resistance. They would bring back the prisoners, by hook or by crook.

Montauban left this meeting with a presentiment. Things were escaping all control. The diplomatic mission was transforming into a punitive expedition. And he had the intuition that the worst was yet to come.

The march on Beijing began on September 18, 1860. Twenty-two thousand men, French and British, set out toward the imperial capital. An impressive column extending over several kilometers, snaking through the fertile plains of North China.

Delmas rode alongside Montauban, observing the passing landscape. Burned villages, trampled fields, corpses of Chinese soldiers rotting in the sun. War left its mark on this millennial land.

"Mon général, do you think we'll find these prisoners alive?"

Montauban kept his attention fixed on the horizon.

"I hope so, Captain. I sincerely hope so. Because if they're dead, if the Chinese tortured them... nothing will be able to hold back

British vengeance. And we'll be swept up in this spiral of violence, whether we want it or not."

"We could refuse. Maintain our distance from English excesses."

"We're allies. Our honor obliges us to remain in solidarity, even when we disapprove of their actions."

"Honor..."

The captain shook his head.

"I have the impression this word is losing its meaning as we advance."

Montauban shared this feeling. Military honor, noble principles, the fine words from Paris... all this was dissolving in the raw reality of this campaign. Nothing remained but the necessity to advance, to conquer, to survive.

And somewhere ahead of them, beyond the horizon, Beijing awaited them with its mysteries and dangers. The Summer Palace the missionaries spoke of so much was drawing nearer. And with it, the temptation, the greed, the possibility of a pillage that would forever mark the history of this expedition.

On the morning of September 21, the allied column resumed its march after an agitated night. The soldiers had slept in the fields, wrapped in their cloaks, lulled by the strange sounds of this Chinese countryside: the croaking of frogs in the rice paddies, the distant howling of wild dogs, sometimes the cry of a nocturnal bird that resembled a human lament.

Beaumont had barely closed his eyes. He had remained awake, smoking his pipe, observing the shining stars. Near him, his men snored, exhausted by the previous day's forced march. Dubois moaned in his sleep, pursued by nightmares Beaumont could easily imagine. The boy had killed for the first time during the taking of the Dagu forts, and this experience had marked him indelibly.

When dawn broke, Beaumont woke his section with abrupt orders. The men emerged from their blankets grumbling, limbs

numb, features drawn. They swallowed a meager breakfast composed of hard biscuits and lukewarm coffee, then lined up in ranks, waiting for the departure signal.

Delmas passed before them on horseback, inspecting the troops with a distracted eye. He too had slept poorly, haunted by thoughts that tormented him. The conversation he had had with Montauban on the ship, Louise's prophetic words, all of it mingled in his mind.

"Captain," Beaumont hailed him, "what's our destination today?"

He stopped his horse.

"We're heading northwest. There's a fortified village about fifteen kilometers away. The scouts report that Chinese troops have entrenched themselves there. We'll probably have to force passage."

"More blood. Always more blood."

"It's war, Sergeant. You know that as well as I do."

"I know. But it doesn't get any easier."

Delmas approved and withdrew. He understood what Beaumont felt. He too was weary of these incessant combats, of these victories that had a taste of ashes. But they had no choice. They had to advance, always advance, until the Chinese emperor capitulated or their forces were exhausted.

The column progressed for three hours through landscapes alternating between flooded rice paddies and sorghum fields. The heat was overwhelming, humidity saturated the air to the point one had the impression of breathing water. Uniforms stuck to skin, packs weighed more and more on tired shoulders.

Around ten o'clock, the first gunshots rang out. Isolated shooters, hidden in the tall grass, harassed the column. Their bullets whistled overhead, rarely causing damage, but keeping the soldiers in a state of constant tension.

"Skirmishers forward!" an officer shouted. "Clean out those bushes for me!"

Light infantry deployed in dispersed order, carefully searching suspect areas. From time to time, a volley rang out, followed by a cry. Sometimes it was a Chinese who fell, sometimes a Frenchman. War continued, implacable, reducing men to statistics, to figures in military reports.

The fortified village appeared in early afternoon. An agglomeration of about a hundred houses surrounded by a rammed earth wall. Chinese flags floated on the ramparts, and silhouettes of soldiers could be seen coming and going.

Montauban had the column halt a kilometer from the village and convened his officers. They gathered around a map displayed on a cart hood, studying the topography of the place.

"Classic defensive position. They have the terrain advantage, solid walls, doubtless reserves of food and ammunition. A frontal assault would be costly."

"We won't attack frontally. Favier, install your artillery on that hill, to the east. You're going to pound the defenses. Meanwhile, Collineau, you'll go around the village from the north with your brigade. When the defenders are concentrated on our artillery, you'll strike from the rear."

"And if the Chinese have anticipated this maneuver? If they're waiting for us in the north?"

"We'll improvise. But I doubt they have the troops to defend all sides at once."

Orders were transmitted. The French army split into several groups, each heading toward its assigned position. The soldiers marched with that tension preceding combat, checking their weapons, adjusting their equipment, exchanging a few words in low voices.

Beaumont gathered his section behind a copse of stunted trees and repeated to them what he had already said multiple times.

"Listen to me well. In an hour, perhaps less, we're going to attack this village. Some of you will die. Others will be wounded. I'm not going to lie to you by saying otherwise."

He let his words take effect, examining the faces that tensed, the jaws that clenched.

"But if you stay together, if you support each other, if you obey orders without hesitating, you have a chance. A good chance. We're the best soldiers in the world. Never forget that."

The French artillery opened fire at precisely two o'clock. The cannons thundered in a deafening concert, spitting their iron cannonballs against the village walls. The result was immediate. Entire sections of wall collapsed in clouds of dust, roofs flew off, fires broke out here and there.

From his position, Montauban observed the bombardment with a satisfaction mixed with unease. A demonstration of crushing power, but it also reminded him how much modern war had become impersonal. Men died at a distance, killed by projectiles launched by artillerymen who would never see them, who would never know their names, who would never bear the weight of their deaths.

"Mon général, Collineau's brigade is in position. It awaits your signal to attack."

"Have it wait ten minutes. I want the Chinese to be completely disoriented before launching the assault."

These ten minutes elapsed in the continuous din of artillery. The French cannons fired with metronome regularity, destroying enemy defenses. In the village, one could imagine the panic, the terror, the wounded screaming, the dead piling up.

Montauban gave the signal. A flag waved on the hill, and Collineau's brigade launched the assault. Five thousand men surged from the north shouting, rushing toward the breaches opened in the walls.

Chinese resistance was short, but intense. The defenders, stunned by the bombardment, tried to repel the assailants with frenetic bravery. Hand-to-hand combat broke out in the narrow alleys, brutal and merciless.

Beaumont and his section were part of the second assault wave. They discovered a spectacle of devastation. Dismembered bodies littered the streets, houses burned, wounded crawled moaning.

"Forward!" Beaumont shouted. "Don't stop, keep advancing!"

They progressed through the burning village, pushing back the last pockets of resistance. Dubois fired at a Chinese soldier charging toward him, hitting him square in the chest. The man collapsed coughing blood, his eyes wide staring at the sky in an expression of frozen surprise.

The young Frenchman remained petrified, contemplating the man he had just killed. Beaumont slapped him violently.

"No time for that! Reload your rifle and advance!"

Dubois obeyed mechanically, but his face had become cadaverously pale. Something had just broken in him, something that would never be repaired.

The combat was brief. When silence fell again, the village was conquered. The Chinese survivors had fled to the west, abandoning their wounded and their dead. The French counted their losses: fifteen dead, about forty wounded. The Chinese had left nearly three hundred corpses.

Montauban entered the village on horseback, escorted by his staff. Around him, soldiers searched abandoned houses, looking for food, water, sometimes valuable objects.

"Stop the pillaging. I want strict discipline. These people will perhaps return when we've left. They mustn't have the impression we're savages."

Jamin moved away to transmit the order, but Montauban knew he was limited in his power. Pillaging was as old as war itself. One could circumscribe it, not prevent it. Soldiers took what they

wanted, justifying their acts by the dangers they faced, by the distance from home, by the certainty that no one would really punish them.

In an interior courtyard, Chief Surgeon Renaud had installed his aid station. Wounded lay on mats, waiting their turn. Some screamed in pain, others remained still, their gaze empty. Renaud went from one to another, providing his care.

"Mon général, we have a problem. Several of our wounded have been hit by poisoned weapons. Arrows dipped in who knows what substance. The wounds are becoming infected at a terrifying speed."

"Can you save them?"

"Perhaps. If we amputate without delay, before the poison spreads throughout the organism. But it will be painful, and I lack opium to anesthetize them."

"Do what you can. They're our men."

Renaud nodded and returned to his bloody work. Montauban moved away, unable to bear any longer the cries of the amputees. He had commanded armies, won victories, received decorations. But these cries of mutilated men haunted him more than any battle.

Night fell on the conquered village. The French soldiers established their encampment in the ruins, lighting fires to warm themselves. The atmosphere was singular, a mixture of relief at having survived and unease in the face of the destruction they had caused.

Beaumont sat with his men around a fire, sharing a ration of canned beef that had an unappetizing metallic taste. No one spoke. The soldiers ate silently, lost in their thoughts.

It was Leroux who broke this oppressive silence.

"Sergeant, have you ever killed a man up close? I mean, while looking at him?"

Beaumont continued his meal without answering right away. A question that had been asked of him dozens of times over the years, and he had never found a satisfactory answer.

"Yes. In Algeria. A rebel who had taken me by surprise in an oasis. We struggled for what seemed like an eternity to me. I ended up planting my knife in his throat. I felt his warm blood flowing over my hands. I saw the light go out in his eyes."

"And how... how did you manage to continue? To live with that memory?"

"We have no choice. We continue because we must continue. We drink a bit more than reasonable, we try not to think about it too much, we concentrate on the comrades who are alive."

He waited a moment.

"And then, with time, the memory becomes less vivid. Not that we forget, no. We never forget. But it hurts less."

Dubois, who had barely touched his food, intervened in a strangled voice.

"I killed him today. That Chinese. I watched him die. And I can't help wondering who he was. If he had a family. Children waiting for him somewhere, who will never know what happened to him."

"Don't do that. Don't inflict that torture on yourself. You did what you had to do. You defended your life and that of your comrades. That's all that matters."

"But he was a man, Sergeant. A human being, like us. He hadn't done anything to us."

"He wore an enemy uniform. He was defending a position we had to attack. That's enough. War isn't a personal matter, Dubois. It's a matter of States, of politics, of things beyond us all."

The young soldier shook his head negatively, unconvinced. He got up and moved away from the fire, seeking solitude.

Beaumont let him go, knowing each must confront his demons in his own way.

Dambach, who had listened to the exchange, spat in the fire.

"All this for what? To force the Chinese to buy our merchandise? So merchants get rich while we die here?"

"Careful, Dambach. That kind of talk can lead you before a court-martial."

"I don't care. I'm saying what everyone thinks. This expedition makes no sense. We kill people who've done nothing to us, we destroy villages, we burn crops. And for what? For the Empire's honor?"

Beaumont remained silent. He shared these doubts. But he was a sergeant, he had to maintain discipline, preserve morale. He swallowed his own questions and forced himself to smile.

"This war will have meaning when we return to France, covered in glory, with pockets full of money and medals on our chests. That counts, lads. Not philosophy. The reward."

But his words rang false, even to his own ears.

The Summer Palace

Meanwhile, in an abandoned house transformed into a temporary headquarters, Montauban presided over a meeting with his principal officers. General Grant was also present, as well as Lord Elgin and Baron Gros. The atmosphere was tense.

"Gentlemen," Elgin began, pacing the room, "we have received news of our prisoners. Horrifying news."

He stopped and turned toward the assembly, his features contracted with emotion.

"Eighteen of our men are dead. Dead in Chinese dungeons, after having been tortured in the most barbaric manner. Their bodies have been found, mutilated, disfigured. Some had been tied in

impossible positions until their limbs broke. Others had been deprived of water and food until they died of thirst."

A horrified silence followed these revelations. Even the most hardened French officers paled at the enumeration of these atrocities.

"Unacceptable. Violation of all laws of war, of all conventions between civilized nations. The Chinese must pay for these crimes. They must be punished in an exemplary manner."

"What do you propose?"

"I propose we destroy something precious to them. Something that will make them understand one doesn't treat British envoys this way."

"You're speaking of the Summer Palace?"

Elgin faced the Frenchman, his gaze inflexible.

"The Summer Palace is the emperor's favorite residence. It's where he keeps his most precious treasures, his rarest art objects. Its destruction would be a violent blow to imperial prestige."

"It would also be an unprecedented act of cultural vandalism," Gros objected. "You're talking about destroying centuries of art and civilization. Irreplaceable works."

"I'm talking about justice, Baron Gros. Of vengeance for men tortured to death. Your scruples weigh little against these atrocities."

The baron turned toward Montauban, seeking support. But the French general remained silent, his face closed. He was reflecting on the situation, weighing the different options.

"Mon général, you cannot condone this. France has always defended the arts, culture, the preservation of humanity's heritage. We cannot associate ourselves with the deliberate destruction of a historic monument."

"The Chinese tortured diplomats to death. A fact that demands a response."

"But not that one! Not gratuitous destruction! There are other means to punish the responsible parties, to make them pay for their crimes."

"Which ones?" Elgin asked with contempt. "A fine? An additional clause in the treaty? The Chinese mock these punishments. They only understand force, the demonstration of power."

Grant, who had remained silent until then, intervened.

"Lord Elgin is right. Our men were massacred. We must respond. The question isn't whether we should act, but how and with what scope."

The discussion continued for about twenty minutes, opposing those who wanted spectacular vengeance and those who pleaded for moderation. No formal decision was made. Elgin declared he would consult London, Montauban promised to refer to Paris. But everyone knew communications took months, and that decisions would be made on the ground, by men who didn't have time to wait for instructions from so far away.

When the meeting ended and the participants dispersed, Montauban retained Delmas.

"Captain, what do you think? Honestly."

Delmas hesitated. The question was a trap. Telling the truth risked endangering his career. But lying would betray the values he strove to preserve.

"I think, mon général, that we're on a dangerous slope. That each act of violence calls for another. That if we destroy this palace, we'll cross a line we can't cross back."

"And if we don't destroy it? If we let the British do it alone?"

"We'll at least be able to look ourselves in the mirror without too much shame. We won't be accomplices to this act."

"You're an idealist. It's admirable. But idealism doesn't survive war. Sooner or later, you'll have to make compromises. Everyone does."

"Not you. You have values that transcend these contingencies."

"I'm a man who obeys. Nuance."

The officer saluted and withdrew, leaving Montauban alone with his thoughts. The general sat on a stool. He thought of Louise, his daughters, of Paris that seemed to belong to another world. He thought of these eighteen men tortured to death, of their suffering, of their families who would soon receive the terrible news. He also thought of this mysterious palace everyone spoke of, of these treasures that aroused so much covetousness.

And he wondered, for the hundredth time, how he had come to this. How a man who believed himself honorable, who had devoted his life to serving France, could find himself complicit in acts he disapproved of.

The following days, the allied army continued its progression toward Beijing. Other villages were taken, other battles fought. Victories accumulated, but the human cost also increased. Each day brought its share of dead and wounded, of soldiers exhausted by the march and heat, of sick struck down by tropical diseases.

Troop morale was rapidly degrading.

In his section, Beaumont did his best to maintain cohesion. He organized card games in the evening, told stories of his past campaigns, distributed his own tobacco when supplies were late. But discipline was eroding.

Dubois had become taciturn. He accomplished his tasks mechanically, but his gaze was empty, lost in thoughts no one could reach. Beaumont worried about him. He had seen other soldiers sink thus into a melancholy that could lead them to desertion or worse, to suicide.

Dambach, on the contrary, had become cynical and bitter. He openly criticized officers, questioned orders, encouraged

pillaging and gratuitous violence. A disruptive element Beaumont had to watch constantly.

One evening, as the section bivouacked near a stream, Beaumont took Dambach aside.

"You're going to calm down. Your comments are demoralizing the others. If you continue, I'll have you put in irons."

"On what grounds? For having told the truth?"

"For insubordination. For undermining troop morale. Choose the formulation you prefer. The result will be the same: you'll be punished."

Dambach spat on the ground with contempt.

"You're all the same, you non-coms. Always licking the officers' boots. Never thinking of the men you command."

Beaumont seized Dambach by the collar and slammed him against a tree.

"Listen to me well, you little shit. I've seen things you can't even imagine. I've buried more comrades than you've ever known. And if I'm here, if I'm a sergeant, it's because I care about my men. Because I do everything in my power to get them back to France alive."

"By sending them to get killed in useless battles?"

"By keeping them disciplined, organized, united. Because in this war, that's the only thing that can save them. Not your complaints, not your criticisms. Discipline and solidarity."

He released Dambach who withdrew muttering insults. Beaumont hadn't convinced the soldier. But perhaps he had made him think, at least for the moment.

October 6, 1860, was a date that would remain engraved in the history of this campaign. That day, the allied armies reached the outskirts of Beijing. The imperial capital stood before them, its imposing walls outlined against the horizon, its glazed tile roofs shining in the sun.

But it wasn't the city that interested the British. It was what lay about ten kilometers to the northwest: the Summer Palace, this famous Yuen-Ming-Yuen everyone spoke of.

Scouts had reconnoitered the place and returned with enthusiastic descriptions. Immense gardens, hundreds of pavilions, artificial lakes, marble bridges. And above all, it was said, priceless treasures, accumulated over centuries by the Chinese emperors.

Emperor Hien-Fung had fled Beijing a few days earlier, taking with him part of his court toward Jehol, his summer residence in Manchuria. The Summer Palace was almost abandoned, guarded only by a few eunuchs and servants who would offer no resistance.

Lord Elgin convened a meeting. In the British command tent, all the superior officers were assembled. The atmosphere was electric, charged with an excitement reminiscent of that of gold prospectors before a rush.

"Gentlemen, we're going to occupy the Summer Palace. We're going to secure the place and inventory what's there. Then, we'll decide what comes next."

"What do you mean by 'what comes next'?" Baron Gros asked in a suspicious tone.

"I mean we'll examine all options. Including that of complete destruction."

"No!" Gros exclaimed, standing up abruptly. "I'll oppose it with all my strength! You cannot destroy such a monument! It's... it's barbarism!"

"It's justice. Our men were tortured. Their death must be avenged."

Montauban intervened, trying to calm things.

"Gentlemen, let's not rush anything. Let's first go see this palace with our own eyes. Then, we'll make an informed decision, in consultation with our respective governments."

"Our governments are months away from here. We must act with the information we have."

"That's precisely why we must be prudent. A decision made in haste could have consequences we don't measure."

The discussion went in circles without any consensus emerging. It was decided that the French and British troops would go together to the Summer Palace the next morning for a reconnaissance in force. What would happen next would depend on what they found there.

That night, few people slept in the allied camp. Soldiers murmured among themselves, speculating about the riches awaiting them. Some spoke of green jade, of solid gold, of ancient porcelains worth fortunes. Others evoked magical objects, talismans endowed with mysterious powers. Imagination was inflamed, stoked by months of privations and dangers.

Beaumont listened to these conversations. He felt that grave things were going to happen, that events were escaping all control. He had lived long enough to recognize these moments when history tips, when ordinary men commit extraordinary acts, in the good or bad sense.

"Sergeant, is it true there's gold there? That we'll be able to help ourselves?"

"I don't know what's there. And even if there's gold, it's not ours. It belongs to the Emperor of China."

"The emperor who had our prisoners tortured? Who made war on us for no reason?"

"Even him. Stealing remains stealing, no matter what justification you give yourself."

"But if the officers allow us? If it's considered war booty?"

Beaumont sighed.

"If the officers allow it, you'll have to follow your consciences. But me, I won't take anything. Not a penny, not an object. I'll return to France empty-handed."

The men lowered their eyes, uncomfortable. They respected Beaumont, and his words carried weight. But the temptation would be strong, they knew. Very strong.

The dawn of October 6, 1860, rose in a golden mist that enveloped the Chinese countryside in an unreal beauty. The allied armies set out around ten o'clock, following the road that led northwest of Beijing. An impressive column: twenty thousand men, French and British mixed, advancing in an order that held more of procession than military formation.

Montauban rode at the head with Grant, Elgin, and Baron Gros. No one spoke. Each was lost in his thoughts, anticipating what they were going to discover.

They first crossed abandoned villages, then cultivated fields left fallow. War had emptied the region of its inhabitants, transforming a once prosperous landscape into a sort of ghostly no man's land.

Around noon, they glimpsed the first buildings of the Summer Palace. Elegant structures with curved roofs, surrounded by carefully maintained gardens. Centennial pines stood guard, their twisted branches creating complex shadows on the ground.

The further they advanced, the more impressive the spectacle became. The Summer Palace wasn't a single building, but a gigantic complex extending over several square kilometers. Pavilions, temples, galleries, bridges, kiosks succeeded each other in an architectural harmony that testified to centuries of refinement.

"My God," Baron Gros murmured, "it's magnificent. Truly magnificent."

Even Elgin seemed impressed, though he strove to show nothing. Grant, more pragmatic, studied the place with a military eye, seeking strategic positions, possible defense points.

They arrived before the main palace, where the emperor usually resided. A majestic construction of sober elegance, surrounded by a courtyard paved in white marble. The doors were wide open, as if inviting them to enter.

Montauban dismounted and stepped forward. His boots resonated, producing an echo that seemed to reverberate infinitely. He crossed the threshold and found himself in a vast hall whose splendor took his breath away.

Red and gold lacquered columns supported a ceiling decorated with dragons. Silk screens adorned the walls, representing scenes from Chinese mythology with colors of stunning vividness. Porcelain vases, several meters high, were arranged symmetrically along the walls. Tables of precious wood supported innumerable art objects: jades, bronzes, rock crystals, sculpted ivories.

A museum, a collection accumulated by emperors who had made beauty an obsession. Each object had been chosen with care, arranged with art, preserved with devotion.

The captain, who had followed Montauban, remained frozen in place, unable to detach his attention from this spectacle.

"Mon général," he whispered, "it's incredible. I've never seen anything like it, even at the Louvre."

"Neither have I, Delmas. Neither have I."

Other officers entered, then soldiers. Soon, the hall filled with French and British uniforms, contrasting violently with the delicate harmony of the place. The men walked on tiptoe, as in a church, intimidated by so much beauty.

Baron Gros found Montauban, tears in his eyes.

"Mon général, you see what I see? This isn't a palace. It's a treasure of humanity. If we destroy it, if we pillage it, we'll commit a crime that will forever tarnish our honor."

Montauban continued to look around him, trying to absorb the magnificence of the place. He thought of Empress Eugénie, of her veiled request to bring back art objects. He thought of the soldiers waiting outside, hungry for rewards after so many sacrifices. He thought of Elgin and his desire for vengeance.

And he understood he was at a crossroads of History. That what would be decided in the coming hours would have repercussions for decades, perhaps centuries.

"Baron Gros, I share your feelings. But I fear we're no longer masters of events. Forces more powerful than us are at work here. Vengeance, greed, imperial ambition. All this converges on this place, and I don't know if we'll be able to prevent what must happen."

"You're the commander of French forces. You have the power to refuse."

"I have the power to obey. It's different."

Outside, soldiers began exploring the complex's other buildings. They discovered hall after hall, pavilion after pavilion. Libraries containing thousands of ancient manuscripts. Art galleries displaying paintings by Chinese masters. Treasury chambers where gold and silver ingots piled up.

Excitement was mounting. Voices became louder, gestures less respectful. Someone knocked over a vase that shattered with a crystalline sound. It was like a signal. Suddenly, restraint shattered.

Soldiers rushed into the halls, seizing everything that glittered, everything that seemed to have value. The British were the most aggressive, their colonial troops in particular, but the French weren't slow to follow. The meticulous arrangement of the collections couldn't resist the assault of these men who saw there an opportunity for riches they would never find again.

Beaumont, who had remained with his section in the main courtyard, saw the beginning of the pillage with horror.

"No!" he shouted. "You have no right! It's theft!"

But his voice was lost in the uproar. The men no longer listened to him. Even those of his own section hesitated, watching their comrades gorge themselves on booty, wondering why they should remain empty-handed.

Dubois approached Beaumont, his face tormented.

"Sergeant, what do we do?"

"We do nothing. We take nothing. We keep our dignity, even if nobody else keeps theirs."

"But the others..."

"I don't give a damn about the others! I don't give a damn what these thieves do! You, Dubois, you're worth more than that. You're worth more than this pack of pillagers."

The young soldier approved, tears in his eyes. He remained at Beaumont's side, watching the sacking continue with a feeling of shame and powerlessness.

Inside the main palace, General de Montauban witnessed the disaster. Around him, his own officers tried to maintain some semblance of order, but it was a waste of time. Pillaging had begun, and nothing could stop it.

General Jamin approached, his face red with anger.

"Mon général, we must do something! Our men are behaving like primitives! They're destroying everything, they're stealing everything!"

"I know, Jamin. I know."

"Give an order! Make them stop!"

Montauban faced his subordinate, and Jamin saw in his eyes a resignation he had never seen before.

"An order? And who will execute it? The men are unleashed. If I try to stop them by force, they'll turn against us. You know military history, Jamin. You know what happens when an army tastes pillage. It becomes uncontrollable."

"Are we going to stand there, watching without reacting? Letting centuries of civilization be destroyed?"

"We're going to try to limit the damage. To preserve what can be. But we won't be able to save everything. Designate commissioners. Have them choose the most precious pieces and put them in safekeeping. The rest... the rest will follow its course."

Jamin wanted to protest, but understood it was useless. He saluted and moved away to execute the order, rage in his heart.

Delmas, who had heard the exchange, joined Montauban.

"Mon général, is this how our adventure ends? In pillage and dishonor?"

"Honor is a luxury we can no longer afford. We've gone too far. We must live with the consequences of our acts."

"But you said... You promised we would remain men of honor. Even in the worst circumstances."

"I tried. God knows I tried. But I failed."

"And you'll fail too, one day. Because war leaves no room for saints. Only for survivors."

He broke away and left the palace. He needed air, space, distance from this horror. Outside, pillaging continued. Soldiers emerged from buildings loaded with heterogeneous objects. Some fought over the same vase, breaking it in their struggle. Others drank alcohol found in the imperial reserves, getting drunk in the afternoon heat.

Chaos. An organized chaos, even ritualized, as if pillaging were an integral part of war, as if it were a deserved reward.

Baron Gros tried to save what he could. With a few French officers who shared his scruples, he was building a modest collection of objects he hoped to preserve. But it was a drop of water in an ocean of destruction.

The hours passed. The sun began to decline. The pillaging continued, more anarchic as the soldiers became intoxicated. Fights broke out, gunshots rang out from time to time.

And then, toward evening, Lord Elgin convened a new meeting. In the palace's main courtyard, he made an announcement.

"Gentlemen, I have made a decision. This palace must be destroyed. Entirely. We will set it on fire. This will be our response to the monstrosities committed against our prisoners. This will be our message to the Emperor of China: one does not trample British honor with impunity."

CHAPTER 2 - THE TREASURE OF THE SON OF HEAVEN

On October 7, 1860, at dawn, General Charles Cousin de Montauban summoned his three best officers to the throne room. Captain of artillery Jacques Bessières, former student of the Polytechnic school who had studied art history. Commander Henri Fould, collector of Chinese antiquities. And Colonel François Lambert, who had spent two years in Egypt and brought back dozens of crates of Oriental artifacts.

"The pillaging that began yesterday continues today. We are going to organize it. You three are the most cultivated men in this army. You will become commissioners for war prizes. Your mission: to catalog the most precious objects. Those that deserve to enter the imperial collections. You will choose three hundred of them. No more – transport will already be a nightmare. These objects will be sent to the Emperor and Empress Eugénie. To work, gentlemen. You have carte blanche throughout the palace. Take the time to examine, compare, and choose. I want these three hundred objects to be the most beautiful, the most precious, the most remarkable. They will bear witness to this campaign. They will enter into History."

Colonel Lambert spoke:

"Where do we begin, General?"

"With this room. The imperial throne is over there, on the dais. Clear out the soldiers coming and going. Start with the insignia of power. Then you will explore the rest of the palace. Take notes. Establish a precise inventory. In three days, I want your list."

"Very well, General."

The Great Throne Room

They approached the dais where the imperial throne stood. The colonel climbed the marble steps first, followed by his two subordinates. Their boots echoed in the oppressive silence of the now-deserted hall.

The throne was carved from a block of solid sandalwood, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and jade. The backrest, two meters high, was adorned with a five-clawed dragon whose eyes were formed of Burmese rubies the size of pigeon eggs.

Commander Fould leaned over the gemstones:

"These rubies must weigh fifty carats each, perhaps more. And the quality of the cut... Not a visible inclusion."

Captain Bessières had sat down on the steps, contemplating the throne with a strange expression.

"You know what strikes me, gentlemen? This throne has probably not been used for months. The emperor no longer came here. He had taken refuge in Rehe, at his summer residence. This throne is empty. The power it symbolizes has evaporated."

"You're rambling, Bessières," replied the commander with a smile.

"Perhaps. But this yellow silk cushion bears no recent traces. Not a wrinkle, as if time had stopped here. For this dynasty, for this empire, time stopped the day we landed at Tientsin."

"Don't be so dramatic, Captain. The Qing will survive this war. They will sign a treaty, pay indemnities, open ports. But they will remain in power."

"For how long? In fifty years, in a hundred years, will China still be an empire? Or will it have become a European colony, like India?"

The captain stood up, dusting off his uniform:

"No one can colonize China. It is too vast, too populous, too ancient. No, China will remain Chinese. But it will have to adapt to the modern world."

The colonel had approached the throne, examining it closely.

"Forget the throne," he declared. "It's too bulky. We'll never be able to transport it. It's the objects on this table that interest us."

He descended from the dais and headed toward the low rosewood table arranged in front of the throne.

"Come see, gentlemen."

They gathered around. Several objects were arranged there with ritualistic care: two jade scepters, a tablet, seals, an incense burner.

The commander took out his notebook from his pocket and opened it to a blank page.

"First object. A command staff. Imperial scepter. Ruyi."

He reached out his hand, hesitated for a moment – as if he feared committing sacrilege – then grasped the scepter. About seventy centimeters long, it was carved from a single block of nephrite jade of a deep green, almost black.

"Feel the weight of this thing."

He passed it to Fould, who weighed it respectfully.

"It must weigh three kilos? Four?"

"At least four," confirmed the colonel. "A block of jade this size, of such pure color... priceless."

The commander ran his fingers over the smooth surface.

"It's cold to the touch, but at the same time... there's something alive in this stone. Do you feel it?"

Captain Bessières approached:

"The Chinese say that jade possesses a qi, a vital energy. They consider it more precious than gold or diamonds."

"A vital energy," repeated Lambert with a skeptical smile. "Do you believe that, Captain?"

"No, Colonel. Hold it for a few minutes. It warms up."

Lambert took the scepter back and examined it more attentively.

"The end terminates in a mushroom head. The lingzhi, symbol of longevity and good omen. And there, characters engraved all along. Very fine calligraphy."

The commander leaned in.

"Captain, can you decipher these inscriptions?"

"Only a few characters, Commander. I studied before the campaign, without mastering the language. But enough to recognize certain words. This is poetry. Poems composed by Emperor Qianlong himself."

