

The Fox with Fifty-Five Tales

Written down by certain Ivan Appel

On Ability

The guru of a monastery visited a nearby town for some insignificant business and along the way joined the town's prefect for dinner.

The prefect was glad to see the guest, but overall, he looked exhausted.

"I can't request more funds from the governor, and I can't ask the guilds either, so I have to find ways to run the town on whatever morsels I get. I also can't make my subordinates follow the rules, so I have to deal with various minor mistakes and violations all the time. I've never been the one to whine, but sometimes I just feel hopeless. You're a wise man, maybe you have some advice for me on what to do?"

The guru nodded, scribbled two words on a piece of paper, heartily thanked for the meal and for the company and left.

The two words were "you can."

On Aliens

In one monastery, they practice meditation over the image of what is most alien and scary to you.

Some imagine the nightmarish creatures with hungry mouths, insect-like eyes, and an abundance of tentacles.

Some imagine the people who never take their time to think and meditate.

On Arguments

A sage was giving a lecture when in the middle of it, one student interrupted him.

“There’s nothing new and original about what you’re teaching. I’ve already heard all of it many times.”

The sage replied, “there are two weak arguments that people use when they want to dismiss the lesson but lack the guts to attack either the teacher or the essence of what’s being taught.”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Yes, that’s the other one.”

On Assignments

There is a long-standing tradition in the Imperial High School that each of the four best graduates of the year is free to choose the place where one wants to begin the career.

So, the best graduate of that year applied for the Prefecture of Q, a major Northern centre of agriculture and cattle trade, as well as for the Prefecture of M, an Eastern city renowned for its craftsmen and industry.

He was disappointed to learn that both of his applications got rejected, and, to make matters worse, they didn't even reach the respective provinces but were dismissed by the rector of the School. When he visited the rector to ask for the reasons, she explained.

"You must understand one thing. Some people are driven by fear, and some people are driven by passion."

"You're clearly a passionate person, and officials at the Q Prefecture are all of the fearful kind. That's why you will see them as cowardly backstabbing bureaucrats, and they will see you as a reckless arrogant mutineer, and you will waste important

time and energy on losing arguments and overcoming annoyances.”

“As for the M Prefecture, officials are all very passionate there, just like yourself. Which means you will feel thoroughly joyful and welcome there but at a high hidden cost of missing the opportunity to learn the importance of diversity of opinions and worldviews.”

“Instead, you’ll be sent to the Prefecture of X. This is a bustling Southern port with all kinds of people coming and going, a perfect place to complement your perfect knowledge of books with a fair understanding of life.”

On Automata

One of the most exciting lessons during the study in the Imperial High School was a part of the Introduction to Battlefield Command course that was given to prepare the graduates for competent leadership not only during peacetime but also at war, should such unfortunate necessity arise.

The lesson itself was an excursion to the Automata Chamber of the Emperor's Palace that housed the collection of the most beautiful and intricate mechanical masterpieces made by the best artisans from all over the world.

There were flocks of golden and silver birds that didn't simply fly but formed complex geometric designs in the air. There were machines that looked exactly like real people, even able to talk and sing. There were whole miniature cities with smoke coming out of small bakeries where little bakers made bread and with city walls patrolled by tiny mechanical soldiers. There were so many of those wonders that even remembering each of them in detail was challenging by itself.

The lesson to be learned was that no matter how mesmerized you are by the precise rhythm of

moving mechanisms, you should not expect the same from the real armed men prepared to kill or to be killed.

On Awareness

“I’m getting a new advisor reassigned from a different province,” the governor told the sage. “I heard she was your student once, and I would like to hear your opinion of her.”

“She is very aware.”

“Is it safe to tell her she is stupid?”

“It’s even safe to tell her she is clever.”

“Unbelievable.”

“And yet.”

The Belief

An officer was about to be promoted to the rank of a regiment commander. He had an impeccable track record, and he had successfully passed all required examinations except one. For the final trial, he had to travel to a remote place in the Southwestern Province.

First, he reached the province's capital, where he enjoyed a week of governors' hospitality, and from there, he went to a tiny remote village. There he whiled away a few days in a squalid inn until a scruffy-looking shaman came and told him to follow him into the steppe.

By the dusk, they reached the camp where two other old shamans welcomed him and offered him a drink that looked and tasted like milk, although a bit bitter.

Tired after a day of walking, the officer sat down and watched foxes jumping over the campfire. And listened to wolves howling in the steppe. And smelled the terror of the wild horse running away from the wolf pack. All until he realized that the fox jumping over fire, the wolf howling in the darkness, and the wild horse running away were all himself.

When he woke up, it was late morning, and his body ached like never before. Old men were busy cooking around the campfire.

“Elders,” the officer croaked, “with all due respect, I can’t believe that all of this has anything to do with my appointment as a senior officer. It must’ve been some kind of mistake.”

Old men wryly looked at each other, and then the eldest shaman vanished into his tent. When he came back, he wore the uniform of the Imperial General, the old-fashioned one like they used to wear two decades ago, and the old man’s stature alone proved his right to wear it.

“Let’s take a walk. It’s not far.”

At the end of their walk, there was a tombstone.

“Here lies one regiment commander. This is the very place where he died. His last words were “I can’t believe it”, which he kept repeating while his perfectly trained regiment was being massacred after an ambush.”

