

The Qilin At Court

November 1416.

Jubilant cries greeted the first scarlet silk sail that appeared on the horizon. The Yongle emperor's treasure fleet glided back up the Yangtze River, returning to Nanjing after three years at sea.

Admiral Zheng He, the emperor's most trusted advisor and friend, reported immediately to the imperial palace.

"Your return is a welcome diversion," said the emperor, as the admiral kow-towed before him. "I'm exhausted. I cannot persuade the mandarins to approve the funds to rebuild China."

"Sire, I have a riddle," The admiral smiled. "The answer to it is the solution to your problem."

"I really haven't time for frivolity," frowned the emperor. Then relented, "Let's hear this riddle."

"What has the body of a deer, the tail of an ox, the hooves of a horse, a horn like a unicorn and is patterned with bright scales?"

"Simple," the emperor said. "The qilin."

"Has anyone ever seen one?" asked the admiral.

"Never," said the emperor. "It's a mythical, celestial animal."

"Sire," murmured the Admiral "didn't a qilin once appear to a woman and predict she'd bear a son, a king without a throne?"

"You mean the mother of Confucius?"

"That appearance, thousands of years ago, was auspicious for China, not so?"

"It was."

"What if a qilin visited your court today?"

"If only that could happen," the emperor chuckled, "I'd be omnipotent!"

The admiral clapped his hands. "Then I predict this gift, from the Sultan of Malindi, makes your wish come true."

The great doors swung open. A sailor led the African sultan's tribute before the court.

"Behold!" exclaimed the admiral, "A qilin visits the Yongle emperor's court."

The Yongle emperor's eyes widened. Then, for the first time in months, a smile creased his features.

A marvellous creature approached on long, slender legs. It inclined its impossibly long neck to gaze inquisitively at the emperor (upon whom no man dared look) with enormous soft brown eyes, ringed by the longest lashes imaginable.

The qilin caused a sensation at court.

The court poet composed a eulogy to the celestial being. The mandarins, astounded by its auspicious appearance, thereafter granted the emperor's every request.

Thus, the Yongle emperor realised his costly ambitions for China - moving the capital from Nanjing to Beijing, restoring the Great Wall, repairing and enlarging the Grand Canal between Beijing and Hangzhou.

All thanks to the common African giraffe, still called a qilin in China.