"An emperor who writes poetry on his scepters," marveled Fould. "In our country, kings have their coats of arms and titles engraved. They engrave poems."

"For the Chinese, a sovereign must be an accomplished scholar. Military strength is not enough. One must master the classics, compose poems, practice calligraphy. An ignorant emperor would be unthinkable."

"And yet they lost the war against us," noted the colonel.

"Their refinement is not a weapon of war, Colonel. But in a thousand years, who will remember this war? No one. But Qianlong's poems will still be read, this scepter will still be admired."

"A fine consolation for a military defeat," Fould remarked ironically. "Do you realize what we're doing? The emperor held this scepter during great ceremonies. The equivalent of the crown of France, the scepter of Saint Louis. And we are stealing it."

Lambert stiffened:

"We're not stealing it, Commander. We're taking it as war prize."

"Really, Colonel? How is that different?"

"It's legal. Recognized by all civilized nations. The law of war authorizes victors to seize the property of the vanquished."

"The law of war... Do you think that's a law that deserves to be respected, Colonel?"

The colonel approached Fould, his voice firm:

"Commander, if you cannot accept this mission, say so now. I will ask the general to replace you. But if you stay, then accomplish your task without qualms. We are not here to judge the justness of this war."

Fould clenched his jaw.

"I'm staying, Colonel. And I will execute the orders. But that won't prevent me from thinking."

"Think as much as you want. But work as well."

The commander carefully set down the scepter and noted in his notebook:

"Imperial ruyi scepter, dark green nephrite jade, length approx. 70 cm, engraved with poems by Emperor Qianlong. Qing period, late 18th century. Exceptional quality."

"Lord Elgin will want this scepter," predicted the colonel. "The very symbol of imperial power. He'll want to bring it back to England as a trophy."

"Undoubtedly, Colonel," admitted Bessières. "But there is a second one."

He pointed to a second ruyi, resting next to the first. This one was carved from translucent white jade, of a different beauty, but just as remarkable.

The commander lifted it.

"This one is lighter. Three kilos, perhaps."

"And the color," observed the captain. "Pure white jade. Rare. White jade of this quality comes from the Kunlun mountains,

thousands of kilometers from here. Its transport must have cost a fortune. We have two imperial scepters. One for Lord Elgin, one for Napoleon III."

Fould couldn't help but make a remark.

"Providence arranges things so nicely..."

The colonel struck his fist on the table:

"Enough! We're not going to fight like ragpickers at the foot of the imperial throne! Yes, what we're doing raises moral questions. Yes, we can discuss the legitimacy of this war and this pillaging. But we are soldiers. Our duty is to obey. General de Montauban has entrusted us with a mission. We will accomplish it as best we can."

"You're right, Colonel. Forgive me. My nerves are frayed."

"So are mine, Commander."

They shook hands, reconciled.

"Good. Third object: a jade tablet."

The commander lifted a gui tablet, carved from translucent white jade. It measured thirty centimeters long by ten wide, with rounded edges.

"You can almost see through it," marveled the colonel.

"Almost, but not quite," retorted Bessières. "This translucency, this light veil, that's perfection."

He turned the tablet over. One side was engraved with archaic characters.

"These characters are very ancient. They don't resemble modern writing. I would say Zhou dynasty, perhaps even older."

"You mean this tablet could be three thousand years old?" wondered the colonel.

"No. The tablet itself is probably more recent. But it was engraved with archaic characters to give it a venerable appearance. A common practice under the Qing. They wanted

to connect themselves to ancient dynasties, show the continuity of their power."

"What was this tablet used for?"

"A ritual object. The emperor used it during ceremonies to communicate with supernatural forces, with imperial ancestors. These characters are invocation formulas, prayers."

"Can you read them, Captain?"

"A few words. There, for example, the character tian – 'heaven.' And there, di – 'earth.' The rest is too complicated for me. We would need a sinologist."

Lambert took the tablet and weighed it.

"It's heavy for its size."

"Jade is a very hard stone, Colonel," explained Bessières. "On the Mohs scale, which measures the hardness of minerals, it ranges between 6 and 7. Less hard than diamond, but much harder than marble or granite."

"How could they cut a stone so hard with the tools of the time?"

"With patience. They rubbed with abrasive sand for months, years. They slowly wore down the material until obtaining the desired shape. A tablet like this probably required ten years of work."

"Ten years!" exclaimed the colonel. "For a single object!"

"They understood that certain things cannot be rushed. That beauty requires time."

"How much is such a thing worth, Captain?"

Bessières looked at him.

"It's worth nothing. It's priceless. You can't put a price on an object like this. Like asking the price of Charlemagne's crown. These objects have no market value. They have symbolic, historical, cultural value."

"Yet someone will end up giving it a price."

"This tablet will never be sold. It will enter the French imperial collections, where it will be preserved and admired."

The colonel straightened up, massaging his aching back.

"Gentlemen, we've spent an hour on three objects. At this rate, it will take us a month to complete the inventory. Captain Bessières, guide us to the porcelains. We must speed up."

The Porcelains of the Empire

They approached the shelves that occupied the entire west wall of the room. They rose four meters in height, divided into dozens of compartments of finely carved rosewood. The porcelains occupied the central part, arranged with meticulous care.

Fould stopped short, contemplating the extent of the collection.

"Where do we begin, Colonel? There must be a hundred pieces? Two hundred?"

"More than that," responded Bessières, scanning the shelves. "I'd say three hundred, perhaps four hundred. And these are only the porcelains of this room. There are probably thousands more in the rest of the palace."

"Thousands," repeated Lambert. "And we'll only take a few dozen."

"The most beautiful ones," specified the captain. "The masterpieces. The rest..."

The colonel interrupted him and swept his gaze across the room:

"Captain, your opinion on the method?"

"I suggest starting from the top. The most precious pieces are placed high up, out of reach of dust and accidents. Commander, do you see that ladder over there?"

Fould headed toward the corner of the room. When he lifted the ladder, he noticed it wasn't made of ordinary wood. The uprights were rosewood carved with floral motifs.

"Even their ladder is sculpted. These people did nothing banal."

"That's what makes their greatness," responded Bessières. "And also, perhaps, their weakness. They spent so much time perfecting the arts, letters, aesthetics, that they neglected the army, the navy, modern technology."

He began to climb. The rungs creaked under his weight but held firm.

"Be careful, Captain," warned the commander. "If you fall with one of these vases in your hands, the general will have us shot."

"Rest assured, Commander."

Arriving at the top, Captain Bessières found himself facing a row of spectacular vases.

"A series of vases from the Qianlong period, I'm certain. Late 18th century."

"How many do you see?" asked Colonel Lambert.

"Twelve. All from the same series, matched. Monumental pieces. This one must measure... wait, I'll bring it down."

The captain grasped the first vase with infinite delicacy. Heavier than he had imagined – the porcelain of this size and thickness must weigh at least five or six kilograms. He descended step by step, concentrated, aware that the slightest false move could shatter forever a masterpiece nearly a century old.

"Watch out for the last step."

"I see it, thank you, Commander."

He set the vase down on a table in the center of the room. They gathered around it, contemplating it in silence.

The porcelain was of immaculate whiteness, of a purity that seemed unreal. On this perfect background, scenes of court life had been painted with a delicacy that defied imagination. Mandarins in embroidered silk robes strolled through a garden. Concubines played the pipa under weeping willows. Children ran after butterflies among blooming flowers. Each character,

though tiny – some measuring no more than a centimeter – was painted with stupefying attention to detail.

"Miniature painting," whispered the commander, leaning so close that his breath almost made the surface tremble. "The details... The folds of the robes, the features of the faces, the blades of grass in the garden. How can one paint with such precision on porcelain?"

"With fine brushes," responded Bessières, also fascinated. "Made from a single weasel hair. Sometimes even a single human eyelash for the finest details. And years of apprenticeship. The painters of Jingdezhen begin their training at the age of seven."

"Jingdezhen?"

"The city of porcelains. In southern China, in Jiangxi province. All imperial porcelains are made there. It goes back to the Yuan dynasty in the 14th century. The center of Chinese porcelain, as Limoges is the center of French porcelain. Except that Jingdezhen is much older, larger, more perfected."

The colonel, who was examining the vase in silence, suddenly spoke:

"The handles. Look at the handles."

The other two leaned in. The handles of the vase were sculpted in the shape of miniature dragon heads. Each dragon showed an open mouth, sharp fangs, protruding eyes. And on the body, hundreds of scales had been sculpted then enameled.

"Each scale is different," noted Lambert, running his finger over the surface. "They're not uniform. Slightly irregular, like on a real dragon. Well, if dragons existed."

"That's the difference between a masterpiece and a simple beautiful object. The artisan who made this didn't repeat a pattern. He thought about what a dragon is, how its scales would be arranged, how light would play on their surface."

The commander had knelt down to study the balance of proportions.

"And there, on the neck. Inscriptions. Can you read them, Captain?"

Bessières leaned in. On the neck of the vase, in characters of microscopic fineness, ran an inscription in classical Chinese.

"Let's see... It's difficult, the characters are so small... But I think I recognize the date of manufacture. And here, the name of the imperial workshop. This piece was created in 1765, during the reign of Qianlong."

"Almost a hundred years ago," murmured the commander. "A century that this vase has existed. And it's in perfect condition. Not a crack, not a chip."

"Because it was preserved in this palace," explained Bessières, "protected from direct light, from dust, from temperature variations. The Chinese know how to preserve their porcelains. They wrap them in rice paper, store them in sandalwood cabinets whose scent keeps insects away. They always handle them with silk gloves. For them, each ancient porcelain is a link with their ancestors, a family treasure to transmit to future generations."

"A family treasure that we're going to steal from them," stated the commander in a low voice.

The colonel sighed but didn't respond.

The captain climbed back up the ladder. One by one, with infinite patience, he brought down the eleven other vases. Each presented different decorations, but in the same style: peaceful scenes of courtly life, painted with that breathtaking technical mastery that characterized the imperial workshops of Jingdezhen.

The second vase showed court ladies admiring koi carp in a pond. The third represented a picnic in a garden pavilion. The fourth, a music concert under wisteria. Each vase told a different story.

When the twelve vases were aligned on the table, they stepped back to admire the whole.

"Extraordinary," noted the colonel. "They harmonize. The colors, the styles, the proportions. They were designed as a whole."

"Probably a special commission from the emperor, Colonel," suggested Bessières. "For an anniversary, perhaps, or a great ceremony. An artist – or a team of artisans – must have spent two or three years creating this series."

Fould noted in his notebook:

"Series of twelve vases, Qianlong period (dated 1765), height 75-85 cm, varied decorations representing scenes of court life. Exceptional condition. Recommendation: keep the complete series, do not separate the pieces."

"How many vases are we taking from this series, Captain?" asked the commander.

"All twelve, Commander. They cannot be separated. It would be like separating the pages of a book or the movements of a symphony."

"Transport will be complicated," noted Lambert.

"The general said not to worry about transport, Colonel. Our role is to select the best pieces. The rest will follow."

The colonel turned toward the next shelf.

"Now, these pieces on the middle shelf. Celadons."

Bessières carefully brought down a vase of luminous jade green. The form was different from the first vases: simple, refined, without any painted ornamentation. A globular jar, with bulging walls, resting on a small circular foot.

"Much older, Colonel. Song dynasty, I would say. Perhaps even Northern Song. 11th or 12th century."

"Seven hundred years ago?" exclaimed the commander, taking the vase with new reverence.

"The glaze is smooth. Not the slightest crackle, not the slightest defect. This color called celadon is obtained by the oxidation of

iron contained in the glaze during reduction firing at over twelve hundred degrees. A difficult technique to master. You must control with absolute precision the temperature of the kiln, the amount of oxygen, the firing time."

"How did they do it, in the 11th century, to control temperature with such precision?"

"With experience transmitted from generation to generation. The master potters of Longquan – that's where these celadons were made – knew their kilns like we know our own homes. They knew, just by looking at the color of the flames, if the temperature was correct. Just by listening to the crackling of the fire, if the firing was going well. Almost magic. Or rather, art elevated to the level of a science."

The commander held the vase in front of the window, letting sunlight play on the surface.

"This color is splendid. It changes depending on the angle of observation. Sometimes pale green, almost white. Sometimes deep green, almost blue."

"The irregular thickness of the glaze. Where the coating is thicker, the color is more intense. Where it's thinner, it lightens. These variations aren't defects. On the contrary, they're part of the beauty of the object. They give life to the surface."

"It's splendid," admitted the colonel. "This simplicity, this purity of lines..."

"Japanese?" suggested the captain with a smile.

"Yes! Exactly. This minimalism reminds me of Japanese objects I saw at the Louvre."

"The Japanese learned everything from the Chinese. Porcelain, painting, calligraphy, architecture, gardens, tea, Zen Buddhism. Everything comes from China. The Chinese are the masters. The Japanese are brilliant students, certainly, who have sometimes surpassed their masters."

The commander was counting the celadons on the shelf.

"There are fifteen? Sixteen?"

"Eighteen, Commander," corrected the captain after counting in turn. "Of different forms. Jars like this one, bottles with long narrow necks, flared cups. All from the Song or Yuan period."

"Do we take them all, Captain?"

"Yes, Commander. All of them. Very rare pieces. Song celadons are worth a fortune on the European market."

"How do you know all this?" asked the commander with curiosity. "You know more about Chinese porcelain than any art dealer I know."

The captain smiled modestly.

"I spent three months in Paris before the expedition, Commander. As soon as I knew we were leaving for China, I understood we would have the opportunity to see – and perhaps acquire – extraordinary objects. I prepared myself. I visited all the museums, consulted all the sale catalogs, questioned all the experts. I read all the books I could find about Chinese art."

"You're a foresighted man, Captain," smiled the colonel.

"Or greedy, Colonel. It all depends on your point of view."

"Let's continue, Colonel. We still have the blue and white pieces to examine."

The blue and white vases occupied the lower part of the shelves. When Bessières brought down the first one, Fould let out a whistle.

"Spectacular."

A large pear-shaped vase – a yuhuchunping in Chinese terminology – measuring nearly a meter in height. The neck, flared in the shape of a trumpet, surmounted an elegant belly that curved gracefully before narrowing toward the base.

But what took one's breath away was the decoration. On a background of dazzling white porcelain, narrative scenes had been painted in cobalt blue of magical intensity.

"The story of General Yue Fei," observed the captain, turning the vase. "A national hero of the Song dynasty. There, we see him as a child, studying the classics with his mother. Here, he enters the emperor's service. There, he goes to war against the Jurchen invaders from the North. And here..."

He turned the vase again.

"Here, we see him betrayed by Minister Qin Hui, imprisoned, executed. His entire life told on this vase."

His two colleagues approached, fascinated. Each scene was of microscopic precision. The characters were painted with stupefying attention to detail.

"How can one paint with such precision? The brushes must have been fine."

"A steady hand, Commander. One tremor, one abrupt movement, and everything is ruined."

The colonel was scrutinizing the base of the vase.

"There's a mark here. Can you read it, Captain?"

Bessières leaned in.

"The imperial mark of the Yuan dynasty. 14th century. This vase is six hundred years old, gentlemen."

"Six centuries," whispered the commander. "And in perfect condition."

"It's not a miracle. The result of constant care, of attention at every moment. The Chinese know these objects are fragile, irreplaceable. They protect them. They cherish them."

The captain counted the blue and white vases on the shelves.

"There are twenty-three blue and white vases. All from different periods. Some Yuan, like this one. Others Ming. A few Qing. I propose we take them all."

Bessières consulted his notes.

"Colonel, the afternoon is advancing. We've spent several hours on the porcelains. We've selected fifty-three: twelve famille rose, eighteen celadons, twenty-three blue and white. We still have the cloisonnés, the jades, the bronzes, the textiles, the scholars' objects, the clocks. If we continue at this pace, it will take us a week. Yet we only have two days."

"What do you propose, Captain?"

"We must speed up, Colonel. Make quicker choices. We can't examine each object for an hour. We must be more pragmatic."

"Pragmatic," repeated the colonel. "A nice word for saying 'superficial.'"

"If you have a better idea, Colonel, I'm listening."

The colonel knew the captain was right.

"Very well. Let's move on to the cloisonnés. They're in those display cases, over there."

The afternoon was advancing. The light entering through the high windows was beginning to take on that golden hue that precedes twilight. The three men had filled several pages of notes.

The Enameled Wonders

The low display cases containing the cloisonné enamels were arranged along the west wall of the room. When they approached them, the light of the setting sun struck the objects full on, making them sparkle.

"It looks like they're on fire," declared the commander, shielding his eyes.

"The effect of the enamels," explained the captain. "They reflect light like glass. Normal, since enamels are colored glass."

He knelt before the first display case, wiping with his sleeve the thin layer of dust covering the glass. Inside, a dozen vases were aligned, each more spectacular than the last.

The colonel knelt beside him.

"What is cloisonné? I've heard of it, but I've never understood the technique."

Bessières seemed pleased to be able to explain.

"An enameling technique on metal. Very complex. You take a copper or bronze support. You solder very fine copper wires to it – sometimes barely a millimeter wide – following the contours of a design. These wires form compartments, partitions. Then you fill each compartment with enamel powder of different colors. Glass powders mixed with metallic oxides. Blue comes from cobalt, green from copper, yellow from iron, red from gold."

"Gold?" wondered Fould.

"Colloidal gold, yes. It makes red expensive and difficult to obtain. Once the compartments are filled, the object is fired in a kiln at very high temperature – about eight hundred degrees. The powders melt and vitrify. But in cooling, the enamels retract. So you must add enamel and fire again. Sometimes three times, four times, until the compartments are filled. Then the surface is polished. And finally, the copper wires and the rest of the metal support are gilded."

"Titan's work."

"Work that can take years for a single piece. Great cloisonné vases sometimes require an artisan for three or four years."

Bessières opened the display case and took out the first vase. A cylindrical piece, about thirty centimeters high, covered with a floral decoration on a turquoise blue background.

"This blue. What we call Jingtai blue, named after Emperor Jingtai who reigned in the mid-15th century. He's the one who made cloisonné enamel an imperial art. Before him, a minor craft. After him, a major art."

Fould carefully took the vase. It was heavier than it appeared.

"The colors are so vivid, so pure. It looks like they were applied yesterday."

"The quality of Chinese enamels. They don't tarnish over time. A four-hundred-year-old cloisonné has the same colors as a new cloisonné."

Lambert was closely inspecting the decoration.

"These flowers... are they lotus?"

"Lotus and peonies, Colonel. Symbols of purity and wealth. Floral motifs are very common. But the fineness of the work... Each petal is in a separate compartment. And in each compartment, the enamel has a different shade. There are pale pinks, more sustained pinks, creamy whites. These gradations are intentional, calculated. The artisan carefully chose which enamel to put in which compartment to create this effect of depth, of relief."

"Painting with glass."

"Exactly, Commander."

They spent the next half hour examining the collection. There were vases of all sizes, boxes, plates, incense burners. One object in particular caught their attention: an incense burner in the shape of a mandarin duck, twenty centimeters high.

"Fabulous," exclaimed the colonel, lifting it. "Each feather is cloisonné. The color gradations... Orange-red on the head, transitioning to dark brown on the body. And the eye... a black pupil with a white point of light."

"The artisans worked with magnifying glasses. For the finest details, they even used magnifying glasses mounted on supports, like those of watchmakers. Some pieces required such a level of concentration that an artisan could only work two or three hours a day."

"Two or three hours a day," repeated Fould. "Over four years."

"About three thousand hours for a single object."

The captain put the duck back in the display case and stood up.

"How many are we taking, Colonel?"

"Hard to say. There must be sixty pieces? Eighty?"

"At least eighty," confirmed the colonel after touring the display cases.

"We can't take them all. They're too heavy. Bronze weighs a lot. If we take eighty, that will be hundreds of kilos just for the cloisonnés."

"How many, Captain?"

Bessières thought, scanning the collection.

"Forty-seven. The most beautiful pieces from each period. Jingtai, Qianlong, a few more recent pieces. And this duck, of course."

"The duck is mine," joked the commander.

"Pardon, Commander?"

"I'm joking. But if one day these objects are put up for sale, I reserve the right to buy this duck."

"If they're put up for sale, it will be in a century, Commander. You'll have been dead for a long time."

"Then my grandchildren will buy it. I'll mention it in my will."

Despite the ambient tension, they smiled.

Fould noted in his notebook:

"Forty-seven cloisonné enamels. Mainly Jingtai and Qianlong periods. Vases, boxes, incense burners, decorative animals."

"Where are we now, Captain?"

Bessières quickly counted.

"Fifty-three porcelains, forty-seven cloisonnés. One hundred objects. We still need two hundred more."

"The jades," said the colonel. "We haven't seen the jades yet. And from what I've heard, the emperor's jade collection is fabulous."

"It's in the adjoining room, Colonel. Let's go."

The Imperial Jade Room

They crossed an antechamber and entered a smaller room, hung with yellow silk – the imperial color. The lighting was subdued, almost mystical. Rosewood display cases with glass doors, arranged along the four walls, contained what was undoubtedly the most beautiful jade collection in all of China.

They stopped on the threshold, seized by what they discovered. Even through the glass of the display cases, even in the half-light, the jades seemed to shine with an inner light.

"All these pieces," said Lambert.

There were hundreds of objects. Cups, sculptures, scepters, jewelry, ritual objects. And contrary to what they imagined, jade wasn't always green. It came in a surprising palette of colors: milky white, pale green, dark green, gray, brown, orange, even mauve.

"I thought jade was always green," wondered the commander.

"A common false idea," responded Bessières. "Jade actually designates two different minerals: nephrite and jadeite. Nephrite, exploited since the Neolithic, offers a range of colors from white to dark green, passing through cream, gray or brown tones. Jadeite, rarer and more precious, discovered in Burma only in the 18th century, presents more vivid colors: emerald green, mauve, orange, pure white."

He approached the first display case, took a key from his pocket – General Montauban had given him all the palace keys – and opened the glass door.

"This piece, gentlemen."

He took out a sculpture that drew exclamations from the other two. A white jade mountain, about fifty centimeters high and nearly a meter wide. Carved from a single block of translucent

white nephrite, it represented a landscape of snow-covered peaks of stupefying realism.

He placed it on a table in the center of the room and they gathered around.

The sculpture was of breathtaking complexity. Dozens of rocky peaks rose to different heights, creating a depth, a perspective that defied understanding. Miniature pines clung to steep slopes. Sculpted waterfalls seemed to flow between the rocks. Tiny hermits walked on steep paths, heading toward pavilions perched atop cliffs. Stylized clouds floated between the peaks, creating an atmosphere of mystery and spirituality.

"How is this possible?" whispered the commander. "How can you sculpt something so complex in such a hard stone?"

"With time. A lot of time. This sculpture required ten years of work. Perhaps fifteen. Perhaps twenty."

"Twenty years!" exclaimed the colonel. "It's unimaginable!"

"For us, yes, Colonel. But for the Chinese, normal. Time has a different value here. They're not in a hurry. They understand that certain things cannot be rushed."

Lambert leaned over the sculpture, examining the details with a magnifying glass.

"The hermits. You can see their faces. You can see their robes. You can even see their walking sticks. These characters measure no more than five millimeters, and yet every detail is rendered!"

"The back," added the captain, turning the sculpture over.

On the back, engraved in characters of great fineness, ran a long poem.

"A poem by Qianlong. It celebrates the beauty of sacred mountains, the spiritual quest of hermits, the serenity of life withdrawn far from the tumults of the court."

"Can you read it, Captain?"

"A few passages, Colonel. My Chinese is limited. But I understand its essence. Look, there for example, it says something like: 'In the eternal mountains, the spirit finds peace.' Approximate, my translation, but that's the general idea."

"Cold to the touch. But at the same time... there's something alive. Do you feel it?"

"What the Chinese say. They believe jade possesses a qi. For them, it's a living stone."

"Do you believe it?"

"Not really, Commander. Hold it for a few minutes. It warms up, seems to adapt to your body temperature. Troubling. Almost disturbing."

The colonel took the sculpture. Indeed, after a few seconds, it no longer seemed so cold.

"Strange," he admitted.

They put the jade mountain back on the table and continued their exploration.

The jade cups formed an impressive category. The captain took one out, in celadon jade. It measured thirty centimeters in diameter.

"The thickness of the walls. Three millimeters, perhaps less."

He placed the cup in front of a window where a bit of twilight light still entered. The light passed through the jade, revealing internal veins, color nuances that weren't visible in normal light. The jade seemed to ignite with an unreal green glow.

"Magic."

"Art, Commander," corrected the captain. "Very great art. To cut a cup of this fineness requires years. You can't make a mistake. One blow too many, excessive pressure, and the cup breaks. All the work is lost."

"How many cups break during the process?"

"Many. For every cup that reaches perfection, ten or twenty break along the way. These objects represent not only the work invested in the piece itself, but also all the work lost in the broken pieces."

The cup's handles were sculpted in the shape of miniature dragons. Each dragon, barely five centimeters long, showed scales, claws, whiskers. And the dragons' bodies plunged inside, as if they were drinking the liquid contained.

"What imagination. Sculpting dragons that drink from the cup. Both functional and poetic."

"Chinese genius. They never separate function from aesthetics. For them, an object must be both beautiful and useful. Art and craft are one."

They then discovered the famous concentric balls. The colonel took one out of the display case.

A green jade sphere about ten centimeters in diameter. But when he turned it in his hands, he noticed there were other spheres inside, each able to turn freely.

"How many spheres?"

Bessières counted through the delicate perforations.

"Seven, Colonel. Seven spheres nested inside each other."

"How is this possible? How can you sculpt spheres inside a ball without breaking it?"

"No one knows exactly. A secret jealously guarded by the artisans of the imperial workshops. We think they use very fine tools – hooks, miniature chisels – introduced through small holes. They work blind, so to speak. It requires dexterity, precision, patience that surpasses understanding."

"How long to sculpt a piece like this?"

"Three years, four years. Perhaps more. And each sphere is decorated with a different motif. You can see them through the perforations. The first sphere – the outermost – is decorated with

dragons. The second with phoenixes. The third with lotus flowers. The fourth with clouds."

Fould had sat down on a stool.

"You know what strikes me? These objects weren't even used. They were kept here, in these display cases, admired occasionally. All these years of work, all this genius, for objects that spent their existence locked in cabinets."

"But that was precisely their function, Commander. These objects weren't meant to be used in the practical sense. They were meant to be contemplated, admired, meditated upon. For the Chinese, possessing a beautiful jade was possessing a piece of eternity. A link with ancestors, with the past, with future generations."

They worked quickly, opening display case after display case, examining, comparing, noting. The ritual objects fascinated them. Bi discs, symbols of heaven, dating from the Neolithic. Cong tubes, symbols of earth, several millennia old. Gui tablets for imperial ceremonies. Ruyi scepters in jades of different colors.

There were also more personal objects. Belt buckles, pendants, mandarin buttons, rings. A white jade buckle circled in gold caught their attention. The jade was engraved with a hunting scene where mounted archers pursued deer in a pine forest. The gold of the mount was chiseled with bat motifs – symbol of happiness in Chinese.

"Let's take this one," decided Lambert. "It's exquisite."

After an hour, they had selected sixty-seven jade objects. Sculpted mountains, cups, concentric balls, ritual objects, jewelry. Each a unique, irreplaceable masterpiece.

The captain noted everything in his notebook, then counted:

"Fifty-three porcelains, forty-seven cloisonnés, sixty-seven jades. One hundred sixty-seven objects. We still need one hundred thirty-three."

Night had fallen. Through the windows, lanterns could be seen lighting up throughout the palace. The soldiers continued their nocturnal pillaging. Laughter, songs rose in the darkness.

"It's too late to continue tonight," declared the colonel. "We can't see anything anymore."

"You're right, Colonel. Let's return to our quarters. We'll resume tomorrow at dawn. A long day awaits us."

They closed the display cases, extinguished the lanterns they had lit, and left the jade room. In the corridor, they passed a group of Zouaves carrying crates filled with stolen objects. One of them wore a yellow silk robe over his uniform. Another had put on a mandarin cap and was making his comrades laugh with grimaces.

"They're disguising themselves with imperial clothes," growled Lambert with disgust. "Obscene."

"It's war. In war, everything is permitted."

"Everything? Really everything? Are there no limits?"

"Apparently not."

They walked in silence to their quarters, each lost in thought. This first day of inventory had exhausted them – physically, of course, but especially morally. They had contemplated marvels, touched masterpieces, handled objects of inestimable beauty and value. And at the same time, they had become aware of the magnitude of what they were doing.

That night, none of the three slept well. They remained awake in their camp beds, listening to the sounds of pillaging continuing in the palace, thinking of all those objects that were going to disappear, burn, be destroyed forever.

And in the early morning, when the bugle sounded reveille, they got up with a single thought: they had one day left. They had to work fast. Save what could be saved. Preserve at least some of these treasures before everything went up in smoke.

The Ancestral Bronzes

On October 8, at five o'clock in the morning, the three commissioners met in front of the bronze room. The captain had drawn features, circles under his eyes. The commander walked stiffly, his back aching. Only the colonel seemed in form, although his gaze betrayed deep melancholy.

"Gentlemen," began Lambert, taking out his bunch of keys, "today is our last full day. We still have to inventory the bronzes, textiles, scholars' objects, and clocks. We must be efficient."

The bronze room was located in a separate wing of the palace, in a building older than the others. The architecture was more sober, more austere. The walls were of bare stone, without the luxuriant decorations found elsewhere. A simple setting that didn't distract attention.

When they entered the room, they were struck by the atmosphere of the place. Morning light entered through tall narrow windows, projecting golden rays onto the objects arranged on pedestals of black lacquered wood.

The bronzes were of impressive size. Some tripod cauldrons measured over a meter in height. Their surface, covered with a verdigris patina testifying to their venerable age, was engraved with archaic motifs of fascinating strangeness.

The colonel approached the first object, a large ding – a ritual tripod cauldron from the Shang dynasty.

"This one must be three thousand years old. Perhaps even three thousand five hundred."

The bronze was massive, probably weighing over a hundred kilograms. The three feet, in the shape of stylized animal paws, sank deep into the pedestal.

"Three thousand five hundred years," murmured the commander. "This object already existed when Moses led the Hebrews out of Egypt."

"It existed before, Commander," corrected the captain. "The Shang dynasty begins around 1600 BCE. This object was already ancient when Troy fell. When Rome was founded, it was already a thousand years old."

The colonel touched the engraved motifs. They represented masks of fantastic creatures with globular eyes, sharp teeth, curved horns.

"What is this, Captain? Demons?"

"They're called taotie. Demon or deity masks. No one knows exactly what they represent. Archaeologists still debate. Some think they're protective deities, invoked during offering ceremonies to ancestors. Others think they're malevolent spirits that ancestors had to fight in the afterlife. Still others believe they're symbolic representations of royal power."

"They're frightening. These eyes, these teeth... It looks like they're going to devour us."

"That may have been the goal. To frighten, impress, manifest power. These bronzes were used during great ceremonies. Imagine: dozens of cauldrons like this one, aligned in an ancestral temple, lit by torches. Steam rising from offerings being cooked in them. Priests in ritual robes chanting incantations."

The commander walked around the cauldron, scrutinizing it from all angles.

"How did they melt bronze at that time? And to create pieces of this size?"

