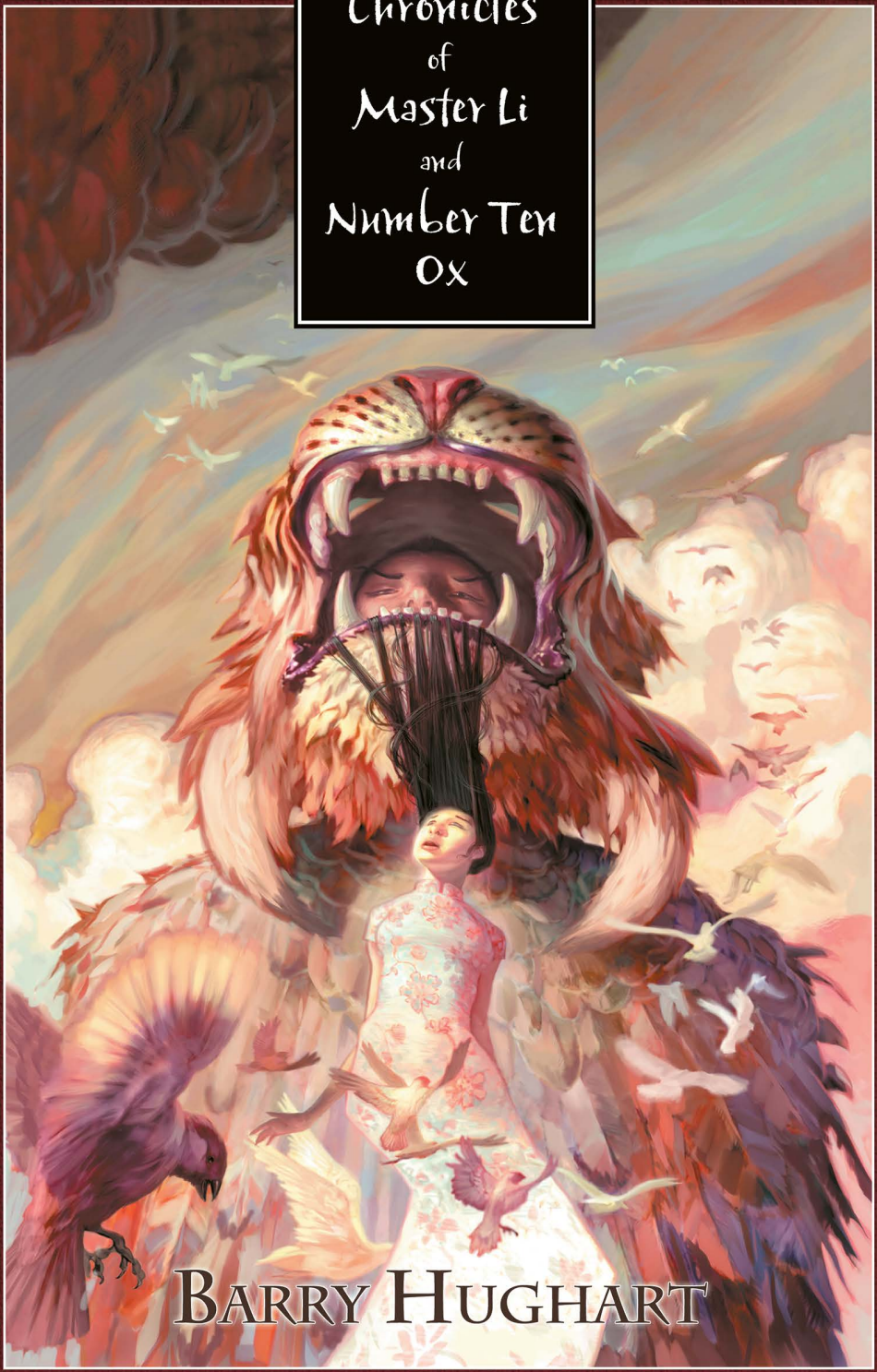
The Chronicles of Master Li and Number Ten Ox



BARRY HUGHART

THE CHRONICLES of MASTER LI and NUMBER TEN OX

The Chronicles of Master Li and Number Ten Ox

Barry Hughart

Subterranean Press 2011

The Chronicles of Master Li and Number Ten Ox
Copyright © 2008 by Barry Hughart. All rights reserved.

Bridge of Birds Copyright © 1984 by Barry Hughart.
All rights reserved.
The Story of the Stone Copyright © 1988 By Barry Hughart.
All rights reserved.
Eight Skilled Gentlemen Copyright © 1991 By Barry Hughart.
All rights reserved.

Dust jacket illustration Copyright © 2008 by Jon Foster.
All rights reserved.

Interior design Copyright © 2008 by Desert Isle Design, LLC.
All rights reserved.

Second Subterranean Press Edition

ISBN
978-1-59606-455-3

Subterranean Press
PO Box 190106
Burton, MI 48519

www.subterraneanpress.com

An omnibus of the novels:

Bridge of Birds

The Story of the Stone

Eight Skilled Gentlemen

BRIDGE
of
BIRDS

For Ann and Pete

Caveat Oriens

prolepsis (prō lep′ sis), *n*., *pl*. **-ses** (-sēz). 1. *Rhet.* The anticipation of possible objections in order to answer them in advance. 2. The assigning of a person, event, etc., to a period earlier than the actual one.

—*The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*

Caveat Occidens

Chen. To stand still. To gallop at full speed.

Wan. A small mouth. Some say a large mouth.

Ch'he. Devoid of intelligence, deficiency of wit, silly, idiotic. Also used for borrowing and returning books.

Pee. A dog under the table.
A dog with short legs.
A short-headed dog.

Maou Tsaou. A scholar not succeeding and giving himself over to liquor.

—*The Chinese Unicorn,* edited, from Chinese-English dictionaries,
by Thomas Rowe; printed for Robert Gilkey
(private circulation).

Master Li

The Village of Ku-fu

I shall clasp my hands together and bow to the corners of the world.

My surname is Lu and my personal name is Yu, but I am not to be confused with the eminent author of *The Classic of Tea*. My family is quite undistinguished, and since I am the tenth of my father's sons and rather strong I am usually referred to as Number Ten Ox. My father died when I was eight. A year later my mother followed him to the Yellow Springs Beneath the Earth, and since then I have lived with Uncle Nung and Auntie Hua in the village of Ku-fu in the valley of Cho. We take great pride in our landmarks. Until recently we also took great pride in two gentlemen who were such perfect specimens that people used to come from miles around just to stare at them, so perhaps I should begin a description of my village with a couple of classics.

When Pawnbroker Fang approached Ma the Grub with the idea of joining forces he opened negotiations by presenting Ma's wife with the picture of a small fish drawn on a piece of cheap paper. Ma's wife accepted the magnificent gift, and in return she extended her right hand and made a circle with the thumb and forefinger. At that point, the door crashed open and Ma the Grub charged inside and screamed: "Woman, would you ruin me? *Half* of a pie would have been enough!"

That may not be literally true, but the abbot of our monastery always said that fable has strong shoulders that carry far more truth than fact can.

Pawnbroker Fang's ability to guess the lowest possible amount that person would accept for a pawned item was so unerring that I had concluded it was supernatural, but then the abbot took me aside and explained that Fang wasn't guessing at all. There was always some smooth shiny object lying on top of his desk in the front room of Ma the Grub's warehouse, and it was used as a mirror that would reflect the eyes of the victim.

"Cheap, very cheap," Fang would sneer, turning the object in his hands. "No more than two hundred cash."

His eyes would drop to the shiny object and if the pupils of the reflected eyes constricted too sharply he would try again.

"Well, the workmanship isn't too bad, in a crude peasant fashion. Make it two-fifty."

The reflected pupils would dilate, but perhaps not quite far enough.

"It is the anniversary of my poor wife's untimely demise, the thought of which always destroys my business judgment," Fang would whimper, in a voice clotted with tears. "Three hundred cash, but not one penny more!"

Actually, no money would change hands because ours is a barter economy. The victim would take a credit slip through the door to the warehouse, and Ma the Grub would stare at it in disbelief and scream out to Fang. "Madman! Your lunatic generosity will drive us into bankruptcy! Who will feed your starving brats when we are reduced to tattered cloaks and begging bowls?" Then he would honor the credit slip with goods that had been marked up by 600 percent.

Pawnbroker Fang was a widower with two children, a pretty little daughter we called Fang's Fawn and a younger son that we called Fang's Flea. Ma the Grub was childless, and when his wife ran off with a rug peddler his household expenses were cut in half and his happiness was doubled. The happiest time of all for the team of Ma and Fang was our annual silk harvest, because silkworm eggs could only be purchased with money and they had all the money. Ma the Grub would buy the eggs and hand them out to each family in exchange for IOUs that were to be redeemed with silk, and since Pawnbroker Fang was the only qualified appraiser of silk for miles around they were able to take two-thirds of our crop to Peking and return with bulging bags of coins, which they buried in their gardens on moonless midnights.

The abbot used to say that the emotional health of a village depended upon having a man whom everyone loved to hate, and Heaven had blessed us with two of them.

Our landmarks are our lake and our wall, and both of them are the result of the superstition and mythology of ancient times. When our ancestors arrived in the valley of Cho they examined the terrain with the greatest of care, and we honestly believe that no village in the world has been better planned than the village of Ku-fu. Our ancestors laid it out so that it would be sheltered from the Black Tortoise, a beast of the very worst character, whose direction is north and whose element is water and whose season is winter. It is open to the Red Bird of the south and the element of fire and the season of summer. And the eastern hills where the Blue Dragon lives, with the element of wood and the hopeful season of spring, are stronger than the hills to the west, which is the home of the White Tiger, metal and the melancholy season of autumn.

