“Golden Age” or “The Emperor’s Daughter”

The girl’s veil was a light red color, very pretty, and her delicate hands, a light brown color, caressed the pot with utmost care. She poured the tea slowly and remained silent, as was the custom. To appease the customary silence, I asked a question to which she could respond with graceful motion.

“Do you write well?” I asked (the girl was from a less powerful family than that from which I hailed, so I felt no shame in conducting an interview).

With her delicate hands, she beckoned slightly toward the wall to the left and rocked her veil slightly. The motion expressed a certain conformity that I found attractive in prospective wives. Smiling inwardly, I followed her invitation and cast a gaze at a script daintily hung on the wall. It was a copy of a passage from the Zevzehnkehl, a section that I myself had recently copied. Remembering my education, I pictured the exploits of the late Pudelehlkahvahn Ahnehk in the desert, bringing the beautiful skill of writing back for us all to share. The girl had learned well, only erring in her work a few times with her graceful fingers. This time my smile was an outward one, and she again rocked her veil just slightly.

After the interview, I decided it best to head to work. The Fho Plain was presently experiencing its rainy season, and it was as dark as night with the tumult of blinding showers. I held high a rigid tarp to prevent my countenance from incident, but my lower body had little prospect of staying intact. I reached the palace of the Pudelehlkahvahn Dukhahb, and in the servant’s entrance, I discovered that I would be compelled to change my leggings (and robe as well).

The robe was crisp and clean, quite different from the disappointingly common one I had worn to visit my prospective wife. I now went to thank the person who had given me this gift: the Daughter of the Pudelehlkahvahn. Her room was open, and I felt compelled to draw the entrance after me out of decency, but any thought of this was abstained by the momentary presence of the Daughter herself.

“Oh, you are here! I have waited long!” she cried. “And you are wearing the robe!”

Her face, bare and shameful, always started me at first, especially after my appreciation of the red veil worn innocently by my prospective wife. As a product of reflex, my hand flew to my face and diverted my sight to a familiar landscape painted on the wall.

The Daughter seized the obstacle, my hand, from my face and placed it, rightfully so, out in front of my chest. My other hand rushed sheepishly out to meet it in a harried greeting. I tilted my head forward and said:

“Nukehdelpudelehlkahvahn Vehlutehleh Dahn Beteh.” The greeting, with my best attempt at sincerity, was interrupted by the Daughter again; she forced my hands to my sides.

“Can you check my writing again? I just finished copying the Kehzunhahte,” she asked, her bare face contorting with the expectance of the answer.

“…” I said, and she shoved some tablets in my direction. The Kehzunhahte was a banned work (as it was written by the Orhsan scum), but it was poetry and therefore a much sought-after piece. “Of course she would have this,” I thought worriedly. I felt the sharp pain of a figurative slap on the side of my face from a similar mistake I had once made, but I nevertheless was enthusiastic to check her work. I had not yet found any error in her writing. I began to scan the careful writing; it was much more elegant than my prospective wife’s, and the sample only exemplified her prowess as a writer. My concentration was however broken by one of the Daughter’s many monologues, an aspect about her I did not find intriguing in the least.

“…why does the Pudelehlkahvahn treat me like a prisoner? You know, I have not been outside since the Ancestral Procession, and even then I was locked away in a palanquin. I had to wear a veil that day (regardless). My mother has shut out my pleas; what should I do?” The Daughter already had salt flowing down her bare face, which was twisted with sadness. She continued earnestly, much to my dismay, “it is as if no one understands me; I am surrounded by writing, spices, and jewelry, but… but… they don’t seem to understand…”

I sat solemnly, staring at one of the forgotten tablets lying on the wooden floor. Thinking about my prospective wife, I painstakingly passed the time; my legs cramped with my refusal to change position.

“…are you even listening to me? Do not be one of them as well.” The Daughter’s lips curled in suspicion, but this faded as I turned toward her and gave the most nominal expression of agreement. Her bare face perverted into a certain pointed look, and my resulting fearful thoughts were confirmed when again she opened her lips.