"With a sophisticated technique. They used multi-piece molds. They first sculpted a model in clay with all the details. Then they created molds around this model. They poured molten bronze, an alloy of copper and tin. After cooling, they broke the molds to extract the bronze."

"And the temperature?"

"About twelve hundred degrees. With the furnaces of the time, a feat. They had to use superior quality charcoal, powerful bellows

to stoke the flames. And they had to control the temperature with rigorous precision."

The colonel had knelt to examine the inside of the cauldron.

"There are inscriptions here. Inside."

The captain leaned in. Indeed, engraved inside, archaic characters formed several columns of text.

"Ancient Chinese. Very ancient. I can't read it. These characters are different from modern writing. But generally, these inscriptions indicate for whom the bronze was cast. The name of a king, a noble, an important ancestor. And they often describe the occasion."

"Like history books," observed the commander. "These bronzes tell the history of ancient China."

"Exactly. For Chinese historians, these bronzes are irreplaceable documents. They contain information found nowhere else."

"And yet we're going to take some," said the colonel bitterly.

"Yes, Colonel. But at least we'll preserve them. They'll be studied, admired, kept in museums. Better than leaving them here to be melted down by soldiers who'll make cannonballs from them."

They continued their examination. The collection included dozens of pieces: ding of different sizes, gui, yi, zun, you.

A you vase caught their attention. It measured forty centimeters in height and presented an elegant form: an ovoid body surmounted by a domed lid, all resting on a circular foot. The handle was sculpted in the shape of a dragon whose body coiled from the lid to the foot of the vase.

"This dragon," marveled the commander. "Each scale is chiseled. And the eyes – they're inlaid with gold."

"Gold?" wondered the colonel.

"Yes, Colonel. A technique called inlaid gold. You dig small holes in the bronze, insert gold wires, hammer them so they fix. Reserved for the most precious pieces."

Lambert was examining the lid.

"There's an animal on the lid. A tiger, it seems."

"Yes, Colonel, a reclining tiger. Protective animal. The lids of these vases were often adorned with animals – tigers, elephants, mythical birds. Each animal had a symbolic significance."

Fould, who had toured the room, returned to them.

"There must be about fifty bronzes here, Colonel. We can't take them all. They're too heavy."

"No, indeed, Commander. I propose we take twenty-three. The most beautiful, the oldest, the best preserved. A number that represents the diversity of this collection well without being impossible to transport."

They spent the next two hours selecting the pieces. Difficult work. Each bronze had its merits.

"This one or that one?" asked the commander, pointing to two ding of similar sizes.

"This one," decided the colonel after careful examination. "The inscriptions are longer, more detailed."

"And this gui? Do we take it?"

"Yes. The patina is splendid. This jade green. It must have been buried for centuries before being unearthed. The oxidation of copper in contact with soil moisture created this color."

Little by little, their list grew. By ten o'clock in the morning, they had selected twenty-three bronzes, from the Shang dynasty to the Han. A condensed version of fifteen hundred years of Chinese history.

The colonel noted the totals in his own notebook:

"Fifty-three porcelains. Forty-seven cloisonnés. Sixty-seven jades. Twenty-three bronzes. Total: one hundred ninety objects. We still need one hundred ten."

"The textiles next," proposed the commander. "The imperial robes. The general will be happy to have a few to offer to Empress Eugénie."

"Good idea. The Hall of Ten Thousand Beauties. Let's go."

The Textile Room

They crossed several interior courtyards, skirting ponds where lotus still bloomed – unconscious of the chaos reigning around them. Soldiers passed them, carrying stolen objects. One of them carried a Ming vase under each arm. Another had wrapped a silk scroll around his waist like a belt. A third had fashioned a turban from an embroidered banner.

"Pathetic," whispered the colonel. "They don't even realize the value of what they're stealing."

"At least they're not destroying it, Colonel."

The Hall of Ten Thousand Beauties was a long gallery that the eunuchs had used to preserve imperial textiles. The walls were covered with sandalwood cabinets whose scent filled the room with an intoxicating perfume.

Many cabinets had already been forced open. Fabrics lay on the ground, trampled by soldiers. Robes had been torn, probably by men wanting to cut pieces to make handkerchiefs or scarves.

Dozens of robes littered the floor. Some had been slashed with a knife. Others bore traces of muddy boots. An imperial yellow silk robe – which must have required two years of work – had been torn in two.

The commander leaned down, picked up a fragment of embroidered silk. The fabric, of great fineness, was adorned with a golden dragon embroidered in gold and silver threads. But it had been trampled, soiled, damaged.

"A disaster. A real disaster."

"Let's search the cabinets that haven't been opened yet," ordered the colonel. "There are still a few at the back of the gallery. Perhaps we'll find intact pieces."

They headed toward the back of the room where about ten cabinets, closed and intact, waited. The colonel took out his bunch of keys, looked for the right one, opened the first cabinet.

Inside, wrapped in rice paper as thin as a spider's web, rested perfectly preserved imperial court robes.

Bessières took out the first robe with infinite precautions. The fabric was of wild silk of exceptional quality, of a dazzling imperial yellow that seemed to shine from within. On the front and back, embroidered in gold, silver and polychrome silk threads, appeared the twelve imperial symbols: the sun, the moon, stars, mountains, dragons, pheasants, ritual vases, aquatic algae, flames, rice grains, an axe, the fu symbol for happiness.

"This embroidery work," said the commander. "Each dragon scale is embroidered. You can see the reliefs, the shadows, the lights. Like a three-dimensional painting."

The colonel had approached, fascinated despite himself.

"How long to embroider a robe like this, Captain?"

"Two years minimum, Colonel. The palace embroiderers devoted their entire lives to it. They began their apprenticeship at the age of seven or eight. At fifteen, they were capable of embroidering simple pieces. At twenty-five, they were entrusted with imperial robes. Some of them spent their entire lives embroidering, until their eyes could no longer bear the effort."

"Their entire lives. To dress an emperor who will wear this robe only once, during a great ceremony."

"It was their honor. For these embroiderers, participating in the creation of an imperial robe was the culmination of a lifetime of work. Their way of serving the empire, of participating in the greatness of the dynasty."

They opened the other cabinets. Each contained marvels. Five-clawed dragon robes, reserved for the emperor. Four-clawed dragon robes, for princes of the blood. Sleeveless surcoats, embroidered with auspicious characters. Procession banners, several meters long, where embroidered dragons in relief seemed to fly in golden clouds.

One object in particular fascinated them: a twelve-panel screen, each panel measuring two meters high by fifty centimeters wide. Each panel was silk stretched over a rosewood frame, and on each panel had been painted – yes, painted, not embroidered – a scene of the Four Seasons.

Spring showed plum blossoms opening. Summer, lotus blooming on a pond. Autumn, chrysanthemums under the moon. Winter, pine branches bending under snow.

"Painted directly on silk," marveled the captain. "The fineness of the brushstrokes... It looks like a work by Shen Zhou or Tang Yin. A master of the Ming period."

"Do you think it's the work of a famous painter, Captain?"

"Possible, Commander. Or a court painter whose name hasn't been preserved. In China, many works are anonymous. Artists didn't always sign their creations. They considered the work more important than its creator."

The colonel was inspecting the back of the screen.

"There's something written here. Poems, it seems."

Indeed, on the back of each panel, a poem had been calligraphed in elegant characters.

"Poems about the seasons. Composed by the emperor himself, no doubt."

They spent the next hour selecting textiles. Thirty pieces in total: ten imperial robes, five embroidered surcoats, ten procession banners, and five painted silk screens, including the Four Seasons one.

"One hundred ninety plus thirty," calculated the colonel. "Two hundred twenty. We're still missing eighty objects."

"The scholars' objects and the clocks. We have the afternoon to examine them."

"Let's have lunch first," proposed the commander. "I'm starving. And we need rest."

They returned to their quarters where a requisitioned Chinese cook had prepared a simple meal: rice, sautéed vegetables, grilled fish. They ate in silence, too tired to talk.

But in each one's head turned the same thoughts. Soon, all this would burn. The palace, the gardens, the pavilions, the temples. Everything would be reduced to ashes. And they would have saved only three hundred objects. Three hundred objects out of tens of thousands.

The Scholars' Objects and the Clocks

The afternoon of October 8 was devoted to the last works to be inventoried. The scholars' objects room was a small room, but every square centimeter was occupied by treasures.

The three commissioners entered the room with a certain weariness. Two days of intensive inventory had exhausted them. But they had to continue. Time was pressing.

"These shelves contain everything a Chinese scholar uses to practice the arts: calligraphy, painting, poetry," explained the captain. "The Chinese call this the 'Four Treasures of the Scholar': the brush, the ink, the paper and the inkstone."

He lifted an inkstone carved from a block of purple rock veined with golden lines.

"This is a Duan stone. It comes from a famous quarry in Guangdong province. These natural markings in the rock. They're called 'stone eyes.' The more eyes a stone has, the more precious it is. This one has eight. Extremely rare."

"What is an inkstone used for, Captain?" asked the colonel.

"You grind the ink stick on it with a little water. The friction of the stick against the stone produces superior quality liquid ink. And the calligrapher can control exactly the dilution, the thickness, the intensity of the black. Essential for obtaining the desired nuances."

He showed them calligraphy brushes, stored in lacquered bamboo cases. Some were very old, their bamboo handles patinated by centuries of use.

"This brush supposedly belonged to calligrapher Wang Xizhi. Jin dynasty. 4th century AD."

"Sixteen hundred years?" exclaimed the commander.

"That's what the label claims. Probably exaggerated. The Chinese like to attribute objects to famous figures. But this brush is certainly very old. The bristles come from tails of Manchurian weasels. The best brushes in the world. And despite the centuries, they're still supple, elastic."

Lambert was examining a collection of seals – small carved stone blocks used to sign documents and works of art.

"There are hundreds of them. All different. This one is white jade. And that one, red cornelian. And this other one, carved ivory."

"Seals are very important in Chinese culture, Colonel. A scholar often possesses dozens of different seals. Some bear his name, others his titles, still others philosophical mottoes or poems. You choose which seal to affix according to the occasion, according to mood, according to the message you want to transmit."

The commander had discovered a collection of brush rests in porcelain, jade and bronze. Some had the shape of miniature mountains. Others represented animals – dragons, lions, celestial dogs.

"Even the most utilitarian objects are works of art. This brush rest in the shape of a mountain. It's sculpted from a single block

of green jade. The pines, the waterfalls, the pavilions... a sculpture in its own right."

"For the Chinese, there's no separation between art and craft," repeated the captain. "A utilitarian object must be beautiful. And a beautiful object must be useful."

They selected forty-five scholars' objects. Inkstones, brushes, brush rests, seals, ink boxes, calligraphy scrolls. Each piece was a condensed version of Chinese scholarly aesthetics.

"Two hundred twenty plus forty-five," calculated the colonel. "Two hundred sixty-five. We're still missing thirty-five objects. The clocks will allow us to complete."

The western apartments of the palace, built by the Jesuits in the 18th century, housed Emperor Qianlong's collection of clocks and automata. These pieces, imported from Europe at great expense, represented the pinnacle of Western clockmaking and mechanics.

When the three commissioners entered the room, they stopped short, dazzled.

The room resembled a fantastic watchmaker's workshop. Dozens of clocks of all sizes were arranged on tables, shelves, consoles. Some measured barely twenty centimeters in height. Others, monumental, rose nearly three meters.

But these weren't simple clocks. Automata, mechanical marvels that combined clockmaking with sculpture, painting, music, animation.

The most spectacular was a clock-automaton nearly two meters high, made by London clockmaker James Cox.

The case, in gilded and enameled bronze, represented a Chinese pavilion with several floors. On the ground floor, visible through glass windows, were miniature characters: an emperor seated on his throne, mandarins standing at his sides, musicians with their instruments, dancers frozen in mid-movement.

"Does it still work, Captain?"

"Let's try, Colonel."

The captain looked for the winding mechanism, found a key attached to the back of the case, inserted it in the intended hole, and began to turn. The springs tightened. You could hear the clicking of gears falling into place.

Then, suddenly, the clock came to life.

A crystalline melody rose from a carillon of twenty-four bells. The pavilion doors opened. The emperor rose from his throne and bowed three times. The mandarins bowed in turn. The musicians began to play – or rather to mime playing their instruments, for the music came from the carillon. The dancers began to spin gracefully.

For two minutes, the small mechanical theater animated before their astonished eyes. Then, gradually, the movements slowed. The characters returned to their initial positions. The doors closed. Silence fell again.

"Alive," murmured the colonel. "I had the impression they were alive."

"Mechanical genius. James Cox was one of the greatest clockmakers of his time. His automata are worth fortunes. This one must have cost the equivalent of ten years' salary of an English worker. Perhaps more."

The commander was scrutinizing the mechanism through an opening in the back.

"There are hundreds of gears in there. How can you design such complex mechanics?"

"With genius and patience. These clockmakers spent years designing and making their automata. Each piece was made by hand, adjusted with extreme precision. Luxury craftsmanship, reserved for kings and emperors."

They discovered other splendors. A clock in the shape of an elephant that raised its trunk every hour and trumpeted – a strangely realistic sound produced by a pneumatic mechanism

hidden in the body. A peacock whose tail deployed, revealing on each feather a different dial indicating the time in different world capitals: London, Paris, Rome, Constantinople, Beijing.

A clock representing a garden where mechanical birds sang, where a silver waterfall seemed to flow, where the sun and moon rose and set according to the time of day.

"Let's take them all," decided the colonel. "Twelve clocks and automata. Unique, irreplaceable pieces. European museums have nothing comparable."

"Twelve," repeated the commander, noting. "How many does that make us in total now?"

"Two hundred sixty-five plus twelve... two hundred seventy-seven. We're close to three hundred."

"The zodiac heads," reminded the captain. "The general wanted us to add them to the list. The twelve bronze heads from the Haiyan Tang fountain. That will make two hundred eighty-nine."

"Perfect. With a few additional objects, we'll reach three hundred tomorrow morning. Let's go see the general to report."

The Decision to Burn

On the evening of October 8, they presented themselves at General de Montauban's headquarters. They found the general in deep conversation with several senior officers and, to their surprise, with Lord Elgin himself, the commander-in-chief of British forces.

"Ah, gentlemen commissioners," called out Montauban seeing them enter. "Come closer. Lord Elgin wished to meet you."

Lord Elgin turned toward them.

"Gentlemen," he said in French with a slight English accent, "General de Montauban told me you've conducted a remarkable inventory of the treasures of Yuen-Ming-Yuen. I wished to thank

you personally. Your work will allow at least part of this heritage to be preserved."

"We only did our duty, milord," responded Colonel Lambert.

"A difficult duty, I imagine. I myself visited the palace yesterday. An architectural and artistic fairyland. When I think of what we're going to do..."

He left his sentence hanging, but everyone understood. The fire. The destruction. The annihilation.

Montauban intervened:

"Lord Elgin has confirmed that the fire will take place on October 18. We need time to catch our breath. The men are uncontrollable, absorbed by their thirst for pillaging. If we restrain them, we risk mutiny and even an uprising against superior orders. In a few days, the pressure will have subsided and we can regain control of the situation. Gentlemen, this gives you nine days to finalize your inventory and supervise the packing of selected objects."

"Very well, General."

Lord Elgin spoke again, his voice charged with emotion:

"I want you to know, gentlemen, that this decision doesn't please me. I would have preferred another form of reprisal. But the Chinese emperor must understand that the torture and execution of our prisoners cannot remain unpunished. Yuen-Ming-Yuen is the symbol of his power. By destroying it, we send a clear message: no barbarity will be tolerated."

Commander Fould couldn't restrain himself:

"With all due respect, milord, destroying a masterpiece to punish barbarity... isn't that also barbarity?"

The officers present looked at the commander with wide eyes. How dare he speak thus to Lord Elgin?

But the Briton, to everyone's surprise, didn't get angry. On the contrary, he slowly nodded.

"You're right, Commander. A barbarity. A calculated, deliberate barbarity, but a barbarity nonetheless. But war, sir, is by nature barbaric. We try to civilize it with rules, conventions, treaties. Deep down, war remains a confrontation of violence. And sometimes, to end violence, you must employ violence."

"I'm not sure I follow this logic, milord."

"I'm not asking you to follow it, Commander. I'm asking you to obey. You're a soldier. Soldiers obey."

Fould clenched his jaw.

Lord Elgin turned to Montauban.

"General, ensure these three officers receive a reward for their work. They've accomplished a difficult mission with professionalism."

"It will be done, milord."

"Good. Now, gentlemen, if you'll excuse us, we have plans to finalize."

The three commissioners saluted and left. Once outside, in the cool October night, the commander exploded:

"Calculated barbarity! Did you hear that? He admits himself it's barbarity! And he does it anyway!"

"Calm down," intervened the colonel. "You were lucky he didn't have you arrested for insubordination."

"Arrest me? For telling the truth?"

"Truth has no place in the army. You should know that by now."

They returned to their quarters in silence.

The following days, from October 9 to 16, were devoted to the meticulous organization of the evacuation of selected treasures. The three commissioners supervised the packing of the most fragile objects, coordinated with the general staff the modalities of transport to Tientsin, and established detailed lists for tracking the crates. Meanwhile, generalized pillaging continued throughout the palace. Soldiers continued to loot the pavilions,

taking everything of value, destroying what they couldn't transport.

Montauban and Lord Elgin finalized their plans for the final destruction of Yuen-Ming-Yuen. The decision was made: the palace had to burn. It would be the punishment inflicted on the emperor for the mistreatment suffered by Western prisoners.

The Last Day

On October 17, they spent the day ensuring the transport of the three hundred selected objects.

Meticulous work that demanded constant attention. Several times, the colonel had to intervene when a soldier handled a piece too brutally.

"Gently!" he shouted. "This vase is eight hundred years old! If you break it, you'll have destroyed eight centuries of history!"

At the end of the day, all the crates were ready. They were loaded onto carts that would take them to the port of Tientsin, then onto ships that would bring them back to Europe.

In the evening, exhausted, they met one last time in the throne room, now empty. The shelves had been pillaged. The display cases broken. The floor was littered with debris.

"Three hundred objects saved," whispered the colonel. "Out of how many? One hundred thousand? Two hundred thousand?"

"We'll never know. But yes, we've only saved an infinitesimal part. The rest..."

"The rest will burn tomorrow."

They remained silent, contemplating this room that would soon be reduced to ashes.

"You know what saddens me most?" said the commander. "It's not the objects we didn't take. It's those we'll never know. All the marvels in the parts of the palace we didn't explore. All the masterpieces whose existence we don't even know about.

Everything will burn. Everything will disappear. And no one will ever know what was lost."

"History will know. Historians will write about the sack of Yuen-Ming-Yuen. They'll say it was one of the greatest cultural crimes ever committed. And we, we'll be presented as the culprits."

"We are the culprits. Let's not try to hide behind orders or military necessity. We're accomplices to this crime."

"I know," admitted the colonel. "I know."

They left the palace at nightfall. Behind them, the buildings rose in the darkness, majestic and condemned. Tomorrow, all this would be nothing but ashes and ruins.

The Fire, October 18, 1860

On October 18 at ten o'clock in the morning, the first flames were lit. British soldiers, on Lord Elgin's orders, began setting fire to the buildings.

The three officers, like all French and British officers, were forced to witness the spectacle. They stood on a neighboring hill, from where they had a complete view of the palace.

The first buildings to burn were the cedar wood pavilions. The dry wood, several centuries old, caught fire immediately. Within minutes, flames twenty meters high rose toward the sky.

"How quickly it burns," murmured the commander.

The fire spread from building to building, carried by the wind. The roofs of glazed tiles exploded under the heat, projecting colored fragments in all directions. The lacquered wood columns consumed, collapsed. The dragon and phoenix sculptures disappeared in the flames.

The smoke rose in thick black columns, darkening the sky. The smell of burning wood filled the air, suffocating.

The commander had sat on the ground, his head in his hands.

"We're inhuman. We destroy what we cannot understand. What we cannot equal. We burn beauty because it shames us."

The colonel, standing beside him, said nothing.

The captain, for his part, stared fixedly at the fire, as if hypnotized. His face was impassive, but his eyes shone with a strange light – perhaps they were reflections of the flames, perhaps they were tears he refused to let flow.

CHAPTER 3 - THE SILENT WITNESSES

Night of October 17-18, 1860, Summer Palace, midnight

An Dehai was fifty-three years old. He had devoted forty-one years of his life to the service of the palace, since that day when, at the age of twelve, his family had sold him to be castrated and integrated into the ranks of the imperial eunuchs.

The pain, he still remembered it. Not the physical pain—memory had mercifully erased that, leaving only a phantom trace, like an amputated limb that continues to hurt long after its disappearance. But the pain of humiliation remained intact, crystallized in his mind like an insect trapped in amber. He could see his mother's face, turning away when they took him. His father, counting the silver coins. His two older brothers, unable to look at him. And the old man with the knife, with his calloused hands and his smell of ginger and rice alcohol, who had whispered to him: "Don't scream. Eunuchs never scream. That's the first lesson."

He had not screamed. Not that day. Not the following days, when fever nearly took him. Not during the long weeks of healing, locked in a dark room that smelled of medicinal herbs and sickness. He had learned to swallow his pain, to transform it into something else, into determination, into perfectionism, into a sense of duty so absolute that it became almost sacred.

"Serving the Emperor is an honor," they had told him. "A chance to escape misery."

And for four decades, he had believed in that honor. He had climbed the ranks, learning first to serve tea without making the porcelain tremble, then to walk without rustling the silk, then to listen without hearing, to see without looking, to become invisible while being indispensable. At twenty, he was already attending imperial audiences, standing in the shadows, holding documents the Emperor might need. At thirty, he was entrusted

with delicate missions, carrying secret messages, supervising discreet transactions. At forty, he had become responsible for the inventory of the imperial collections.

Every vase, every jade, every scroll of calligraphy in the Summer Palace—he knew them by heart. He could recite from memory the provenance of thousands of objects, their history, their significance. He remembered the day when Emperor Daoguang had acquired a lacquer screen inlaid with mother-of-pearl, a masterpiece from the Song dynasty. He had spent three days examining it, noting every detail, the crane motifs, the stylized mountains, the almost invisible signature of the craftsman in a corner. This screen told eight centuries of history. It had belonged to a Song emperor, had survived the Mongol invasion hidden in a monastery, had been rediscovered under the Ming, restored under the Qing.

All of this was going to disappear.

This thought struck him in waves, like rising nausea that he could not suppress. Forty-one years of his life. Eight centuries of history. Entire dynasties crystallized in objects that were going to be stolen, broken, burned by men who didn't even know their names.

He left his narrow mat and adjusted his blue silk robe, the one he had worn for ten years and had carefully mended many times. The fabric was worn but clean, the repairs almost invisible—a matter of pride, even now, even on the edge of the abyss. His quarters were modest: a room of eight square meters whose every crack in the ceiling he knew, every groove in the wooden planks. A low table where he took his solitary meals. A chest containing his few possessions: three spare robes, a calligraphy set, a book of Tang poetry that his first mentor had given him, and a letter from his mother that he had never had the courage to open. Nothing luxurious, despite his relatively elevated position among the eunuchs.

He went out into the corridor. The darkness was almost total. His eyes, accustomed to the palace's semi-darkness, could barely distinguish the contours of the walls. Usually, lanterns burned all night along the passages, their flickering glow creating dancing shadows on the lacquered wood panels. But tonight, most were extinguished. Oil economy, the stewards had claimed. In reality, everyone knew that the servants were fleeing, taking what they could, including lanterns.

The silence was oppressive. An Dehai listened intently, searching for the familiar sounds that usually punctuated the palace's nights: the rustle of silk robes when the night guards made their rounds, the distant lapping of water in the basins, the creaking of old wood contracting with the nocturnal cold, sometimes the cry of a peacock in the gardens. But tonight, nothing. As if the palace itself was holding its breath.

A nervous voice rang out in the darkness, making him start.

"Who goes there?"

"It's me, An Dehai."

A silhouette emerged from the shadows. It was Li Lianying, a eunuch An Dehai had taken under his wing three years earlier. The boy was brilliant, quick-witted, capable of learning a complete inventory in a few weeks where others took months. He had seen in him a younger version of himself, that same intensity, that same desperate need to prove his worth in a world that considered them less than human.

He was trembling all over. In the faint light, An Dehai could see that his eyes were red, swollen from tears.

"Master An, you can't sleep either?"

"No. Too many thoughts. Come, let's walk a bit."

They headed toward the east exit of the servants' building. An Dehai placed a hand on Li Lianying's shoulder, feeling the tense muscles, the body stiffened by terror. He remembered his own first year at the palace, that constant fear of making a mistake, of

being beaten, chased away, sent back to a misery even worse than the one he came from. He remembered his master, the old eunuch Ma Dequan, who had guided him with the same patience he now showed to Li Lianying. Ma Dequan had died twenty years ago, but An Dehai could still hear his voice: "We are not what they made of us. We are what we choose to be despite that."

Outside, the night was surprisingly clear. The moon, almost full, bathed the gardens in silvery light that transformed the familiar landscape into something unreal, almost dreamlike. The pavilions stood out in black silhouettes against the starry sky. Kunming Lake reflected the moon like a giant mirror. The ancestral trees—some planted three centuries ago—raised their gnarled branches toward the sky. Everything seemed peaceful, frozen in an instant of eternity.

An Dehai stopped, seized by the beauty of the moment. How was it possible that the world could be so beautiful on the eve of its destruction? He thought of the Tang poets who celebrated nature precisely because it was ephemeral. Cherry blossoms are beautiful only because they fall. The moon moves only because it wanes. But this was not the same thing. Nature was reborn. What was going to be destroyed here would never return.

"Look how beautiful it is. How can they want to destroy something so splendid?"

An Dehai came to sit on a stone bench near a basin where koi carp were swimming lazily. He remembered the day when these carp had been introduced. It was fifteen years ago. They were just small fry. Now, some measured nearly a meter, their orange and white scales shining in the dark water. A gardener had explained that they could live a hundred years. They would not see their twentieth birthday.

Li Lianying sat beside him, hugging his knees to his chest like a child seeking comfort. An Dehai contemplated the young man for a long moment before speaking, choosing his words carefully.

"Beauty means nothing to those who don't understand it. For these Western boors, only gold matters. Power. Domination. They look at a Ming vase and see money. They look at Song calligraphy and see paper. They don't see the centuries, the hands that created, the eyes that admired."

Hurried footsteps rang out behind them, breaking the moment of calm. Three other eunuchs appeared, breathless and terrified. An Dehai recognized Wang Changgui who supervised the imperial kitchens, accompanied by two young ones, Sun Yaoting and Cui Yugui. Wang Changgui's face was flushed from the effort, sweat beading on his forehead despite the coolness of the night. Sun Yaoting's eyes were wide like a hunted animal. Cui Yugui, usually taciturn, let out small uncontrollable whimpers.

"Master An! You're still here! I thought all the senior eunuchs had left with the Dowager Empress!"

An Dehai observed them for a moment, these terrified men who clung to him like a buoy. He thought of all those moments in his life when he had had to be strong for others.

"I was not summoned for the evacuation. I was ordered to stay to protect the collections."

Protect the collections. With what? His bare hands against thousands of armed soldiers? It was an impossible mission, and everyone knew it. The Emperor had given him an order that was in reality an abandonment.

Wang Changgui shook his head.

"The kitchens. I was told to keep them operational in case the Emperor changed his mind and came back."

Young Sun Yaoting collapsed on the bench, sobbing uncontrollably. His narrow shoulders shaken by spasms, his face buried in his hands. Between two sobs, he hiccupped almost incomprehensible words. An Dehai approached and gently placed a hand on his head, as he would have done with a son—

that son he would never have. The contact seemed to slightly calm the sobs.

He thought again of his own mother. Was she still alive? He had left her at twelve and had never seen her again. Eunuchs did not have the right to return to their families. They belonged to the palace, body and soul. Had she died wondering what had become of him? Had she regretted selling him? Or was it a relief, one less mouth to feed?

"Calm down, Yaoting. Your mother is probably already safe. The people of Beijing are fleeing toward the interior. She must have left with the others."

He didn't know if it was true, but the comforting lie was sometimes the only form of compassion possible.

The six men remained sitting there until dawn, in the moonlit garden that would soon cease to exist. They spoke in low voices, exchanging fragments of their lives like sharing a last meal. Wang Changgui recounted how he had learned cooking from his father, who had learned it from his own father, a lineage of imperial cooks going back five generations. Sun Yaoting spoke of his mother, a widow who had sold everything she owned to raise him alone. Cui Yugui revealed that he composed poems in secret, verses he had never shown to anyone.

An Dehai listened to them, engraving every detail in his memory. These lives, however humble they might be, deserved to be preserved. If the palace had to disappear, at least the men who had served it would not be forgotten.

As the first glimmers of day began to light the sky in the east, they heard a new noise: shouts, orders barked in a foreign language, the clatter of thousands of boots on the park's paved paths. The sound was still distant, but approaching inexorably, like a rising tide.

The soldiers, who had reached the first buildings of the palace and had been pillaging it for several days, were arriving in the

wing where they had taken refuge and where neither fire nor sacking had yet begun. The palace was so immense that its invasion could only take place progressively, building by building, pavilion by pavilion. A methodical, meticulous destruction.

An Dehai stood up. He thought of all the mornings when he had risen at this same hour to begin his workday. The morning rituals, the water to wash his face, the green tea he prepared with care, the robe he adjusted meticulously. Then the walk through the silent corridors to his office, where the registers to be updated awaited him, the objects to be catalogued, the reports to be written. A life regulated like a clock, predictable, safe.

All of that was finished. And with the rising sun came the unknown.

October 19, 1860, Summer Palace, six o'clock in the morning

The first French soldier An Dehai saw was a young man with blond hair and blue eyes, a bayonet rifle on his shoulder. He was constantly looking around as if expecting an ambush. His blue uniform was already dirty, stained with sweat and dust. An Dehai wondered if he had a mother somewhere in France who was praying for his return.

An Dehai and his friends had hidden behind a wall, observing the troops invading the park. It was a surreal vision: hundreds, perhaps thousands of soldiers in blue and red uniforms spreading like a tide through the manicured gardens. They were shouting, laughing, pointing at buildings with excitement. Some were firing in the air like excited children. Others were jostling to be the first to enter the pavilions.

An Dehai observed the scene with a kind of detachment, as if watching a nightmare unfold without being able to wake up. These men didn't look like the demons he had imagined. They just looked... like men. Ordinary men, far from home, excited by

the prospect of loot. That made them in a way more terrifying. Banal evil, almost joyful.

Wang Changgui clenched his fists, his knuckles whitening.

"Look at them. They don't even understand what they're desecrating. For them, it's just... loot."

"Silence. They might hear us."

But it was too late. A squad of five soldiers, led by a lieutenant, had spotted their hiding place. The fire was beginning to spread in certain parts of the palace—smoke could be seen rising in the distance—but the pillaging didn't stop for that. The officer shouted something in his incomprehensible language and pointed his pistol at them. The pistol barrel shone in the rising sun, a small black circle promising death.

An Dehai felt his heart racing. This was the moment. Live or die. He took a deep breath, trying to calm the trembling of his hands. He thought of all the moments when he had survived by making himself small, by lowering himself, by accepting humiliation to preserve his life.