“Always be careful with what you can’t believe.”

On Boredom

The Emperor was an old and wise man who had seen life in all of its aspects, and he wasn't the one to be surprised easily.

Once he was travelling incognito with only a small retinue, and in one town on his way, he met a baker's apprentice who was very unhappy with his life.

"Why are you so unhappy?" Emperor asked. "You have a good job, you feed your neighbours, you put food on your own table. That's an honourable life."

"But being a baker feels so unimportant. I wish I could do something great in my life."

"Well, you can become a monk. There's hardly anything more important than serving the Heaven."

"But being a monk feels so boring to me. I wish I could do something more exciting."

"Well, you can become a traveller. There's hardly anything more exciting than faraway lands and amazing adventures."

"But being a traveller feels so dangerous to me. I wish I could do something safer."

“Well, you can also become a jester at the Emperor’s court. I’m sure they will appreciate a grumpy young man like you.”

“But being a jester feels so embarrassing to me. I wish I could keep my dignity.”

“Wait, you have dignity?”

The Emperor was genuinely surprised.

On Codices

The Imperial High School course that was by far the toughest and the broadest was the laws of the Empire, and that covered both disputes between people, their dealings with the officials, and the internal work of the bureaucracy itself.

To pass the course, students had to study endless codices of laws, rules, and instructions, and one student got so exhausted by it that he fell asleep at his table in the School's library. When he woke up, it was already late evening, and he saw the professor sitting at the table in front of him smiling compassionately when she saw him opening his eyes.

"Professor," the student was nearly bursting in tears, "but why do we need so many rules and regulations? Can't people just act according to their common sense?"

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "I can explain it to you. It's very simple. The thing is, in the absence of written rules, people don't always behave according to common sense, but often they instead stick to the unwritten rules, traditions, customs, and such. And the difficulty with unwritten rules is that they never

favour the one who is right nearly as much as they bend to one who has the loudest tongue and the worst manners.”

On Coming Back

A young woman had spent seven years living in the monastery, meditating, studying, and serving the Heaven. And then one day, a noblewoman came with an inspection, and so they met, and soon fell in love, and then the guru gave her his blessing to leave the monastery and marry.

Her marriage was nothing but happy, but a year later, she felt that she was missing that solemn silence and awe of the meditation halls, and so she visited the monastery to ask the guru for permission to come and join them every now and then.

The guru said no.

Then he said, if you want to meditate and study, there is a handful of good schools and monasteries not far away from your wife's family castle. For the sake of your own convenience, I suggest you join one of them, and I can introduce you to their gurus.

But if what you truly want inside your heart is to revive your best memories about your life here in this place, and you expect that life itself will live up to their warmth, I'm sorry, but this will not happen.

This never happens.

The Commitment

One sage lived in a decrepit mud hut in a tiny oasis in the middle of the Great Desert.

When asked why he lives here and not in a place that would be both more welcoming for him and more accessible for those who want to learn, he always said that various people are coming to see him.

“Some just want to learn the truth and then live by it, so I tell it.”

“Some want to learn the truth, but they are suspicious of the truth that comes too readily, and they first need to wrestle with it through arguments and discussions, so I’m happy to argue with them for as long as they need to.”

“Some want to learn the truth but then get overwhelmed by it and need time to embrace it, so they leave and then come back.”

“Some couldn’t care less about learning the truth: they just want to mock and ridicule, pretending it’s a fair argument.”

“But I’m still to see one single person who travelled through the Great Desert merely to mock a poor old man.”

On Compassion

One guru taught his monks that the most crucial thing they have to develop in themselves is love.

He said: if you meditate long enough, you'll be able to see clearly anyway. But then you'll come back to the world, and you'll meet people, and you'll look through their passions and fears and words and thoughts, and you'll see that behind them there's nothing, just emptiness.

And it's only through love that you'll be capable of not turning away in arrogant disgust but helping them to fill the emptiness inside them.

On Consequences

When the imperial advisor was visiting a prefecture in the Southwestern Province, a young official was one of the people to catch his attention. Albeit reserved with the advisor, the said official was impatient with his superiors, arrogant with his peers, and downright rude with the scribes and servants.

After several days the advisor took the young man aside to tell, “I’m from the Eastern Province, and in the East, we say when there’s a fight between a dog and a wolf, the outcome depends on who decides the rules. If the wolf decides, he always retreats and then goes about his business. If the dog does, he always attacks and then gets killed.”

“That’s because the dog believes he’s somehow protected from harm. While the wolf knows he’s not, and so he chooses his battles wisely.”

On Decisions

There was a young official in the Northwestern Province whose career was nothing short of spectacular: it took her mere seven years after graduating from the Imperial High School to rise to the rank of the State Advisor, a deed that not many have accomplished in their lifetime. So obviously, there was no shortage of rumours about her secret connection with the governor, so she came once to the governor to discuss this matter.

“We’re certainly not sleeping together, and I have all reasons to believe I’m not your illegitimate daughter either, so I’m wondering why do I get much more acclaim than my peers?”

The governor smiled.

“If you permit me such honesty, I’d be proud to have a daughter like you. Of course, we both know that your late mother was always as faithful to your father as she was beautiful... As for your question, it’s simple. You want to make decisions, and most of your peers want somebody else to make the decisions they like. That’s all.”