Considerable thought was given to the shape of the village, on the grounds that a man who built a village like a fish while a neighboring village was built like a hook

was begging for disaster. The finished shape was the outline of a unicorn, a gentle and law-abiding creature with no natural enemies whatsoever. But it appeared that something had gone wrong because one day there was a low snorting sort of a noise and the earth heaved, and several cottages collapsed and a great crack appeared the soil. Our ancestors examined their village from every possible angle, and the flaw was discovered when one of them climbed to the top of the tallest tree on the eastern hills and gazed down. By a foolish oversight the last five rice paddies had been arranged so that they formed the wings and body of a huge hungry horsefly that had settled upon the tender flank of the unicorn, so of course the unicorn had kicked up its heels. The paddies were altered into the shape of a bandage, and Ku-fu was never again disturbed by upheavals.

They made sure that there would be no straight roads or rivers that might draw good influences away, and as a further precaution they dammed up the end of a narrow little valley and channeled rivulets down the sides of the hills, and thus produced a small lake that would capture and hold good influences that might otherwise trickle away to other villages. They had no aesthetic intent whatsoever. The beauty of our lake was an accident of superstition, but the result was such that when the great poet Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju passed through on a walking trip five hundred years ago he paused at the little lake and was inspired to write to a friend:

The waters are loud with fish and turtles,
A multitude of living things.
Wild geese and swans, graylags, bustards,
Cranes and mallards,
Loons and spoonbills,
Flock and settle on the waters,
Drifting lightly over the surface,
Buffeted by the wind,
Bobbing and dipping with the waves,
Sporting among the weedy banks,
Gobbling the reeds and duckweed,
Pecking at water chestnuts and lotuses.

It is like that today, and Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju was not there in the season to see the masses of wildflowers, or the tiny dappled deer that come to drink and then vanish like puffs of smoke.

Our wall landmark is far more famous. It is only fair to point out that there are many different stories concerning the origin of Dragon's Pillow, but we in Ku-fu like to think that our version is the only correct one.

Many centuries ago there was a general who was ordered to build one of the defensive walls that were to be linked into the Great Wall, and one night he dreamed that he had been summoned to Heaven to present his plan for the wall to the August Personage of Jade. At his subsequent trial for treason he gave a vivid account of the trip.

He had dreamed that he had been inside a giant lotus, and the leaves had slowly opened to form a doorway, and he had stepped out upon the emerald grass of Heaven. The sky was sapphire, and a path made from pearls lay near his feet. A willow tree lifted a branch and pointed it like a finger, and the general followed the path to the River of Flowers, which was cascading down the Cliff of the Great Awakening. The concubines of the Emperor of Heaven were bathing in the Pool of Blissful Fragrances, laughing and splashing in a rainbow of rose petals, and they were so beautiful that the general found it hard to tear himself away. But duty called, so he followed the path as it climbed seven terraces where the leaves on the trees were made from precious stones, which rang musically when the breeze touched them, and where birds of bright plumage sang with divine voices of the Five Virtues and Excellent Doctrines. The path continued around the lush orchards where the Queen Mother Wang grew the Peaches of Immortality, and when the general made the last turn around the orchards he found himself directly in front of the palace of the Emperor of Heaven.

Flunkies were waiting for him. They ushered him into the audience chamber, and after the three obeisances and nine kowtows he was allowed to rise and approach the throne. The August Personage of Jade was seated with his hands crossed upon the Imperial Book of Etiquette, which lay upon his lap. He wore a flat hat rather like a board, from which dangled thirteen pendants of colored pearls upon red strings, and his black silk robe rippled with red and yellow dragons. The general bowed and humbly presented his plan for the wall.

Behind the throne stood T'ien-kou, the Celestial Dog, whose teeth had chewed mountains in half, and beside the Celestial Dog stood Ehr-lang, who is unquestionably the greatest of all warriors because he had been able to battle the stupendous Stone Monkey to a standstill. (The Monkey symbolizes intellect.) The two bodyguards appeared to be glaring at the general. He hastily lowered his eyes, and he saw that the symbol of the emperor's predecessor, the Heavenly Master of the First Origin, was stamped upon the left arm of the throne, and on the right arm was the symbol for the emperor's eventual successor, the Heavenly Master of the Dawn of Jade of the Golden Door. The general was so overcome by a dizzying sense of timelessness in which there was no means of measurement and comparison that he felt quite sick to his stomach. He was afraid that he was going to disgrace himself by throwing up, but in the nick of time he saw that his plan, neatly rolled back into a scroll and retied, was extended before his lowered eyes. He took it and dropped to his knees and awaited divine censure or praise, but none was forthcoming. The August Personage of Jade

silently signaled the end of the interview. The general crawled backward, banging his head against the floor, and at the doorway he was seized by the flunkies, who marched him outside and across a couple of miles of meadow. Then they picked him up and dumped him into the Great River of Stars.

Oddly enough, the general testified, he had not been frightened at all. It was the rainy season in Heaven, and billions of brilliant stars were bouncing over raging waves that roared like a trillion tigers, but the general sank quite peacefully into the water. He drifted down farther and farther, and then he fell right through the bottom, and the glittering light of the Great River receded rapidly in the distance as he plunged head over heels toward earth. He landed smack in the middle of his bed, just as his servant entered to wake him for breakfast.

It was some time before he could gather enough courage to open his plan, and when he did he discovered that the Emperor of Heaven—or somebody—had moved the wall 122 miles to the south, which placed it in the middle of the valley of Cho, where it could serve no useful purpose whatsoever.

What was he to do? He could not possibly defy the mandate of Heaven, so he ordered his men to build a wall that led nowhere and connected to nothing, and that was why the general was arrested and brought before the Emperor of China on the charge of treason. When he told his tale the charge of treason was tossed out of court. Instead the general was sentenced to death for being drunk on duty, and desperation produced one of the loveliest excuses in history. That wall, the general said firmly, had been perfectly placed, but one night a dragon leaned against it and fell asleep, and in the morning it was discovered that the bulk of the beast had shoved the wall into its current ludicrous position.

Word of Dragon's Pillow swept through the delighted court, where the general had clever and unscrupulous friends. They began their campaign to save his neck by bribing the emperor's favorite soothsayer.

"O Son of Heaven," the fellow screeched, "I have consulted the Trigrams, and for reasons known only to the August Personage of Jade that strange stretch of wall is the most important of all fortifications! So important it is that it cannot be guarded by mortal men, but only by the spirits of ten thousand soldiers who must be buried alive in the foundations!"

The emperor was quite humane, as emperors go, and he begged the soothsayer to try again and see if there might not have been some mistake. After pocketing another bribe the soothsayer came up with a different interpretation.

"O Son of Heaven, the Trigrams clearly state that *wan* must be buried alive in the foundations, but while *wan* can mean ten thousand, it is also a common family name!" he bellowed. "The solution is obvious, for what is the life of one insignificant soldier compared to the most important wall in China?"

The emperor still didn't like it, but he didn't appear to have much of choice, so he ordered his guards to go out and lay hands on the first common soldier named Wan. All accounts agree that Wan behaved with dignity. His family was provided with a pension, and he was told that heaven had honored him above all others and he was given a trumpet with which to sound the alarm should China be threatened, and then a hole was cut in the base of the wall and Wan marched dutifully inside. The hole was bricked up again, and a watchtower—the Eye of the Dragon—was placed upon the highest point of Dragon's Pillow where Wan's ghost could maintain lonely vigil.

The emperor was so sick of the whole affair that he refused to allow that cursed stretch of wall, or anyone connected with it, to be mentioned in his presence. Of course that is what the clever fellows had been planning all along, and their friend the general was quietly set free to write his memoirs.

For nearly a century Dragon's Pillow was a favorite of sightseers. A small number of soldiers was detached to maintain the wall, but since it served no purpose except as a watchtower for a ghost it was eventually allowed to fall into decay. Even the sightseers lost interest in it, and weeds grew and rocks crumbled. It was a paradise for children, however, and for a few centuries it was the favorite playpen of the children of my village, but then something happened that left Dragon's Pillow abandoned even by children.

One evening the children of Ku-fu were beginning one of the games that had originated somewhere back toward the beginning of time, and suddenly they stopped short. A hollow, bodiless voice—one boy later said that it might have been echoing through two hundred miles of bamboo pipe—drifted down to them from the Eye of the Dragon. So strange were the words that every one of the children remembered them perfectly, even though they took to their heels as soon as their hearts resumed beating.

Was it possible that poor Wan, the most important of all sentinels on the most important of all watchtowers was sending a message to China through the children of the humble village of Ku-fu? If so, it was a very strange message indeed, and sages and scholars struggled for centuries to wrest some meaning from it.

If my illustrious readers would care to take a crack at it, I will wish them the very best of luck.

Jade plate,
Six, eight.
Fire that burns hot,
Night that is not.
Fire that burns cold,
First silver, then gold.

The Plague

My story begins with the silk harvest in the Year of the Tiger 3,337 (A.D. 639), when the prospects for a record crop had never seemed better.