The six eunuchs emerged from their hiding place, arms raised. An Dehai stepped forward first, trying to appear as unthreatening as possible. He lowered his eyes in a sign of submission. Never defy. Never provoke. Survive first.

The French lieutenant examined them up and down with an expression mixing curiosity and disdain. His eyes lingered on their silk robes, on their hair tied in buns, on their beardless faces. He said something in his language, a comment that made his men laugh.

An Dehai thought quickly. He had learned English from a British missionary who had briefly worked at the palace ten years earlier. He had perfect command of this language. Perhaps the officer would understand English? It was their only chance.

"We are palace servants."

The lieutenant frowned, then seemed to understand. He said something to his men, who lowered their weapons. Then the officer made an imperious gesture toward the south, accompanied by a word that sounded like an order.

But as they were beginning to move away, Sun Yaoting stumbled and fell. The young eunuch was so terrified that his legs could no longer carry him. In his fall, a jade box slipped from his sleeve and rolled on the pavement with a musical clatter.

Time seemed to freeze. An Dehai saw the scene unfold in slow motion. The box rolling. The lieutenant's eyes fixing on it. The expression changing from indifference to greed.

Immediately, the atmosphere changed. The officer screamed something and the soldiers pointed their weapons again. One of them, a colossus with a face marked by smallpox, rushed at Sun Yaoting, grabbed him by the collar and lifted him off the ground with one hand.

The young eunuch let out a cry of terror. His feet beat the air, his hands clawed at the soldier's arm. An Dehai took a step forward, but Li Lianying held him back.

The soldier violently slapped the young eunuch. The sound of the hand against the cheek resonated like a gunshot. Then he picked up the jade box, turned it over to judge its weight, and pocketed it with a possessive gesture.

The officer barked an order. The soldiers searched each of the eunuchs, tearing away anything that seemed to have value. Their hands were brutal, indifferent. They took a silver watch that Wang Changgui had inherited from his father, a copper ring worn by Cui Yugui, even the few coins they had on them. An Dehai felt hands search his pockets, feel his robe. A bamboo brush he always kept with him was confiscated—an object worthless to the soldiers, but precious to him.

When it was over, the lieutenant motioned for them to leave with a gesture of contempt, as if they were stray dogs being chased away. He even spat on the ground at their feet.

An Dehai helped Sun Yaoting get up. The boy's face was swollen where the soldier had hit him, already purple, and blood was flowing from his nose, forming a red line on his chin.

"Come, Yaoting. Lean on me."

They moved away as quickly as they could without running. Running would have looked like flight, might have triggered the soldiers' hunting instinct. Behind them, they already heard the sounds of destruction: windows shattering in a crystalline crash, doors being smashed with rifle butts, cries of joy when soldiers discovered treasures inside the pavilions. And above all that, laughter—collective laughter, drunk with power and license.

An Dehai clenched his teeth so hard that his jaw hurt. Each step took him away from his life, his identity, everything that had given meaning to his existence. But he continued to walk, supporting Sun Yaoting, guiding the others. Survive. That was all that mattered now.

Approaching the servants' quarters, they discovered that chaos already reigned there. Dozens of people were running in all directions, some trying to flee with bundles of clothes and food, others panicking aimlessly. Cries, tears, desperate calls. An elderly woman was sitting on the ground, rocking back and forth, endlessly repeating a name—perhaps that of a son, a husband. Two guards in imperial uniforms, but without weapons, were huddled against a wall, their gaze empty. A child—he must have been seven or eight years old, one of the many servants' children who lived at the palace—was running in circles, calling for his mother.

"An Dehai!"

A familiar voice rang out above the tumult. It was Madame Liu, a lady-in-waiting who had served the Empress. An Dehai had

always respected her. She was of rare dignity, of keen intelligence, and treated even the eunuchs with courtesy—which was far from the case with all the court ladies. She was small, thin, with gray hair carefully styled and piercing eyes that seemed to see everything.

She made her way through the crowd and grabbed An Dehai's arm.

"Thank God! I thought you had left with the Empress!"

"No. I was ordered to stay. Madame Liu, where is your daughter?"

Madame Liu's face fell apart. Her lips trembled and her eyes filled with tears she tried in vain to hold back.

"Mei Feng? She works in the Pavilion of Harmonies. I tried to go there, but there are soldiers everywhere... She's only nineteen years old, An Dehai. Just nineteen years old."

The Pavilion of Harmonies was in the zone that had been attacked first. If Mei Feng was still there...

"We will find her. I promise you."

Madame Liu swept her gaze over the surroundings, trying to make a count in the ambient chaos.

"Maybe fifty, sixty people? Many left during the night. Those who remain are either too old to travel, or they're afraid of bandits on the roads. Some still hope that the Emperor will come back to save them."

She pronounced these last words with a bitterness that surprised An Dehai. Madame Liu had always been a fervent imperial loyalist.

"Gather them all. Tell them to meet in the main courtyard of the servants' quarters in an hour. We need to discuss what we're going to do."

An hour later, about eighty people were gathered in the courtyard. It was a motley group: eunuchs of all ages, ladies-in-

waiting, cooks with stained aprons, gardeners with calloused hands, a few disarmed guards who had fled but had remained nearby, ashamed of their cowardice but unable to leave completely.

An Dehai observed them. All now shared the same expression: fear, incomprehension, desperate hope that someone, anyone, would tell them what to do.

He raised his hands to ask for silence. The conversations ceased progressively, replaced by tense waiting.

"My friends..."

His voice broke. He coughed, tried again.

"My friends, we are living through a terrible moment in our history. The Summer Palace, this place we have served and cherished, is being invaded by foreign armies. The Emperor has fled. The Dowager Empress has fled. We are abandoned."

A murmur ran through the crowd. Some nodded, others let silent tears flow.

"But we are not powerless. We have choices to make. The first choice: to stay or to leave."

Immediately, voices rose, creating a cacophony of fear and confusion.

An Dehai raised his hands again, waiting for calm.

"Flee where? Beijing is besieged. The barbarians control all the main roads. The secondary paths are infested with bandits. Many of you have families here, in the surrounding villages. If you leave now, in the chaos, you risk never finding them again."

An old gardener named Wang Daniu interrupted him. The man had a face tanned by the sun, hands gnarled like tree roots, and a gaze that had seen much.

"You want us to help them steal our heritage? To stand there, arms crossed, while they take away treasures that have belonged to China for centuries?"

An Dehai descended from the platform and walked directly toward Wang Daniu. He wanted this conversation to be intimate, respectful, not a public debate.

"Wang Daniu, you have spent your life creating the gardens of this palace. I remember when you planted the plum grove near the Pavilion of Harmonies. How many years ago? Twenty-five? Thirty?"

"Twenty-eight years," replied the old man, his voice hoarse with emotion.

"Twenty-eight years. Tell me, if someone comes to destroy this grove now, would you rather die trying to stop them, or survive to perhaps, one day, replant plum trees elsewhere? To pass on your knowledge to other gardeners? So that the art doesn't die with the trees?"

The gardener clenched his fists, but An Dehai could see the tears that threatened to fall.

An Dehai turned back to the assembled crowd, raising his voice so all could hear.

"I propose this. Those who want to leave can leave. I will not prevent you and I will not judge you. It's a legitimate choice, perhaps even the wise choice. But those who stay, we must organize ourselves. First, we must hide in places that the military don't know—the cellars, the tunnels, the secondary buildings they have no reason to explore. Second, we must try to save what can be saved—not the large pieces obviously, but perhaps documents, books, objects we can hide or take. Third and most importantly, we must remember. Note everything that happens, so that our descendants will know the truth."

Wang Daniu nodded slowly, as if making a grave decision.

"Very well. I'm staying. Someone must bear witness. My trees are going to burn, but at least their memory will live on."

Other voices rose, one after another, forming a hesitant but determined chorus. In the end, about twenty-five people decided to stay.

As they began to disperse into organized groups, a young servant approached timidly. Her name was Mei Lin and she worked in the concubines' quarters.

"Master An, I have something to tell you. Last night, I saw soldiers..."

She stopped, tears in her eyes. Her voice was nothing more than a trembling whisper.

"They caught three of my friends. They screamed, but... but no one came. No one could come. And the soldiers, they... they..."

She couldn't continue, collapsing in sobs. An Dehai gently placed a hand on her arm.

"I know, Mei Lin. I know. That's why we must stay together, stay hidden as much as possible. If you stay with Madame Liu's group, you'll be safer."

Mei Lin nodded, wiping away her tears with a furious gesture. An Dehai saw in her eyes something that wasn't just fear. There was also anger. A cold, controlled anger that would keep her standing when others would collapse.

"Thank you, Master An. I just needed to say it to someone. To know that someone cares."

"We all care. That's what keeps us human in this inhumanity."

October 19, 1860, Summer Palace, noon

An Dehai, accompanied by Li Lianying and two other eunuchs named Zhang Qinlin and Cui Yugui, headed toward the Pavilion of Precious Clouds. It was one of the buildings he knew best, having spent hundreds of hours cataloging its treasures.

The path to get there was familiar. He knew every turn, every tree along the path. But today, everything seemed different. The

air itself was charged with electric tension, like before a storm. The silence of the birds was abnormal—they had fled, sensing danger.

Approaching, they heard a dreadful racket. Laughter, shouts, the sound of heavy things being dragged or dropped, the crash of broken glass. An Dehai felt his stomach knot.

They hid behind a bamboo grove and observed the scene unfolding before them.

About twenty French soldiers were running in all directions, carrying everything they could carry. The scene had something grotesque, almost comical if it hadn't been so heartbreaking. Some had put on several layers of imperial silk robes one over the other, creating a ridiculous effect—bearded and massive men in women's robes embroidered with dragons and phoenixes. Others were carrying enormous porcelain vases, stumbling under the weight, holding them against their chests like babies. A soldier was trying to carry alone a lacquer screen inlaid with jade. He fell and the screen shattered into a thousand pieces on the marble slabs.

An Dehai couldn't help but groan, an involuntary sound torn from the depths of his throat.

"No! That screen was three hundred years old..."

That screen, he remembered it perfectly. He had cataloged it seven years ago, spending an entire day documenting every detail. It was a commission from Emperor Kangxi to celebrate his mother's sixtieth birthday. Each piece of jade had been individually selected for its color, its translucency. The motifs represented the Eight Immortals crossing the sea—a scene from Taoist mythology that symbolized longevity and transcendence. Emperor Kangxi himself had composed a poem engraved on the back, in characters so fine that a magnifying glass was needed to read them. An Dehai had memorized this poem: "Through the waves of jade, the Immortals travel / Each generation keeps their

wisdom / May my mother live ten thousand autumns / As these immortals cross the ages."

Now, all of that was nothing more than debris scattered on the ground, trampled by dirty boots.

Li Lianying touched his hand in warning.

"Master, look over there."

Two soldiers had found the collection of Ming porcelains that An Dehai had organized two months earlier. The pieces were arranged on sandalwood shelves, each with a label he had calligraphed, indicating the origin, date and significance of each object. He remembered spending three weeks on this work, checking and rechecking every detail, making sure everything was perfect.

The soldiers contemplated the porcelains with avidity, trying to decide which ones to take. They spoke to each other in French, an incomprehensible language to An Dehai, but whose greedy tone was universal. One of them grabbed a blue and white vase from the Xuande era.

An Dehai knew its history by heart. The vase had been created in 1426 by an imperial potter named Zhang Wei, in the kilns of Jingdezhen. Zhang Wei was a master potter whose family had made porcelain for four generations. The blue came from cobalt imported from Persia via the Silk Road—a pigment so precious it was worth its weight in silver. The motif represented dragons playing in the clouds, symbol of imperial power tempered by celestial wisdom. Emperor Xuande had supervised the creation of this vase, demanding that the blue be exactly the shade he saw in his dreams.

The vase had then spent two centuries in the imperial collections, admired by generations of emperors. In 1702, when a terrible flood had devastated Guangdong province, killing thousands and ruining crops, the provincial governor had offered this vase to Emperor Kangxi in thanks for a tax remission that had saved his

region from famine. Kangxi had loved it so much that he had kept it in his private quarters and composed poetry while contemplating it. He had even had a poem engraved on a gold medallion that he had attached to the foot of the vase. The vase had a small crack at the base—a minor defect that didn't diminish its beauty. Emperor Qianlong, Kangxi's grandson, had had this crack restored in 1750 by the master restorer Liu Heng, using a secret technique that made the repair almost invisible.

But the French soldier knew nothing of all this. For him, it was just a blue and white object, pretty but heavy. He held it awkwardly, without understanding its value or fragility. The vase slipped from his hands and shattered on the marble floor.

The sound resonated in An Dehai's heart like a funeral gong. Five centuries of history, annihilated in a second by the clumsiness of a man who didn't even know what he had just destroyed.

The soldier shrugged—a gesture so casual it was obscene—and took another vase.

Zhang Qinlin, a eunuch who had worked on the inventory, let tears flow down his cheeks. His shoulders trembled with silent sobs he desperately tried to hold back.

"I can't bear this. Years of work, care, preservation... destroyed in a few hours by these vandals. They don't even know what they're destroying."

But one of the soldiers had spotted them. He shouted something to his comrades and three of them headed toward the bamboo grove, rifles in hand, their faces showing a mixture of mistrust and aggression.

An Dehai came out of their hiding place, hands raised. The soldiers surrounded them, examining them with suspicion. One of them, a sergeant judging by his stripes, said something in French, then tried approximate English.

"You... palace people?"

"Yes. We work here," he replied in perfect English.

The sergeant observed them, then seemed to make a decision. He made a gesture toward the pavilion, accompanied by words that An Dehai didn't fully understand, but whose general meaning was clear. They wanted help.

"You come. Help us."

They were led inside the pavilion. An Dehai had to force himself to look. The floor was littered with debris. Shelves had been overturned, their contents scattered like broken bones after a battle. Ancient calligraphy scrolls lay in the dust. Fragments of porcelain cracked under their feet with each movement.

A French officer, a captain, stood in the middle of the room with a notebook and pencil. He seemed to be trying to make an inventory, but it was an impossible task in this chaos. His hair was disheveled, his forehead shining with sweat despite the coolness of the air. He looked frustrated, overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task.

When the sergeant brought him An Dehai and the others, the captain seemed relieved. He murmured something in French, then tried English with a thick but understandable accent.

"You know... these things? Value?"

"Yes. I know all the things here. I'm the one who cataloged everything."

The captain smiled, and it was a sincere smile, almost friendly—which made it in a way more disturbing.

"Good. Very good. You help me. I need to know... what is precious, what is... just... decoration? Not important?"

An Dehai understood perfectly. The officer wanted to distinguish genuine treasures from objects of lesser value. He wanted to optimize his pillage, make sure to steal the right things. The logic was cold, almost professional.

An Dehai had a decision to make in a fraction of a second. A decision that would haunt him for the rest of his life. If he helped this officer, he would contribute directly to the theft of Chinese

heritage. He would become a collaborator, a traitor to his own culture. Future generations might judge him harshly. But if he refused, they would probably be beaten, perhaps killed. And then, no one would know exactly what had been stolen.

An idea germinated in his mind. If he helped with the inventory, he could at least document what was being stolen. He could memorize who took what. Later, if justice was ever done—and he had to believe in that possibility, otherwise what was the point of surviving?—there would be a witness. A witness who knew not only the objects, but also their deep significance, their complete history.

"I can help you and catalog everything too. In Chinese."

The captain thought for a moment, frowning. An Dehai held his breath. Then the officer shrugged.

"Why not? You write Chinese, I write French. Two registers. Good for... how to say... transparency?"

He gave An Dehai a brush, ink and paper he had found in the pavilion's office. An Dehai took the brush with involuntary reverence. It was a good brush, with wolf hair, perfectly balanced. He had ordered it himself five years ago from a reputed Beijing craftsman. Holding it now, in these circumstances, provoked in him a mixture of emotions so complex he couldn't untangle them—shame, determination, grief, and a strange form of relief at having at least this, this familiar brush, this tool of his profession.

An Dehai lived one of the strangest and most painful moments of his life. He stood there, side by side with the French captain, identifying the treasures the soldiers found. It was surreal, like an absurd theater scene. Two men, from different civilizations, from opposing camps, working together in a parody of scholarly collaboration.

The captain showed an object. An Dehai identified it in simple English. The captain noted it in his notebook. Then An Dehai

noted it in his, but in much richer detail, transforming each object from a simple "precious thing" into a fragment of living history.

The captain showed a small bronze representing a horse. For him, it was just "horse statue, bronze, ancient."

For An Dehai, it was the story he wrote: "Celestial horse from the Han dynasty, 206 BC - 220 AD. Represents the horses of Ferghana, legendary breed that Emperor Wudi desired so much he sent an army of 60,000 men to obtain them. This bronze commemorates that expedition. Found in an imperial tomb in 1735, offered to Emperor Qianlong. Position of legs suggests the flying gallop, artistic technique that would not be rediscovered in the West for another thousand years. Stolen October 19, 1860."

Each object became an opportunity to write its complete history—not to justify the theft, but to create a testimony that would survive the chaos.

The work continued, object after object. Each identification was for An Dehai a small death. He saw parade before him an entire lifetime of work, an entire civilization's history, reduced to lines in an inventory notebook.

"And this one?"

The captain showed a calligraphy scroll, holding it more carefully than he had shown until now. Perhaps he was beginning to understand the fragility of these objects.

An Dehai unrolled it delicately, his hands trembling slightly. His heart leaped in a way that almost took his breath away. It was a poem by Su Dongpo, one of the greatest poets of the Song dynasty, written in his own hand eight hundred years ago.

Su Dongpo—or Su Shi, his full name—had lived from 1037 to 1101. Poet, calligrapher, painter, philosopher, statesman. One of the most accomplished figures in all Chinese history. This poem had been composed during his exile in Huangzhou, after he had been disgraced at court for criticizing certain imperial policies. Exile, instead of breaking him, had transformed him. It was there

that he had written some of his most beautiful poems, meditating on the ephemeral nature of power, on beauty that persists even in adversity.

The characters were magnificent, full of life and grace. Each brush stroke revealed the poet's personality—his strength, his melancholy, his love of nature, his humor even in dark moments. An Dehai had read this poem a hundred times in reproductions, but this was the first time he was seeing the original. It had been taken out of special vaults only a few weeks earlier for a private exhibition for the Dowager Empress.

The poem said:

"In the middle of the river, the moon shines, The reeds murmur their ancient song. A man alone contemplates the flowing water. So many lives have passed on these banks. Where are the heroes of old? The waves carry away even their names. Only the beauty of this night remains, eternal, indifferent to our pain."

An Dehai felt tears sting his eyes. These words, written by a man in exile, resonated with terrible force in this present moment. He too was witnessing the destruction of everything he knew. He too was contemplating ruins. And yet, this poem had survived eight centuries. Perhaps his own testimonies would survive too.

"Very old writing. Very famous poet. Eight hundred years. Cannot be replaced. Unique in the world."

The captain whistled softly, impressed despite himself.

"Eight hundred years? That's... incredible."

He looked at the scroll with more respect, touching it almost with reverence.

An Dehai fixed his eyes on him. For an instant, he forgot caution, forgot danger. He had to tell the truth, whatever the consequences.

"You are punishing eight hundred years of art for the actions of a few men. This poem did not torture your envoys. This vase did not declare war. These objects are innocent. They don't know

politics. They don't understand revenge. They are just... beauty. Memory. The soul of a people."

The captain turned away, uncomfortable. An Dehai thought he saw a glimmer of shame in his eyes, a crack in the armor of the obedient soldier. But it quickly disappeared, replaced by the cold indifference of the soldier who only obeys orders.

"This is war. In war, there are no innocents."

An Dehai wanted to argue, wanted to scream that it was false, that art objects were always innocent, that destroying beauty was a crime against humanity itself, that civilizations were judged not by their capacity to make war, but by their capacity to create and preserve beauty. But he held back. This was not the time. He had to survive, document, bear witness. Anger would come later. For now, he had to play his role, however humiliating.

The captain simply noted in his notebook and moved on to the next object.

Li Lianying, who was standing nearby, maintaining prudent silence, whispered in Chinese so softly that only An Dehai could hear:

"Master, why are you helping them? Isn't this treason? Won't future generations judge us?"

An Dehai replied just as softly, his lips barely moving:

"I'm not helping them steal. I'm creating an archive. Every object I note is an object the world will know was stolen, by whom, when, under what circumstances. This is our only form of resistance now: memory. One day, someone will demand justice. And I will have the proof. The names. The dates. The details the victors will want to forget."

The day was drawing to a close when they heard a horrible cry outside, followed by gunshots. The sound tore through the air, breaking the morbid concentration that had enveloped the pavilion for hours.

Everyone rushed to the windows. In the garden below, they saw a group of British soldiers—recognizable by their distinctive red uniforms—pursuing an old Chinese gardener.

The man was running as fast as his aged legs would allow, but it was pathetic to see—a desperate race, without hope. He stumbled on a root and fell heavily on the pavement. His basket overturned, spilling gardening tools—a trowel, pruning shears, carefully labeled seed packets.

An Dehai recognized Wei Guoliang, a gardener who worked at the palace. A gentle man who spoke to his plants like children, who knew the botanical name of every flower, who had created some of the most beautiful floral arrangements. He remembered seeing him hundreds of times, kneeling in the earth, hands dirty but smile on his lips, patiently explaining to a young apprentice how to properly prune a fruit tree to maximize its blooming.

"Wei Guoliang... No. He wouldn't hurt a fly. He doesn't even know how to fight. He spent his life creating beauty, not destroying it."

The British soldiers reached the old man. One of them turned him over brutally with his foot, as one would turn over a sack of grain. Wei Guoliang raised his hands in supplication, saying something no one could hear from the pavilion. His face was distorted with terror, his lips moving rapidly—perhaps he was praying, perhaps he was begging, perhaps he was saying goodbye to his family in his mind.

Then one of the soldiers raised his rifle and fired. Once. A single shot.

Wei Guoliang's body jerked, then became still. A dark stain began to spread beneath him, coloring the stone pavement.

In the pavilion, a deathly silence fell. An Dehai felt his legs give way beneath him. He had to lean against the wall to avoid falling, his hand seeking support, anything to keep him from collapsing. Even the French soldiers seemed shocked. Some looked away.

Others stared at the scene as if hypnotized, unable to tear their eyes from what they had just seen.

An Dehai turned to the captain, his voice trembling with contained rage, each word articulated with terrible precision.

"Why? What had he done? He was just an old man. Just a gardener. He didn't even have a weapon. He was carrying seeds. Seeds! Why did they kill him?"

The captain closed his eyes.

"I don't know. Maybe he resisted. Maybe he had something they wanted. Maybe..."

He didn't finish his sentence, the words failing him or the courage deserting him.

An Dehai felt something break inside him. All the restraint, all the diplomatic politeness he had maintained since morning, all of that evaporated in the face of this gratuitous violence, this absurd murder of a man whose only crime was to have run.

"Maybe they killed him for pleasure? Is that what you were going to say?"

The captain reopened his eyes. For the first time, An Dehai saw humanity in his gaze. Shame, regret, horror at what his allies had become, at what he himself had become.

"This is wrong. All of this..."

He made a gesture encompassing the pillaged pavilion, the treasures piled up like vulgar loot, the body in the garden that was slowly cooling.

"This is wrong. But I am a soldier. I follow orders. That's all I can do. Follow orders."

An Dehai came closer, fixing him with an intensity that made the officer step back.

"And orders excuse everything?"

The captain turned away, unable to sustain An Dehai's gaze.

"It's late. You can leave. Come back tomorrow, same time. We must finish the inventory."

An Dehai gathered his notes with slow gestures. He didn't want to let his emotions dominate him now. He had to stay focused, stay alive, finish his documentation work. But anger boiled in him like a pot on the fire, threatening to overflow at any moment.

He signaled to the other eunuchs to follow him. As they left the pavilion, walking in silence through the corridor littered with debris, Li Lianying murmured:

"Master, we cannot come back tomorrow. It would be collaborating with them. After what we just saw... after Wei Guoliang... how could we continue to help them?"

An Dehai stopped in the corridor's semi-darkness, turning to face the young man.

"Believe me, every fiber of my being wants to flee, never come back here, never see these faces again. And yet, if we don't come back, who will bear witness accurately? The French captain will take his notes, but they will only serve to justify the pillage, to catalog the loot. Our notes, they will one day serve to demand justice. To prove that each object had a history, a significance. To transform theft into documented crime."

Cui Yugui, who had been silent all afternoon, finally spoke.

"What justice? Who will render justice to Wei Guoliang? Who will give him back his life? The dead don't see justice. Justice doesn't erase blood."

An Dehai had no satisfactory answer. Cui Yugui was right. Justice, if it ever came, would be abstract, distant, insignificant for those who were already dead. But what else could they do?

"No one will give him back his life. That's true. But at least, his name will be engraved in history. At least, in a hundred years, in two hundred years, people will know that he existed, that he lived, that he created beauty, that he was killed unjustly. It's little. It's pathetically little. But it's all we can do. It's our resistance.

Our refusal to let the victors write the only history that will survive."

They walked toward the meeting point, each lost in their thoughts. The sun was declining. Behind them, they still heard the sounds of pillage: laughter, exclamations, the crash of broken objects, the sound of a dying world.

An Dehai walked in front, his steps mechanical, automatic. In his mind, he saw Wei Guoliang's face again, those moments when he had crossed paths with him in the gardens, always with a smile, always an anecdote to share about this or that plant. He remembered a conversation they had had perhaps five years ago. Wei Guoliang had shown him a plum tree he had just planted.

"This plum tree will bloom in two years," he had said with pride. "And in twenty years, it will be magnificent. In fifty years, my grandchildren will be able to sit under its branches. That's the gardener's work—planting for the future, for people you'll never know."

Wei Guoliang would never see this tree bloom. His grandchildren would never sit under its branches. But An Dehai promised himself to remember this tree, to look for it if he survived, to watch over it if possible. It was the least he could do.

October 19, 1860, Summer Palace, sunset

When the different groups met in the servants' quarters courtyard at sunset, the atmosphere was heavy with unspoken pain. Faces were marked by what each had seen, bodies bent under the weight of accumulated horror.

Madame Liu was the first to share her report. She stood in the center of the courtyard, upright despite her exhaustion, but her voice was broken, aged ten years in a few hours.

"We explored the concubines' quarters. They took everything. The robes, the jewelry, the mirrors, the fans, the embroidered shoes. They even tore the hangings from the walls. But the

worst... we found Li Mei. She was fifteen years old. Just fifteen years old. She had hidden in a wardrobe, thinking she would be safe. They found her."

She stopped, her voice breaking completely. Mei Lin, who was standing beside her, took her hand.

"We found her after. Her body... what they had done to her... no girl should endure that. No human being."

She didn't continue. She didn't need to. Everyone understood. A heavy silence settled, each contemplating the horror in their own mind.

Wang Changgui, the kitchen supervisor, spoke.

"We explored the kitchens and storerooms. The soldiers found the alcohol reserves and are getting massively drunk. Dozens of jars of imperial wine, wines that emperors had kept for special occasions. They're drinking them like water, pouring wine into their mouths, spilling half on their uniforms. They're vomiting in the gardens, in the corridors. Some are so drunk they can barely stand. They're going to be even more dangerous tonight. Drunk men with weapons, without discipline, without officers to control them... we must hide, and quickly."

Wang Daniu, the old gardener, remained mute. He had no report to make, no words to pronounce. An Dehai saw him staring into space, his eyes glassy, his hands trembling that he vainly tried to control. He was in shock. Probably he had seen Wei Guoliang's death. They were friends, had started working at the palace almost at the same time.

An Dehai spoke when all had finished sharing their testimonies.

"My friends, we have all seen horrors today. We have lost comrades. Wei Guoliang is dead. Li Mei is dead. Perhaps others whose names we don't yet know. We must remain united. And we must think practically about our survival. Wang Changgui, how much food do we have exactly?"

Wang Changgui pulled out a small notebook from his pocket—the habit of the meticulous cook.

"Three days if we ration carefully. Maybe four if we eat very little. We have rice, dried beans, some vegetables that are starting to spoil, salt, and a little oil. No meat. The soldiers took all the meat."

An old librarian named Zhang Yinghuan raised his hand. The man had always been meticulous, organized, devoted to the books he had in his charge. His usually serene face was now ravaged by grief.

"Master An, I spent the day in the Great Library. They're burning the books."

His voice broke on these words, as if saying the truth aloud made it more real, more unbearable.

"They're burning them. Not because they want to destroy them specifically—they don't even know what these books are, they can't read them. But because they take up space and they want the space to pile up their loot. Thousands of volumes, some dating from the Song and Tang. Unique manuscripts, commentaries on the classics copied by the hand of great scholars. Poems, medical treatises, astronomical texts, historical chronicles. They're using them to light their campfires. I saw a soldier tear pages from a Song dynasty manuscript to light a cigarette."

He opened his bag with a trembling hand and pulled out five ancient books, clutching them to his chest like a father would clutch a dying child.

"I managed to save these. Only five. Out of tens of thousands. But it's something. It's something, isn't it?"

The question was desperate, imploring validation, assurance that his effort was not in vain.

An Dehai descended from the platform.

"Zhang Yinghuan, these five books you saved perhaps contain a million characters. Ideas that have survived centuries, wisdom that generations of scholars have studied. Thanks to you, they will survive even longer. That's enormous. That's an act of resistance. An act of preservation. Thank you. Thank you for having the courage to return to that hell to save even these five books."

One of the disarmed guards, a man named Chen Mingde who had served in the imperial army before being assigned to the palace, then intervened. He was a pragmatic man, used to finding solutions in difficult situations.

"I have a suggestion. There are caves in the hills to the west. My father was a hunter and took me there when I was a child. I know the way. They're hidden, difficult to find if you don't know where to look. Some are large enough to shelter fifty people or more. We could establish a temporary camp there, safe far from the soldiers."

An Dehai felt relief wash over him. A refuge. A safe place to regroup, breathe, plan.

"That's an excellent idea. That's exactly what we need. But we can't all go there at the same time. A large group of fifty people crossing the hills would be noticed. The soldiers are patrolling. We must go in small groups, at different times, taking separate paths."

They spent the following hour organizing the evacuation with meticulous care, An Dehai even drawing a rough map in the dust so everyone would understand the plan. It was decided that the first group, composed mainly of women and elderly people—those who would be most vulnerable if drunk soldiers found them—would leave immediately under Chen Mingde's guidance. They would take the most direct path, taking advantage of the last hours of light.

The second group, including An Dehai, Li Lianying and a few others, would leave before dawn the next day, in the darkness that precedes dawn, when the soldiers would be asleep after their night of drinking.

The third group, those who wanted to try to save a few more objects or documents, would leave in the morning after making one last recovery attempt.

An Dehai gave precise instructions to the third group, his voice firm and clear:

"Don't forget, the objective is not monetary value. The soldiers are already taking everything that shines, everything that's gold or jade. Leave them those things. Look for documents that tell how people lived—personal letters, diaries, account books that show daily details, registers that name ordinary people. Look for photographs if you find any—they're irreplaceable visual testimonies. Look for objects that have stories attached, even if they don't look precious. A simple fan that belonged to a concubine can tell us more about daily life than a golden throne. These are the things that truly reveal a civilization, not the treasures."

