

Emperor Ai of Han

Outside, in some nearby courtyard, a fountain was splashing joyously. I could hear children play in it to make the summer heat more bearable. It was the same reason I had withdrawn to this cool, shaded room with my love. We had been here for a while, but I had no idea how much time had passed. I was awake, now, but only barely. Next to me, Xian was still asleep.

I shifted slightly to look at him. His dark hair was pulled back loosely, and his expression was serene. I traced his cheekbone lightly, marveling at the sight. I didn't think I would ever get tired of it.

My peace was interrupted by the door swinging open, quickly replaced by a hurried servant.

"Your Imperial Majesty-" he began.

Sitting up, I beckoned him closer, and he fell silent. I glanced at Xian, but he seemed not to have taken notice of the intrusion.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"The councilors have requested your presence."

I closed my eyes and sighed. State matters were the last thing I wanted to be dealing with right now. But I leaned forward and kissed Xian on the forehead, then moved to rise.

I had barely leaned away from my love when I froze. Curled up with him as I had been, I hadn't realized that he was laying on my robe. Carefully, I tugged at the fabric caught under his body with the one free arm I had.

Xian grumbled and shifted. For a second, I feared I had woken him, but then he sighed and curled deeper into the fabric of my sleeve, still fast asleep.

The sight of him warmed my heart, until I realized that there was no way I could extract myself from him like this. Not that I minded that. I would have to disappoint the councilors waiting for me, but at least I now had an excuse.

I looked at the servant and promptly dismissed that idea. I couldn't allow myself this luxury, as much as I wanted to. I knew about the rumors, the accusations. Corruption. Favoritism. An emperor unfit to rule.

I didn't have to stoke those flames.

"Get me one of the guard's daggers," I whispered.

The servant frowned, but did as I asked. He returned moments later, offering it to me hilt first. I took the sword and gave my robe one last, wistful glance. It was pretty and expensive and its destruction would also lead to talk. But it was the lesser evil of the two.

Carefully I raised my arm so the free part of the robe would stretch taut below it, then stabbed the blade into the thin fabric. Still cautiously, I carved downward. With half of the sleeve gone, I could extract my second arm, removing it from harm's way. The second cut, which severed the rest of the fabric, was quicker, and my relinquished sleeve fluttered to the ground.

Xian was still asleep despite it all, but he must have sensed something change, shifting to gather the discarded fabric to his chest. He inhaled deeply, then sighed again. I handed the dagger back to the servant and rose to my feet.

With a last glance at Xian I slipped noiselessly from the room.

Story by Celine Baumbach

Quote: "I knew about the rumors, the accusations. Corruption. Favoritism. An emperor unfit to rule. I didn't have to stoke those flames.

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Context:

Emperor Ai of Han was the second to last emperor of the Han dynasty. Not much is known about homosexuality in ancient China, mainly because it seems to have been so normal that it wasn't really worth writing about. Yet we still know that at least ten emperors of the Han dynasty were queer in some way, as they took male lovers, and Ai is perhaps the most famous of them, because of the anecdote that inspired this story. One afternoon Ai's lover Dong Xian fell asleep on the emperor's sleeve, and rather than waking him, Ai simply cut off his sleeve so he could leave. In the following centuries "The Passion of the Cut Sleeve" became a euphemism for homosexuality in China. While his contemporaries frowned upon the relationship because the Emperor was bestowing disproportional favors onto his lover, it's an important part of queer

history, showing that whenever and wherever you go in the ancient world, queer people have always existed. It's also just a very cute story.

Resources:

<https://daily.jstor.org/in-han-dynasty-china-bisexuality-was-the-norm/>

<https://www.iheart.com/podcast/263-always-here-an-lgbt-28883374/episode/episode-10-emperor-ai-of-han-29142512/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-gd3H789Zc>

<https://www.fumble.org.uk/homosexuality-ancient-china/>