The advisor nodded.

“I understand. Now, if you have some more time, can you tell me a bit about my parents?... Before I was born.”

“Sure, I have time.”

On Dragons

One sage taught that if you want to make love to a dragon, you essentially have two options to choose from. One is hard because it involves becoming a dragon yourself, and the other is impossibly disgusting.

On Dreams

As the teachings say, when you ask your neighbour for help, be shy, be modest, don't ask for more than you need, promise to repay your debt at the first possibility, and then keep your promise. This is because your neighbour is as poor as you are, and you must respect that, or else you won't get any help next time.

Whereas when you ask the Universe for help, don't be shy or modest, ask for everything you can think of, and promise to accept everything you couldn't even imagine. This is because the Universe is almighty, and you must respect that, or else your modesty and shyness can come off as doubt and contempt that will then be punished in the harshest way possible.

Which is by giving you precisely what you asked for.

On Duels

The Emperor was looking for a general to lead his army.

There were many gifted and educated people in the Empire, so the Emperor's advisors had to come up with the most exquisite trials to find the best among them. Eventually, they settled on two men. One of them was the best fencer in the whole Empire who could defeat five fine warriors attacking him simultaneously without breaking a sweat or opening his eyes. The other one was the best soothsayer who could read the past, the present and the future of any random stranger as if it was an open book with lavishly painted illustrations.

And to decide who of the two would be the worthiest general, the Emperor himself ordered them to have a swordfight.

So, it was a duel between the best fencer and the best soothsayer. And to say it lightly, it was uneventful.

They stood in front of each other doing nothing but staring at each other and lightly waving the swords in their hands. The soothsayer tried to invent an attack that would succeed against the opponent with the vastly superior technique, and he couldn't. And

the fencer tried to invent an attack that would prevail against the opponent who sees clearly through all surprises, and he also couldn't.

Finally, after three days and three nights, the soothsayer dropped his sword and accepted his defeat.

Right after that, the soothsayer arranged a feast in fencer's favour. There, he gave a profound speech about how proud and delighted he was to see such a great person in charge of the Imperial Army. And then, at the feast, he poisoned the fencer. After the fencer died a horribly painful death, the soothsayer was named the victor of their contest and appointed the army's general.

The Emperor wasn't particularly excited about such turn of events as he himself favoured the fencer. But later in his life, he had enough reasons for delight as the next thirty years of his reign with the soothsayer as the general were relatively calm and peaceful.

No matter how much the leaders of the neighbouring lands despised the general who was content with a disgraceful victory, none of them was particularly eager to be on the wrong side of his sword.

On Enlightenment

Elders told the story about how in one monastery, a young monk didn't want to meditate but instead kept bugging the guru to show the clap with one hand. Eventually, the guru got so annoyed that he broke the young monk's leg and sent him one-legged to run four hundred meters with obstacles.

By the end of the distance, the monk got enlightened and then hospitalized.

On Friends

There were two friends. One of them decided to write a book to explain how everyone in this world could be happy. After hearing that, the other chose to write a book to explain why everyone in this world will dismiss his friend's writings. They vowed to never talk until their work was finished, and one of them walked away northeast while the other went southwest.

In two years, both books were complete, and when the friends met again, they found out that their books were perfectly the same, word for word, except that one of them was written in the language of the wind and the other was written in the language of the soil.

Those who read a book in their mother tongue said it didn't make sense because it was too obvious. While those who read the version in the foreign language said that it didn't make sense because it was too obscure.

And then, one day, the Emperor read both books and then invited both friends to study in the High Imperial School as they were bright and dedicated young women.

Any bright young man or woman can write down the rules of how to be happy.

Being happy is an entirely different business, though.

On Good Ideas

The junior staff officer presented his plan for the upcoming battle to the regiment commander.

The senior officer went through the plan and said, “I see there are quite a few good ideas, but what I don’t see is what we’ll have to do if these moves won’t be as successful as expected.”

“This is not necessary,” the junior officer replied sharply. “My plan will be successful.”

Commander sighed.

“As I said, there are quite a few good ideas.”

On Harmony

As the teachings say, harmony with the Universe is not something you can earn, and neither it's something that you're entitled to.

Therefore, you can't achieve it by blunt effort or by diligent learning or by unbridled desire, but only by accepting your role in the Universe as well as the role of the Universe in yourself.

A few find it trivial. Many more run away, scared to death.

On Haste

A young official had to get to the other side of the great mountain range that separates Southern and Western provinces.

He came to a village on the southern side of the passage and found a villager who agreed to be his guide.

“How long will it take to cross the pass?” the young official asked.

“It will take two weeks.” the guide answered.

That’s a long time, can I cross it faster?”

“You can indeed go faster, and then it will take five months.”

“That’s hilarious,” the young official laughed. “When you do things faster, they get done faster, not slower. You’re so stupid, that’s why you live in this forgotten village, and I’m the Imperial Official.”

So, he went by himself. The first day was thoroughly pleasant: the sun was shining bright, the path was meandering between blossoming hills, and birds were singing their love songs. So was the second day. On the third day, the path changed, and it wasn’t a dusty road between the hills but treacherous

stones above the high cliffs. The young official was too determined to even think about slowing down, and so eventually, the inevitable happened, and he slid down the cliff into the abyss.