As night fell and the first group prepared to leave, checking their provisions one last time, Madame Liu joined An Dehai. Her face was resolute, hardened by a new determination that had replaced the initial despair.

"Master An, I want to stay one more day. To look for my daughter Mei Feng. Maybe she's hiding somewhere in the ruins. Maybe she's injured and can't move, waiting for someone to come. I can't leave without knowing. A mother can't abandon her child, even if the chances are slim."

An Dehai contemplated this courageous woman who had already lost so much in her life. Madame Liu had served the Empress with absolute loyalty, sacrificing her own life for the palace. She

had raised Mei Feng alone after her husband's death from fever. The daughter was her whole life, her only family.

"Take Mei Lin and one or two other people with you. Search together, stay grouped at all times. Never separate. And if tomorrow night you haven't found her..."

He left the sentence unfinished. They both knew what it would mean. After forty-eight hours, the chances of finding someone alive were almost nil.

"If I haven't found her, I'll leave. I promise you. I won't die here uselessly. But I must try."

"I pray that you find her."

That night, An Dehai stayed awake in the basement where they had hidden. It was a narrow, damp space that smelled of earth and mold. Roots hung from the low ceiling. Water seeped along the stone walls. But it was safe, hidden, a temporary refuge in the chaos.

Listening to the sounds above, he created in his mind a map of the disaster. Drunken songs, discordant, brutal. Laughter that resonated in the night with a manic quality. Occasional gunshots—perhaps soldiers shooting at shadows, perhaps summary executions, perhaps just drunken amusement. And sometimes, the worst sounds—piercing screams that chilled the blood. Screams of women, children. Each scream was a life broken, an innocence destroyed, a story ending in violence.

Li Lianying, huddled next to him in the damp darkness of the basement, was murmuring Buddhist prayers. His lips moved constantly, forming the mantras he had been taught in his childhood. "Om mani padme hum... Om mani padme hum..." The prayer to the Buddha of Compassion, repeated endlessly like a talisman against evil.

"Do you think Buddha hears us in this hell?" murmured An Dehai.

The young eunuch looked up, his features barely visible in the semi-darkness pierced only by the faint glow of a small candle.

"I don't know if Buddha exists. I don't even know if I really believe in anything anymore. Maybe the gods have abandoned us. Maybe they never existed. But I know that prayer brings comfort. It gives me something to do, something to focus my mind on instead of listening to those screams. And right now, we need all the comfort possible, even if it comes from an illusion. Maybe that's the real function of religion. Not to save us, but to give us something to hold onto when everything collapses."

An Dehai nodded slowly. He thought again of his own religious education, a mixture of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism like most Chinese. He had prayed to the ancestors every year at the Festival of the Dead, burned incense in temples on special occasions, copied Buddhist sutras to gain merit. But did he really believe? Or was it just reassuring rituals, cultural habits passed down from generation to generation?

"Are you afraid, Lianying?"

"I'm terrified, Master. Every noise above makes me jump. Every time we hear footsteps, I think it's the end, that they've found us, that we're going to die like Wei Guoliang. My heart beats so hard I'm afraid they can hear it. But fear is natural, isn't it? It's what we do despite fear that defines who we are."

"And what are we? What have we become in this nightmare?"

Li Lianying thought for a long time before answering, choosing his words carefully.

"We are survivors. Witnesses. Guardians of memory. It's more important than it seems. In a hundred years, in a thousand years, someone will want to know what happened here. And we will be the only ones able to tell the truth. Not the truth of the generals in their official reports. Not the truth of historians who weren't there. But the truth of those who lived through the horror, who saw the faces, heard the screams, smelled the smoke."

Above, an explosion rang out, making the basement tremble. Dust and debris fell from the ceiling. Some in the basement let out cries of terror before remembering they had to stay silent, biting their lips, stifling their sounds in their hands.

Cui Yugui, huddled in a corner like a wounded animal, asked in a barely audible voice:

"What was that? What are they doing now?"

"They're exploding the vault doors to access the last treasures. Or perhaps they're already starting to burn buildings more systematically. Gunpowder speeds up the work of destruction."

"How long will this last? How many days of this ordeal must we endure?"

An Dehai didn't want to tell the truth—that it could last weeks—but lying was useless.

"I don't know with certainty. Days, surely. Until they've taken everything they want, everything they can carry. Until there's nothing left worth stealing. Until even the ruins are ruins."

In the damp darkness, An Dehai closed his eyes and tried to remember the palace as it was. It was a painful exercise, but necessary. He had to engrave these images in his memory before they faded, before the horror of the present completely erased the beauty of the past.

He remembered the gardens in spring, when the peach trees were in bloom and the air smelled of honey and petals. He remembered the pavilions at sunset, their golden roofs shining in the declining light. He remembered summer evenings when the Emperor organized poetry recitals by the lake, lanterns floating on the water like fallen stars. He remembered winter mornings when snow covered everything with a white mantle and the silence was so deep you could almost hear the past whispering its secrets.

He wanted to engrave these images so deeply in his memory that they could never be stolen, never be burned, never completely disappear.

October 20, 1860, caves in the western hills, evening

When An Dehai reached the caves after an exhausting journey through the hills, guided by the precise instructions that Chen Mingde had left with the first group, he was physically and emotionally exhausted. His robes were torn by thorns that scratched the silk fabric like accusing fingers. His feet were bleeding in his worn shoes, each step a small torture. But he was alive. That was all that mattered.

Chen Mingde, the guard who had found this refuge, greeted him at the entrance of the largest cave with visible relief.

"Master An! Thank God! We thought you were captured or worse!"

An Dehai leaned against the rocky wall, catching his breath in large painful gulps. Each breath burned his lungs. He was no longer at the age for this kind of physical effort.

"Almost. The soldiers were patrolling everywhere. We had to hide three times. But I survived. How are the others?"

"All here. Twenty-three people counting the first group. Zhang Qinlin has a nasty head wound—a brick fell on him while he was looking for books in the ruins—but Gao Niang treated him with herbs she found. He'll make it. Madame Liu and Mei Lin haven't come back from their search yet."

An Dehai felt his stomach knot painfully. Madame Liu. Mei Feng. He had hoped they would have already found the young girl, that they would be here safe.

"How long has it been?"

"They left this morning at sunrise. They were supposed to be back two hours ago, before night fell completely."

An Dehai straightened up immediately despite his exhaustion, ignoring the pain in his legs.

"I'm going to look for them. They may need help. Maybe they found Mei Feng injured and can't carry her alone."

Chen Mingde grabbed him by the arm with a firm grip that left no room for discussion.

"No! You're exhausted. You can barely stand. Look at yourself—you're trembling with fatigue. And it's almost night. It's too dangerous. You'll never find your way in total darkness, and even if you do, the soldiers are patrolling everywhere. They have torches. They'll see you before you see them."

An Dehai wanted to protest, wanted to insist, but he knew Chen was right. In his current state, exhausted, hungry, disoriented, he would be useful to no one. He would more likely be a burden than a help.

"Very well. But if they haven't come back by tomorrow morning at dawn, at the first light of day, I'll go look for them. With or without help. I won't abandon them."

He entered the cave, his eyes taking time to adjust to the semi-darkness. Inside, about thirty people were huddled around several improvised fires. The atmosphere was oppressive, charged with smoke that stung the eyes and with despair that weighed like a leaden shroud. The cave smelled of dampness, cold earth, and fear—that acrid smell of sweat mixed with anguish that cannot be masked. Everyone had reddened eyes, either from the acrid smoke or from incessant tears, probably both.

An Dehai observed them for a moment, these survivors who had clung to life by pure will. Some stared at the fire without really seeing it, lost in their thoughts. Others rocked gently, a comforting and unconscious movement. A few murmured prayers, their lips forming ancient words that had consoled generations before them.

Zhang Yinghuan, the old librarian, was sitting in an isolated corner, still clutching his five saved books to his chest as if they were fragile newborns he had to protect against the world. He was mumbling passages from memory, his voice a continuous and hypnotic murmur. An Dehai approached close enough to hear. The old man was reciting a passage from the Classic of Filial Piety, then moved on to an excerpt from the Analects of Confucius, then to a Tang dynasty poem. He was afraid of forgetting, An Dehai realized. Afraid that if the books were lost and his memory failed, wisdom would be lost forever in the void.

Wang Daniu, the gardener who had worked with Wei Guoliang for decades, stared at the fire with an empty gaze. His eyes hardly blinked. He hadn't said a word. An Dehai knew that look. Shock. The brain shutting down to protect itself from a reality too painful to accept. He had seen that same look on the faces of soldiers who had survived terrible battles.

Sun Yaoting, the young eunuch who had been hit the first day, his face still marked by bruises that were now turning yellow-green, was huddled in another corner, knees pressed against his chest, rocking back and forth in a rhythmic and soothing movement. His eyes were wide open but saw nothing of the real world. He was humming a lullaby, always the same melody, over and over—probably the one his mother sang to him when he was a child and afraid of the dark.

Li Lianying leaned toward An Dehai.

"They're in shock. All of them. We've seen too many horrors in too little time. The human mind isn't made to absorb so much violence, loss, destruction in such a short time. It fragments, breaks to protect itself."

An Dehai nodded. He himself felt emotional numbness beginning to set in—that strange dissociation where a part of him observed everything from the outside, as if these events were happening to someone else. It was a psychological protection

against a reality too painful to fully accept. If you let all the pain in at once, you would go mad.

He sat near the central fire, feeling the warmth on his face like a blessing after the night's cold. He spoke loud enough for all to hear, his voice resonating against the cave's stone walls:

"My friends, listen to me. I know these last two days have been the worst of our lives. Perhaps the worst days that humans can live. I know some of you are wondering why continue, what's the point of surviving when everything we've known has disappeared, when everything that gave meaning to our lives has been destroyed or stolen. When even our dreams have been burned."

He let his words resonate in the silent cave before continuing. Some slowly raised their eyes to him, others kept their gaze fixed on the ground or on the dancing flames.

"But I'll tell you why we survive. We survive because we are the witnesses. We are those who truly know what happened here. Not the version the victors will write in their glorious newspapers to justify their actions. Not the propaganda that governments will spread to appease their consciences. The real story. Our story. The story of ordinary people who lost everything but kept their humanity, their dignity, their capacity to remember and bear witness."

He stood up, slowly pacing the space in front of the fire, his gestures deliberate to capture attention.

"We must remain united. That's our strength—the only one we still have. And we must think practically about our immediate survival. I propose that we establish teams. A team for cooking, led by Wang Changgui—you know rations, preparation, hygiene. One for security and patrols around the caves, led by Chen Mingde and Zhao Hong—you know the terrain, you have military training. One to go look for food in neighboring villages when it's safe—but only when the soldiers have left, not before.

And one to return to the palace to see what's happening, save what can still be saved."

Zhao Hong protested immediately, his voice rising:

"Return to the palace? Why? To get killed? We've already seen enough horrors! Wei Guoliang died for nothing! You want us to die too for objects?"

Li Lianying stood up beside An Dehai, his youth giving him an energy that the older ones no longer had.

"To bear witness, Zhao Hong. Master An is right. Otherwise, how will we know what was lost? How can we tell our children, our grandchildren, what was there before the destruction? How will history know the truth?"

An Dehai nodded with gratitude to Li Lianying.

"I'll go. Every day as long as it's possible, I'll go observe, note, remember. It's my last mission."

Li Lianying straightened his shoulders.

"I'll come with you. You shouldn't go alone. Two pairs of eyes see better than one, two memories are more reliable than one alone."

Cui Yugui, to everyone's surprise, also stood up. The taciturn young eunuch, who had barely spoken, who had seemed to withdraw into himself, now found the courage to volunteer.

"And me too. I have to do something. I can't just stay here waiting, consuming myself from the inside, going mad from sitting in the darkness thinking about everything we've lost. If I can help preserve memory... it's better than nothing. It's better than letting everything disappear as if it had never existed."

"Thank you. Thank you both. You're braver than you think. We'll go together, we'll protect each other. Three together are worth more than one alone."

They spent the following hour organizing life in the caves with surprising efficiency that contrasted with the ambient despair.

Teams were formed, responsibilities assigned with precision. Wang Changgui took charge of organizing meals and rations, establishing a ticket system to avoid disputes. Chen Mingde and Zhao Hong established a watch system with two-hour guard shifts, alert signals, escape points in case of emergency. Zhang Yinghuan, finally coming out of his trance, proposed to begin teaching the younger ones—reading, writing, calculating, reciting the classics—to keep their minds active and give them hope for a future where these skills would be useful.

It gave people a purpose, something to focus on beyond their immediate pain. Organization was a form of resistance against chaos, an affirmation that despite everything, they remained civilized human beings.

Gao Niang, an old servant who had been a lady-in-waiting and who had a soft, maternal voice, suggested sharing anecdotes, happy memories of the palace before the destruction.

The idea was greeted with hesitation at first, as if remembering past happiness made the present pain even sharper, more unbearable. But slowly, hesitantly, people began to speak. It was like opening a long-closed door—difficult at first, then increasingly easier.

Wang Changgui told the story of the time he had accidentally added salt instead of sugar to the Empress's birthday cake. His face animated for the first time in telling the anecdote.

"It was fifteen years ago. I was young, perhaps too confident in my skills. I'd been told a hundred times to check ingredients, to always taste before serving. But I was in a hurry that day—there were so many dishes to prepare for the party. I trusted my habits. When the Empress took the first bite in front of the entire court, I saw her face change. My heart stopped. I thought I was going to be executed on the spot. I'd been told stories of cooks beheaded for less than that. But she... she just laughed. A big frank laugh that surprised everyone. She said: 'This reminds me that I am human, subject to the same mistakes as everyone else.

Even emperors sometimes eat salt instead of sugar.' She even ate her entire portion so as not to shame me in front of the others."

Soft laughter ran through the group, a strange and almost forgotten sound in this context. It was good to laugh, even faintly, even if the laughter mixed with tears.

Gao Niang, encouraged by the reaction, spoke of the day she had seen Emperor Qianlong composing a poem in the garden, so absorbed in his creation that he hadn't noticed it had started to rain and was soaked to the bone.

"It was a summer day, perhaps fifty years ago—I was new to the palace. The Emperor was known for composing poems everywhere, at any time. When inspiration took him, nothing else existed for him. That day, he had sat under a willow by the lake. His servants had followed him, of course, but didn't dare interrupt him when he was composing. That was the rule. When the rain began—first a light drizzle, then a real downpour—we all stayed there, also in the rain, patiently waiting for him to notice it. He must have stayed there half an hour, completely focused on his brush and paper, while water ran down his face, soaked his imperial robes. Finally he looked up and said, as if it were a great discovery: 'Oh, it's raining.' We were all soaked to the bone, shivering with cold, but no one laughed. The poem he had composed—I still remember it—spoke of drought and the need for rain to grow crops. Perhaps the heavens had heard him."

Other stories followed, weaving together a complex and beautiful tapestry of life that had existed at the palace. Li Lianying spoke of the day when a peacock had escaped from its enclosure and ran through the palace corridors, creating comic chaos as servants and guards tried to catch it without hurting it, the bird running between people's legs, its colorful feathers leaving a trail in its wake.

Sun Yaoting, finally emerging from his catatonic silence for the first time, recounted how his mother had given him a jade amulet before he left for the palace at the age of ten, an amulet he still

wore and which was now the only thing he possessed that came from her.

"She told me that as long as I wore this amulet, she would think of me every day. That her love would travel through the jade to protect me. I didn't know if I should believe her—I was young, frightened. But I wore it every day for six years. And when the soldiers searched us that first day, they took my ring, they took my coins, but they didn't find the amulet. I had hidden it in my mouth. It's still there, against my chest. Maybe my mother is still thinking of me. Maybe she's still alive."

One by one, they shared their memories—moments of joy and sadness, tiny triumphs and failures, the almost boring daily life and extraordinary events. The first snows when the entire palace transformed into a fairytale landscape. New Year celebrations with firecrackers, red lanterns, feasts that lasted for days. Weddings of members of the imperial family, magnificent ceremonies that mobilized the entire palace for weeks. Births that brought joy and hope. Promotions that rewarded years of loyal service. Reprimands that humiliated but taught. Unlikely friendships between people of different ranks. Petty rivalries that seemed important at the time but appeared ridiculous now.

Life in all its complexity, its sublime banality, its ordinary beauty, now reduced to stories whispered around a fire in a cold and damp cave.

An Dehai listened to everything, nodding from time to time, sometimes adding his own memories, weaving the individual threads into a collective tapestry. He thought of the remark he had made earlier: preserving not only objects, but stories, lives lived, the humanity of the place.

"You see? This is what we must preserve. The small moments that define who we were. A palace is not just marble walls and golden treasures. It's the people who lived there, who loved, who worked hard, who dreamed, who laughed and cried. It's the cooks who got up before dawn to prepare meals. The gardeners

who spent hours on their knees in the earth. The eunuchs who walked kilometers every day in the corridors. The ladies-in-waiting who embroidered for hours. That's the real loss. And that's what we can still save by remembering."

Dawn was approaching. They heard voices at the cave entrance. Everyone froze, terror immediately seizing each one. The soldiers? Had they been discovered?

But it was Madame Liu and Mei Lin who appeared at the entrance, dark silhouettes outlined against the slowly lightening sky.

Everyone jumped up. Madame Liu seemed exhausted, her clothes torn and dirty, her carefully styled bun now undone, her gray hair hanging, but she was whole, alive. Mei Lin was supporting her, helping her walk, practically carrying her the last meters. Both women advanced slowly, their faces bearing the imprint of a pain that went beyond the physical, a pain that marked the soul.

An Dehai rushed toward them, his heart pounding.

"Madame Liu! Thank God! We were so worried! We were going to organize a search team at the first ray of sunlight!"

She collapsed near the nearest fire. Someone—Wang Changgui—gave her water which she drank avidly. Then she looked up at An Dehai, and he saw in her eyes a pain so deep, so absolute, that it seemed bottomless, like a well descending to the center of the earth.

"I found her. My Mei Feng. I found her."

An Dehai felt his heart clench painfully. He already knew the answer before even asking the question. It could be read on her face, in the way her shoulders sagged.

"Where is she?"

Madame Liu's voice was nothing more than a hoarse whisper, broken by pain and exhaustion.

"Dead. In the ruins of the Pavilion of Harmonies. She and eight other girls. Young girls, all so young. They..."

Her voice broke completely. She took a breath, desperately trying to regain composure, to keep some semblance of dignity despite the gulf of pain that threatened to engulf her.

"They had tried to hide in the cellars under the pavilion. They thought they would be safe underground, that the soldiers wouldn't think to search there. But the barbarians set fire to the building. They burned everything, methodically, room by room. The smoke descended into the cellars. The girls died of asphyxiation. We found them... their bodies were... they had held each other, trying to comfort each other in their last moments."

She couldn't continue, collapsing in heartbreaking sobs that seemed to tear her chest.

Mei Lin took over in a resolute voice, determined to finish the account that Madame Liu could no longer continue.

"We buried them. We couldn't leave them there, exposed to the elements, to animals perhaps. They deserved better. We found a place in the peony garden—it was Mei Feng's favorite garden. She went there every spring to see the flowers, spent hours there, drawing in a small notebook. We didn't have proper tools—the soldiers had taken all the gardeners' tools. Just our hands and some pieces of wood found in the rubble. But we dug. We dug for hours, until our hands bled, until our nails broke. We gave them at least that. A decent burial. A resting place. A bit of dignity in all this barbarity."

Madame Liu pulled something from her sleeve—a silver hairpin, delicately worked with a plum blossom motif. She held it before her like a talisman, the only tangible thing that remained of her daughter.

"This belonged to my Mei Feng. I had given it to her for her sixteenth birthday. It was a tradition in my family—mothers gave their daughters hairpins when they became women, a symbol of

their passage to adulthood. She always wore it, even to sleep. She said it was her lucky charm, that it would protect her from all harm. That's all that remains of her now. A silver hairpin. Nineteen years of life, reduced to this object."

She clutched it so hard her knuckles were white, her fingers clenched like claws.

No one knew what to say. What could be said in the face of such loss, such grief? Words seemed derisory, almost insulting in their inadequacy. The silence stretched, heavy with shared pain.

Finally, Zhang Yinghuan stood up. The old librarian put down his precious books with reverence, placing them carefully on a flat stone. He approached Madame Liu and knelt before her with difficulty—his old knees cracking audibly. He began to recite a Buddhist sutra on the ephemeral nature of life, on the liberation of the soul from earthly suffering, on the wheel of karma and rebirth.

The ancient words filled the cave, resonating against the stone walls, creating a natural harmony. It was a melody that had consoled countless generations of mourners, a bridge between the living and the dead.

When he had finished the first sutra, others spontaneously joined him. Some recited other sutras they knew. Others recited poems about loss and remembrance. Those who didn't know the exact words simply hummed, creating a collective harmony of shared pain that transformed individual despair into something greater, more bearable, almost transcendent.

The sound was strangely beautiful despite its sadness—a collective lamentation that wove together all their individual losses into a unique song of remembrance and resistance against forgetting.

When silence finally fell again, heavy and sacred, Madame Liu addressed the assembled group. She had wiped away her tears with the corner of her sleeve. Her face, though ravaged by grief,

showed a new resolution, a determination that hadn't been there before.

"Thank you. Thank you all for your prayers, for your compassion. I know now. I can mourn, I can grieve, carry my pain, but I know. I'm no longer torn by uncertainty. And in a way, despite the horror, it's better than uncertainty. Hope is torture when there's no longer any reason to hope. Now I can begin to accept, even if acceptance will take the rest of my life."

She fixed An Dehai with her reddened eyes, a new intensity in her gaze.

"Master An is right. We must bear witness. We must remember. My Mei Feng and the eight other girls—they must not be forgotten. They must not be just statistics in a military report, numbers without faces. They had names, dreams, families who loved them. Mei Feng wanted to marry, have children, perhaps become a poetess. She wrote beautiful poems about flowers. All the people who died these last days—they must be named, remembered, honored."

An Dehai approached her and took her hands in his, feeling the new calluses, the cuts, the dried blood from the grave she had dug.

"They will be. I solemnly promise. We will make a complete list of all those we know who died. Their names will be preserved, carefully written, protected. Their memory will live as long as we live. And we will pass this memory on to our children, and they will pass it on to theirs. The chain will not be broken."

That night, most of the others had finally fallen asleep, physically and emotionally exhausted. An Dehai remained awake. Under the light of a small oil lamp he had positioned carefully so as not to disturb anyone, he began what would become his life's work, his testament, his final contribution to history: the Register of the Lost.

On sheets of paper he had saved from the palace—superior quality rice paper, thick and durable, strong enough to last centuries if properly preserved and protected from moisture—he began to write the names of all those he knew to be dead. He used his best brush, the one he had recovered from the ruins of his office, and ink he had mixed himself according to the traditional recipe he had been taught: soot from burned pine, animal-based glue, a bit of musk for fragrance.

Each character was traced with extreme care, like a prayer engraved in stone. His hand moved slowly, deliberately, transforming each name into a form of calligraphic art. This wasn't just a register—it was a monument.

The first name he wrote:

"Wei Guoliang, chief gardener of the Pavilion of Precious Clouds, approximately sixty-five years old, originally from Xiangshan village in Hebei province. Worked at the Summer Palace for forty-seven years. Specialist in plum trees and peonies. Had created the plum grove near the Pavilion of Harmonies in 1832—twenty-eight years of patient care. Married to Lady Wang (deceased 1855), three adult children including the eldest who is a farmer in Xiangshan. Loved to sing while working—especially folk songs from his youth. Had a reputation for talking to his plants like children. Knew the botanical name of every flower in the palace. Often said: A gardener plants for the future, for people he will never know. Killed without provocation by British soldiers on October 19, 1860 near the Pavilion of Precious Clouds. His crime: running, perhaps to protect his seeds. Witness: An Dehai and four others. May the earth be light upon him."

Then the second name:

"Mei Feng, servant of the Pavilion of Harmonies, nineteen years old, only daughter of Lady Liu (imperial lady-in-waiting). Born in Beijing on the fifteenth day of the third lunar month of 1841. Worked at the palace since the age of fourteen. Gentle, shy,

graceful in her movements. Loved to draw flowers, particularly peonies—had filled three notebooks with sketches. Dreamed of marrying, having children, perhaps becoming a poetess. Wrote poems about nature that she sometimes recited to her mother. Always wore the silver hairpin her mother had given her for her sixteenth birthday. Died of asphyxiation in the fire of the Pavilion of Harmonies on October 19 or 20, 1860, with eight other young girls aged fifteen to twenty. They had hidden in the cellars, thinking they would be safe. Buried in the peony garden by her mother and Mei Lin. May Buddha grant peace to her soul."

The third name:

"Li Mei, servant, fifteen years old. Orphan, no known living family. Long black hair that she carefully braided each morning. Soft voice, shy laughter. Dreamed of seeing the sea she had never seen. Collected polished stones from the lake. Hidden in a wardrobe in the concubines' quarters. Found by soldiers. Raped. Killed. Her body discovered by Madame Liu and her group. No family to mourn her death except us who knew her. May Buddha transform her suffering into wisdom in her next life."

And so on. Each name accompanied by everything An Dehai knew or could discover about this person—their exact age if possible, otherwise an estimate, their position in the palace hierarchy, their geographical origins, their families, their passions, their daily habits, their speech patterns, their fears, their joys, their dreams for the future. Not just how they died—that horrible but necessary information—but especially, especially, how they had lived. Who they had been when they were alive, breathing, laughing, crying, loving.

Li Lianying, who wasn't sleeping either—how could he sleep after all they had seen?—came to sit silently beside him. He observed An Dehai writing for several minutes before speaking.

"You're writing their complete stories. Not just their names."

"Yes. Because names alone aren't enough. A name without a story is just an empty sound. But a name with a story—that was a person, Lianying. A real person who lived, who felt, who contributed to the world in their own way. What they were, not just how they died. That's important. That's crucial. Death is universal, even banal. Everyone dies, always, since the beginning of time. But life—the way each person lived, what they loved, who they were in their truest moments—that's unique. Irreplaceable. That's what deserves to be preserved. That's what makes us human beings."

Others, awakened by their low voices or unable to sleep themselves, progressively joined them. Wang Changgui spoke of his assistant cook, a young man named Liu Yang, twenty-three years old, who dreamed of opening his own restaurant one day and who made the best dumplings in all of Beijing—a family secret passed down over three generations.

Gao Niang remembered a fellow servant named Xiao Qing who always sang while working, her clear voice resonating in the corridors and bringing joy even on the most difficult days. She had been killed the first day, caught while trying to flee with a small bag of clothes.

Sun Yaoting spoke sadly of a eunuch friend named Wang Ming, seventeen years old, with whom he had shared quarters for two years. Wang Ming had been captured the first day while trying to protect an old servant who could no longer run. He hadn't been seen again—probably dead, but without certainty, which was perhaps worse than knowing.

They worked until late into the night, these involuntary guardians of memory, creating a monument of paper and ink for those who could never have tombstones, ancestral temples, descendants to burn incense in their memory. Each name added was an act of resistance against forgetting, a declaration that these lives had mattered, that their loss had importance, that they would not be erased from history as if they had never existed.

When An Dehai finally put down his brush, his eyes burning with fatigue, his hand tired from holding the brush for hours, he had filled thirty entire pages with names and stories. Sixty-three people. Sixty-three lives documented, preserved, honored. This was only a beginning—there would be many more in the days to come. But it was a beginning. A first step against forgetting.

October 21, 1860, Summer Palace

The next morning, An Dehai, Li Lianying and Cui Yugui cautiously returned to the palace. Or rather, to what remained of it.

The journey from the caves took about an hour's walk through the wooded hills. They advanced carefully, often stopping behind trees or rocks to listen, to observe, to make sure no patrol was nearby. The familiar landscape seemed strange now, transformed by tragedy. The birds were still absent—their silence was almost more deafening than their song would have been. The small animals that usually ran through the underbrush had fled to safer territories. Only the wind murmured sadly in the bare trees, carrying with it the persistent and sickening smell of smoke.

The transformation in just four days was stupefying, almost impossible to believe for someone who hadn't witnessed the daily progression. An Dehai had seen the palace for the last time two days earlier. It was already severely damaged, but recognizable, still identifiable as the place he had known. Now...

Where had once existed the Summer Palace in all its imperial magnificence—one hundred fifty hectares of meticulously maintained gardens, more than three thousand rooms distributed among hundreds of interconnected buildings and pavilions, art collections carefully accumulated over centuries by refined emperors—there remained only a lunar landscape of smoking ruins extending as far as the eye could see.

Entire buildings had completely disappeared, consumed by flames down to their foundations, leaving only blackened squares in the earth and solitary chimneys that stood like accusing fingers pointed at an indifferent sky. Others were nothing more than empty shells, their magnificently painted roofs collapsed in heaps of broken tiles, their charred walls standing precariously, threatening to collapse at the slightest breath of wind. Smoke floated everywhere like a toxic and persistent fog, reducing visibility to a few dozen meters and making each breath painful, irritating eyes and throat.

An Dehai had to stop for a moment, overwhelmed by the scale of the destruction. His legs refused to carry him further. He sat on a stone, his head in his hands, trying to control the sobs that threatened to overwhelm him. His entire adult life devoted to this place. And now...

Li Lianying took his hand.

"Master, we must continue. That's why we came. To see. To bear witness."

An Dehai nodded, regaining composure. The young man was right. He wiped away his tears and stood up, forcing his legs to carry him.

They moved silently through this apocalyptic landscape, like ghosts haunting the ruins of their former life. An Dehai took mental notes of everything he saw, creating a map of the destruction in his mind—which building had completely disappeared, which was partially intact, where treasures might have been stored before being stolen, which paths the pillagers had taken. From time to time, he took out his paper and brush to write a few quick observations.

They discovered that the British and French armies had established a remarkably organized system for their pillage. It wasn't the chaos one might have imagined, but a military operation planned with precision. Specific geographical zones

were assigned to different regiments—the French mainly controlled the eastern sector of the palace, the British the western sector. Officers supervised the pillage, keeping detailed records, ensuring that loot was equitably distributed among units according to a quota system. This made it in a way more obscene—it wasn't the chaos of soldiers gone wild losing all control, but a planned operation executed with the cold efficiency of a well-oiled machine.

In what remained of the Pavilion of the Sea of Wisdom—the outer walls were still standing, but the roof had completely collapsed, creating a space open to the sky—they found a group of British soldiers carefully packing Buddhist bronze statues. A bearded officer was consulting a thick book that seemed to be an art catalog, meticulously annotating each piece with notes in English that An Dehai couldn't read.

He approached cautiously, his feet crackling on the debris littering the floor. The officer looked up and frowned, his hand moving instinctively toward the pistol hanging from his belt.

"Who are you? What are you doing here? This place is under British military control. Chinese civilians are not allowed here."

The officer's English was precise, educated, that of a gentleman probably from a good family.

An Dehai bowed slightly with the deference he had learned.

"I worked here. At the palace. I know these buildings, these statues. I was responsible for the inventory."

The officer examined him with more interest now, his eyes assessing, calculating.

"You're one of the palace eunuchs, aren't you? I've heard about your system. Fascinating from an anthropological point of view."

"Yes, sir. I am a eunuch. And I would like to tell you about these statues."

The officer considered the proposition for a moment.