“I will do it. I will starve myself. Then, they will be forced to take me outside.” Such a conclusion greatly worried me, but I dared not realize this concern on my face. The Daughter rose from her place and upset a nearby table, which was covered with food offered to the royalty. When the dishes, having been imported from the far-off Sekuun Empire came upon the ground and shattered into tiny pieces, I flinched and closed my eyes.

Three days later, I had completed my trip to the land of my clan from the capital (in the rain, nonetheless) and directly went to dine with my Father, the son of the Father of the Clan, and my sister. An attendant took my tarp on my arrival but failed to notice my ruined robes and leggings; these I shamefully dealt with myself. While walking, I had left a sorry trail of mud in the hallway, and my sister took this quite blatant sign of my entrance as a prompt to invade my room with her greeting.

“Kulehd Vehlutehbehzuke Dehketehl, where have you been? It has been three full months,” she cried.

My face broke into an absolute smile when I saw her. There was no one I loved more than my sister (save the Ancestors, of course), and even her veil, which signified that she had had to entertain a suitor earlier that day, was dear. “I am contrite. It has been a hard three months in the capital. Your hand would fall off if you copied as much as I have these past weeks. I did an entire Zevzehnkehl, and much else!”

Her veil quivered and I visualized admiration on her face. “Oh, Brother, forget your work (as you know, I am not talented at writing) and come enjoy dinner with Father and myself.” She took my hand and rushed me to the dining area, where my Father and a feast awaited.

“Ahpudeh Vehlutehbehzuke Dehketehl.” I said, and my Father cast up his hand and called me to eat his food.

“So, he is back from the capital to visit his lowly family,” he said, “and how long will he grace us with his demanded presence?” My Father had a well-executed habit of making one feel guilty while simultaneously being gracious in conversation and expression.

“…I will be staying for two nights only,” and as soon as I had confessed this I regretted it. As I had worked, I was increasingly contracted for writings outside the palace, and these had filled my schedule as of late.

My Father proceeded to induce more guilt with his expression, but continued all the same: “How did your visit to Dehnvahm Vehlutehvahvle Dehtehlun go?” My Father spoke of my prospective wife, and I was appreciative of his asking the question (it would be awkward for me to introduce the topic).

“I would like to marry with haste.” I said pointedly. My Father smiled in agreement, remembering that the Vehlutehvahvle Dehtehlun owned irrigation works near to the river, and now hoping that some of those would become mine with such a maneuver. My sister’s veil again shook as she laughed and too recounted this fact; despite her lack of talent at writing, she was quite smart. She had though, a foolish curiosity about the world as was realized by her next comment.

“I must fly to the capital with Brother to meet this Dehnvahm,” she addressed my Father with the force of ignorance. The request seemed so out of place and so reflected her naïve character that I chuckled slightly.

“Abstain! You will not!” growled my Father, not finding the situation humorous in the least. “When your Brother gets married, he may then take you there to serve his house to save you yourself from marriage… but for now, you will not go.” My sister’s veil shook again and she laughed, loud and long; the ridiculous request, of course, had all been in jest.

I had hiked back to the capital as well in the driving rain. My belief in the presence of the sun was based on faith alone; I went directly to the palace to avoid getting any more drenched. This time, with no immediate sight of the Daughter herself, I was able to draw the room closed to protect her naked face. Of course, that was only if the Daughter was present; the air felt heavy, and I felt for some reason a wont to wave something away with my hand. The Daughter’s complex was larger than my Father’s whole house, but she, not having much interaction with anyone of stature, was usually quite attentive to one’s presence in her chambers. I dared not call out, so I silently probed through the vast maze. If I had been a thief, I could have just as well invested in great amounts of property with all the luxuries the Daughter had stocking her rooms.