He survived the fall, but both his legs were shattered, so he could barely crawl, and he wouldn't know where to go anyway, so he just composed himself and prepared to die.

Two days later, a small search party came, led by the villager whom the young man had rejected as the guide. They put the young man on a stretcher and carried him back to the village. The village doctor told the young man that he'd be healed, but it'd take a couple of months to recover.

While they were descending, the guide said, "If I was one of those smart birds at the court, I'd have a witty remark to summarize this life lesson. But I'm a poor stupid villager, so you, Imperial Official, will have to come up with one yourself."

On Honesty

Elders of the Great Desert between Two Kingdoms say: Many whom you consider brave are merely lucky. Many whom you deem honest just didn't have the right opportunity. Many whom you believe loyal are simply incapable. Many whom you consider intelligent are very good at dodging hard questions. Sometimes impeccable is only untried.

On Importance

In one monastery, the guru had a peculiar habit of running long distances. Every now and then, he would run away early in the morning and then would not come back until afternoon.

The acolytes were wondering what the most important thing of being able to run that long and that far was.

One said it must be strong legs that can bear such a long run.

Another said it must be strong lungs that allow running for so long without running out of breath.

Yet another said it must be the power of will that makes it possible to not give up until the end.

Finally, they asked the guru, and he replied, while everything you mentioned matters a lot, the most important of all is firm control of the bowels.

Because sometimes it happens that you had a good dinner the evening before, and then you run the road where pilgrims and travelling officials recognize you and making a detour to nearby bushes would be gravely embarrassing.

On Inner Peace

In one monastery at the edge of the Great Desert, there is a peculiar rule. A newcomer who wants to study has to describe themselves to the guru of the monastery. And when the newcomer says something to the effect of “I am smart” or “I’m rich,” they are forbidden from studying but instead ordered to put the double effort into meditation for one full year, and only then they are allowed to retry the test.

How the guru explains this rule is this: if you say about yourself “I shit,” it means something’s wrong with your guts because if you’re at peace with your own bowels, you wouldn’t even think about bringing it up as something that describes you in any distinctive way.

Likewise, if you say you’re smart, maybe you feel obliged to constantly prove it, or perhaps you’re ashamed of not using your full potential, or it could be that you depend on it to cope with the lack of some other qualities. But in any case, it means you’re not at peace with your own intelligence. The same is true if you say you’re rich, or fat, or old, or anything.

The answer that the guru is looking for is “I’m just me.”

Needless to say, some frauds attempted to cheat the test, but none of them stayed unexposed for more than a week or three.

On Inspiration

One sage said: when I was young, I aimed to always tell people what I believed to be the truth, and it was tough as I had to deal with many who disagreed with me and challenged every word I said.

When I got older, I aimed to tell people what they wanted to hear, and it was also tough as I had to deal with myself feeling dead inside.

Now I just blurt out whatever comes to my tongue, and what it inspires them to, I mostly don't care.

On Intelligence

Once a stranger came to the monastery, and he was different from others. While regular pilgrims quietly and humbly listened to the teachings, that one kept interrupting with witty scepticism and elaborate logic, causing a lot of annoyance and confusion.

After observing that, the guru handed him two pieces of paper. The first was the list of seven routes through the Great Desert, and the second was the list of nine highest mountain peaks of Two Kingdoms, all of which the stranger had to cross and ascend all by himself without any outside help.

“When your courage and your resilience and your humility will match your intelligence and your wits, you’ll have the great potential. Now go.”

On Joy

The elderly sage was telling his students, I lived a long life, and I did many things. Some great, some less so, and some so shameful they haunt me until this day.

There was a man who I deeply hated for reasons not important to this story, and I wanted to destroy him.

I considered killing him. But that would mean he would only suffer for a brief moment, and I felt it would be too easy for him and too unsophisticated for me.

I also considered tarnishing his name and taking away his family fortune. But that would mean he would get a shining beacon of purpose in fighting to get his life back, and I didn't want to give him that.

Instead, and since I was already renowned and respected by that time, so he listened to me, I told him that joy and happiness he had in his life were impure and false unless he complied with particular rules. I gave him a sheet of paper with seventeen rules I made up, each contradicting at least three others. He gratefully accepted my advice.

And so, I watched him losing connections with his loved ones and, brick by brick, dismantling his whole life.

Later my hatred wore thin, and my shame came in its stead, so I wanted to undo the evil I've done, but by that time, he was so immersed in those stupid rules that even the Emperor himself wouldn't be able to change his mind.

On Kindness

The governor of the Southern Province was approaching his retirement, and one experienced official was being considered to be appointed his successor. The imperial advisor visited him to assess his personality, and for two weeks, the official himself, his family and his retinue were all genuinely happy to entertain their guest with intricate conversations, elaborate dinners, and hunts in the nearby woods.

A week after his departure, the advisor returned from the Capital.

“I’m supposed to notify you in writing, but that’ll be terribly impolite, so I’m telling you this face to face.”

“You will not be appointed a governor, and instead, you will be given an advisory post in the Western Province.”

“As I merely confirmed to the Emperor, you’re known as a very kind, compassionate, educated and respected man. Regretfully, the war is approaching the Southern border. And your kindness and compassion will force you to agonize over finding compromises in situations that demand willful decisions.”

“I’m sure you understand that this will be better both for you, for the province, and for the Empire.”