"Hmm. You could indeed be useful to me. Can you tell me the age of these bronzes? Their... historical and religious significance?"

An Dehai contemplated the statues the soldiers were packing in cloth and straw. He knew them well, these sacred representations. The three principal bodhisattvas of Mahayana Buddhism: Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, Manjusri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, and Samantabhadra, the bodhisattva of virtuous practice.

"These statues were created during the Tang dynasty, sir. About twelve hundred years ago. They were commissioned by Emperor Taizong for an important Buddhist temple. When the temple was destroyed during the great anti-Buddhist persecutions under Emperor Wuzong, they were saved by courageous monks who risked their lives. They were hidden in caves for decades. They were rediscovered and preserved in the imperial collections. They represent..."

He searched for his words in English, trying to translate complex Buddhist concepts into a foreign language.

"They represent Buddhist holy beings. Bodhisattvas. These are beings who have achieved complete enlightenment, who could enter nirvana and escape the cycle of suffering, but who choose to remain in the world to help all sentient beings achieve enlightenment as well. Very sacred to the Chinese people. Millions of people have prayed before these statues for centuries. They represent the highest spiritual aspirations of our civilization."

The officer noted carefully in his book, his pen scratching the paper.

"Tang dynasty. Twelve hundred years. Considerable religious significance. Fascinating. These pieces will be sent to the British Museum in London. They will be properly displayed in a climate-controlled case, properly preserved by experts, properly studied

by scholars. They will be seen by millions of visitors who will be able to appreciate ancient Chinese art. Much better than leaving them here to be destroyed by fire or the elements, or worse, by the ignorance of your own people who might not understand their value."

An Dehai felt familiar anger rising in him like a tide.

"You're setting the fires yourself, sir. You and your French allies. You're destroying the palace with remarkable efficiency. You say you're saving the statues from the fire you're lighting yourselves. This is..."

He searched for the word in English, finally finding the one that perfectly captured the moral absurdity.

"This is hypocrisy of the worst kind. It's like a man who sets fire to a house then boasts of saving the children from the flames he created."

The officer visibly stiffened, his face turning red with anger or perhaps embarrassment.

"We're following Lord Elgin's orders. I don't make Empire policy. I'm just a soldier doing my duty to the Queen and England."

"Every soldier says exactly that, sir. 'I'm just following orders. I'm just doing my duty. It's not my responsibility.' But someone must be responsible for all this. If everyone just follows orders without thinking, without questioning the morality of these orders, who is really guilty? How can this be called anything other than organized banditry on an international scale?"

The officer didn't respond immediately. He closed his book with a snap and turned away, contemplating the sacred statues his men were packing like vulgar merchandise.

"This conversation is over. You may leave. And consider yourself lucky that I'm a civilized gentleman. Other officers would have had you shot for insolence."

An Dehai bowed with barely veiled irony.

"Thank you for your 'civilization,' sir. History will judge who was truly civilized in this affair."

As they moved away from the ruined pavilion, Li Lianying whispered in a low voice, his voice tense with worry:

"Master An, you're taking too many risks speaking like that. If you anger these men, they might kill you without hesitation. One more or less Chinese eunuch, who would care? No one would ask questions."

An Dehai continued walking, his back stiff with anger and wounded pride.

"I know I'm taking risks, Lianying. But I can't remain completely silent. I can't watch them steal our heritage while pretending they're doing us a favor, that they're 'preserving' our culture by stealing it, that they're 'civilizing' us by destroying our civilization. The hypocrisy is unbearable. At least, I want them to know we're not fooled. That we see through their justifications."

"But we're completely powerless against them physically. Our words don't change reality."

An Dehai stopped and turned to the young man.

"Physically, yes, we're completely powerless. They have guns, cannons, military force. But morally? Morally, we're superior, and I want them to know it. I want them to feel the weight of shame for what they're doing, even if they'll never admit it publicly, even if they'll justify their actions in their official reports. I want to plant a seed of doubt in their minds. Maybe in ten years, twenty years, when they're old and think back to what they did here, they'll feel that shame. It's little, but it's all I have as a weapon."

They continued their painful exploration of the destroyed palace. In each pavilion they visited, the same repetitive and heartbreaking spectacle: treasures carefully packed for export to Europe, debris from what had been judged too ordinary to steal but too beautiful to leave intact, traces of fire everywhere like scars on a tortured body. The floor was littered with fragments

that crackled under their feet—pieces of Ming porcelain transformed into worthless shards, bits of burned fabrics that had been imperial robes embroidered for months, torn pages from ancient books that the wind slowly dispersed.

An Dehai sometimes bent down to pick up these fragments. Even fragments had value as testimonies, as proof of what had existed.

In the Great Library, the vision was even more Dantesque than he had imagined during his last visit. The interior was now completely annihilated. Thousands of books were nothing more than gray and fine ashes that came up to the ankles and flew away at the slightest breath of wind, swirling like black snow. The precious wood shelves—sandalwood, ebony, rosewood—had burned, leaving only twisted nails and fittings deformed by extreme temperatures. Only a few stone walls remained standing, blackened by soot, their surfaces cracked by heat like burned skin.

Cui Yugui bent down and delicately picked up a half-burned page from an ancient book. The paper was fragile, brittle, ready to disintegrate at the slightest too abrupt contact. A few characters could still be read on the side that had escaped the flames: "...the sage understands that knowledge is the treasure that cannot be stolen, the wealth that cannot be burned, the heritage that cannot..." The rest had disappeared in the flames, taking with it the end of the thought.

"This is all that remains of this wisdom. Thousands of years of philosophical thought, hundreds of thousands of books copied by hand with infinite care, unique texts that existed nowhere else in the world... reduced to a few fragmented characters on a burned page. It's as if part of the human soul itself had been burned."

An Dehai took the page with extreme delicacy, handling it like a holy object, and placed it between two sheets of intact paper to protect it.

"Even a fragment has immense value. It's tangible proof. One day, someone will see this and truly understand the extent of what was lost here. Numbers in official reports aren't enough. We need physical evidence, objects we can touch, smell, see."

They spent hours exploring, painfully remembering, documenting everything they could. It was mentally and emotionally exhausting work. Each turn revealed a new destruction, a new loss that added to the already unbearable weight. But they persisted, driven by a sense of duty that transcended immediate pain.

At noon, completely exhausted, they sat near Kunming Lake to rest for a few minutes. The lake, once of such pure crystalline blue that fish could be seen swimming several meters deep, was now covered with a thick layer of floating debris. Objects the pillagers had judged too heavy, too cumbersome or not precious enough to transport floated sadly on the murky water: pieces of sculpted wooden furniture that had taken months to create, fragments of porcelain that had been magnificent vases, torn robes that trailed like corpses, broken decorative panels. A few koi carp, those that had miraculously survived the chaos, swam slowly between the debris, their movements disoriented and lethargic, as if they too were in shock.

Li Lianying contemplated the aquatic disaster.

"It was so sumptuous before. I remember summer festivals when I started working here. The dragon boats on the lake, their hulls painted in red and gold shining gloriously in the sun. The rowers singing in rhythm. The white marble bridges that spanned the water like solid rainbows. The pavilions reflecting in the calm water like perfect paintings, so clear you couldn't distinguish the real from the reflection. The lanterns at night, floating on the water like fallen stars from the sky. The pink lotuses in summer, covering the surface with a carpet of living flowers. And now... it's a cemetery. An open-air cemetery for a dead civilization."

An Dehai could only nod slowly. Words failed him. Any description seemed inadequate in the face of this total devastation.

Suddenly, Cui Yugui stiffened, pointing discreetly.

"Look. Over there, in the ruins. Someone is moving."

They saw a human silhouette moving furtively among the rubble of a neighboring pavilion, lifting stones and pieces of wood, searching for something with desperate gestures.

"Someone else stayed or came back. Another survivor perhaps. We should go see. Maybe they need help. Maybe they're injured."

They approached cautiously, being careful not to surprise the person too suddenly. The silhouette revealed itself to be a young woman dressed in dirty and torn rags that might have once been a servant's robe. Her face was smeared with black soot, her hair in disarray, roughly tied. She was searching for something among the rubble with almost manic determination, lifting stones despite her bleeding hands from multiple cuts.

An Dehai coughed softly to signal their presence without frightening her.

The woman turned around abruptly, terrified, her eyes widening like those of a hunted animal. Then, seeing they were Chinese, that their clothes indicated they were palace servants and not soldiers, she seemed to relax slightly, although mistrust remained clearly visible in her gaze and in the tension of her body.

"Who's there? You're not military?"

"No. We are palace servants. We lived and worked here before... before all this. Who are you?"

The woman hesitated for a long moment before answering.

"My name is Qin Yue. I was a servant in the Pavilion of Harmonies, like my little sister. When the soldiers came four days ago—or is it five now? I've lost track of time—I hid in the underground kitchens. There was a secret reserve for emergency

provisions that few people knew about. A narrow, dark, damp space. I stayed there for two whole days without food or water, too terrified to come out even to drink. I just waited for them to find me and kill me."

"The underground kitchens. Of course. That's how you survived the pavilion fire. Fire couldn't go down there. You were lucky in your misfortune."

"Lucky? I heard everything for two days. Every scream, every plea, every gunshot. The screams of my friends when the soldiers found them. The crackling of the fire devouring the building above my head. The beams collapsing. The walls crumbling. For two days, I was alone in absolute darkness, terrified, not daring to come out, listening to my entire world being destroyed above my head. Sometimes I heard French or English voices just above, separated from me by a few centimeters of wood. It was like being in hell, locked alive in a tomb. Maybe dying quickly would have been easier, more merciful."

An Dehai immediately understood this pain. Sometimes, surviving was infinitely more difficult than dying. Survivors carried the weight of everything they had seen, of all those they couldn't save.

"You're alive. That's what matters now. What are you looking for here?"

Qin Yue's eyes filled with tears that flowed freely, tracing clean furrows on her dirty cheeks.

"My sister. My little sister, Qin Mei. She was only fifteen years old. She also worked here, in the gardens. She loved flowers, spent hours drawing them. We were supposed to meet near the jade bridge the first day, when it all started. It was our emergency meeting point—we had decided together when we heard about the approaching foreign armies. But I never found her that day. Everything happened too fast. I desperately hope she escaped, that she fled to a village, that she's safe somewhere. But if she

didn't make it... if she's still here somewhere... I must know. I can't leave without knowing. She's my little sister. I raised her after our parents died. She's all my family."

An Dehai immediately thought of Madame Liu and her desperate search for her daughter Mei Feng. He knew intimately how important it was to know, even when the news was the worst imaginable. Uncertainty was a particularly cruel form of torture that never ended, that gnawed at the soul day after day.

"Come with us. We'll help you search for your sister. With four of us, we'll cover much more ground, more quickly and more efficiently."

They spent the following two hours searching through the ruins of the jade bridge sector, calling Qin Mei's name over and over, carefully lifting debris, exploring every corner where someone might have hidden or fallen injured. It was dangerous and grueling work—unstable structures constantly threatened to collapse, charred beams hung precariously, and there was always the risk of encountering hostile soldier patrols. But they persisted, driven by Qin Yue's desperate hope and by their own humanity that refused to give up.

Near what had been the jade bridge—now just pieces of broken white stone scattered on the ground like the remains of a giant skeleton—Cui Yugui found something. He had moved slightly away from the group, exploring an area the others hadn't yet covered.

"Here! Come see quickly!"

There was a body. Or rather, almost unrecognizable human remains, carbonized by fire to the point that features could no longer be distinguished, age, even sex. Fire had consumed everything, reducing a human being to a black and shriveled form. But near the remains, half-buried in gray ashes, was a metal object—a silver brooch that had resisted the flames thanks to the metal.

Qin Yue fell to her knees as if her legs had suddenly ceased to carry her. She picked up the brooch with trembling hands, turning it in all directions, examining it from every angle. She held it before her, staring at the object as if she could read her sister's entire tragic story in it.

"This is Mei's brooch. I would recognize it among thousands. I had given it to her for her fourteenth birthday last year. We had saved for months to buy it. It represents a butterfly—Mei loved butterflies so much. She said they symbolized transformation, hope. She never took it off, even to sleep."

Her voice was strangely calm at first, as if shock had emptied all emotion. Then reality hit her like a breaking wave. She completely collapsed in heartbreaking sobs, clutching the brooch to her chest, rocking back and forth.

"She was only fifteen years old. Fifteen years old. Her whole life ahead of her. So many things she wanted to do. She wanted to marry, have children, perhaps become a head gardener. She loved to sing so much—she had the most beautiful voice I've ever heard, clear as spring water. She drew flowers with extraordinary talent. And now... now, there's just a brooch and ashes. That's all. An entire life reduced to that."

She knelt near the carbonized remains and cried, her shoulders shaken by deep sobs. An Dehai and the others let her grieve, standing at a respectful distance, forming a protective circle around her. Some pains were too deep to be shared, too personal to be interrupted by awkward words of comfort. Sometimes, all one could do was be present, bear witness to someone else's pain.

After a long moment—perhaps fifteen minutes, perhaps an hour, time seemed to have stopped in this place of death—Qin Yue slowly stood up. Her face was a mask of tragic determination despite the tears that continued to flow.

"We must bury her. I can't leave her like this. She deserves better than that. She deserves a decent burial, even simple. She was a good girl, hardworking, kind to everyone."

They found an appropriate place in what had been the plum garden, now a devastated space where the trees were nothing more than carbonized trunks. Qin Yue explained while wiping away her tears that this was Qin Mei's favorite place in the entire palace—she came here every spring to see the plum blossoms, sitting for hours under the flowering trees, meticulously drawing the branches and flowers in a notebook she always kept preciously with her.

Without proper tools, they had to dig with their bare hands and pieces of wood found in the rubble. The earth was hard, compacted, full of stones and roots. Their hands quickly covered with painful blisters that burst, then bled, but they continued, motivated by respect for the dead and compassion for Qin Yue. A decent burial, a small piece of human dignity.

When it was finished—a hole about a meter deep, not perfect, but sufficient—they delicately placed the remains in the earth with all the reverence of a complete funeral ceremony. Qin Yue arranged the body with infinite care, murmuring soft and soothing words in Chinese as if her sister could still hear her. Then she placed the silver brooch on what had been her sister's chest, a last gift, a last link.

"Goodbye, little sister. Xiao Mei. You had such a short life, so tragically short. Only fifteen years on this earth. But you were good and kind and gentle, and you deserved so much better than this horrible end. You deserved to grow old, to marry as you dreamed, to have the children you wanted, to become the great gardener you could have been. You deserved to see the sea, to travel, to sing your songs. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry that I couldn't protect you. I had promised to always take care of you after our parents died, and I failed. Forgive me."

They slowly covered the grave with earth. Then they placed flat stones on top to mark and protect it. It wasn't much—no tombstone engraved with elegant characters, no elaborate Buddhist ceremony with monks chanting sutras, no ancestral tablet in a temple—but it was an identifiable resting place. A place where Qin Yue could return to honor her sister, to speak to her, to maintain the bond.

An Dehai took out his precious paper and brush. He wrote with particular care: "Qin Mei, assistant gardener, fifteen years old, sister of Qin Yue, originally from Tianjin. Worked in the Summer Palace gardens since the age of fourteen. Specialized in ornamental flowers. Sang magnificently—clear and pure voice. Drew flowers with remarkable talent. Dreamed of marrying, having children, seeing the sea. Always wore a silver butterfly-shaped brooch given by her sister. Died near the jade bridge during the invasion, probably October 18 or 19, 1860, burned by fires lit by invading troops. Buried in the plum garden, her favorite place, by her sister Qin Yue and three witnesses: An Dehai, Li Lianying, Cui Yugui. May the earth be light upon her. May her soul find peace. May the butterflies she loved so much guide her spirit to a better existence."

Qin Yue watched him write with an expression of deep gratitude that transcended words.

"What are you doing exactly?"

"I'm keeping a detailed register. Of all those who died in this massacre. So that their names will never be forgotten, so that in a hundred years, in a thousand years, people will know that Qin Mei existed, that she lived, that she had dreams and talents, that she mattered."

New tears flowed down Qin Yue's cheeks, but this time they were different. Not just pure grief, but also gratitude, perhaps even a tiny relief.

"Thank you. Thank you for remembering her. For remembering all of us. Sometimes I feel we're so insignificant that no one will remember we ever existed."

"Every life matters. Every death matters. The powerful will write official history with their great events and treaties. But the small stories, ordinary lives—that's what truly reveals a civilization. That's what shows who we really were. And I refuse to let these stories disappear."

"Will you come with us now? We've found refuge in caves in the western hills. It's not much—cold, damp, uncomfortable—but it's safe, far from the soldiers. There are other survivors there, shared food, a semblance of community. You shouldn't stay here alone. It's not safe and it's no longer a place for the living."

Qin Yue cast a last long look at the grave they had just created, memorizing the exact location, the arrangement of stones.

"Yes. I'll come with you. I don't want to stay here anymore. This is no longer the palace I knew and loved. It's become a giant tomb."

They began to move away, Qin Yue glancing back until the plum garden disappeared from view.

They heard a new noise—a regular, rhythmic rumbling. They hid behind a collapsed wall and observed cautiously.

A column of British carts was entering the park, pulled by tired horses. There must have been about fifty of them. The carts were empty on arrival. But An Dehai guessed they would be filled with stolen treasures on departure.

"This is the final evacuation. They're taking away everything of value. Soon, there will really be nothing left."

They waited for the carts to pass, then ran toward the hills, taking Qin Yue with them. Behind them, dusk was falling on the dying Summer Palace.

October 22, 1860, farewell to the palace

As the sun set, they gathered one last time at the edge of Kunming Lake.

"The Summer Palace no longer exists. But our work begins. We are the guardians of its memory."

That last night, they held a ceremony. An Dehai read all the names of the dead—ninety-three lives lost.

When he had finished, the sun was rising. A new day. The first day of their new life.

"Let's go. Toward our future. We carry the memories. One day, our voices will be heard."

They left toward the north, toward the mountains. Behind them, the ruins were still smoking.

But in their hearts, the palace would live eternally. The silent witnesses had become the eternal guardians.

CHAPTER 4 - THE JOURNEY

Taku Port, mouth of the Pei-Ho River, November 4, 1860

The crates were piling up on the Taku wharf. Frigate Captain Auguste Morand contemplated them with a somber eye while L'Avalanche swayed behind him, ready to embark its cargo. Artillery Officer Henri Roux, designated to accompany the convoy to France, approached while adjusting his kepi.

"Captain, how many in total?"

Morand consulted his register.

"Sixty-seven crates."

"Filled with imperial treasures. Destined for Her Majesty the Empress."

"Stolen, you mean."

Roux stiffened and glanced around to make sure no one was listening to them. Chinese coolies were busy loading the crates under the supervision of French sailors.

"The division was made according to the ordinance of May 3, 1832. Article 119 is very clear..."

"Spare me the military jargon! I've read the ordinance. All this may be legal, but is it moral? We pillaged an imperial palace, emptied museums, burned libraries. And now, we're packaging the fruit of this plunder to offer it like a vulgar gift."

Roux clenched his jaw.

"General de Montauban himself supervised the division..."

"According to the rules? You were there. You saw the soldiers who rushed into the palaces, who tore down the hangings, who broke the furniture to extract the precious stones."

Roux lowered his eyes. He couldn't deny it.

"The army decided to offer these objects to the Empress..."

"Decided? It was the general who decided. The men had no choice but to acquiesce."

The sound of footsteps interrupted them. Naval Lieutenant Pallu came to them, accompanied by a Chinese foreman who was gesticulating while pointing to one of the crates.

"We have a problem. This crate is too heavy. It needs to be divided in two."

Morand approached. The crate bore the inscription "Bronzes and jades - Audience Hall."

"What does it contain?"

Roux consulted his inventory.

"Ritual bronzes from the Shang dynasty, cloisonné vases, a palanquin throne... and the Emperor's command staff in green jade."

"The jade staff?" exclaimed Pallu. "The one Lord Elgin wanted for Queen Victoria?"

"No, that one left with the English. General de Montauban reserved this second specimen for the Emperor."

Morand shook his head.

"Of course. Everything must go in pairs. As if we were dividing pirate booty..."

"Captain!" protested Pallu.

"Oh, cease your shocked airs! We're pirates in uniform."

The Chinese foreman waited patiently.

"Fine. Have this crate divided. But if a single object is damaged, you're the one who'll explain it to the general."

Morand looked northward, where columns of smoke were still rising.

"You know what revolts me most? The hypocrisy. We claim to be civilized. We come here to 'open' China to commerce, bring it the lights of European civilization. And what do we do? We

pillage, we burn, we kill. And then, we carefully pack our booty to send it to Paris where it will be exhibited as a trophy of our greatness."

Roux remained silent. Deep down, he shared Morand's unease. He had seen the palace before its destruction. The audience halls with silk-adorned ceilings, the gardens with delicate pavilions, the libraries with millennial manuscripts.

A sailor approached them and saluted.

"The loading is almost complete. We'll be able to set sail in two hours."

"Make sure all the crates are securely fastened. I don't want them moving an inch during the crossing."

Morand turned to Roux.

"You're going to accompany this convoy to France?"

"Orders to personally deliver these crates to Her Majesty."

"Prepare yourself for a long voyage. And pray we don't encounter a storm."

Aboard L'Avalanche, November 8, 1860

The crates had been loaded and securely fastened in the hold and on the aft deck. L'Avalanche had left Taku and was sailing up the Chinese coast toward Shanghai.

Roux was inspecting the cargo. He had drawn up a precise inventory, marking each crate with a number and scrupulously noting its contents. It was tedious, but necessary.

Morand joined him on deck.

"Is everything in order?"

"Yes. Sixty-seven crates, all numbered and inventoried. I've also written a report on the conditions of the division."

"A sanitized report, I imagine."

Roux didn't respond. His report didn't mention the scenes he had witnessed or the disputes between French and English officers.

"I did my duty."

"Your duty..."

Morand leaned on the rail and stared at the sea. The sky was clear, the sea calm.

"I wonder if our grandchildren will judge us harshly."

"We obeyed orders."

"Orders... Always orders. It's a convenient excuse, isn't it?"

Roux frowned.

"You seem very affected by this affair. May I ask why?"

Morand hesitated, then sighed.

"I've studied history. The Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs... All these brilliant civilizations. And do you know what they all have in common? The conviction of being superior to others. The conviction that their superiority gave them the right to conquer, to pillage, to destroy."

"We are superior. We have science, technology, industry..."

"And they have a millennial civilization. Philosophers, artists, scholars. What do we really know about China? We judge it barbaric because it refuses to submit to our commercial demands. But who are we to judge?"

These questions exceeded Roux.

Shanghai, November 24, 1860

The stopover in Shanghai allowed them to replenish provisions and check the condition of the crates. Roux took the opportunity to meet with the French consul, Monsieur de Montigny.

The consul received him in his office, a vast room adorned with Chinese furniture and calligraphy scrolls.

"So, you're in charge of conveying the booty... pardon, the 'presents' destined for Her Majesty?"

Montigny had a sardonic smile.

"These objects were divided according to regulations, Monsieur le Consul."

"Yes, yes. Everything is perfectly legal. But tell me, what do the Chinese think?"

Roux stiffened.

"The Chinese lost the war. To the victors go the spoils."

"What an elegant formula."

The consul stood up and went to the window. From his office, one could see the port teeming with activity.

"I've lived in China for fifteen years. I've learned their language, studied their culture. What we did at the palace is unforgivable."

"Lord Elgin ordered the fire, not us. Baron Gros and General de Montauban opposed it..."

"Oh, certainly! We protested. What a noble attitude! But meanwhile, we made sure to take our share. Sixty-seven crates."

"That was before the fire. The division took place on October 7. The fire was only ordered on the 18th..."

"And you think that changes anything? For the Chinese, we're all pillagers. French or English, what's the difference?"

The consul returned to his seat.

"I'm not reproaching you personally. But what happened will have consequences. The Chinese won't forget. They won't forgive. And one day, they will demand reparation."

"Reparation? They signed the treaty."

"You're very naive. Treaties are signed, but History isn't erased. What we've done will remain engraved in Chinese collective memory. And wounds always end up festering."

He leaned forward.

"One day, China will rise again. It will regain its power. And it will remember. It will demand justice."

"What do you advise me to do?"

"You? Nothing. You have your orders. But keep a written record of everything. Of the complete inventory, of the conditions of the division. Because one day, you'll be asked to account for it. Maybe not you, but France."

Roux nodded.

"I'll keep a detailed journal."

"Do so. And be honest. Future generations have the right to know what really happened."

The consul stood up, signaling that the interview was over.

"Safe voyage."

Returning to the port, Roux passed Chinese merchants who watched him pass with eyes full of hatred. Montigny was right. The Chinese would never forget.

At sea, between Shanghai and Singapore, December 2, 1860

The crossing continued without incident. L'Avalanche was heading toward Singapore. The weather was mild, the sea calm.

Roux had made it a habit to go down each day for an inspection. He checked the moorings, making sure no crate showed signs of humidity or deterioration.

One evening, he noticed that a crate had moved slightly. It was number 23, marked "Ceramics and porcelains - Peacock Pavilion." He immediately called the boatswain.

"This crate has moved. Re-secure it immediately."

The boatswain, an old sea dog named Barthélemy, examined the crate.

"It must have loosened with the rolling. We'll put it back in place."

"Be careful. It contains Ming porcelains. Extremely fragile."

Barthélemy had an ironic smile.

"Ming porcelains! And to think we're crossing the ocean with treasures worth fortunes, while our guys make do with their measly pay."

"They received their share. One hundred and eighty francs per man."

"One hundred and eighty francs! Do you know how much just one of these porcelains is worth? Thousands of francs. Maybe tens of thousands. How generous!"

The division had been profoundly unequal. The senior officers had received tens of thousands of francs, the junior officers a few thousand, and the simple soldiers barely enough to pay a few months' rent.

"Re-secure this crate. And check all the others."

"Yes, Lieutenant."

Barthélemy signaled two sailors. Roux watched them work for a few moments, then went back up on deck. The sun was setting on the horizon.

Morand was waiting for him on the bridge.

"A problem?"

"A loosened crate. Nothing serious."

Morand nodded and contemplated the sea.

Night was falling. Roux saluted and went down to his cabin. He took out a blank notebook from his trunk, dipped his pen in ink, and began to write.

"December 2, 1860. At sea, between Shanghai and Singapore. We're transporting sixty-seven crates of objects pillaged from the Yuen-Ming-Yuen. Pillaged. We must call things by their name."

He stopped, reread what he had just written. It was the first time he had put on paper what he really felt.

He continued.

"Captain Morand told me that History would judge us. I believe he's right. We participated in something terrible. We must assume responsibility for it."

He wrote thus for an hour, emptying his heart, releasing his doubts. When he finished, he closed the notebook and put it away. Then he lay down, strangely at peace. For the first time, he had told the truth.

Singapore, December 12, 1860

L'Avalanche dropped anchor in Singapore harbor in the early morning. They needed to reload coal, repair a minor leak, and above all check the condition of the crates after two weeks of navigation.

Roux went ashore with Morand. They had to meet the British governor, Sir William Orfeur Cavenagh. Singapore was a British possession, and relations between the French and English were tense.

The governor received them in his colonial residence with wide verandas. An Indian servant served them tea.

"Gentlemen, I've received instructions from London concerning your... cargo."

Morand and Roux exchanged a worried glance.

"Instructions, Excellency?"

"Lord Elgin has written personally to my government. It would seem that certain objects were divided in a... let's say, not very equitable manner."

Roux felt anger rising.

"The division was carried out according to the rules established by both commands..."

"Oh, I don't doubt it. But Lord Elgin claims that certain pieces of great value were removed before the official division."

Morand stood up abruptly.

"That's a lie! General de Montauban even insisted that the Queen have first choice!"

"Sit down. I'm not accusing you of anything. I'm simply transmitting my government's concerns."

Morand sat back down. Roux spoke in a measured voice.

"Excellency, I have in my possession a complete inventory of our cargo, as well as a detailed report. I can show them to you."

Cavenagh waved his hand.

"That won't be necessary. I believe you. But understand that this affair is delicate. Lord Elgin is furious."

"He was there! He participated in the choice!"

"I know. But politics is thus made. Lord Elgin needs a scapegoat to explain to the Queen why the British share is smaller than expected. And the French make an excellent scapegoat."

Cavenagh took a sip of tea.

"I'm going to grant you permission to stay at dock for your repairs. But I advise you to leave as soon as possible. Tensions are mounting between our two nations, and I cannot guarantee the security of your cargo."

"You think the English might try to seize our crates?"

"I think nothing. I observe that certain British officers have very... strong opinions on the division. And that there are lawyers here who would be delighted to plead a restitution case before the colonial courts."

Morand stood up.

"We understand. We'll be gone in three days maximum."

"Wise decision. Personal advice? Don't linger in British ports on your route. Aden, Cape Town... pass through them quickly. Lord Elgin has allies everywhere in the Empire."

The two Frenchmen saluted and left the residence. In the street, Morand gave free rein to his anger.

"Those damned English! After burning the palace, after forcing us to witness their vandalism, now they're accusing us of theft!"

"Calm down. We're on British territory."

"You're right. Let's return to the ship. And double the guard around the crates."

Back on board, Roux summoned Barthélemy.

"I want four guards in the hold day and night. And two men on deck, near the exterior crates. Armed."

Barthélemy widened his eyes.

"Armed? You're expecting an attack?"

"The English aren't happy about our cargo."

"Ah. They would have wanted to keep everything for themselves, right?"

"Just execute the orders. And choose reliable men."

That night, Roux couldn't sleep. He stayed on deck, watching the dimly lit wharves. Several times, he thought he saw shadows prowling near the ship.

Morand came to join him around two in the morning.

"You're not sleeping?"

"I'm thinking about what the governor said. What if the English try to seize the crates?"

"They wouldn't dare. It would be a casus belli."

"Officially. But unofficially?"

Morand sighed.

"Unofficially, the English hate us. Waterloo isn't so far back in their memory. This alliance hangs by a thread."

"We should leave tomorrow."

"Impossible. The leak isn't repaired. If we put to sea now, we risk sinking. We must stay two more days. But be vigilant."

The following two days were a test of nerves. Roux inspected the crates every two hours, checked the guards, scrutinized the wharf. Several times, British officers came prowling near the ship, asking apparently innocent questions. Morand repelled them politely but firmly.

Finally, on the morning of December 15, L'Avalanche was able to set sail. Roux breathed a sigh of relief seeing Singapore fade away.

Indian Ocean, January 3, 1861

The storm struck at midnight. In two hours, the raging sea was sweeping L'Avalanche's deck. Morand had the sails reduced and everything that could be secured fastened.

In the hold, Roux and Barthélemy were desperately checking the crates' moorings. Water had begun seeping in, and the ship was rolling so hard that several crates threatened to break loose.

"That one's moving!" shouted Barthélemy. "Seventeen!"

Roux rushed over. It was one of the largest crates, the one with the bronzes from the Shang dynasty. If it broke loose, its weight could unbalance the ship.

"We have to re-secure it! Call men!"

Four sailors came down, fighting against the pitching. They tried to pass new ropes, but the ship was listing so much that it was almost impossible to work.

"Lieutenant!" shouted a sailor. "Twenty-three! It's tipped over!"