The eggs that Ma the Grub handed out were quite beautiful, jet black and glowing with health, and the leaves on the mulberry trees were so thick that the groves resembled tapestries woven from deep green brocade, and youngsters raced around singing, "Mulberry leaves so shiny and right, children all clap hands at the sight!" Our village crackled with excitement. Girls carried straw baskets up the hill to the monastery, and the bonzes lined them with yellow paper upon which they had drawn pictures of Lady Horsehead, and the abbot blessed the baskets and burned incense to the patron of sericulture. Bamboo racks and trays were taken to the river and vigorously scrubbed. Wildflowers were picked and crushed, lamp wicks cut into tiny pieces, and the oldest members of each family smeared cloves of garlic with moist earth and placed them against the walls of the cottages. If the garlic produced many sprouts it would mean bountiful harvest, and never in living memory had anyone seen so many sprouts. The women slept with the sheets of silkworm eggs pressed against their bare flesh, in order to hasten the hatching process through body heat, and the old ones tossed handfuls of rice into pots that bubbled over charcoal fires. When the steam lifted straight up, without a quiver, they yelled, "Now!"

The women brushed the eggs into the baskets with goose feathers. Then they sprinkled the crushed wildflowers and pieces of lamp wicks on top and placed the baskets upon the bamboo racks. The goose feathers were carefully pinned to the sides of the baskets, and charcoal fires were lit beneath the racks. (The significance of wildflowers, lamp wicks, and goose feathers has been lost in antiquity, but we would never dream of changing the custom.) The families knelt to pray to Lady Horsehead, and in every cottage the eggs hatched right on schedule.

The Dark Ladies wriggled lazily, enjoying the heat of the fires, but they were not lazy for long. Unless one has seen them, it is quite impossible to imagine how much silkworms can—must—eat, and their only food is mulberry leaves. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that the chewing sounds of ravenous silkworms are enough to waken hibernating bears, but sleep would be out of the question anyway. It takes thirty days, more or less, for silkworms to prepare to spin, and there are but three brief periods when they aren't eating: the Short Sleep, the Second Sleep, and the Big Sleep. After the Big Sleep silkworms will die if an hour passes without food and we worked day and night stripping leaves from trees and carrying them to the cottages in basket brigades. The children were given regular rest periods, of course, but during the thirty days the rest of us were lucky to get sixty hours of sleep.

The old ones tended the fires, because silkworms must have steady heat, and the children who were too young to work in basket brigades were turned out to fend for themselves. In grove after grove we stripped the trees to the bare branches, and then we stumbled in exhaustion to the mulberry grove that belonged to Pawnbroker Fang. That cost us more IOUs, but they were the finest trees in the village. Gradually the silkworms changed color, from black to green, and from green to white, and then translucent, and the oldest family members erected bamboo screens in front of the racks, because silkworms are shy when they begin to spin and must have privacy.

The deafening feeding noises dropped to a roar, and then to a sound like distant surf, and then to a whisper. The silence that finally settled over our village seemed eerily unreal. There was nothing more to be done except to keep the fires going, and if fortune favored us we would pull the screens away in three days and see fields of snow: the white cocoons called Silkworm Blossoms, massed upon the racks and waiting to be reeled into spindles in continuous strands more than a thousand feet long.

Some of us made it to our beds, but others simply dropped in their tracks.

I awoke on the fifteenth day of the eighth moon, which happened to be my nineteenth birthday, to the sound of a soft pattering rain. The clouds were beginning to lift. Slanting rays of sunlight slid through silver raindrops, and a soft mist drifted across the fields like smoke. In the distance I could see the hazy outline of Dragon's Pillow, and nearby on the riverbank some boys were teasing Fang's Fawn, who was riding a water buffalo. I decided that the boys were following her around because the rain had plastered her tunic around small shapely breasts that the pretty little girl didn't have a month ago, and Fawn was enjoying the attention immensely. Bells were ringing from the monastery upon the hill.

I stretched lazily in bed, savoring the smells of tea and porridge from Auntie Hua's kitchen, and then I jerked upright. The boys at the riverbank were staring wide-eyed at Fang's Fawn, who had turned pale as death. She clutched her throat and gave a sharp cry of pain and toppled from the water buffalo to the grass.

I was out the door in an instant. Fawn's eyes were wide and staring, but she didn't see me while I tested her pulse, which was faint and erratic. Perspiration glistened on her forehead. I told the boys to run for her father, and then I picked her up and raced up the hill to the monastery.

The abbot was also our doctor, professionally trained at Hanlin Academy, but he was clearly puzzled by Fawn's sickness. Her vital signs had dropped so low that he had to hold a mirror to her lips to find a trace of condensation, and when he took a pin and pricked her flesh at various pain points there was no reaction. Her eyes were still wide and unseeing. Suddenly the pretty little girl sat up and screamed. The sound was shocking in the hush of the monastery. Her hands clawed the air, fending off something that wasn't there, and she jerked convulsively. Then she fell back upon the bed and her eyes closed. Her body grew limp, and once more her vital signs dropped to almost nothing.

"Demons!" I whispered.

"I sincerely hope so," the abbot said grimly, and I later learned that he had begun to suspect rabies, and that he would prefer to confront the most hideous demons from the most horrible corners of Hell.

There had been noises swelling up in the village below the hill, a confusion of sounds, and now we began to hear curses from the men and wails and lamentations from the women. The abbot looked at me and raised an eyebrow. I was out the door and down the hill in a flash, and after that things got so confusing that I have difficulty sorting them out in my mind.

It began with Auntie Hua. She had been tending the fire at the silkworm rack in her cottage and she had smelled something that worried her. When she cautiously peered through a crack in the screen she had not seen a field of snow, but a black rotting mass of pulp. Her agonized wails brought the neighbors, who raced back to their own cottages, and as howls arose from every corner of the village it became apparent that for the first time in living memory our silk harvest had been a total failure. That was merely the beginning.

Big Hong the blacksmith ran from his house with wide frightened eyes, carrying his small son in his arms. Little Hong's eyes were wide and unseeing, and he screamed and clawed the air. The blacksmith was followed by Wang the wineseller, whose small daughter was screaming and clawing the air. More and more parents dashed out with children in their arms, and a frantic mob raced up the hill toward the monastery.

It was not rabies. It was a plague.

I stared in disbelief at two tiny girls who were standing in a doorway with their thumbs in their mouths. Mother Ho's great-granddaughters were so sickly that the abbot had worked night and day to keep them alive, yet they were completely untouched by the plague. I ran past them into their cottage. Mother Ho was ninety-two

and sinking fast, and my heart was in my mouth as I approached her bed and drew back the covers. I received a stinging slap on my nose.

"Who do you think you are? The Imperial Prick?" the old lady yelled.

(She meant Emperor Wu-ti. After his death his lecherous ghost kept hopping into his concubines' beds, and in desperation they had recruited new brides from all over, and it was not until the total reached 503 that the exhausted spectre finally gave up and crawled back into its tomb.)

I ran back out and turned into cottage after cottage where tiny children stared at me and cried, or laughed and wanted to play, and the old ones who wept beside the racks of rotting silkworms were otherwise as healthy as horses. Then I ran back up the hill and told the abbot what I had seen, and when we made a list the truth was indisputable, and it was also unbelievable.

Not one child under the age of eight and not one person over the age of thirteen had been affected by the plague, but every child—every single one—between the ages of eight and thirteen had screamed and blindly clawed the air, and now lay as still as death in the infirmary that the abbot had set up in the bonzes' common room. The weeping parents looked to the abbot for a cure, but he spread his arms and cried out in despair:

"First tell me how a plague can learn how to *count*!"

Auntie Hua had always been the decisive one in the family. She took me aside. "Ox, the abbot is right," she said hoarsely. "We need a wise man who can tell us how a plague can learn to count, and I have heard that there are such men in Peking, and that they live on the Street of Eyes. I have also heard that they charge dearly for their services."

"Auntie, it will take a week to squeeze money out of Pawnbroker Fang, even though Fawn is one of the victims," I said.

She nodded, and then she reached into her dress and pulled out a worn leather purse. When she dumped the contents into my hands I stared at more money than I had ever seen in my life: hundreds of copper coins, strung upon a green cord.

"Five thousand copper cash, and you are never to tell your uncle about his. Not ever!" the old lady said fiercely. "Run to Peking. Go to the Street of Eyes and bring a wise man back to our village."

I had heard that Auntie Hua had been a rather wild beauty in her youth and I briefly wondered whether she might have reason to sacrifice to P'an Chin-lien, the patron of fallen women, but I had no time for such speculations because I was off and running like the wind.

I share my birthday with the moon, and Peking was a madhouse when I arrived. Trying to shove through the mob that had turned out for the Moon Festival was like one of those nightmares in which one struggles through quicksand. The din was incredible, and I forced my way through the streets with the wild eyes and aching ears

of a colt at a blacksmith's convention, and I was quite terrified when I finally reached the street that I was looking for. It was an elegant avenue that was lined on both sides with very expensive houses, and above each door was the sign of a wide unblinking eye.

"The truth revealed," those eyes seemed to be saying. "We see everything."

I felt the first stirrings of hope, and I banged at the nearest door. It was opened by a haughty eunuch who was attired in clothes that I had previously associated with royalty, and he ran his eyes from my bamboo hat to my shabby sandals, clapped a perfumed handkerchief to his nose, and ordered me to state my business. The eunuch didn't blink an eye when I said that I wanted his master to explain how a plague could learn to count, but when I said that I was prepared to pay as much as five thousand copper cash he turned pale, leaned weakly against the wall, and groped for smelling salts.

"Five thousand copper cash?" he whispered. "Boy, my master charges fifty pieces of silver to find a lost dog!"