In her sleeproom, I happened upon a dark form folded over and still; indeed, it was the Daughter herself. The weighty air again nearly warranted a wave of my hand, and the Daughter slowly pivoted around to face me (to this I customarily started and averted). Upon my recovery, I took notice of the dreadful state she was in. Her bare face was wan and appeared wasted, but her gaze was still the fiery glare I was long accustomed to though it seemed to have a hard edge to it. Drops formed in her eyes as they focused and realized my entrance; they swelled as I put my hands together and greeted her.

“…they have stopped bringing me food. At first, I skipped meals out of spite, but now… now… I feel weak; they have stopped bringing me food!” The Daughter had this time evidently made true of her spoken threat (I did not believe she was capable of the act); this concerned me greatly, and subsequently, I reached in my robe for a familiar stash of food I kept. My hand closed around a piece of lahbehd-cake. I gave her this only to effect more salt from her dark eyes.

For her efforts at starving herself, surely her mother had punished the Daughter with this horrid lack of food. “Now,” I thought, “she will see why she cannot do as she wishes. She will, or she must, see how much her family need not marry her off; if her existence is known by many, she will be taken up by crowds of suitors.” Buried in my potent thoughts, I had failed to detect a contrary monologue emanating from the Daughter.

“How can they punish me for this? I just need to experience something for once! For my fifteen years in this world, I have done nothing! And now the Pudelehlkahvahn, he suppresses me! My Brother would tell me often of his exploits outside and with other people (of course he no longer talks to me); I just desire one pleasurable emotion, a single second of life!” the Daughter’s bare face met her arms and in such a way she sobbed endlessly.

I began to feel out of place and designed to remove myself but was rooted in place perhaps by sympathy for the ruined bare face wetting her sleeves. I watched her sob for a time until I became aware of the lack of sound. My focus, having been disturbed by the raw emotion of the Daughter, now found it hard to shift to the situation at hand. She suddenly crumpled over onto a cushion with her bare face as sickly pale as the moon. The Daughter had fainted from weakness and the same raw emotion which had so diverted my attention. My misplacement again became all too apparent; after summoning a physician, I trekked again through the rain to the house of Vehlutehvahvle Dehtehlun and there I spent the night negotiating my imminent marriage to the my prospective wife with the Father.

A week passed before I was able to work anymore; my marriage ceremony had taken place two days prior in the Grand Utehlhah with the blessing of my Father and sister, who now visited my complex in the house of Vehlutehbehzuke Dehketehl with my wife. There my sister would stay, finally getting her wish to be in the capital with me. I had, however, paid little heed to my work and was recently inspired to write something of my own. The rainy season was finally done, and I trudged, this time, through the dust of dried mud in the arid heat of the sun, eager to make its presence known.

When I entered the palace, my robes still proved to be a problem: the dust had coated the robe from waist down, and my leggings were as well condemned. I, unaware it would be for the last time, changed into the robe the Daughter had entrusted me. I crossed the threshold of her complex and nearly coughed with the burden of the air. The bright daylight outside starkly contrasted the depth of the gray rooms. I, rendered nearly blind, found a window and tore the curtains apart. Scathing (and I did not expect it to be so) light frighteningly revealed a tired figure behind me. The Daughter was leaning against a wall, supporting herself with a grasping hand. The other gesticulated wildly in my direction; to this, I stood agape and at a loss of thought. I could not even bring myself to start at the destitute bare face which showed desperate longing and utter strife. I was transfixed to the spot; I faced her, no more than two paces from the window, a god surrounded and backed by the light from the opening. She made her way toward me, and, in her struggle, the weak form fell against mine.

“Just let me…” she said with barely a sound (it was of no matter; I could not make a noise myself). The Daughter gripped my body and her head pressed against my chest out of unrefined desire for feeling. The hand not wrapped around my body searched through my robes until it came upon contact with skin. She let out a sigh, and seemed to lose weight, like a pouch losing air.