Roux felt his heart tighten. Crate twenty-three contained the Ming porcelains, the most fragile of the entire cargo.

He made his way through the flooded hold. The crate lay on its side, one of its planks split. Through the crack, he could see porcelain shards.

"No..."

Barthélemy joined him.

"We have to right it. If it stays like this, everything will be broken."

With eight of them, they managed to right the crate, but the damage was done.

A sinister crack resounded. Crate thirty-two had just broken loose and had slid against the hull.

"Good God! We're not going to make it!"

Roux looked around him. About ten crates were in danger.

Morand came down into the hold, soaked to the bone.

"We have to lighten the ship! We're taking on too much water!"

"Lighten?"

"Throw ballast overboard. We have no choice."

"But the crates..."

"If we sink, the crates sink with us!"

Morand gave quick orders. The men went back up and began throwing everything non-essential overboard: barrels, provision crates, equipment.

The storm lasted all night and part of the next day. When it calmed, L'Avalanche had survived, but everyone was exhausted.

Roux immediately went down to the hold. The spectacle was desolate. Five crates had been seriously damaged. Twenty-three, the one with the Ming porcelains, was the most affected. He opened it carefully.

Of the twenty-eight porcelains it contained, twelve were broken to pieces. The others were cracked or chipped.

Barthélemy whistled through his teeth.

"Thousands of francs gone up in smoke."

Roux didn't react. He was thinking of these porcelains centuries old, which had survived so many wars, so many dynasties, only to end up broken in the hold of a French ship.

He examined the other damaged crates. Seventeen had lost a plank, but the bronzes seemed intact. Thirty-two contained wet silk scrolls. Forty-five and fifty-one had suffered minor damage.

He went back up where Morand was waiting.

"So?"

"Five crates damaged. Twelve Ming porcelains destroyed. Wet silks. The rest seems intact."

Morand passed a hand over his face.

"Twelve porcelains... You'll have to mention it in your report."

"Yes."

"The Empress will be furious. And the general too."

"It's not our fault. It was the storm..."

"Do you think they'll care? We were responsible. We failed."

Roux felt the weight of this responsibility fall on him.

"What should we do with the broken porcelains?"

"Keep the pieces. Maybe a restorer can do something. Take precise notes."

That night, alone in his cabin, Roux wrote in his journal.

"January 4, 1861. Indian Ocean. The storm damaged five crates. Twelve Ming porcelains are destroyed. I saw them, broken to pieces. These objects had crossed the centuries. They had adorned the palace halls, admired by emperors. And we destroyed them in a few hours.

Morand claims we failed. He's right. But hadn't we already failed even before leaving China? These twelve porcelains are just additional damage in a long list of destructions.

I wonder if this voyage is cursed. If these objects don't carry a curse within them. As if they didn't want to leave China. As if they were resisting.

But these are just superstitious thoughts. The truth is simpler: we're transporting stolen objects. And stolen objects never bring good fortune."

Marseille, February 22, 1861

After several months of navigation, L'Avalanche finally entered Marseille harbor. It was a cold February day, the mistral was blowing hard, but for Roux and Morand, they were finally in France.

A military detachment was waiting for them on the wharf, commanded by an artillery colonel. Roux went ashore with his report.

"Lieutenant Roux? I'm Colonel Dumas. I've received orders to take charge of your cargo and transport it to Paris."

"To Paris, Colonel? Not to Fontainebleau?"

"The Empress wishes to see the objects first at the Tuileries Palace. There will be a private exhibition before their final installation."

Roux handed him his report.

"Here's the complete inventory. I must inform you that five crates were damaged during a storm in the Indian Ocean. Twelve Ming porcelains were destroyed."

The colonel's face hardened.

"Destroyed? How?"

"Storm. We nearly sank."

"I see. The Empress won't be pleased. These porcelains were worth a fortune."

"I've kept all the pieces. Maybe a restorer..."

"You think Ming porcelains five centuries old can be glued back together like common earthenware? Well. What's done is done. Let's begin the unloading. I want everything in Paris in a week."

The unloading took all day. The crates were transferred onto military wagons, under good escort. Colonel Dumas insisted on opening each crate and checking its contents.

When they opened twenty-three, the one with broken porcelains, Dumas remained silent, looking at the pieces.

"What a loss," he murmured.

He turned to Roux.

"You'll have to explain yourself to the general. And probably to the Empress herself."

"I'm ready to assume my responsibilities."

"Your responsibilities... This is about politics. Imperial prestige. These objects were supposed to demonstrate France's greatness. And you let part of them be destroyed."

Morand, who was attending the scene, intervened.

"The lieutenant did everything in his power. The storm was so violent we feared for our lives. Preserving the objects was secondary to the crew's survival."

Dumas stared at him coldly.

"The crew's survival is important. But not at the cost of the mission. These objects were entrusted to you. You had to protect them at all costs."

"Even at the risk of sinking?"

"Even at the risk of sinking."

Roux and Morand exchanged a glance. They now understood how important this cargo was to the Empire. More important than their lives.

The next day, the wagons left for Paris, escorted by a cavalry detachment. Roux accompanied them. Morand had to stay in Marseille to supervise L'Avalanche's repairs.

As they parted, the two men shook hands.

"Good luck in Paris. You'll need it."

"Thank you for your support during this voyage."

"I spent my time criticizing, doubting. I couldn't have been a very pleasant companion."

"You opened my eyes. You made me understand what we had really done in China. I'm grateful to you for that."

"Bear witness. When you're asked, bear witness. Tell the truth. Don't let this story be rewritten by the victors."

"I promise you."

The convoy took six days to reach Paris. Six days of travel on snowy roads, in the biting cold of winter. Roux slept little, tormented by the idea of having to face the Empress.

Finally, on the evening of February 28, they entered Paris. The crates were transported directly to the Tuileries Palace, to a specially prepared wing.

Tuileries Palace, Paris, March 2, 1861

The opening of the crates began under the supervision of General Cousin de Montauban, Count of Palikao, freshly returned from China. The general was in a very bad mood.

"Twelve porcelains destroyed!" he thundered while inspecting crate twenty-three. "Twelve! Do you realize?"

"Yes, General," replied Roux at attention. "The storm..."

"The storm! Always the same excuse! You were entrusted with imperial treasures! And you let them break like common crockery!"

"General," intervened Colonel Dumas, "Roux did everything in his power. I read Captain Morand's report. They nearly sank."

The general turned to him, furious.

"Sink or not, these objects had to arrive intact!"

"General," dared Roux, "we saved sixty-two crates out of sixty-seven. The rest is intact."

The general stared at him with blazing eyes.

"Sixty-two out of sixty-seven? You think the Empress will be satisfied with that? She's expecting a complete collection! Perfect! And you bring her broken pieces!"

He turned his back and took a few steps, trying to calm down.

"Where are the other damaged crates?"

Roux showed them to him. Seventeen with its intact bronzes despite a broken plank. Thirty-two with its wet silks. Forty-five and fifty-one with their minor damage.

Montauban examined each crate in silence. Finally, he sighed.

"The bronzes can be cleaned. The silks too, perhaps. But the porcelains... it's an irreplaceable loss."

He turned to Roux.

"You kept the pieces?"

"Yes, General. All of them."

"Good. I'll send for a restorer. We'll see what he can do."

An officer entered and saluted.

"General, Her Majesty the Empress wishes to see the objects. She'll be here in an hour."

Montauban straightened immediately.

"An hour! Quick! We must arrange the most beautiful pieces! Colonel, have tables and display stands brought!"

A frenzy seized the room. The crates were opened one by one, carefully removing the objects. The cloisonné vases, sparkling with multicolored enamels. The green and white jades,

translucent as water. The ritual bronzes covered with ancient patina. The silks embroidered with dragons and phoenixes.

Roux handled each piece with a mixture of reverence and guilt. These marvels had been torn from their palace. They should have been there, in China, not here in a room at the Tuileries Palace.

The famous photographer Eugène Disdéri arrived with his equipment.

"Arrange the ceramics here. The bronzes there. And the jades in the center."

While he was setting up his apparatus, Roux observed him. These photographs would immortalize this moment. They would serve as proof.

"There," said Disdéri satisfied after having taken several shots. "Now, if you could arrange the vases differently..."

The general intervened.

"We don't have time. The Empress is arriving. Put your equipment away."

Disdéri obeyed reluctantly. A few minutes later, a commotion was heard in the corridor. Footsteps, voices. Then the door opened.

"Her Majesty Empress Eugénie!"

Everyone stood at attention. Eugénie entered, accompanied by several ladies-in-waiting and chamberlains. She wore a water-green silk dress that contrasted with her auburn hair.

She stopped on the threshold, contemplating the objects arranged in the room. Her face remained impassive, but Roux thought he saw a gleam of wonder in her eyes.

"General, approach."

Montauban stepped forward and bowed deeply.

"Your Majesty, I have the honor of presenting you with the objects that the Army of the Orient wished to offer you in testimony of recognition."

Eugénie moved forward, examining each object. She stopped before a cloisonné vase depicting dragons.

"They're magnificent. Absolutely magnificent."

"This vase dates from the era of Emperor Qianlong, from the 18th century..."

"I know what they are, General. I've studied Chinese art."

She continued her inspection, stopping before each piece, sometimes asking technical questions to which the general responded with deference.

Finally, she arrived before the open crate containing the pieces of broken porcelains.

"What is this?"

The general shot a dark look at Roux.

"Your Majesty, there was an... incident during transport. A storm..."

"Broken Ming porcelains. How many?"

"Twelve, Your Majesty."

"Who was responsible for transport?"

Roux stepped forward and bowed.

"I was, Your Majesty. Lieutenant Henri Roux, artillery officer."

Eugénie fixed him with her green eyes, piercing as blades.

"Explain yourself."

Roux swallowed.

"Your Majesty, we encountered a storm of exceptional violence in the Indian Ocean. The ship was rolling so much that several crates broke loose despite our precautions. We did everything possible..."

"Everything possible was manifestly not sufficient."

"Your Majesty," intervened Montauban, "the ship's captain confirmed that the storm..."

"I don't care about the storm, General! These porcelains were five centuries old. They had survived wars, revolutions, entire dynasties. And this man let them break in a few hours!"

Roux felt anger rising in him.

"Your Majesty, these porcelains should never have left China. They had their place in the palace. We tore them away. We stole them."

A deadly silence fell over the room. Several officers widened their eyes, horrified. The general turned red with fury.

"Lieutenant! How dare you..."

But Eugénie raised a hand, silencing him. She approached Roux, staring at him intensely.

"Stolen, you say?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. Stolen. Pillaged. Torn away. These objects don't belong to us."

"They now belong to France. By right of conquest."

"Is the right of conquest a real right? Or simply the law of the strongest disguised as legality?"

Montauban exploded.

"That's enough! You're under arrest! Guards!"

"No. Let him speak. Continue. Tell me what you really think."

Roux hesitated. This was a decisive moment. He could be silent, apologize, save his career. Or he could tell the truth.

He thought of Captain Morand. Of his words: "Bear witness. Tell the truth."

"Your Majesty, I was there. I saw the palace before its destruction. It was... indescribable. A marvel. And we pillaged it. We emptied its halls like thieves. We fought among ourselves for the most precious pieces. I saw soldiers break furniture to extract the stones. I saw Chinese coolies finish the pillage after our passage. And then, the English burned everything. Everything.

The libraries, the archives, the pavilions. Millennial treasures reduced to ashes."

He continued in a lower voice.

"These objects that are here are all that remains. All that remains of an extraordinary palace. And we destroyed it. Out of pride. Out of greed. Out of barbarism."

The silence was total. Eugénie continued staring at him.

"You think we're barbarians?"

"I think we behaved like barbarians. Yes."

Eugénie turned away and took a few steps. When she turned back, her face had softened.

"You have courage. Or unconsciousness. Perhaps both."

She approached a table where rested a white jade carved in the shape of a dragon.

"You think I'm ignorant of where these objects come from? You think I don't know what happened in China?"

"I... I don't know."

"I know what Lord Elgin did. I know that Baron Gros opposed it. I know that General Cousin de Montauban refused to participate in the fire."

She caressed the jade.

"I also know that these objects are the fruit of pillage. You're not the first to tell me. Victor Hugo himself wrote me a scathing letter."

"Victor Hugo?"

"Yes. From his exile in Guernsey. He calls us bandits. Thieves. Exactly the words you just used."

She turned to him.

"But what do you want me to do? Send these objects back to China? The army offered them to me. If I refuse this gift, I'm

disavowing the entire expedition. I'm sullying the honor of our soldiers."

"Honor? What honor is there in pillaging a palace?"

Eugénie sighed.

"You're young. You see the world in black and white. But imperial politics is made of gray. Of compromises. Of necessities."

She made a gesture encompassing all the objects.

"These objects will remain in France. They'll be exhibited at Fontainebleau, in a museum I'm going to create. A Chinese museum. Where people can admire them, study them. Isn't that better than letting them rot in the ruins of a burned palace?"

"The English burned the palace. Not the Chinese."

"I know. And I deplore it. But the harm is done. The palace no longer exists. These objects are all that remains of it. And they'll stay here, in France, where they'll be preserved."

Roux wanted to protest, but Eugénie raised her hand.

"I admit your scruples. I even respect them. But understand my position. I'm the Empress of France. My duty is to France, not to China."

She faced Montauban.

"General, how long will it take to transfer all this to Fontainebleau?"

"A week. Time to pack everything and prepare the rooms."

"Do it. And hire the best restorer you can find for the broken porcelains. I want them repaired, even imperfectly."

She cast a last look at Roux.

"As for you, you're not under arrest. On the contrary. I want you to supervise the installation of the objects at Fontainebleau. You accompanied them from China, you'll accompany them to their final destination."

"But..."

"It's an order. And perhaps a punishment. Or a reward. I don't know. You'll have all the time to think about it while you organize my Chinese museum."

With these words, she left the room. As soon as she had gone, the general turned to Roux, furious.

"You're an imbecile! You're lucky the Empress has indulgence!"

"I only told the truth."

"The truth! What does truth have to do with all this? We're in politics! Truth is what the Emperor decides it is!"

"Truth exists independently of what the Emperor decides."

Montauban stared at him, then shook his head.

"You're impossible. Go. Prepare yourself for Fontainebleau. And this time, try not to break anything."

Château de Fontainebleau, March 12, 1861

The Château de Fontainebleau stood majestically in the March cold. Roux had arrived three days earlier to supervise the preparation of the rooms that would house the Chinese museum.

The Empress had chosen the ground floor of the Gros Pavilion. Four spacious rooms would be transformed into a museum: an antechamber, a large salon sometimes called the "lake salon," a gallery-salon, and a lacquer cabinet.

Roux stood in the large salon in the company of the imperial architect, Monsieur Lefuel, and the decorator, Monsieur Rousseau.

"The Empress desires a decor that highlights the objects without overwhelming them," explained Lefuel. "Crimson hangings, gilded woodwork, but in a sober style."

"Display cases for the most fragile pieces," added Rousseau. "And corner shelves for the porcelains."

Roux listened to them with half an ear. He was thinking of the objects that would soon fill these rooms.

"Lieutenant? Are you listening to me?"

Roux started.

"Forgive me. I was... elsewhere."

"I was saying that the large salon will present the major pieces: the cloisonné vases, the large Tibetan stupa, the ritual bronzes."

"The stupa. You mean the gilded brass stupa with the turquoises?"

"Exactly. It's an impressive piece. It will be the centerpiece of the salon."

Roux remembered this stupa. He had seen it at the palace, in a temple. Monks prayed before it. It was a sacred object. And now, it was going to become a decorative piece.

"And the lacquer cabinet?"

"The cabinet will be devoted to the most precious pieces. The jades, the rock crystals, the jewels. We'll also install Chinese lacquer panels from the 18th century on the walls."

"Lacquer panels? Where do they come from?"

"From the Empress's personal collection. They come from ancient screens."

"So objects also stolen from China."

Lefuel frowned.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing. Continue."

Over the following days, Roux supervised the installation of furniture and display cases. Artisans worked day and night so that everything would be ready before the objects arrived.

Restoration workshop, March 15, 1861

One afternoon, while he was inspecting the work, an elderly man entered, carrying a briefcase.

"Lieutenant Roux? I'm Master Dubois, restorer. The Empress mandated me to examine the broken porcelains."

Roux led him to an adjacent room where the crates had been stored. He opened crate twenty-three.

Master Dubois examined the pieces, turning them in his hands, bringing them close to the light. He was a man whose face was marked by decades spent bent over fragile objects. His fingers, gnarled but precise, handled the fragments with infinite delicacy.

"Hmm. Ming porcelains, Xuande period if I'm not mistaken. 15th century."

"Can you restore them?"

Dubois slowly shook his head.

"Restore them, no. Glue them back together, perhaps. But they'll never regain their original state. And their value will be considerably diminished."

"The Empress wants them repaired."

"I'll do my best. But it will be visible. The breaks will remain apparent. And several pieces are missing."

"Pieces are missing?"

"Yes. Look at this porcelain."

Dubois delicately lifted the fragments of a large blue and white bowl. He arranged them on the table like an incomplete puzzle.

"At least three fragments are missing. Probably lost during the storm, thrown out of the crate."

Roux leaned in. Dubois was right. The pieces didn't fit together completely. Gaps appeared in the pattern.

"What can you do without these fragments?"

"Reconstruct the general shape. But the missing parts will remain empty. Unless you want me to fill them with an amalgam and paint. I could recreate the pattern, imitate the glaze. From a distance, no one would see the difference."

Roux looked at the pieces arranged on the table. The idea of falsifying them, of creating an illusion of completeness, suddenly repulsed him.

"No. No fakes. If they must remain broken, let them remain broken. At least, it will be honest."

Dubois looked up, surprised.

"That's unusual. Most collectors prefer a beautiful appearance to authenticity. They want their pieces to look perfect, even if that perfection is artificial."

"I'm not a collector. I'm just a man trying not to add lies to theft."

The restorer looked at him for a long time, then nodded with an expression that resembled respect.

"You know, in the Japanese tradition, they practice kintsugi. It's a technique for repairing broken ceramics."

"I don't know it."

"When a ceramic breaks, they glue the pieces back together with lacquer mixed with gold powder. The cracks become golden, visible, assumed. They're not hidden, but magnified."

Dubois caressed one of the cracks with his finger.

"Why do they do this? Because the break is part of the object's history. To hide it would be to deny its past. By making it golden, they transform it into something beautiful. A scar that becomes adornment."

Roux approached the table where the fragments of the twelve porcelains under examination were aligned.

"The Empress wanted you to repair them. But perhaps she's wrong. Perhaps we should leave them broken."

"To show your failure?"

"To show the truth. These objects were torn from their palace, transported thousands of miles, tossed in a storm. They bear the stigmata of this journey. To erase them would be to erase history."

Dubois began sorting the fragments, separating those belonging to each porcelain.

"You're putting me in a delicate position, Lieutenant. I received orders to restore them to the best of my abilities. The Empress expects results."

"Restore them. But as you said: assume the cracks. Let them remain visible. Let people see what happened to them."

The restorer smiled, a weary but complicit smile.

"You know that some collectors would pay me a fortune to perfectly conceal these breaks? They want the illusion of perfection. A Ming porcelain 'restored by Dubois' where you can't see where the breaks were, that's worth twice as much on the market."

"The Empress isn't an ordinary collector."

"No, indeed. She's cultivated, sensitive. Perhaps she'll understand what you're trying to do."

Dubois took one of the fragments and raised it to the light coming through the window. The cobalt blue shone, deep and pure.

"Look at this blue. Do you see how it seems to vibrate? It's Samarkand blue, imported via the Silk Road. Ming artisans mixed this cobalt with other local minerals to obtain this exact shade. It's a blue we no longer know how to make today. The formula was lost."

He delicately set down the fragment.

"These porcelains are over four hundred years old. They were made under the reign of Emperor Xuande, one of the greatest patrons in Chinese history. They survived the fall of the Ming

dynasty, the arrival of the Qing, centuries of wars and upheavals. And now..."

"And now they're broken in a French château," finished Roux bitterly.

"Yes. But at least, they still exist."

Dubois began making sketches, noting how the fragments fit together, where the gaps were.

"It will take me about three weeks. I'll work here, in this workshop. You can come observe if you wish."

"I'll come. I'd like to see how you proceed."

"Good. But I must warn you: it will be difficult to watch. Gluing broken porcelains back together is like... it's like trying to repair something fundamentally broken. We can improve the appearance, but the original integrity is lost forever."

Roux nodded. He understood what Dubois wasn't saying explicitly: these porcelains were a metaphor. They represented the relationship between France and China, broken by violence and pillage. One could glue the pieces back together, create an illusion of repair, but the original fracture would always remain visible.

"Master Dubois, may I ask you a personal question?"

"Certainly."

"What do you think of all this? Of the pillage, of these objects, of this museum we're creating?"

The restorer put down his tools and looked Roux in the eyes.

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes."

"I think it's a tragedy. A complex tragedy, without true culprits or innocents. The soldiers who pillaged the palace were obeying orders. The officers who organized the division were following military regulations. The Empress who accepts these objects is responding to the expectations of her role. And yet, the result is

the same: an irreplaceable cultural heritage was torn from its original context."

He gestured toward the porcelain fragments.

"But here's the thing: these objects exist now. They're here, in France. We can't redo history. The only question that remains is: what do we do now? Do we hide them out of shame? Do we destroy them out of remorse? Or do we preserve them as best we can, keeping in mind the tragedy of their acquisition?"

"And you, what would you do?"

"What I always do: my work as a restorer. I repair what can be repaired, I preserve what remains. But I never forget where the objects come from. And when I can, like today, I leave the scars visible. So that no one can claim there was never a wound."

Over the following days, Roux came regularly to observe Dubois working. The restorer was installed in a workshop bathed in natural light, surrounded by his tools: animal glues, brushes of all sizes, magnifying glasses, small tweezers, sandpaper of extreme fineness.

The process was fascinating and painful at once. Dubois began by cleaning each fragment, removing dust, dirt, residues of seawater that had infiltrated the crate during the storm. Then he assembled the pieces like a puzzle, testing each combination, searching for how the pieces fit together.

"The hardest part," he explained to Roux, "is resisting the temptation to force. When a fragment doesn't fit perfectly, the instinct is to push it, press it. But that can create new cracks. You have to be patient, let the pieces reveal themselves."

For the first porcelain, a large blue and white bowl decorated with dragons and clouds, Dubois took four days simply to assemble all the available fragments. When he had finished, the bowl was reconstituted, but three large areas remained empty. The missing pieces created holes in the pattern, like windows open onto emptiness.

"There," said Dubois, stepping back. "That's the best I can do without falsifying."

Roux contemplated the restored porcelain. The glue lines were visible, forming a network of silvery cracks. The missing areas brutally interrupted the dragons, leaving them incomplete. It was beautiful and sad at once.

"It looks like a map," he murmured.

"A map of its destruction, yes. Each line tells of an impact, a fall, a violence. It's the story of its journey, inscribed in the ceramic itself."

"Will the Empress accept this?"

"I don't know. But it's honest. And sometimes, honesty is more precious than beauty."

The weeks passed. Dubois finished the restoration of the twelve porcelains. Some were almost complete, with only a few visible cracks. Others, like the large bowl with dragons, remained manifestly incomplete, with large empty areas.

On the last day, when all the objects were finished, Dubois aligned them on a long table. Roux contemplated them at length.

"They're different now."

"Yes. They've acquired a new history. The history of their breaking and their repair. They're no longer the same objects that were in the imperial palace."

"Does that take away their value?"

"It depends on what we mean by value. Their market value? Certainly. A collector will pay much less for a broken and restored porcelain than for an intact porcelain. But their historical value? Their value as testimony? Perhaps that one has increased."

Dubois put away his tools.

"You know, Lieutenant, in my entire career, this is the first time I've been asked to leave the scars visible. Generally, people want

me to erase all trace of damage. But I think you're right. These porcelains must bear the mark of what happened to them. They must bear witness."

"Bear witness to what?"

"To fragility. To violence. To the tragedy of pillage. And perhaps also to the possibility of repair, even imperfect."

Paris, Bing Gallery, Rue de Provence, March 20, 1861

Roux had obtained a few hours' leave. Instead of staying at Fontainebleau, he had taken the train to Paris. Something was pushing him to understand what was happening to the other objects pillaged from the palace, those that hadn't ended up in the crates destined for the Empress.

He had heard of Siegfried Bing, an art dealer specializing in Asian objects. His gallery on Rue de Provence was renowned for the quality of its pieces.

When Roux entered, a little bell tinkled. The gallery's interior was an Ali Baba's cave: Chinese porcelains neighboring Japanese prints, Thai bronzes next to Burmese jades. Everything was arranged with exquisite taste, lit by natural light entering through large windows.

Siegfried Bing was a thin, elegant man with steel-rimmed glasses and a carefully trimmed small goatee. He was examining with a magnifying glass a small jade that a discreet client was presenting to him. The man wore civilian clothes but had the characteristic military bearing.

"Qing dynasty," confirmed Bing. "Exceptional work. Provenance?"

"The Summer Palace. I was there."

"Like so many others."

Bing set down the jade and noted a figure on a paper that he slid toward his interlocutor. The man paled.

"That's all?"

"The market is saturated, my dear. All of Paris is selling 'authentic Summer Palace treasures.' Half are fakes, the other half has no verifiable provenance."

"But this one is authentic! I was there! I took it myself from..."

"I don't doubt your story. But prove it. Do you have a certificate? A document attesting that you were indeed in the China expedition? Testimony from a superior officer?"

The man hesitated.

"No, but..."

"For me, and for my clients, this jade could come from anywhere. Perhaps from the Summer Palace, perhaps from a Beijing workshop that makes copies for European tourists. Without documented provenance, I can't guarantee authenticity. And without guarantee, the price plummets."

The man took back his jade, visibly disappointed and frustrated.

"This is theft! I risked my life there!"

"No, sir. The theft is what you did at the Summer Palace. What I do is commerce."

The man left, slamming the door. Bing sighed and turned to Roux, whom he was noticing for the first time.

"Forgive me. The day has been long. May I help you?"

"I'm not sure. You buy objects from the Summer Palace?"

Bing examined him carefully. The military bearing, the uniform under the badly closed civilian coat, the look both curious and uneasy.

"Are you buying or selling?"

"Neither. I wanted to see."

"See what?"

"What happens to the objects that didn't end up at Fontainebleau."

Bing smiled, a smile both amused and weary.

"Ah. You're one of those officers who has remorse. There are more and more of them. Sit down. I'll show you."

Roux sat down. Bing went to fetch a large leather-bound register and opened it on the counter.

"Look. Since October 1860, I've bought seventy-three objects purportedly from the Summer Palace. Seventy-three. And I'm just one dealer among dozens in Paris. You imagine the total number?"

Roux looked through the register. Each entry detailed an object: description, supposed provenance, seller's name, purchase price.

"You have the sellers' names..."

"Yes. Most are soldiers or officers from the expedition. Some are sailors, a few are Chinese coolies who followed the troops. All have the same story: they 'found' these objects, they 'saved' these treasures from destruction."

"And you buy them?"

"It's my job. I don't judge. I don't ask how they obtained these objects. What interests me is their authenticity and quality."

Bing closed the register.

"But let's be honest, Lieutenant... it is Lieutenant, isn't it?"

"Lieutenant Henri Roux."

"Lieutenant Roux. Let's be honest. Most of these objects were stolen. Not 'requisitioned according to the rules of war' or 'saved from destruction.' Stolen. Purely and simply. Soldiers entered a palace, took what they liked, and now they're reselling it for a few hundred francs."

"Doesn't that bother you?"

"Of course it bothers me! I'm not a monster. But what do you want me to do? If I don't buy them, someone else will. At least, I make sure they end up with serious collectors who will preserve them."

Bing stood up and took a few steps in the gallery.

"Come, I'll show you something."

He led Roux to a display case at the back of the gallery. Inside were three blue and white porcelains, manifestly ancient and of very high quality.

"Look at these pieces. Ming period, 15th century. They come from the Summer Palace according to my seller, an infantry sergeant. He took them from one of the palace rooms, wrapped them in his blanket, and brought them back to France in his bag."

"And you bought them."

"I bought them. Five hundred francs for all three. A pittance. The sergeant knew nothing about Chinese art. He thought they were worth fifty francs at most. I could have had them for a hundred francs, but I wanted to be fair."

"Fair," repeated Roux.

"Yes, fair. And now, these porcelains are here, in my gallery. I'm going to sell them to a collector, probably for three or four thousand francs. This collector will preserve them carefully, study them, perhaps lend them to exhibitions. They'll be preserved, appreciated, transmitted to future generations."

"They should have stayed in China."

"Of course they should have stayed in China! But they're no longer in China. The palace is destroyed. These porcelains can't return there. What do we do? Destroy them out of remorse? Hide them in a cellar? Or accept reality and make sure they're at least well treated?"

Roux didn't respond. He looked at the porcelains, so similar to those he had transported.

"How many objects from the Summer Palace do you think there are in Paris now?" he finally asked.

"Thousands. Perhaps tens of thousands. In galleries, in private collections, in the attics of soldiers who don't know what they

possess. Not counting what's in England, Russia, Germany. The pillage wasn't just a French act, you know."

Bing returned behind his counter.

"You want to know what really saddens me? It's not so much that these objects were stolen. It's that they were dispersed. An imperial collection that had taken centuries to constitute, that had coherence, logic, was scattered to the four winds. The objects lost their context. A vase that was in a precise salon, next to other precise pieces, creating a harmonious whole, now finds itself isolated in a Parisian display case. Its meaning has been lost."

"The Fontainebleau museum is trying to reconstitute something..."

"An ersatz. A simulation. It will never be what the Summer Palace was. How could it be?"

Roux headed toward the exit, then turned back.

"You said many officers come to see you, with remorse. What do you tell them?"

"The truth. That what's done is done. That they can't change the past. But that they can at least make sure the objects they took are well treated. It's a small consolation, I know. But it's better than nothing."

"It's not enough."

"No, it's not enough. But it's all we have."

Tuileries Palace, Empress's private cabinet, November 25, 1861

Eugénie read and reread the letter her secretary had just handed her. The handwriting was Victor Hugo's, recognizable among all. Large, emphatic, almost theatrical. The letter had been written from Hauteville House, in Guernsey, where the poet lived in exile since his opposition to Napoleon III's coup d'état.

She knew Hugo. She had even admired him, before the exile, before politics separated them. And now, from his Guernsey rock, he continued to criticize them, her and her husband, with implacable constancy.

This letter was different from the others. More personal. More hurtful.

"Madame,

I'm told you have created a 'Chinese Museum' at Fontainebleau to exhibit the objects brought back from the China expedition. I'm told you consider these objects as presents from the army, as testimonies to France's greatness.

Allow me to tell you, with the respect due to your rank, but also with the frankness I owe to my conscience, what I think of these 'presents.'

There was, in a corner of the world, a wonder of the world; this wonder was called the Summer Palace. Art has two principles, the Idea, which produces European art, and the Chimera, which produces Oriental art. The Summer Palace was to fantastic art what the Parthenon is to ideal art.

Build a dream with marble, jade, bronze, porcelain, frame it in cedar wood, cover it with gems, drape it in silk, make here a sanctuary, there a harem, there a citadel, put gods in it, put monsters in it, varnish it, enamel it, gild it, paint it, have architects who are poets build the thousand and one dreams of the thousand and one nights, add gardens, pools, jets of water and foam, swans, ibises, peacocks, suppose in short a kind of dazzling cave of human fantasy having the figure of a temple and palace, that was this monument.