The door slammed in my face, and when I tried the next house I exited through the air, pitched by six husky footmen while a bejeweled lackey shook his fist and screamed, "You dare to offer five thousand copper cash to the former chief investigator for the Son of Heaven himself? Back to your mud hovel, you insolent peasant!"

In house after house the result was the same, except that I exited in a more dignified manner—my fists were clenched and there was a glint in my eyes, and I am not exactly small—and I decided that I was going to have to hit a wise man over the head, stuff him in a bag, and carry him back to Ku-fu whether he liked it or not. Then I received a sign from Heaven. I had reached the end of the avenue and was starting to go back up the other side and suddenly a shaft of brilliant sunlight shot through the clouds and darted like an arrow into a narrow winding alley. It sparkled upon the sign of an eye, but this eye was not wide open. It was half-shut.

"Part of the truth revealed," the eye seemed to be saying. "Some things I see, but some I don't."

If that was the message it was the first sensible thing that I had seen in Peking, and I turned and started down the alley.

A Sage with a Slight Flaw in His Character

The sign was old and shabby and it hung above the open door of a sagging bamboo shack. When I timidly stepped inside I saw smashed furniture and a mass of shattered crockery, and the reek of sour wine made my head reel. The sole inhabitant was snoring upon a filthy mattress.

He was old almost beyond belief. He could not have weighed more than ninety pounds, and his frail bones would have been more suitable for a large bird. Drunken flies were staggering through pools of spilled wine, and crawling giddily up the ancient gentleman's bald skull, and tumbling down the wrinkled seams of a face that might have been a relief map of all China, and becoming entangled in a wispy white beard. Small bubbles formed and burst upon the old man's lips, and his breath was foul.

I sighed and turned to go, and then I stopped dead in my tracks and caught my breath.

Once an eminent visitor to our monastery had displayed the gold diploma that was awarded to the scholar who had won third place in the Imperial *chin-shih* examination, and in schoolbooks I had seen illustrations of the silver diploma that was awarded to second place, but never did I dream that I would be privileged to see the flower. The real thing, not a picture of it. There it was, casually tacked to a post not two feet from my eyes, and I reverently blew away the dust to read that seventy-eight years ago a certain Li Kao had been awarded first place among all the scholars in China, and had received an appointment as a full research fellow in the Forest of Culture Academy.

I turned from the picture of the rose and gazed with wide eyes at the ancient gentleman upon the mattress. Could this be the great Li Kao, whose brain had caused the empire to bow at his feet? Who had been elevated to the highest rank of mandarin, and whose mighty head was now being used as a pillow for drunken flies?

I stood there, rooted in wonder, while the wrinkles began to heave like the waves of a gray and storm-tossed sea. Two red-rimmed eyes appeared, and a long spotted tongue slid out and painfully licked parched lips.

"Wine!" he wheezed.

I searched for an unbroken jar, but there wasn't one. "Venerable Sir, I fear that all the wine is gone," I said politely.

His eyes creaked toward a shabby purse that lay in a puddle. "Money!" he wheezed.

I picked up the purse and opened it. "Venerable Sir, I fear that the money is gone too," I said.

His eyeballs rolled up toward the top of his head, and I decided to change the subject.

"Have I the honor of addressing the great Li Kao, foremost among the scholars of China? I have a problem to place before such a man, but all that I can afford to pay is five thousand copper cash," I said sadly.

A hand like a claw slid from the sleeve of his robe. "Give!" he wheezed.

I placed the string of coins in his hand, and his fingers closed around it, taking possession. Then the fingers opened.

"Take this five thousand copper cash," he said, enunciating with a painful effort, "and return as soon as possible with all the wine that you can buy."

"At once, Venerable Sir," I sighed.

Having performed similar chores for Uncle Nung more times than I cared to count I judged it wiser to buy some food as well, and when I returned I had two small jars of wine, two small bowls of congee, and a valuable lesson in the buying power of copper coins. I propped the old man's head up and poured wine down his throat until he had revived enough to grab the jar and finish the rest of it at a gulp, and long practice enabled me to slip a bowl of congee into his fingers and get it to his lips before he realized that it wasn't wine. Two spots of color had appeared in his cheeks when he finished it, and after the second jar of wine he willingly attacked the second bowl of congee.

"Who you?" he said between slurps.

"My surname is Lu and my personal name is Yu, but I am not to be confused with the eminent author of *The Classic of Tea*. Everyone calls me Number Ten Ox," I said.

"My surname is Li and my personal name is Kao, and there is a slight flaw in my character," he said matter-of-factly. "You got a problem?"

I told him the whole story, and I was weeping at the end. He listened with interest, and had me go over it again, and then he pitched the empty bowl over his shoulder so that it smashed upon the rest of the crockery. When he hopped up from his mattress I was astonished to see that he was is spry as a goat.

"Number Ten Ox, eh? Muscles are highly overrated but yours may come in handy," he said. "We will have to hurry, and for a variety of reasons you be required to twist somebody's head off."

I could scarcely believe my ears.

"Master Li, do you mean that you will come to my village and find out how a plague can learn to count?" I cried.

"I already know how your plague learned to count," he said calmly. "Bend over."

I was so stunned that I bent over backward until he advised me to try it the other way around. Master Li hopped nimbly upon my back and wrapped his arms around my neck and stuck his tiny feet into the pockets of my tunic. He was as light as a feather.

"Number Ten Ox, I am no longer as fast on my feet as I used to be, and I suspect that time may be crucial. I would suggest that you take aim to your village and start running like hell," said the ancient sage.

My head was spinning, but my heart was wild with hope. I took off like a deer. Li Kao ducked as I bolted through the door and my head struck something, and when I skidded from the alley and glanced back I saw that my head had struck the bottom of an old shabby sign, and that half-closed eye was spinning around and around as though it was peering at mysteries in every corner of the empire.

I have no idea whether or not it was premonition, but the image remained with me throughout our journey back to Ku-fu.

❁ ❁ ❁

Auntie Hua looked somewhat askance at the sage I had brought back to our village, but not for long. That antiquated gentleman stank of wine, and his robe was as filthy as his beard, but such was his air of authority that even the abbot accepted his leadership without question, and Li Kao walked from bed to bed, peeling back the children's eyelids and grunting with satisfaction when he saw that the pupils of their eyes were not fixed and dilated.

"Good!" he grunted. "It is not a question of teaching a plague how to count, which is quite simple, but of which agent was used, and I had feared that there might be brain damage. Now I shall need samples of mulberry leaves from every grove, clearly labeled so that we will know where they came from."

We raced to do his bidding. Basket after basket of mulberry leaves was carried up the hill to the monastery and Li Kao placed them in vials and added chemicals, while the abbot adjusted the fires beneath alchemists' stoves. When the eighteenth batch of leaves turned the chemicals pale orange Li Kao began to work with great speed, boiling the leaves to a pulp, adding more chemicals a drop at a time, increasing the

heat and reducing the liquid. The pale-orange color began to turn green. When the liquid had been reduced to nothingness a tiny pile of black crystals remained in the vial, and Li Kao placed half of them into a new vial to which he added some colorless liquid. Then he straightened up and stretched wearily.

"Another minute and I will be sure," he said, and he walked over to the window. Some of the younger children who had escaped the plague were wandering disconsolately in the abbot's garden, and Li Kao pointed to a small boy. "Watch," he said.

We watched and nothing happened. Then the boy absentmindedly plucked a leaf from a tree, and he lifted it to his mouth and began to chew.

"All children do that," Master Li said quietly. "The children of your village who were old enough to work in basket brigades chewed mulberry leaves, but the older they were, the more self-conscious they became about doing childish things, and that is why the seizures were limited to children between the ages of eight and thirteen. You see, we are not dealing with a plague but with an agent that was deliberately designed to kill silkworms."

He turned and pointed to the vial. The liquid had the evilest color that I had ever seen: slick and green and slimy and garish, like gangrene.

"That is *ku* poison, for which there is no known antidote," he said grimly. "It was smeared upon the leaves in the mulberry grove that belongs to a certain Pawnbroker Fang."

A lynch mob poured down the hill, but the warehouse door was locked. "Ox!" the abbot snarled. I kicked the door halfway across the room, and a pathetic sight met our eyes. Ma the Grub was lying on his back. Traces of *ku* poison smeared his lips, and he was as dead as Confucius. Pawnbroker Fang was still alive, but barely. His glazed eyes tried to focus on us, and his lips moved.

"We never intended to…. It was the silkworms," he whispered. "If they died… the IOUs…own everything…. Now my daughter…."

He was almost gone. The abbot knelt and placed a small jade Buddha in the pawnbroker's hands and began to pray for his miserable soul. Fang's eyes opened one last time, and he looked blindly down at the jade Buddha, and he made a truly heroic effort.

"Cheap, very cheap," he sneered. "No more than two hundred…."

Then he too was dead.

Li Kao gazed down at the bodies with a rather strange expression on his face, and then he shrugged his shoulders.

"So be it," he said. "I suggest that we leave them here to rot and return to the monastery. We have far more important things to worry about."

Pawnbroker Fang and Ma the Grub had almost certainly killed the children of my village, but when I looked back at the bodies I could find no anger in my heart.

The abbot led the way. We lit candles, and our shadows loomed like twisted giants upon the gray stone walls as we trudged down the long winding flight of steps to the great vaulted cellar where the scrolls were stacked in long rows of wooden shelves. Our monastery is very old, and over the centuries the abbots had added to the library. The medical texts numbered in the hundreds, and I helped the novices bring scroll after scroll to the long tables where the abbot and his bonzes checked every reference to *ku* poison. The references were extensive, since the poison has been a favorite agent for assassination for nearly two thousand years, and the information was always the same: The victims' vital signs would drop so low that they expended almost no energy at all and could last for months, but nothing could restore them to consciousness, and death was inevitable. There was no antidote.