On Leadership

One newly admitted student of the High Imperial School asked, “Professor, but why do we have to study for twelve years just to become an official if it’s such an easy job?”

“Is it?”

“Yes, I mean, you just tell people what to do, and they do it. What can be hard about it?”

Professor smiled.

“I’m a little envious of how many surprises await you in these classrooms.”

On Loyalty

Although students of the Imperial High School were forbidden to drink wine under the penalty of expulsion, boys and girls being boys and girls, every now and then, an occasional troublemaker would get drunk and do something shameful.

Once, when it happened, a classmate of the unruly student decided to go to the rector of the School to plead for mercy.

“He’s a good student,” she said, “and he’s a good guy, and he has never done anything wrong. And I believe that being sent home for a single stupid mistake is much too harsh, so I ask if you could please be merciful and soften his penalty.”

The rector replied, “Your behaviour is honourable, and I will take your plea into consideration. But for that, I’ll ask you to do one thing in return.”

She took a blue crystal from the shelf and put it on the table in front of the girl.

“Don’t be afraid, there’s no high magic in this thing, it’s just a convenient tool when I need to focus. Now look into it and think what would’ve happened if it was you in trouble and in need of his support.”

She stared at the crystal for a few minutes and then gazed away. Her face looked disappointed.

“What did you see?” the rector asked.

“I counted seventeen reasons to not stand up for me he would come with, and not a single one to do it.”

“Good, now go and take your time to reflect on how you understand loyalty.”

On Numbers

A young advisor at the Imperial court worked hard for three years to devise the most elaborate, very sophisticated, and entirely scientific method to evaluate how well a province or a part of it is being governed and what can be advised to improve. Finally, his work was done, and he asked the audience with the Emperor to present his proposal.

“This is a fine academic treatise,” the Emperor said. “But what makes you think I’m the right audience for it?”

“This is my real proposal about how the provinces should be governed.”

Emperor smiled.

“I see. You did good work, now I’d like you to show it to the governor of the Southwestern Province and ask for her opinion.”

Governor of the Southwestern Province was a lush, smiley middle-aged woman and the best graduate of the High Imperial School of a decade.

“This is a fascinating logical puzzle,” she said. “My scribes will make a copy, so I’ll have something to entertain myself with during long summer evenings.

And now be honest about the hidden agenda you have because I don't believe that you have travelled all the way from the Capital just to show me this."

"This is my real proposal that I presented to the Emperor, and I was sent to you to get your opinion."

The governor laughed.

"I see. You did good overall work, except that you didn't think of those with intelligence to find seven ways to subvert and bypass every rule in your book out of pure boredom. Now, you're welcome to be my guest as long as you want, and then I'd like you to show your proposal to the governor of the Eastern Province and ask for his opinion as well."

The governor of the Eastern Province was a grizzled, scarred old man and the commander in some of the bloodiest battles in the Empire's recent history.

"There are few interesting ideas in your book that I'm eager to discuss with my advisors," he said. "But you really didn't have to go such a long way yourself, sending it with a courier would suffice."

"This is my real proposal that I presented to the Emperor, and I was sent to you to ask for the opinion."

Governor grinned.

“I see. Your work isn’t bad at all, except that you didn’t consider those with resolve to discard every rule they disagree with. Now, take your time to enjoy the Eastern hospitality, and after that, you must go to the North.”

The governor of the Northern Province was a tough tanned black-haired giant who used to be a rancher and a sheriff before his current office.

“This is hilarious. This is how people in the Capital think things should be done here? Look, do you have any other funny books with you?”

“This is my real proposal that I presented to the Emperor, and I was sent to you to ask for the opinion.”

The governor burst with laughter.

“Okay, I see. You want my opinion, here’s my opinion. You say you don’t care if I’ve lived here my whole life, and know the land, and know the people, all that doesn’t matter because you’ve got this clever book instead. I say, good luck. That’s my opinion. And, I’m sorry for not offering you to stay and relax, but the ship to the Archipelago departs tomorrow, and you really have to be on that ship.”

The governor-general of the Archipelago was a pale, fragile woman not much older than the advisor himself and a princess of the ancient island lineage.

“You must be disfavoured at the court if they sent you all the way here just to deliver this example of terrible calligraphy.”

“This is my real proposal that I presented to the Emperor, and I was sent to you to ask for the opinion.”

The princess slapped him in the face.

“Most of my family died after pirates ravaged the islands, and I was just a little orphan girl then. It was the Emperor who sheltered me in his palace and took care of me until I grew up, and it was the Emperor who assembled the fleet to hunt down the pirate scum. My loyalty doesn’t have to be checked, especially not with a piece of bad handwriting. And now it’s time for you to go home, advisor.”

Almost a year passed since he had left, and he was coming back exhausted, humiliated, and contemplating his life after resignation from the court.

A letter was awaiting him at home, an appointment as a professor of the Imperial High School signed by the Emperor himself with a postscript.

“Now go teach what you have learned.”

On Passion

One day a disciple left the monastery where he lived for a decade to wander and discover the wisdom of the outside world.

When he came back two years later, the whole monastery gathered to hear what he had learned, and one of the things he shared was from a sage who taught that “Some people are driven by fear, and some are driven by passion. And being fearful is not worthy of a human being, but you must strive to be passionate instead.”