One day, two bandits entered the Summer Palace. One pillaged, the other set it on fire. Victory can be a thief, it seems. A large-scale devastation of the Summer Palace was done half and half between the two victors. We see Elgin's name mixed up in all this, which has the fatal property of recalling the Parthenon.

What the Parthenon had done, the Summer Palace had done. Everything that the imagination of an almost extrahuman people can engender was there. This was not, like the Parthenon, a rare and unique work; it was a kind of enormous model of the chimera, if the chimera can have a model.

Imagine some inexpressible construction, something like a lunar edifice, and you'll have the Summer Palace. And all that no longer exists.

We, Europeans, we are the civilized, and for us the Chinese are the barbarians. This is what civilization has done to barbarism.

History will record the names of these two bandits. One is called France, the other is called England.

But I hope that a day will come when France, delivered and cleansed, will send this booty back to despoiled China.

Such is the theft that one of the two victors committed, and that the other endorsed. We admire these 'treasures' in your museum today. But do you know where they come from? From theft. Do you know where they should be? In China.

I have the honor to be, Madame, your respectful servant,

Victor Hugo"

Eugénie set down the letter. Her hands were trembling slightly. She stood up and walked to the window, looking without seeing at the Tuileries gardens where strollers were wandering in the declining November light.

Her lady-in-waiting, the Duchess of Malakoff, was waiting in a corner of the cabinet, silently embroidering. She had perceived the Empress's distress.

"Your Majesty is upset?"

Eugénie turned around.

"Madame de Malakoff, read this."

She handed her the letter. The duchess scanned the lines, her face progressively closing. When she had finished, she set down the letter with an abrupt movement.

"This is... it's an infamous accusation! This man dares treat Your Majesty as a thief! He who lives in exile, who spits his gall from his rock, who has never lifted a finger for France!"

"This man is Victor Hugo. One of the greatest poets of our time."

"He nonetheless remains a traitor! An opponent! A..."

"A man who tells the truth."

The duchess widened her eyes.

"Your Majesty cannot think that!"

Eugénie returned to sit at her desk. She took the letter and reread it, stopping on certain passages.

"'One pillaged, the other set it on fire.' It's true. The French pillaged, the English set fire. Hugo is right."

"But it was war! The rules of war..."

"Do the rules of war justify everything? The pillage of a palace? The destruction of a millennial library? The burning of temples?"

"Lord Elgin is responsible for the fire, not us!"

"And the pillage? Who's responsible for the pillage?"

Eugénie stood up again and began walking in the room, the letter in hand.

"You know what hurts me most in this letter? It's not the accusation. It's not the tone. It's that he's right. Hugo is right. We came to China claiming to be civilized, superior, enlightened. And we acted like barbarians."

"Your Majesty..."

"No, let me speak. You think I'm ignorant of where these objects come from? You think I don't know what happened at the palace? I've read all the reports. I've heard the testimonies of

officers, those who have the courage to tell the truth. I've seen Charles Wirgman's drawings. I've read Thomas Bowlby's articles before he died in captivity. I know."

She stopped before a portrait of Napoleon III hanging on the wall.

"I know what we did. And I bear this knowledge as a burden."

"Why accept these objects? Why create this museum?"

"Because I'm the Empress of France. Because refusing these objects would have been to disavow the expedition, insult the army, humiliate my husband. Because imperial politics doesn't leave me the luxury of following my conscience."

She returned to her desk and let herself fall into her armchair.

"Hugo asks me to send these objects back to China. Can you imagine? The scandal? The humiliation? The Emperor would never forgive me. The army would hate me. The newspapers would vilify me. And for what? The Chinese themselves couldn't recover them. The palace is destroyed. Where would they put them?"

"Your Majesty has nothing to reproach herself for."

"Yes! I have everything to reproach myself for! I accepted these objects. I created this museum. I exhibited them like trophies. I made myself an accomplice."

"Accomplice to what? To having preserved works of art? Without Your Majesty, these objects would have been dispersed, sold, perhaps even destroyed!"

Eugénie shook her head.

"That's what I tell myself to sleep at night. That I saved these objects. That I gave them a worthy place. But deep down, I know it's a lie. A comforting lie, but a lie nonetheless."

She took a sheet of blank paper and dipped her pen in ink.

"Are you going to respond to Victor Hugo?" asked the duchess.

"How to respond to that? Deny the facts? I cannot. Justify them? I don't want to."

"Don't respond. Ignore this letter. Hugo is an outcast, no one listens to his lamentations."

"You're wrong. Many people listen to Hugo. In France, in Europe. He's one of the moral voices of our time."

Eugénie began to write, then stopped. She crumpled the paper and threw it away.

"No. I won't respond. What could I say? That he's wrong? He's right. That we acted honorably? We didn't. That I'm going to return the objects? I cannot."

She stood up and headed toward a small display case in her cabinet where she kept a few personal objects. Among them was a small white jade, one of the first objects brought back from China, even before the systematic pillage of the palace.

"Look at this jade. It's beautiful, isn't it? Pure. Perfect. When I look at it, I see art, I see beauty. But Hugo sees theft. And you know what? He's right to see theft. Because that's what it is."

"Your Majesty is too hard on herself."

"No. I'm not hard enough. If I were really honest, if I really had courage, I would return these objects. No matter the scandal, no matter the consequences. But I won't do it. Because I'm weak. Because I prefer to live with guilt rather than face public humiliation."

The duchess didn't know what to say. She had never seen the Empress in this state, so vulnerable, so tormented.

"What should I do with Hugo's letter?" she finally asked.

"Keep it. With the other documents on the Chinese museum. Let it remain in the archives. Let future historians find it. Let them know that someone, at least, had the courage to tell the truth. And let them also know that I heard it, this truth, and that I did nothing."

"That's very severe, Your Majesty."

"History will be even more severe. Hugo is right on one point: History will record our names. And it won't be with benevolence."

Evening was falling over Paris. Somewhere in this city, in galleries, private mansions, attics, there were thousands of objects stolen from China. And at Fontainebleau, her Chinese museum shone with all its lights, a monument both to art and to crime.

"You know what saddens me most?" she murmured. "It's not that Hugo condemns me. It's that he's right to condemn me. And that I can do nothing about it."

The Duchess of Malakoff approached.

"Your Majesty is doing what she can in an impossible situation."

"No. I'm doing what's politically opportune. What's acceptable to the Court. What preserves imperial prestige. But it's not the same thing as doing what's just."

She turned to the duchess.

"You know what I'm going to do now? I'm going to put this letter away. I'm going to return to my obligations. I'm going to smile at the museum's inauguration. I'm going to accept compliments on my collection. And I'm going to live with this contradiction."

"Many sovereigns live with much worse."

"It's not a consolation. It's just the observation that we're all corrupted by power, in one way or another."

Night was now complete. The duchess lit the lamps in the cabinet. In their golden light, Eugénie suddenly seemed older, more tired.

"Leave me now. I need to think."

"Very well, Your Majesty."

The duchess left, taking Victor Hugo's letter with her. Eugénie remained alone in her cabinet, surrounded by her precious

furniture, her paintings, her books. And somewhere, at Fontainebleau, her Chinese museum was waiting for her, filled with stolen beauties.

She took her own diary and wrote:

"November 25, 1861. Victor Hugo wrote to me from Guernsey. He calls me a thief. He's right. I'm a thief. Or at least, I'm an accomplice to theft. I accept pillaged objects. I exhibit them. I admire them. What does that make me?

I tell myself I'm preserving them. That without me, they'd be dispersed, lost. But is it really to preserve them that I created this museum? Or is it for prestige? To show France's power? To have something beautiful that's mine?

I don't know the answer. Or rather, I know it, but I don't want to admit it.

History will judge us. Hugo said it, and he's right. History will record our names. And when it pronounces them, it will be with condemnation."

She closed the diary and blew out the lamps, leaving the room in darkness.

Paris, Latin Quarter, January 10, 1862

Roux was strolling along the Seine. It was a day off, rare and precious. The work at Fontainebleau was progressing well, the museum was almost finished. He had decided to come to Paris, for no precise reason, just to walk, to think.

Passing before a bench near the Pont-Neuf, he noticed a man sitting, staring fixedly at the Louvre across the river. Something in his posture, in his immobility, caught Roux's attention.

The man was dressed in European style - dark trousers, wool jacket, bowler hat - but still wore the traditional Chinese queue hanging down his back. He must have been about fifty, his face marked by time and sorrow.

Without really knowing why, Roux approached. Perhaps it was the man's obvious solitude. Perhaps it was his own guilt that pushed him to seek a form of expiation.

"You're admiring the Louvre?"

The man turned to him. His eyes expressed profound sadness, but also a gleam of mistrust.

"I admire and I despise," he replied in hesitant but correct French.

"How so?"

"It's beautiful. But it's a monument to theft. All those Greek statues, those Italian paintings, those treasures from everywhere. Stolen. Taken. Torn away."

Roux felt his heart tighten. He sat on the bench, at a respectful distance.

"You're Chinese."

"I was a gardener at the Yuen-Ming-Yuen. At the Summer Palace. Now I'm... nothing. An exile. A man without country, without work, without future."

"How did you arrive in France?"

"With a French missionary. Father Durand. He hid me after... after the destruction. He took me with him when he returned to France. He thought he was saving me. Perhaps he condemned me."

The man took out a handkerchief and wiped his eyes.

"Forgive me. I shouldn't cry before a stranger. But sometimes, the sorrow is too strong."

"My name is Henri Roux."

"Chen Wei. Pleased to meet you, Monsieur Roux."

They remained silent for a moment, looking at the Louvre. Seagulls cried above the Seine.

"You say you were a gardener at the Summer Palace?"

"Yes. I was responsible for the gardens of the Peacock Pavilion. Do you know it?"

Roux shook his head.

"No. I... I was there, but I only saw a small part of the palace."

Chen Wei looked at him carefully.

"You were there? You were a soldier?"

"Artillery officer."

The man stiffened, his hand clenching on his handkerchief. Roux saw fear and anger pass over his face.

"You were one of them. One of the pillagers."

"Yes."

He could have lied, denied, invented another story. But something in him refused. Truth was all he could offer now.

Chen Wei stood up, as if to leave. Then he sat back down gently.

"Why do you tell me this? Aren't you afraid I'll hit you? That I'll call the police?"

"What would you tell the police? That I participated in a military operation authorized by both governments? That's not a crime in the eyes of French law."

"But it's a crime in the eyes of humanity."

"Yes. It is."

Chen Wei looked at him for a long time, trying to understand this strange Frenchman who admitted his guilt.

"Tell me about your palace," Roux suddenly said. "Tell me about the gardens you took care of."

"Why? To mock me?"

"No. To remember. To bear witness. Because I was there when it was destroyed, and I at least want to know what we destroyed."

Chen Wei hesitated, then began to speak. At first searching for words in French, then faster and faster, as if a dam had broken.

"The Peacock Pavilion was one of the most beautiful in the palace. It had been built during the reign of Emperor Qianlong, in the 18th century. The gardens around the pavilion covered several hectares. Centennial trees, ponds with goldfish, white stone paths that wound between peony beds."

He spoke with his hands, drawing in the air the forms of the vanished garden.

"I spent years maintaining these gardens. Every morning, I got up before dawn. I went to check the plants, prune the branches, clean the ponds. It was my world. My life."

"Was it beautiful?"

"Beautiful? That word is too weak. It was... it was like being in a dream. You know, Chinese gardens aren't like your French gardens. With you, everything is symmetrical, geometric, controlled. Our gardens seek to imitate nature, but an idealized, perfected nature."

Chen Wei closed his eyes, remembering.

"There was a small arched bridge that spanned the main stream. From the top of this bridge, you could see the whole garden. In spring, the cherry trees were in bloom. Pink petals fell on the water like snow. In summer, the lotuses opened their white and pink flowers in the ponds. In autumn, the maples became fire red. In winter, the snow covered everything with a white coat, and the pine branches bent under the weight."

"Who came to these gardens?"

"The Emperor, sometimes. The imperial concubines, often. Scholars, artists, monks. It was a place of meditation, poetry, contemplation. I saw painters spend entire days trying to capture the light on the ponds. I heard musicians play the guqin under the weeping willows. I served tea to philosophers who discussed Confucius and Lao Zi."

He reopened his eyes, and Roux saw they were filled with tears.

"And then you came. The foreign soldiers. I was in the garden that morning. I was pruning the chrysanthemums. I heard screams, gunshots. I saw smoke."

His voice broke.

"I ran toward the pavilion. The soldiers were already there. French. English. I don't know. For me, they all looked alike. They were breaking everything. They were tearing down the silk hangings. They were breaking the furniture. They were fighting among themselves for the most precious objects."

"I tried to intervene. I shouted: 'Stop! This is the Emperor's palace!' A soldier hit me with the butt of his rifle. I fell. When I got up, I saw a French officer - maybe you, who knows? - supervising the pillage. He was shouting orders. The soldiers were taking out the objects and loading them onto carts."

Roux listened, his heart tight. He remembered that day. He had indeed supervised the loading of certain crates. He had shouted orders. He had been that officer.

"I spent three days hidden in the gardens," Chen Wei continued. "I watched the pillage. I saw my colleagues, the other gardeners, the palace servants, flee or hide. Some were killed. I saw bodies."

"The third day, the smoke became thicker. The English were burning everything."

He turned to Roux.

"You ask me to tell you about my palace? It no longer exists. All that remains are my memories. And soon, when I die, even these memories will disappear."

"No. They won't disappear. I'll keep them. I'll write them."

"What's the point? It won't bring back the palace."

"No. But at least, someone will know. Someone will bear witness that the Summer Palace wasn't just a set of buildings filled with precious objects. It was a living place. A place where people like you worked, created, maintained beauty."

"Why are you doing this? Why do you care?"

"Because I was there. Because I participated. And because I must bear this responsibility."

They sat in silence, looking at the Louvre. The January light was pale and cold.

"You know what's most cruel?" Chen Wei finally said. "It's not that you destroyed the palace. It's that you don't even understand what you destroyed. For you, it was just an enemy palace. For us, it was the heart of our civilization. It was centuries of art, culture, knowledge. All that, gone."

"I understand now."

"No. You don't understand. You can't understand. I would have to take you there, show you what the palace was before. But it's impossible. Because it no longer exists."

Chen Wei stood up.

"You said you would write my memories. Will you really do it?"

"Yes."

"Write this: the Yuen-Ming-Yuen was more than a palace. It was a dream made reality. A dream of perfection, beauty, harmony. And you killed it. You killed our dream."

He walked away a few steps.

"There's one thing I'd like to see before I die. The objects. The ones you took. I'm told they're at Fontainebleau. Is that true?"

"Yes. In a museum the Empress created."

"I'd like to see them. Just once. To remember."

"I can take you there. I work there. I can get authorization."

Chen Wei hesitated, then nodded.

"Alright. When?"

"In a few days. I'll send you a message. Where are you staying?"

"With Father Durand. Rue du Bac. Saint-Thomas-d'Aquin church."

"I'll send you a message there."

Chen Wei walked away along the Seine, his Chinese queue swaying on his back, a solitary figure in wintry Paris.

Roux remained on the bench, overwhelmed. For the first time, he had heard the voice from the other side. Not a Chinese officer, not a mandarin, but a simple gardener. A man who had devoted his life to creating beauty, and who had seen this beauty destroyed in a few days.

He took out his journal and wrote:

"January 10, 1862. Paris. I met Chen Wei, former gardener of the Summer Palace. He told me about his work, the gardens he took care of. Listening to him, I understood something I hadn't grasped until now.

We thought we were pillaging an enemy palace. We thought we were taking valuable objects. But we did much more than that. We destroyed a world. A world of beauty, culture, civilization.

Chen Wei spent twenty years maintaining the gardens of the Peacock Pavilion. Twenty years of patient work, daily care, love for his art. And we destroyed everything in a few hours.

He says I can't understand. He's right. How could I really understand? I only saw the palace as a military target. I never saw the gardens in spring, the cherry trees in bloom, the ponds with their goldfish. I never heard the music that was played there, the poems that were recited.

But at least, now I know all that existed. And that we destroyed it.

I'll take him to Fontainebleau. He'll see the objects. Perhaps it will bring him a small consolation. Or perhaps it will make the pain even sharper. I don't know.

All I know is that I owe him this."

Château de Fontainebleau, January 15, 1862

Roux had obtained special authorization. He was waiting for Chen Wei at the château entrance. The Chinese man arrived late in the morning, accompanied by Father Durand, a Lazarist missionary who had spent thirty years in China.

"Lieutenant Roux? I'm Father Durand. Chen Wei told me about your meeting."

They shook hands. The priest had a face weathered by the Chinese sun, piercing blue eyes under bushy eyebrows.

"It's very generous of you to have arranged this visit," Father Durand continued. "Chen Wei needs it. He's been wasting away since we arrived in France. Seeing the palace objects, even in these circumstances, might help him."

Chen Wei said nothing. He looked at the château with apprehension.

"Come," said Roux. "The museum is this way."

They crossed the château courtyards. Chen Wei walked slowly, as if heading toward his execution. When they arrived before the Chinese museum entrance, he stopped dead.

"I can't."

"Yes, you can. Come."

Father Durand gently took Chen Wei's arm.

"Come, my friend. You came all this way."

They entered the antechamber. Chen Wei stopped immediately before the palanquin throne. His hands began to tremble.

"That's the Dowager Empress's," he murmured. "I saw it a hundred times. It was in the Hall of the Great Audience."

He approached and, with infinite delicacy, touched the lacquered wood with his fingertips. Then he withdrew his hand as if burned.

"Sorry. I shouldn't touch."

"It's fine," said Roux. "Touch. These objects were at your home before being here."

They passed into the large salon. Chen Wei stopped before each object, sometimes murmuring words in Chinese, sometimes gently touching the display cases with his fingertips.

Before the large Tibetan stupa, he closed his eyes.

"It was in the Temple of Universal Clarity. I went there to meditate. The monks..."

"Take your time, Chen."

Before the cloisonné vases, Chen Wei crouched to be level with the objects.

"This one was in the Pavilion of a Hundred Flowers. I remember the day the Emperor came to admire it. He said the dragons seemed alive, that you could almost see them move. I was there. I was serving tea."

He stood up and moved to another vase.

"That one came from the Antiquities Salon. The Empress liked to look at it in the morning, when the rising sun made the enamels shine."

They continued the visit. In the gallery-salon, Chen Wei recognized silks, bronzes, jades. Each object triggered a memory, an anecdote, a fragment of daily life at the palace.

Then they entered the lacquer cabinet. Chen Wei stopped, breathless. The fifteen Chinese screen panels adorning the walls created an intimate, almost sacred atmosphere.

"These panels..." he said in a whisper. "They come from the Pavilion of Great Harmony. I saw them there."

He approached and examined the scenes painted on the panels: mountain landscapes, rivers, pavilions perched on cliffs, scholars contemplating nature.

"This is Master Liang's work. He worked on these panels for three years. I attended their installation. That was fifteen years ago."

Before the display cases containing the jades, Chen Wei lingered long. He recognized several pieces, telling their history, their provenance, how they were used.

Then he arrived before the display case of restored porcelains. He immediately noticed the cracks, the missing areas.

"Broken during the voyage?"

"A storm. In the Indian Ocean."

Chen Wei slowly nodded, without anger, just with immense sadness.

"They resisted five centuries in China. A few months with you were enough."

He examined each restored porcelain, following the cracks visible through the glass with his finger.

"Who did this restoration?"

"Master Dubois. One of the best restorers in France."

"He did good work. He left the scars visible. It's honest."

Chen Wei straightened and took a few steps in the cabinet.

"You know what's strange? These objects are magnificently exhibited here. The display cases are beautiful, the lighting is perfect, the arrangement is harmonious. And yet, they're not at home."

He made a gesture encompassing the whole room.

"At the palace, each object had its precise place. This porcelain was next to this jade, which was next to this bronze. Together, they created a meaning, a balance. Here, they're just... exhibited. Like in a shop. Without context. Without soul."

Father Durand gently intervened.

"But at least, they're preserved. At least, people can see them, admire them."

"People can see the objects. But they don't see what they represented. They don't see the palace. They don't see the life that unfolded there."

Chen Wei turned to Roux.

"I thank you for bringing me here. It was important to me. But it's also painful. Seeing these objects out of their context, it's like... it's like seeing members of a body cut up and exhibited separately. We recognize they belong to a body, but the body itself is dead."

They made the complete tour of the museum a second time. Chen Wei stopped less long now, as if the pain had become too strong.

At the moment of leaving, he turned one last time in the large salon.

"These objects don't belong to you. But you're now their guardians. Be good guardians."

"I commit to it."

"The promises of soldiers..."

He didn't finish his sentence. Father Durand took his arm and they headed toward the exit. Roux accompanied them to the château gates.

"Chen Wei," said Roux before they left, "I'd like to write your story. What you told me about the gardens, about your work, about the palace. So that people know. So that your testimony is preserved."

Chen Wei looked at him for a long time.

"What's the point? Who will be interested in the story of a simple Chinese gardener?"

"Future historians. People who will want to understand what really happened."

"Do as you wish. If it can serve some purpose..."

He took out a small object from his pocket. It was a polished jade pebble, the size of an egg, of a deep green.

"Take this. It's all I could save from the palace. I found it in the gardens, the day after the fire. Keep it. In memory of the vanished gardens."

Roux took the jade carefully. It was smooth, warm to the touch, of simple and pure beauty.

"I can't accept..."

"Yes. Take it. You're now its guardian. As you're the guardian of everything in this museum."

Chen Wei and Father Durand walked away. Roux watched them leave, then looked at the jade in his hand.

He returned to the château and went up to the room that served as his temporary office. He took his journal and wrote, at length, everything Chen Wei had told him. The gardens of the Peacock Pavilion. The cherry trees in bloom. The ponds with goldfish. The small arched bridge. The scholars who came to meditate. The musicians who played under the willows. The painters who spent days capturing the light.

He wrote until his hand was crimson, until the candles had burned to the end. And when he had finished, he placed the jade next to his journal.

"January 15, 1862. Fontainebleau. Chen Wei came to see the objects today. He recognized them, each one of them. He told their story, their location in the palace, how they were used.

Listening to him, I understood something fundamental. These objects aren't just works of art. They're fragments of a vanished world. A world we destroyed.

Chen Wei said they weren't at home here. He's right. They never will be. No matter the beauty of the museum, the quality of the exhibition, these objects will remain exiles.

He gave me a jade. A simple polished pebble. He says it's all he could save from the gardens. This little jade without market value is perhaps the most precious object of all. Because it carries within it a man's memories, the memories of a life devoted to creating beauty.

I'll always keep it. To remember. To never forget what we destroyed."

March 18, 1862, everything was finished

Eugénie made a final inspection in Roux's company.

They walked through the four rooms, admiring the result. It was magnificent. The Chinese museum was a jewel, a setting worthy of the treasures it contained.

In the lacquer cabinet, Eugénie stopped before the display case containing the restored porcelains. The fractures were visible, like scars. The missing parts remained empty.

"You were right to refuse the fakes. These scars are important. They remind us of fragility. And perhaps also of our responsibility."

She turned to him.

"Your mission is complete. You accompanied these objects here. You watched over them, protected what could be. I thank you."

"It was only my duty."

"Your duty would have been only to transport them. You did more. You bore witness. You told the truth, even when it was uncomfortable. Keep your journal. Keep it carefully. One day, perhaps a long time from now, someone will want to know what really happened."

"I'll keep it."

"Good. You're free now. Return to your regiment. Resume your life."

Roux saluted and headed toward the exit. On the threshold, he turned one last time. Eugénie had remained before the display case of broken porcelains, motionless, contemplative.

He left the château and walked in the gardens. It was a beautiful late winter day. The first buds were appearing on the trees. He thought of Chen Wei, of the gardens of the Peacock Pavilion that would never green again.

He thought of the journey he had made. From Beijing to Fontainebleau. From China to France. A journey of several months, crossing oceans, facing storms.

He thought of Captain Morand, with his doubts and questions. Of Consul de Montigny, with his prophetic warnings. Of Empress Eugénie, caught between her scruples and her duties. Of Chen Wei, gardener without garden.

And he thought of the Chinese. Of their humiliation. Of their anger. Of their desire for justice that would come one day, as Montigny had predicted.

He took out his journal and sat on a bench. The jade Chen Wei had given him was in his pocket. He took it out, holding it in his palm, feeling its smooth and warm surface. Then he wrote a final entry.

"March 18, 1862. Fontainebleau. The Chinese museum is finished. The objects pillaged from the palace have found their new home. They're sublime. But they're not at home.

The Empress thinks she's preserving them. But she can't erase the fact that they were stolen. That we tore them away.

I don't know what History will say about us. Perhaps it will condemn us. Perhaps it will understand us. Or perhaps it will simply forget us.

But these objects will remain. In this museum. Silent witnesses to a crime. Silent witnesses to an era when we thought our superiority gave us all rights."

He closed his journal and put it away. Then he stood up and left Fontainebleau.

Behind him, in the château, the sixty-seven crates had delivered their secrets. The objects shone in their display cases, admired, protected.

And they were waiting.

They were waiting for the day when they could return home.

EPILOGUE

An Dehai's notebooks survived. First hidden at the Wofo monastery, then dispersed in various libraries during the 20th century's troubles, they were finally brought together and published in 1985. Their historical value was priceless: they offered one of the rare detailed descriptions of the Summer Palace before its destruction, seen from the inside, by someone who intimately knew every corner.

Henri Roux's journal, bequeathed to his descendants, was only published in 1932. The edition sparked a national debate in France on colonialism and the restitution of artworks. Some praised Roux for his honesty; others accused him of treason toward the French army. The jade that Chen Wei had given him was bequeathed to the Guimet Museum with an explanatory note. It's still there today, in a small display case bearing the inscription: "Jade pebble from the Summer Palace, given by Chen Wei, gardener, to Henri Roux, 1862."

Auguste Morand finished his career as vice-admiral. He always refused to speak publicly about the Summer Palace, but in a private letter to his son in 1875, found in the family archives, he wrote: "I obeyed orders all my life. Only once, I should have disobeyed. It was in October 1860."

Colonel Dumas made a brilliant career under the Third Republic. Questioned in 1890 by a journalist about the Summer Palace

affair, he simply replied: "It was war. In war, one doesn't get sentimental."

He died in 1895 without ever expressing the slightest regret.

Chen Wei lived another fifteen years in Paris, employed as a gardener in various city parks. He died in 1877, alone in a small room in Montmartre. Father Durand, who assisted him until the end, reported that his last words were: "The gardens... I want to see the gardens..."

General Cousin de Montauban, who became Count of Palikao, always defended his actions in China. Appointed Minister of War in 1870, he was held responsible for the Sedan debacle and ended his life in obscurity. In his memoirs, published posthumously, he devoted less than three pages to the China expedition, never mentioning the pillage.

Victor Hugo continued his criticisms. His open letter on the sack of the Summer Palace, published in several European newspapers, became one of the foundational texts for reflection on cultural pillage in wartime. It's still cited today in debates on restitution.

Empress Eugénie kept her Chinese museum until the fall of the Second Empire in 1870. Exiled in England after the French defeat, she unsuccessfully tried to have the objects transferred to her residence at Farnborough. They remained at Fontainebleau. In her diary, discovered after her death in 1920, she obsessively returns to the Chinese museum, expressing increasingly deep doubts about the legitimacy of her collection.

The Chinese museum at Fontainebleau still exists. The labels have been modified several times. In 1920, a mention of the "tragic circumstances" of the acquisition was added. In 1960, on the centenary, a commemorative plaque was installed, acknowledging the "pillage" and expressing "regrets." Starting in 2020, the labels explicitly mention: "These objects come from

the sack of the Summer Palace by Franco-British troops in October 1860."

In 1900, during the Boxer Rebellion, the Yuen-Ming-Yuen (or what had been partially reconstructed) was again pillaged and destroyed. The ruins seen today in Beijing are mainly those left by the 1860 fire. The Chinese government chose to keep them as is, as a memorial monument to the "century of humiliation."

In the 1980s, China officially began claiming the restitution of pillaged objects. In 2009, at an auction in Paris, two bronze heads from the Chinese zodiac from the Summer Palace were offered. China protested violently. A Chinese businessman bought them for 28 million euros and refused to pay, creating a major diplomatic incident. The heads were finally returned in 2013.

Since then, several objects have been returned, by institutions or private collectors. But the overwhelming majority remain in France, England, and other countries. The British Museum alone possesses nearly 23,000 Chinese objects, many of which come from the Summer Palace.

The porcelains restored by Master Dubois are still at Fontainebleau. Their cracks have become, over time, the symbol of this broken history. Art students from several Chinese universities have come to study them, fascinated by this "honest restoration" that refuses to hide the trauma.

In 2015, a digital reconstruction project of the Summer Palace was launched by Chinese and French researchers. Using An Dehai's descriptions, Roux's notes, Wirgman's drawings, and Disdéri's photographs, they managed to virtually reconstitute a large part of the palace. The result was presented simultaneously in Beijing and Paris in 2018. The emotion was immense on both sides. For many Chinese, it was the first time they could "see" the Yuen-Ming-Yuen before its destruction.

In 2023, a delegation of Chinese students visited the Fontainebleau museum as part of a cultural exchange program.

One of them, looking at the restored porcelains with their visible cracks, murmured in Mandarin (later translated by the interpreter): "At least, they didn't lie about the breaks."

Another added: "They kept the scars."

It was, perhaps, a beginning. Not a reconciliation - the trauma was too deep for that. Not a pardon - how to forgive the destruction of an irreplaceable cultural treasure? But a mutual recognition of what had happened. An acceptance that history couldn't be rewritten, only understood.

The debate on restitution continues. In France, it divides. Some think the objects should remain at Fontainebleau, where they're preserved and accessible to the public. Others believe the only moral act is complete restitution to China. Still others propose compromises: long-term loans, joint ownership of works, shared museums.

In China, the Summer Palace has become a national symbol. Every October 18, the date of the 1860 fire, commemorations take place at the ruins site. Schoolchildren come to lay flowers. Speakers recall the "hundred years of humiliation" and China's rebirth.

"Never forget" had written An Dehai in his last notebook.

China hasn't forgotten. The objects from the Fontainebleau museum, even preserved, even admired, remain symbols of an unhealed wound. They pose questions that go beyond the simple question of ownership: Who decides what belongs to "humanity's heritage"? Do victors have the right to redefine the culture of the vanquished? Can preservation justify the initial theft?

Henri Roux had written in his journal: "These objects don't belong to us. But we're now their guardians."

One hundred sixty years later, this phrase resonates differently. Can guardians become legitimate owners simply through the

passage of time? Or does the responsibility of guardianship ultimately include that of restitution?

History hasn't yet decided. Perhaps it never will completely. But one thing is certain: the objects from the Chinese museum at Fontainebleau aren't simple works of art. They're witnesses. Witnesses to what happened in October 1860. Witnesses to imperial arrogance. Witnesses to cultural violence.

And they continue to wait, in their gilded display cases, under the château's soft lights.

They're waiting for justice to be done. In one way or another. Someday.

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