The poison was said to have been imported from Tibet. Li Kao was the only scholar who was qualified to interpret the ancient Tibetan texts such as *Chalog Job Jad*, and he said that the abbot's copy of *Zaraga Dib Jad* was so rare that there might not be another one in existence. The rustle of the old parchment was punctuated by Master Li's soft curses. The Tibetan physicians had been magnificent at describing treatments but terrible at describing symptoms, and apparently it had been taboo to mention by name any agent whose sole purpose was murder—possibly, he pointed out, because the alchemists who invented such things belonged to the same monkish orders as the physicians. Another problem was the antiquity of their texts, which were faded and spotted to the point of illegibility. The sun had set and was rising again when Master Li bent close to a page in *Jud Chi, The Eight Branches of the Four Principles of Special Therapy*.

"I can make out the ancient ideograph for 'star,' and next to it is a badly spotted character that could mean many things, but among them is the ideograph for 'wine vessel,'" he muttered. "What would you get if you combine the ideographs of 'star' and 'wine vessel'?"

"You would get the logograph 'to awake from a drunken stupor,'"said the abbot.

"Precisely, and 'drunken stupor,' if used figuratively, is such a maddeningly vague description of symptoms that it could mean almost anything. The interesting thing is that the preceding text suggests seizures and clawing of air," said Master Li. "Can we say that the children are now lying in stupors?"

He bent close to the text and read aloud.

"'To awake from a drunken stupor, only one treatment is effective, and this will succeed only if the physician has access to the rarest and mightiest of all healing agents….'" He paused and scratched his head. "The ancient ideograph for 'ginseng' is accompanied by an exceptionally elaborate construction that I would

translate as 'Great Root of Power.' Has anyone ever heard of a ginseng Great Root of Power?"

Nobody had. Li Kao went back to the text.

"The Great Root must be distilled to the essence, and three drops must be applied to the tongue of the patient. The treatment must be repeated three times, and if it is truly the Great Root, the patient will recover almost immediately. Without such a root no cure is possible…." Master Li paused for emphasis. "And while the patient may remain in his stupor for months, he cannot be awakened, and death is inevitable."

"*Ku* poison!" the abbot exclaimed.

Now the bonzes checked every reference to ginseng, which meant almost every page because at one time or another the plant had been prescribed for almost every ailment known to man, but nowhere was there a reference to a Great Root of Power. We had reached a dead end.

Li Kao suddenly smacked the table and jumped to his feet.

"Back to Pawnbroker Fang's office at the warehouse!" he commanded, and he started up the stairs at a trot, with the rest of us at his heels. "The Guild of Pawnbrokers represents the world's second-oldest profession, and their records are older than the oracle bones of An-yang. The Guild publishes lists of extremely rare and valuable items that might escape the untutored eye, and a Great Root of Power, if such a thing exists, will probably be worth ten times its weight in diamonds and will look like a dog turd," he explained. "A fellow like Fang would undoubtedly subscribe to the entire list, in hopes of swindling an heir who does not know the value of his inheritance."

He trotted rapidly down the path and through the door of the warehouse, and then he trotted right over the spot where two bodies should have been lying.

"Those fellows?" he said in answer to our stunned expressions. "Oh, they got up and took to their heels a long time ago."

I grabbed the abbot and held him, but Big Hong and a number of others were closing in on the ancient sage in a menacing manner. "Do you mean that you knew all along that those murderers were faking their suicides?" the abbot roared.

"Of course, but one should be careful about charging them with murder. So far as I know, they haven't killed anyone yet, and they certainly never intended to," Master Li said calmly. "Reverend Sir, have you considered the plight of Pawnbroker Fang's children? His daughter will probably die, but even if she recovers, what sort of life could she look forward to when she discovered that her father had been torn to pieces by the people of her own village? Her little brother would be condemned to a life of shame at the age of five, which seems a trifle unfair. Surely there is a family that will care for innocent children, and explain that their father was only trying to improve the silk, but that he made a mistake and ran away, and all is forgiven."

I released the abbot, who bowed to the sage, and Big Hong cleared his throat.

"My wife and I will take Fang's Flea," he said huskily. "Fawn, too, if she lives. They will have a loving home."

"Good man," said Master Li. "As for Pawnbroker Fang and Ma the Grub, why not let them punish themselves? Greed such as theirs gnaws at the vitals like packs of rats, day and night, never ceasing, and when they arrive in Hell they will have already experienced whatever torments the Yama Kings may decree. Now let's get to work."

Fang's files were so extensive that they filled two large cabinets and a trunk, and the abbot found the first reference to a Root of Power. We had no idea whether it was the same as a Great Root of Power. The bonzes found three other references, but only one of them was contemporary.

"Thirty years ago, at a price of three hundred talents, which I cannot possibly believe, a Root of Power was sold to the Ancestress," said the abbot, looking up from his lists. "There is no further mention of it, and I assume that it is still in the dear lady's possession."

Li Kao looked as though he had bitten into a green persimmon.

"If that woman laid eyes on me, she'd have my head in two seconds," he said sourly. Then he had second thoughts. "Come to think of it, it would be a miracle if she recognized me. She couldn't have been more than sixteen when I was summoned to the emperor's palace, and that was a good fifty years ago."

"Master Li, you were summoned by an emperor?" I asked with wide eyes.

"Several, but this particular one was old Wen," he said. "In the carefree days of my youth I once sold him some shares in a mustard mine."

We stared at him.

"A mustard mine?" the abbot said weakly.

"I was trying to win a bet concerning the intelligence of emperors," he explained. "When I was summoned to court I assumed that I was going to be rewarded with the Death of Ten Thousand Cuts, but Emperor Wen had something else in mind. Oddly enough, it was sericulture. Some barbarians were trying to learn the secret of silk and the emperor thought that they might be getting close to the truth. 'Li Kao,' he commanded, 'sell these dogs a mustard mine!' It was one of the most ghastly experiences of my life."

Li Kao turned and trotted back out the door, and we followed like sheep as he started back toward the monastery. I was learning that there were many sides to Master Li, and I listened with fascination.

"I had to turn their brains to butter with strong wine, and every morning I pried my eyelids open and glared at red-bearded barbarians who were snoring in puddles of vomit," he said. "They had the constitutions of billy goats, and it was a month and

a half before I was able to persuade them that silk is extracted from the semen of snow-white dragons that breed only in caverns concealed in the mysterious Mongolian glaciers. Before sailing away with the sad news, their leader came to see me. He was an oaf named Procopius, and the wine had not improved his appearance. 'O great and mighty Master Li, pray impart to me the Secret of Wisdom!' he bawled. A silly smile was sliding down the side of his face like a dripping watercolor, and his eyeballs resembled a pair of pink pigeon eggs that were gently bouncing in saucers of yellow won-ton soup. To my great credit I never batted an eyelash. 'Take a large bowl,' I said. 'Fill it with equal measures of fact, fantasy, history, mythology, science, superstition, logic, and lunacy. Darken the mixture with bitter tears, brighten it with howls of laughter, toss in three thousand years of civilization, bellow *kan pei*—which means "dry cup"—and drink to the dregs.' Procopius stared at me. 'And I will be wise?' he asked. 'Better,' I said. 'You will be Chinese.'"

Li Kao led the way back to the infirmary and slowly walked up the long line of beds. Weariness bowed his shoulders, and in the bright morning sunlight his wrinkled skin was nearly transparent.

The children of Ku-fu looked like wax effigies. Fang's Fawn had always been pretty, but now the bone structure was showing beneath her smooth skin. She was exquisite as a carving in white jade is exquisite, without warmth or life. On the bed next to her was a woodcutter's daughter named Bone Helmet, a thin, plain girl who had been gentle and loving. Since she had been old enough to thread a needle, she had worked on her father's burial garment and he had proudly worn it at every festival, and now the heartbroken father had dressed his daughter in his own garment. Bone Helmet looked incredibly small and helpless in a blue silk robe that was five times too big for her and the irony of "longevity" that she had embroidered over it in gold thread was not very funny.

Favorite toys had been placed near each child's limp hands, and the parents sat silent and helpless beside the beds. Mournful howls drifted up from the village, where lonesome dogs were searching for their young masters.

Li Kao sighed and straightened his shoulders and beckoned for me to come closer. "Number Ten Ox, I have no idea whether or not a Root of Power is the same as a Great Root of Power, and for all I know the only use for such a thing is to mix it with glue and use it to repair sandals," he said quietly. "Two things I do know. Anyone who tries to steal a valuable item from the Ancestress is begging for an unpleasant death, and I am now too old to attempt it without having some muscle to back me up. I have accepted your five thousand copper cash, and you are my client, and the decision is yours."

"Master Li, when do we leave?" I asked eagerly.

I was ready to race out the door, but he looked at me wryly.

"Ox, if the children die suddenly there is nothing that we can do about it, and if the textbook prognosis holds true, they should last for months. The worst thing that we could do would be to arrive at our destination weary and unprepared," he said patiently. "I'm going to get some rest, and if you can't sleep, perhaps the abbot will be kind enough to expand your education on the subject of the quest. Ginseng is the most interesting as well as the most valuable plant in the whole world."

He yawned and stretched.

"We'll have to go back through Peking to pick up some money, and we'll leave at the first watch," he said.