My eyelids trembled with emotional tax. The feeling was vastly incorrect, but I found it impossible to move. I closed my eyes and hoped I would fly from the room like Kehzun did from the late Pudelehlkahvahn’s army. Suddenly the Daughter fell back from me and I collapsed to my knees. Her body was prostrate on the ground; it took me all too long to react to this. With her arm wrapped around my chest and the other in pursuit of something she could never have, the Daughter had died. I realized this in a moment when I felt her thin neck; the nape was cold and without motion. She had become one with the Ancestors to determine the fate of our irrigation works. I could do nothing but duck out of the palace, though having been there for scarcely a moment.

My emotions were full, so I poured them out into a poem whence I got home. In the sense of the morning, my beautiful wife, worried as I had stayed awake all the night to write despite her nagging, was duly impressed at the work and not otherwise was my sister. I next went to the Grand Utehlhah to present the Third Day’s tribute to the Ancestors. There, in my offering, I came upon the pained spirit of the Daughter, but this was unpleasant; I waved it away directly.

Without further incident, I exited the place. For some certain reason, I turned back to look at the building. Here, hence the Ancestors directed our lives, I had learned to write; here I had become a man; here I first held the delicate pale brown hand of my wife; and here, I had learned how it was disadvantageous to marry off women in the family, as a great dowry would have to be paid to the line of the suitor, a practice I became personally acquainted with upon my acquisition of two of the irrigation works and fields immediate to them from the Vehlutehvahvle Dehtehlun, the family of my wife.

GLOSSARY–

Ahpudeh – a word for ‘Father’ (not a name); the main character uses this with the line name to address his father in a formal fashion

Kehzun – a fortress just outside the city of Orhsa which was fiercely defended by the Orhsan army in the stalemate between Sythe and Orhsa from 328 to 331RT; the reference to Kehzun “flying” hints at a passage from the epic that describes the defense of the fortress that made it seem invisible

Kehzunhahte – an oral epic told not in Sythe but in the more northern Orhsa, it illustrates the stalemate from 328 to 331RT between Sythe and Orhsa; despite being banned due its content (favoring Orhsa and cursing Sythe), it was of great interest to writers because of the poetic style in which it was most commonly told

Lahbehd - a high-in-starch water-based staple crop of the Fho civilizations, the agriculture for this being developed independently by the people of the Fho River System

Nukehdelpudelehlkahvahn – literally, ‘Daughter of the Pudelehlkahvahn’ (not a name)

Pudelehlkahvahn – the Emperor of Sythe (the word literally is an augmentative form of ‘Father of the grassland’); the current ruler is the Pudelehlkahvahn Dukhahb, the son of Ahnehk

Utehlhah – the Ancestral House so central to Fho culture, it functioned as a community center and religious monument; the Grand Utehlhah was simply that found in the capital

Vehlutehbehzuke Dehketehl – the family line of the main character (the phrase literally means ‘line of the golden fields’)

Vehlutehleh Dahn Beteh – the family line of the Pudelehlkahvahn (the phrase literally means ‘line of he who unified’); of course, this had been changed from another line name on the ascension of the first of this line

Vehlutehvahvle Dehtehlun – the family line of the wife (the phrase literally means ‘line of the distant city’)

Zevzehnkehl – a record commissioned by the Pudelehlkahvahn Ahnehk in 354RT, it described the notable achievements of Ahnehk, his predecessors, and other Fathers of Clans before the empire was consolidated. The first mention makes reference to the “exploits of the late Pudelehlkahvahn Ahnehk in the desert;” this hints at the expansion efforts and discovery of the Traader Logography by Ahnehk in the early 350s RT (writing was not developed by the Fho civilizations independently)

NOTE – This story is set in 413RT in the Empire of Sythe during the reign of the Pudelehlkahvahn Dukhahb, a relatively peaceful and prosperous reign at that.

ANOTHER NOTE – Kulehd Vehlutehbehzuke Dehketehl, the main character, was the grandson of the Father of his Clan, the nephew of the Minister of Commission (of texts), and the official Imperial Scribe. He had the veritable run of the palace and had known the Daughter since childhood. He would succeed his uncle as the next Minister of Commission in 439RT and would become famous throughout Sythe as a talented poet, but he would never forget his star-crossed friend, the Daughter of the Emperor.