To that, the guru of the monastery remarked, the first half of it is widely known and undeniably true, while the second one is not worth a bucket of goat manure. That’s because telling passionate people to be passionate is futile as that’s what they already are. While commanding the fearful people to be passionate essentially means that I’m too lazy to hit you with a stick, and that’s why you must strive to imagine my stick in your own head.

On Perfection

One sage taught: when putting all your heart and all your soul into what you are doing, beware.

When you do very well and then fail, you will still have the strength to do it again because you will have hope that next time you'll do it better.

When you do your absolute impossible best and then fail, there's no hope and no strength, and it's over.

On Priorities

One sage said, I only teach a single truth, and the truth is that chastising your maid for badly washed linen is not the right thing to do when your whole house is on fire.

The rest is merely commentary and practical advice.

On Promises

In the middle of the night, the prince stood in the dark hallway lit only by rare oil lamps, and he had a dagger in his hand. He knew that hallway. It led to the bedroom of his mother, the ruling queen. The prince was there to kill her.

He had no reasons to kill his mother, whom he adored and always obeyed. No reasons except one.

He gave his word. He gave his word to kill the queen, and after he would assume the throne to marry the countess twenty years his older. He couldn't remember clearly why or when he did it, but it didn't matter. The word of the prince is the law.

Every next step towards the bedroom's door was harder and harder to make, but he shrugged off his hesitation. What had been decided had to be done.

Finally, he opened the door and entered the bedroom.

There was someone sitting in the armchair by the window. And when the prince came closer, he saw it wasn't the queen. It was the magician who graciously offered his services to teach the young prince. And even though no one at the court knew

why exactly he decided to get involved in the heir's education, the queen joyfully accepted. And then, no one at the court was particularly eager to doubt both the sovereign and the mysterious sorcerer at the same time.

"Why are you here?" the magician asked.

"I'm here," the prince gulped, "I'm here to kill my mother."

"Do you want to do it?"

"No! Heaven, no!"

"Then why are you here?"

"Because... I gave my word to do it, and the word of the prince is the law."

"Good. Now, the lesson for today will be two numbers. The first is four. This is how many people in this world are capable of going back in time and unmaking a promise that turned out to be a horrible mistake. The other is nineteen. This is how many people in this world can certainly tell whether their decision was real or merely a part of a skilfully crafted illusion."

"And since you're not among either of them, as your mentor, I advise you to not always be that inflexible."

On Reality

As the saying goes, if you saw a beautiful city in the faraway land beyond the Great Desert that you had to cross with great difficulties, and then you saw a beautiful castle in a dream while sleeping in your own soft bed, don't ask the caravanner which one is better.

In the middle of the lecture at the Imperial High School on the topic of the standard staffing list of a prefecture in a medium-sized town, a student raised his hand and asked a question.

“Professor, but why do we need all that enormous bureaucracy? Can’t officials just do what they must without being entangled in such complicated hierarchy?”

“This is a great question, and I’m glad you have asked it. The reason is that life itself is complicated and unpredictable, which is why one day you know what you must do, and the other day you doubt.”

“Now, when the difference in status between the superior and the subordinate is too big, both are afraid that sharing their concerns would mean losing face, and fear brings lie, and lie brings chaos. That’s what we call the rift.”

On Rules

In the Imperial High School, they have a peculiar way to hold examinations.

First, students are questioned about things they have learned during the course, not unlike a regular school except that examiners are often highly ranked officials and renowned academics. Second, a dice is rolled, and the grade is adjusted based on the outcome, so a lucky student can see her “failed” turning into “good” while her unfortunate peer’s “perfect” can become “barely passable.”

A student came once to the professor to tell that, in his opinion, that method was unfair and unreasonable.

The professor replied: I can tell you what’s unfair. It’s when you’re a farmer, and you cleared the weeds, and ploughed the field, and sowed the seeds, and did everything right, but summer was cold and damp, and harvest was meagre. So, you visit the Imperial Official and plead for sustenance so you and your family can survive the winter. And the official blames you for being a terrible farmer as if you followed the rules, you would’ve succeeded, just as this official did throughout his study and career, so

your misery is well deserved. This is what's truly unfair and unreasonable.

Go think about it.

That day a newly appointed guardsman of the Emperor's palace met a visitor. The visitor was very plainly dressed, and his cloak looked like it had seen every outskirt of the Empire. All he had was a sword and a gold signet ring, and he said that he would like to see the Emperor.

"How do I know that you didn't steal that ring?" Guardsman yelled, "go away, or I'll throw you to a prison for beggars."

"Child," the visitor said softly, "when I get impatient, I will kill you, without much effort or much regret. Now, before that happens, please invite the Head of the Guard here."

The guardsman couldn't believe his eyes that he saw such effrontery at the Emperor's palace, but still, he caught some clerk to ask the Head of the Guard to come. When the old man arrived, he kneeled before the visitor and then excused for the behaviour of his "inexperienced, yet brave and honest" subordinate and followed the visitor to the Emperor's private chambers.

Then he came back to explain what had just happened.

“He’s not angry at you, but you must remember the sign on that ring. This man is one of the Peacemakers, by far the most powerful and dangerous secret society in the whole Empire. It takes only three of them to assassinate the Emperor and nine to topple the government.”

“How come I’ve never heard of them?”