Li Kao lay down in the bonzes' bedchamber. I had never been so wide awake in my life. The abbot took me into his study for instruction, and what I learned about ginseng was so interesting that I was almost able to forget the children for an hour.

Root of Lightning

No medicinal plant is quite so controversial, the abbot explained. There are eminent physicians who swear that it is no more effective than strong tea, and there are those who swear that it is effective in treating anemia, cachexia, scrofula, gastrointestinal catarrh, and malfunctions of the lungs, kidneys, liver, heart, and genital organs. Long ago when the plant was plentiful, peasants would mix the ginseng root with owl brains and turtle fat and smear the mixture over the heads of patients to cure insanity, or blend it with the powdered horns of wapiti deer and sprinkle it over the patients' chests to cure tuberculosis. Strangest of all is the professional ginseng hunter, because for him it is not a plant but a religion.

The legends are quite marvelous. Ginseng hunters refer to the plant as *chang-diang shen*, "the root of lightning," because it is believed that it appears only on the spot where a small mountain spring has been dried up by a lightning bolt. After a life of three hundred years the green juice turns white and the plant acquires a soul. It is then able to take on human form, but it never becomes truly human because ginseng does not know the meaning of selfishness.

It is totally good, and will happily sacrifice itself to aid the pure in heart. In human form it can appear as a man or as a beautiful woman, but more often it takes the form of a child, plump and brown, with red cheeks and laughing eyes. Long ago, evil men discovered that a ginseng child can be captured by tying it with a red ribbon, and that is why the plant is now so hard to find, the hunters say. It has been forced to run away from evil men, and it is for that reason that ginseng hunting has become one of the most hazardous occupations upon the face of the earth.

The ginseng hunter must display the purity of his intentions right from the start, so he carries no weapons. He wears a conical hat made from birch bark, and shoes of tarred pigskin, and an oiled apron to protect him from dew, and a badger skin attached to his belt, on which he sits when the ground is wet. He carries small

spades made from bone and two small pliable knives that are quite useless for defense. Along with a little food and wine, that is all he has, and his quest takes him into the wildest mountains where no men have dared to pass before. Tigers and bears are his companions, and the hunter fears strange creatures that are even more dangerous than tigers—such as the tiny owls that will call him by name and lead him into the Forest of Oblivion from which no man returns, and the bandits that are more brutal than savage bears and who crouch beside the few paths in order to murder an unarmed hunter and steal his roots.

Ginseng hunters, when they have thoroughly searched an area and found nothing, will mark the barks of trees with *kao chu kua*, which are tiny secret signs that tell other hunters not to waste their time there. Hunters would not dream of deceiving each other, because they are not competitors but fellow worshippers. Where a find has been made a shrine is raised, and other hunters who pass will leave offerings of stones, or scraps of cloth. If a hunter finds a plant that is not mature enough he will put stakes around it with his mark on them. If other hunters find this place they will pray and offer gifts, but they would rather cut their throats than take the plant for themselves. The behavior of a man who makes a find is very strange.

A weatherworn, clawed, half-starved ginseng hunter will occasionally have the good fortune to make his way through dense underbrush and come upon a small plant with four branches that have violet flowers and a fifth branch in the center that rises higher than the others and is crowned with red berries. The stalk is deep red, and the leaves are deep green on the outside and pale green on the inside. He will drop to his knees, his eyes streaming with tears, and spread his arms wide to show that he is unarmed. Then he will kowtow and bang his head three times upon the ground, and he will pray,

"O Great Spirit, do not leave me! I have come with a pure heart and soul, after freeing myself from sins and evil thoughts. Do not leave me."

Then the hunter covers his eyes and lies still for many minutes. If the ginseng plant does not trust him, and wishes to change into a beautiful woman or a plump brown child and run away, the hunter does not want to see where it has gone. At length he opens his eyes, and if the plant is still there his joy is not so much from the fact that he has found a valuable root as it is from the fact that he has been judged and found to be pure in heart.

He takes the seeds and carefully replants them so that the ginseng can grow again. The leaves and flowers are stripped and ceremoniously burned, with many prayers. The hunter's bone spades are used to dig up the root, which is forked and has something of a human shape—skeptics point to the shape as the basis of an ignorant folk religion—and the small pliable knives are used to clean the tiny tendrils called beards, which are supposed to be crucial to the curative powers. The root is wrapped

in birch bark and sprinkled with pepper to keep insects away, and the happy hunter begins the long, dangerous trek back toward the safety of civilization.

"Where his throat will probably be slit by somebody like Ma the Grub," the abbot said sourly. "Who will be swindled by somebody like Pawnbroker Fang, who will sell the root to somebody like the Ancestress, who will squat like a huge venomous toad upon a folk deity whose sole purpose in life is to aid the pure in heart."

"Reverend Sir, I have never heard of the Ancestress," I said shyly.

The abbot leaned back and rubbed his weary eyes.

"What a woman," he said with grudging admiration. "Ox, she began her career as an eleven-year-old imperial concubine, and by the time she was sixteen she had Emperor Wen wrapped around her fingers to the point where he took her as his number three wife. The Ancestress promptly poisoned the emperor, strangled his other wives, decapitated all but the youngest of his sons, elevated the weakling to the throne—Emperor Yang—and settled down behind the scenes as the real ruler of China."

"Reverend Sir, I have heard all my life that Emperor Yang was a depraved and vicious ruler who nearly destroyed the empire," I exclaimed.

"That's the official version, with parricide tossed in," the abbot said dryly. "Actually he was a timid little fellow, and quite likable. The real ruler was the Ancestress, which is a title that she awarded herself and which carries a certain Confucian finality. Her reign was brief, but gorgeous. She set about bankrupting the empire by decreeing that every leaf that fell in her imperial pleasure garden must be replaced by an artificial leaf fashioned from the costliest silk. Her imperial pleasure barge was 270 feet long, four decks high, and boasted a three-story throne room and 120 cabins decorated in gold and jade. The problem was finding a pond big enough for the thing, so she conscripted 3,600,000 peasants and forced them to link the Yellow and Yangtze rivers by digging a ditch 40 feet deep, 50 yards wide, and 1,000 miles long. The Grand Canal has been invaluable for commerce, but the important thing for the Ancestress was that three million men died during the construction, and a figure like that confirmed her godlike grandeur.

"When the canal was finished," the abbot said, "the Ancestress invited a few friends to accompany her on an important mission of state to Yang-chou. The fleet of pleasure barges stretched sixty miles from stem to stern, was manned by 9,000 boatmen, and was towed by 80,000 peasants, some of whom survived. The important mission of state was to watch the moonflowers bloom, but Emperor Yang did not watch the moonflowers. The excesses of the Ancestress were being performed in his name, so he spent the entire trip staring into a mirror. 'What an excellent head!' he kept whimpering. 'I wonder who will cut it off?' The chopping was performed by some friends of the great soldier Li Shih-min, who eventually took the imperial

name T'ang T'ai-tsung and who sits upon the throne today. T'ang shows every sign of becoming the greatest emperor in history, but I will humbly submit that he made a bad mistake when he assumed that little Yang was responsible for the crimes of the Sui Dynasty and allowed the Ancestress to retire in luxury."

I suppose that I was pale as a ghost. The abbot reached out and patted one of my knees.

"Ox, you will be traveling with a man who has been walking into dangerous situations for at least ninety years, assuming that he began at your age, and he is still alive to tell about it. Besides, Master Li knows far more about the Ancestress than I do, and he is sure to exploit her weaknesses."

The abbot paused to consider his words. Bees droned and flies buzzed, and I wondered if the knocking of my knees was audible. A few minutes ago I had been ready to dash out like a racehorse, and now I would prefer to dart down a hole like a rabbit.

"You are a good boy, and I would not like to meet the man who can surpass you in physical strength, but you know very little about this wicked world," the abbot said slowly. "To tell the truth, I am not so worried about the damage to your body as I am about the damage to your soul. You see, you know nothing whatsoever about men like Master Li, and he said that he would stop in Peking to acquire some money, and I rather suspect…."

His voice trailed off, and he groped for the proper words. Then he decided that it would take several years to prepare me properly.

"Number Ten Ox, our only hope is Master Li," he said somberly. "You must do as he commands, and I shall be praying for your immortal soul."

With that rather alarming blessing he left me to return to the children, and I went out to say farewell to my family and friends. Later I was able to catch some sleep. In my dreams I was surrounded by plump brown children as I attempted to tie a red ribbon around a root of lightning in a garden where three million fake silk leaves rustled in a breeze that stank of three million real rotting bodies.

Of Goats, Gold, and Miser Shen

"A spring wind is like wine," wrote Chang Chou, "a summer wind is like tea, an autumn wind is like smoke, and a winter wind is like ginger or mustard." The breeze that blew through Peking was tea touched with smoke, and spiced with the fragrances of plum, poppy, peony, plane trees, lotus, narcissus, orchid, wild rose, and the sweet-smelling leaves of banana and bamboo. The breeze was also pungent with pork fat, perspiration, sour wine, and the bewildering odors of more people than I had dreamed there were in the whole world.

The first time I was there I had been too intent upon reaching the Street of Eyes to pay much attention to the Moon Festival, but now I gaped at the jugglers and acrobats who were filling the air with clubs and bodies and at girls who were as tiny and delicate as porcelain dolls and who danced on the tips of their toes upon enormous artificial lotus blossoms. The palanquins and carriages of the nobility moved grandly through the streets, and men and women laughed and wept in open-air theatres, and gamblers screamed and swore around dice games and cricket fights. I envied the elegance and assurance of the gentlemen who basked in the practiced admiration of singsong girls—or tiptoed into the Alley of Four Hundred Forbidden Delights if they wanted more action. The most beautiful young women that I had ever seen were pounding drums in brightly painted tents as they sang and chanted the Flower Drum Songs. On almost every corner I saw old ladies with twinkling eyes who sold soft drinks and candied fruits while they cried, *"Aiieee! Aiieee! Come closer, my children! Spread ears like elephants, and I shall tell you the tale of the great Ehr-lang, and of the time when he was devoured by the hideous Transcendent Pig!"*

Master Li had sharp elbows. He moved easily through the throngs, followed by yelps of pain, and he pointed out the landmarks and explained that the strange sounds of the city were as comprehensible to urban ears as barnyard sounds were to

mine. The twanging of long tuning forks, for example, meant that barbers had set up shop, and porcelain spoons rapping against bowls advertised tiny dumplings in hot syrup, and clanging copper saucers meant that soft drinks made from wild plums and sweet and sour crab apples were for sale.

As he moved toward his destination, I assumed in my innocence that he was intending to acquire some money by visiting a wealthy friend, or a moneylender who owed him a favor. I blush to admit that not once did I pause to consider the state of the bamboo shack in which I had found him or the nature of friends that he was likely to have. I was quite surprised when he turned abruptly from the main street and trotted down an alley that reeked of refuse. Rats glared at us with fierce glittering eyes, and fermenting garbage bubbled and stank, and I stepped nervously over a corpse—or so I thought until I smelled the fellow's breath. He was not dead but dead-drunk, and at the end of the alley, the blue flag of a wineseller hung above a sagging wooden shack.

I later learned that the wineshop of One-Eyed Wong was the most notorious in all China, but at the time I merely noticed that the low dark room was swarming with vermin and flies, and that a thug with a jade earring that dangled from one chewed earlobe did not approve of the product.

"You Peking weaklings call this watery piss wine?" he roared. "Back in Soochow we make wine so strong that it knocks you out for a month if you smell it on somebody's breath!"

One-Eyed Wong turned to his wife, who was blending the stuff behind the counter.

"We must add more cayenne, my turtledove."

"Two hundred and twenty-two transcendent miseries!" wailed Fat Fu. "We have run out of cayenne!"

"In that case, O light of my existence, we shall substitute the stomach acid of diseased sheep," One-Eyed Wong said calmly.

The thug with the earring whipped out a dagger and lurched around the room, savagely slashing the air.

"You Peking weaklings call these things flies?" he yelled. "Back in Soochow we have flies so big that we clip their wings, hitch them to plows, and use them for oxen!"

"Perhaps a few flattened flies might add bouquet," One-Eyed Wong said thoughtfully.

"Yours is genius of the highest order, O noble stallion of the bedchamber, but flies are too risky," said Fat Fu. "They might overpower our famous flavor of crushed cockroaches."

The thug did not approve of Master Li. "You Peking weaklings call these midgets men?" he howled. "Back in Soochow we grow men so big that their heads brush the clouds while their feet are planted upon the ground!"

"Indeed? In my humble village," Master Li said sweetly, "we grow men so big that their upper lips lick the stars, while their lower lips nuzzle the earth."

The thug thought about it.

"And where are their bodies?"

"They are like you," said Master Li. "All mouth."

His hands shot out, a blade glinted, blood spurted and he calmly dropped the thug's earring into his pocket, along with the ear that was attached to it. "My surname is Li and my personal name is Kao, and there is a slight flaw in my character," he said with a polite bow. "This is my esteemed client, Number Ten Ox, who is about to strike you over the head with a blunt object."

I wasn't quite sure what a blunt object was, but I was spared the embarrassment of asking when the thug sat down at a table and began to cry. Li Kao exchanged a bawdy joke with One-Eyed Wong, pinched Fat Fu's vast behind, and beckoned for me to join them at a table with a jar of wine that was not of their own manufacture.

"Ox, it occurs to me that your education may be deficient in certain basic aspects of human intercourse, and I suggest that you pay close attention," he said. He placed the thug's jade earring, which was quite beautiful, upon the table. "A lovely thing," he said.

"Trash," sneered One-Eyed Wong.

"Cheap imitation jade," sneered Fat Fu.

"Carved by a blind man," sneered One-Eyed Wong.

"Worst earring I ever saw," sneered Fat Fu.

"How much?" asked One-Eyed Wong.

"It is yours for a song," said Master Li. "In this case a song means a large purse of fake gold coins, two elegant suits of clothes, the temporary use of a palatial palanquin and suitably attired bearers, a cart of garbage and a goat."

One-Eyed Wong did some mental addition.

"No goat."

"But I must have a goat."

"It isn't that good an earring."

"It doesn't have to be that good a goat."

"No goat."

"But you not only get the earring, you also get the ear that is attached to it," said Master Li.

The proprietors bent over the table and examined the bloody thing with interest.

"This is not a very good ear," sneered One-Eyed Wong.

"It is a terrible ear," sneered Fat Fu.

"Revolting," sneered One-Eyed Wong.

"Worst ear I ever saw," sneered Fat Fu.

"Besides, what good is it?" asked One-Eyed Wong.

"Look at the vile creature it came from, and imagine the filth that has been hissed into it." Master Li bent over the table and whispered, "Let us assume that you have an enemy."

"Enemy," said One-Eyed Wong.

"He is a wealthy man with a country estate."

"Estate," said Fat Fu.

"A stream flows through the estate."

"Stream," said One-Eyed Wong.

"It is midnight. You climb the fence and cleverly elude the dogs. Silent as a shadow you slip to the top of the stream and peer around slyly. Then you take this revolting ear from your pocket and dip it into the water, and words of such vileness flow out that the fish are poisoned for miles, and your enemy's cattle drink from the stream and drop dead on the spot, and his lush irrigated fields wither into bleak desolation, and his children splash in their bathing pool and acquire leprosy, and all for the price of a goat."

Fat Fu buried her face in her hands.

"Ten thousand blessings upon the mother who brought Li Kao into the world," she sobbed, while One-Eyed Wong dabbed at his eyes with a filthy handkerchief and sniffled, "Sold."

In the country my life had been attuned to the rhythm of the seasons, and things happened gradually. Now I had entered the whirlwind world of Li Kao, and I believe that I was in a state of shock. At any rate, the next thing that I remember was riding through the streets with Li Kao and Fat Fu in a palatial palanquin, while One-Eyed Wong marched ahead of us and bashed the lower classes out of the way with a gold-tipped staff. One-Eyed Wong was dressed as the major-domo of a great house, and Fat Fu was attired as a noble nurse, and Master Li and I dazzled the eyes in tunics of sea-green silk that were secured by silver girdles with borders of jade. The jeweled pendants that dangled from our fine tasseled hats tinkled in the breeze, and we languidly waved gold-splattered Szech'uen fans.

A servant brought up the rear, dragging a cart filled with garbage and a mangy goat. The servant was a thug of low appearance with a bandage around his head, and he kept whimpering, "My ear!"

"The house of Miser Shen," said Fat Fu, pointing ahead to a large unpainted building in front of which cheap incense burned before the statues of the Immortal of Commercial Profits, the Celestial Discoverer of Buried Treasures, the Lord of Lucrative Legacies, and every other greedy deity in the Heavenly Ministry of Wealth. "Miser Shen owns eight flourishing businesses, six houses in six different cities, one carriage, one sedan chair, one horse, three cows, ten pigs, twenty chickens,

eight savage guard dogs, seven half-starved servants, and one young and beautiful concubine named Pretty Ping," said Fat Fu. "He acquired all of them by foreclosing mortgages."

Ahead of us was an old peasant with a mule that was hauling a stone-wheeled cart that belonged in a museum.

"Manure!" he shouted in a quavering melancholy voice. *"Fresh manuuuu-uuuure!"*

Inside the house a rasping voice exclaimed, "Stone wheels? Stone wheels in Peking?" Shutters flew open and an extraordinarily ugly gentleman stuck his head out. "Great Buddha, they *are* stone wheels!" he yelled, and he vanished inside the house. A moment later I heard him scream, "Cook! Cook! Don't waste a second!" And then the front door crashed open and Miser Shen and his cook raced outside and fell in behind the ancient cart.

They were carrying armloads of kitchen cutlery, which they began to sharpen against the slowly revolving stone wheels.

"At least two copper coins saved, Master!" the cook cried.

"What a bonanza!" howled Miser Shen.

"Manure!" cried the peasant. *"Fresh manuuuuuure!"*

Another pair of shutters flew open, and Fat Fu pointed toward a heart-shaped face and a pair of luscious almond eyes.

"Pretty Ping," she said. "Pretty Ping owns one cheap dress, one cheap coat, one cheap hat, one pair of cheap sandals, one pair of cheap shoes, one cheap comb, one cheap ring, and enough humiliation to last twenty lifetimes."

"More cutlery!" howled Miser Shen. "Bring the hoes and shovels too!"

"One million mortifications," moaned Pretty Ping, and the shutters slammed shut.

"Manure!" the old peasant cried. *"Fresh manuuuuuure!"*

"The heat," Master Li panted, fluttering his fan in front of his face. "The stench. The noise!"

"Our lord is weary and must rest!" Fat Fu shouted to One-Eyed Wong.

"Even this pigpen will do," Master Li said weakly.

One-Eyed Wong rapped Miser Shen's shoulder with his gold-tipped staff.

"You there!" he bellowed. "A thousand blessings have descended upon you, for Lord Li of Kao has condescended to rest in your miserable hovel!"