“Because they stay in the shadows and let the Imperial bureaucracy run the daily affairs, and only reveal themselves when decisions are made that they have questions about.”

“But why does the Emperor allow this?”

“First, there’s a reason they’re called the Peacemakers. When a person who craves power and is able to fight for it emerges, they get visited and questioned. Ones who seek power for the common good are offered a seat at the table. Ones who seek power for their own benefit are never found again. That’s why the Empire hasn’t seen civil wars for three thousand years.”

“And second, why do you think it takes three of the most dangerous people in the whole Empire to assassinate the Emperor? And how do you think he became the Emperor in the first place?”

On Service

The visitor came to the monastery, and without even joining a meal or taking some rest, he rushed to see the guru and to have a heated argument.

“You’re always saying that you’re serving the Universe. And you know what, I’m unable to even imagine how this can possibly make sense.”

“I have a question for you too. What is service?”

“That’s easy, every child knows that. To serve means to do what you’ve been told to do. But are you saying...”

“You’re wrong,” the guru interrupted him. “Doing what you’ve been told to do is not service but slavery. Now go away and take your time to think about it.”

The visitor walked out of the monastery full of pride that this renowned guru couldn’t beat him in a fair debate and had to resort to sending him away. Nonetheless, six years later, he came back to tell his story.

“After leaving your monastery, I went to another one to challenge the guru there. And then to another one, and then to yet another. And then it stroke me that if I was travelling across the Empire anyway, at least I

didn't have to go empty-handed. So, I bought a handful of camels and became a spice merchant. Trade went well and grew steadily, and in a few years, I couldn't take care of every minute detail anymore. So I hired some help. To be fair, they were honest and hard-working men, but not the brightest, and I've often found myself yelling, 'Why do you always need to be told what to do, and why can't you just do what has to be done?' And then I remembered the argument we had in this very room, and I realized that I owed you an apology for my arrogance and foolishness."

The guru nodded.

"Apology accepted."

On Singing

One young man enjoyed singing and playing the lute more than anything in life. He even pondered whether music should be his main occupation, so he visited the master musician for advice, and maybe she could accept him as a student.

The master musician asked the young man to play her some songs, and after he finished playing, she said, I have two answers for you, and you can take the one that rhymes with what your heart truly strives for.

If you want to sing for yourself, what I heard was haunting and beautiful, and I have nothing more to teach you, just keep doing what you love. And if you want to sing for other people, with a proper teacher it will take you three years of hard work to become very bad.

On Structure

A sage once came to his mentor and asked a question.

“I’m writing a book now, and I’m curious if you have any advice regarding how to structure it.”

To that, the mentor replied, “if your book is meant to be returned to, make sure that a reader can easily find the piece that she has loved the most and wants to reread first. And if your book is not worth rereading, it’s most certainly not worth writing either.”

On Teaching

A young nobleman came to the master poet.

“I want to study poetry, and my family is rich, so money or travel is not an issue. I just want to study from the best, and so I humbly ask if you could refer me to someone?”

The master poet replied.

“It depends on you. If you’re very gifted and aspire to become truly great, then you should study from one with the deepest and clearest understanding of poetry. And the best thinker of our generation lives on one of the Archipelago islands.”

“If you can’t put three words together and you wish to get competent, then you should study from the one with the best teaching ability. And the best poetry teacher I’ve ever known lives in the Southern Province.”

“If you genuinely disagree that notions of good and bad apply to poetry, I know few teachers in the Capital who will be pleased to cater to this point of view.”

“And if you’re neither of those, then it doesn’t matter. As long as you put your soul into practice,

any competent master poet will be good, even myself.”

On Temptation

A rumour was that a hermit settled on the mountain that overlooked the valley.

One of the villagers, the blacksmith, went to see if it was true, and after returning, he proclaimed that he'd lead a sober life and never ever drink any wine again.

Then another villager, the miller, decided to pay a visit, and after returning, he vowed to build a new and better school for the children of their valley. Yet another, the baker, got curious, so he packed food, and a couple of blankets, and some utensils, and few other things that could be useful for someone living in the forest, and early in the morning, he set off.

It was around noon when he found the hermit's cave.

"What happened to my neighbours?" the baker asked.

"Well," the hermit replied, "some people are such that you tell them that wine is good, and they'll drink themselves to death. That's because they need simple answers. And some people are such that you tell that wine is bad and they'll burn down the cooper's house thinking they're fighting evil. That's because they

need a mission that's worth their energy. As for you, you don't seem to need anything I have, so I hope you've at least enjoyed the stroll in this beautiful forest." And then he added. "It would be nice though if you could teach something in the school that the miller will build, and also if you could pretend to look guilty when drinking wine in the blacksmith's company."

On Time

Every island of the Archipelago had something special about it, and the most peculiar of them was the one where the passage of time itself was odd.

It wasn't uncommon that you take a walk before dinner because your meal is too hot, you get captured by the pirates and sold into slavery, you escape and join the army, you rise through the ranks to become a general, you celebrate many glorious victories, and then you come home, and your meal is still too hot. It also wasn't uncommon that you visit your friend for a glass of wine and some chit-chat, and then you come home, and your spouse is long dead, and your grandson is now the mayor of the town.

To be fair, time passing unpredictably was widespread throughout the Empire, albeit in less obvious ways.

On Tradition

After the ceremony of Greeting the Rising Sun, one newcomer at the monastery approached the guru to tell that he was confused to hear the melody that had been sung during the ceremony as it wasn't any of twenty Rising Sun melodies from the Golden Songbook.

To that, the guru replied: the song is beautiful and harmonious, and this is all that matters.

On Travellers

A traveller once came to a caravaner inn to spend the night, and he was visibly disappointed. After a glass of wine, he said he had spent months to cross the Great Desert to meet the renowned sage, and all that had been for nothing as the sage was only talking vague nonsense and didn't have any good answers.

Next month another traveller came to that same inn to stay overnight, and he was thoroughly excited. After the light dinner, he said he had spent months to cross the Great Desert to meet the renowned sage, and it had been worth every day and every coin spent as the sage had given him enough questions to think about for the rest of his life.

Although, whether or not they have met the same sage or two different ones is uncertain.

On Unhappiness

One afternoon, a visitor came to the sages' house, and his saddlebags were filled with books.

"I am unhappy," the visitor declared. "And I have carefully studied all these books, but I haven't found answers in them."

Then he displayed his travel library that consisted of rare books on philosophy and soul medicine.

To that sage replied, "I'm not sure I understand why you came to me. Are you seeking a teacher or a healer?"

On Victory

One upstart kingdom managed to conquer smaller neutral principalities on the Southern border and was becoming a threat to the Empire proper.

The Emperor gathered his most senior advisors to decide what to do.

The Master Scholar told, their swords are sharp, their horses are numerous, and their general is gifted. The war will be devastating for our land. We must find a diplomatic solution and forge a peace treaty with them.

The Master Ambassador told, their leaders are bloodthirsty, their spirit is fierce, and their recent victories are blinding. A peace treaty will neither be fair nor will last long. We must muster an army, face them in an open battle, and pray that Heaven will be on our side.

The Master Assassin told, their officers are arrogant, their soldiers are greedy, and their supply train is neglected. In their minds, they're not prepared for anything but a swift, decisive victory. Even a minor setback will suffice to see the men on the ground defecting, their superiors seeking scapegoats between each other, and the whole army collapsing

from the inside. We must reinforce and resupply our fortresses on the Southern border and be patient.

On Weather

One magician was so good at conjuring rain that his fame reached the farthest corners of the eleven realms, and yet no honest man would say it was undeserved as there were plenty of droughts he had averted and many deserts he had turned into meadows.

When dwellers of a desolate Northern island heard of him, they got hopeful that he was able to conjure a rain so intense that it'd wash away the snow that covered most of the island and make their land suitable for growing grain and cattle. So, poor fishermen they were, they went to great lengths to gather the magicians' fee and to send messengers to the faraway Eastern land where the said magician built his castle.

After the magician heard their request, he became sad and very politely rejected them, saying, "I can bring the heaviest rain to your island, but this rain will merely turn into even more snow and will make your condition only worse. To defeat snow, you need not me but a conjurer of fire."

"But, if you permit an opinion from the alien who has already once disappointed you today, I'm not so

sure whether fishermen of many generations truly need help with grain and cattle or if they should instead look for someone with mastery of the language of the storms.”

On Wine

There was a monastery in the Southeastern Province where the guru installed a peculiar order.

Newly arrived pilgrims were banned from meditation, fasting, and attending the lessons. They were only allowed to drink wine, read humorous poetry, eat sweets and meat, and sleep until noon. Many walked away in disgust, saying they had wasted their precious time there.

The guru said: it's only when you're not ashamed of being indolent, you're also not proud of learning. And it's only when you're not proud of learning you may actually begin to learn.

On Wooden Sticks

Once a renowned sage visited the town to give a lecture, and many people gathered to hear what he had to say. Even the guru of the nearby monastery came, although many wondered why that fragile elderly woman brought a heavy hardwood stick.

When asked to explain why, she said, not every single one, but plenty of sages I've met in my life told a lot about things that a woman shouldn't do.

Now, certain things you shouldn't do as they're forbidden by the Emperor, and all of those are mentioned in the Law.

Certain things you should abstain from doing because they're against the Universal Harmony, and all of those I know in great detail myself.

Some things you shouldn't do because they displease your mother or your spouse, and their wishes deserve respect, but also better be kept private.

And there are things that neither the Emperor, nor the Heaven, nor the ones you love, object to, but some strange traveller nonetheless attempts to prove are evil. For those, I have very little time and even less patience.

On Yearly Ritual

Contrary to most of the Empire, where a usual monastery is little more than a combination of a school and a hobby club, in the Archipelago, they are stricter and more demanding, and dark ancient rituals are still performed there even nowadays.

For the most important one, a disciple has to make a human-sized figure out of cloth, hay and wood, then affuse it with their own blood, and then burn it at the dawn of the midwinter night.

As they explain the meaning of it, if you strive to perfect yourself, you have to keep killing your previous selves, or else they will hold you back.

When a young poet came to his mentor, he was visibly disappointed.

He said, I went to a poetic evening yesterday, and I read several of my poems there. And nobody liked them, not a single person out of five dozen visitors, everybody said my poems are bad.

To that, his mentor replied, this is fortunate. It means that among all the ideas that you have about writing, none suits you. That's why you can safely discard all of them and take the other road on every turn. Just imagine how much harder it would've been if only one or two persons liked your verses.