"Eh?" said Miser Shen, and he gaped at the gold coin that One-Eyed Wong slapped into his hand.

"Lord Li of Kao shall also require a suite for his beloved ward, Lord Lu of Yu!" bellowed One-Eyed Wong, slapping a second gold coin into Miser Shen's hand.

"Eh?" said Miser Shen, and a third gold coin smacked into his palm.

"Lord Li of Kao shall also require a suite for his goat," bellowed One-Eyed Wong.

"Your master must be made of gold!" Miser Shen gasped.

"No," One-Eyed Wong said absentmindedly. "His goat is."

A few minutes later I found myself in Miser Shen's best room with Li Kao, the goat, and the garbage. The fake gold coins were concealed inside fish heads and mildewed mangoes, and Li Kao fed a shovelful of the stuff to the goat. This was followed by a pint of castor oil, and shortly thereafter he raked through the mess on the floor with a pair of silver tongs and extracted two glittering coins. "What!" he cried. "Only two gold coins? Miserable beast, do not arouse the wrath of Lord Li of Kao!"

A dull thump from the hallway suggested that Miser Shen had toppled from a peephole in a dead faint. Li Kao gave him time to recover, and then tried again with the garbage and castor oil.

"Four? Four gold coins?" he yelled furiously. "Insolent animal, Lord Li of Kao requires four hundred coins a day to maintain the style to which he is accustomed!"

The dull thump shook the flimsy wall. After Miser Shen recovered, Master Li tried for a third time, and now his rage knew no bounds.

"Six? Six gold coins? Cretinous creature, have you never heard of geometric progression? Two, four, *eight*, not two, four, *six*! I shall sell you for dog food and return to the Glittering Glades of Golden Grain for a better goat!"

The sound of the thump suggested that Miser Shen would be unconscious for quite some time, and Master Li led me out into the hallway. As we stepped over the prostrate body he took my arm and said quite seriously, "Number Ten Ox, if we are to survive our visit to the Ancestress you must learn that a soldier's best shield is a light heart. If you continue with that long face and soggy soul you will be the death of us, and we will attend to the matter immediately." He trotted briskly up the stairs and opened doors until he found the right one.

"Who are you?" cried Pretty Ping.

"My surname is Li and my personal name is Kao, and there is a slight flaw in my character," he said with a polite bow. "This is my esteemed client, Number Ten Ox."

"But what are you doing in my bedchamber?" cried Pretty Ping.

"I am paying my respects, and my client is prepared to spend the night," said Master Li.

"But where is Miser Shen?" cried Pretty Ping.

"Miser Shen is preparing to spend the night with a goat."

"A goat?"

"It will be a very expensive goat."

"A very ex…. *What are you doing?*" cried Pretty Ping.

"I am undressing," I said, because I had been well brought up and I would never dream of contradicting so venerable a sage as Li Kao. Besides, I had been told to obey him by the abbot, who was praying for my soul.

"I shall scream!" cried Pretty Ping.

"I sincerely hope so. Ah, if I could only be ninety again," Master Li said nostalgically. "Ox, flex a few muscles for the young lady."

Pretty Ping stared at me, as Li Kao turned and trotted back down the stairs. I grinned back at a young lady whose family had fallen into the clutches of a usurer, and whose beauty had condemned her to the embraces of an elderly gentleman who was equipped with a pair of glittering little pig eyes, a bald and mottled skull, a sharp curving nose like a parrot's beak, the loose flabby lips of a camel, and two drooping elephant ears from which sprouted thick tufts of coarse gray hair. Her luscious lips parted.

"Help," said Pretty Ping.

The noises downstairs suggested that Miser Shen was acquiring a goat, some castor oil, and a load of garbage and Pretty Ping and I took the opportunity to get acquainted. In China when young people wish to become acquainted they usually start by playing Fluttering Butterflies, because there is no better way to get to know somebody than to play Fluttering Butterflies.

"Eat!" Miser Shen screamed to the goat.

After young people have become acquainted it is customary to warm things up with the Kingfisher Union, because it is impossible to engage in the Kingfisher Union without becoming close friends.

"Gold!" screamed Miser Shen.

A cup of wine is then called for, and a discussion of relative merits that is usually resolved in favor of Hounds by the Ninth Day of Autumn.

"Eat!" screamed Miser Shen.

The young gentleman then plays the lute while the young lady dances in a manner that would cause a riot if performed in public, and they inevitably become entangled in Six Doves Beneath the Eaves on a Rainy Day.

"Gold!" screamed Miser Shen.

Now that friendship has been firmly established it is but a step and a jump to become soulmates, and the fastest way to become soulmates is Phoenix Sporting in the Cinnabar Crevice.

"Eat!" screamed Miser Shen.

This will lead to wine, love poems, and a return to Fluttering Butterflies, but slowly and drowsily, accompanied by giggles, and so it goes in China until the dawn, when somebody might calm down enough to consider testing the purity of gold coins.

"What is that appalling stench, O most perfect and penetrating of partners?" yawned Pretty Ping.

"I fear that it marks the approach of Miser Shen, O beauty beyond compare," I said sadly, as I climbed out of bed and pulled on my trousers.

"And what is that angry noise, O most tantalizingly tender of tigers?" asked Pretty Ping.

"I fear that Miser Shen is arming his seven half-starved servants with clubs, O rarest of rose petals." I sighed, as I collected my sandals, tunic, jade-embroidered silver girdle, fine tasseled hat, and gold-splattered Szech'uen fan.

"Merciful Buddha! What is the ghastly thing that is oozing obscenely through my doorway?" howled Pretty Ping.

"I fear that it is a mound of goat manure, beneath which you should find Miser Shen. Farewell, O seduction of the universe," I said, and I jumped out the window to the street below.

Li Kao was waiting for me, well rested after a pleasant night with Fat Fu and One-Eyed Wong, and he appeared to approve of the sparkle in my eyes. I bent over and he hopped up upon my back, and then I raced through the streets toward the city walls while behind us Miser Shen screamed, *"Bring back my five hundred pieces of gold!"*

A Winsome Damsel

Our path toward the house of the Ancestress ran through steep mountains, and most of the time Master Li rode upon my back. Sea sounds filled the immense sky as the wind blew through tall trees—pine surfs, as the poets say—and the clouds looked like white sails that were gliding across an endless blue ocean.

One day we climbed down the last mountainside to a green valley, and Li Kao pointed ahead to a low hill.

"The summer estate of the Ancestress should be on the other side," he said. "To tell the truth, I'm rather looking forward to seeing her again."

He smiled at a memory of fifty years ago.

"Ox, I hear that she's put on a great deal of weight, but the Ancestress was the most beautiful girl that I have ever seen in my life, and the most charming when she felt like it," he said. "Still, there was something about her that rang warning bells in my mind, and I was quite fond of old Wen. I was in high favor after the affair of Procopius and the other barbarians—I was even allowed to approach the throne on an east-west axis, instead of groveling upon my knees from the south—and one day I sidled up to the emperor and said with a sly wink that I had arranged for us to spy upon some newlyweds who were about to consummate the happy union. Wen was something of a voyeur, so we tiptoed to my suite and I opened a small curtain and pointed a pedantic finger.

"'O Son of Heaven,' I said, 'it would appear that marriage to a certain kind of female can have unfortunate side effects.'

"The newlyweds happened to be praying mantises," said Master Li. "The groom was happily engrossed in copulation, and right on cue his blushing bride craned her pretty neck and casually decapitated him. The groom's hindquarters continued to pump away while the bride devoured his head, which says something about the location of his brains, and for a moment the emperor had second thoughts about

wedding bells. But the Ancestress got to him and I was exiled to Serendip, which was quite fortunate because I wasn't around when she poisoned poor Wen and began massacring everyone in sight."

We reached the top of the hill and I stared down in horror at an estate that resembled a vast, military fort. It covered almost an entire valley, and it was surrounded by high parallel walls. The corridors between them were patrolled by guards and savage dogs, and everywhere I looked I saw soldiers.

"I understand that her winter palace is really something," Master Li said calmly.

"Can we really get into her treasure chambers and steal the Root of Power?" I asked in a tiny frightened voice.

"I have no intention of attempting such a thing," he said. "We'll persuade the dear lady to bring the root to us. Unfortunately that means that we will have to murder somebody, and I have never truly enjoyed slitting the throats of innocent bystanders. We must pray that we will find somebody who thoroughly deserves it."

He started down the hill.

"Of course, if she recognizes me, the funeral will be ours, and for once she will abandon the axe in favor of boiling oil," he said.

In the last town of consequence Li Kao made certain arrangements, such as purchasing an elegant carriage and renting the largest suite in the inn, and then he went to the town square and tacked one of Miser Shen's gold coins to the message board. I assumed that it would be stolen as soon as we turned our backs, but he drew mysterious symbols around it, and the townspeople who approached the message board turned pale and backed away hurriedly, muttering spells to protect themselves from evil. I had no idea what was going on.

That evening the most alarming bunch of thugs that I had ever seen in my life paused at the message board, studied the coin and the symbols, and began trickling by twos and threes into the inn. Li Kao had set out jars of the strongest wine, which they swilled like hogs, growling and snarling and glaring at me with their hands on the hilts of their daggers. The animals noises stopped abruptly when Li Kao entered and climbed up upon a table.

It was as if hands had been clapped over their filthy mouths. Their eyes bulged, and sweat poured down their greasy faces. The leader of the thugs turned quite gray with terror and I thought that he was going to faint.

Master Li was wearing a red robe that was covered with cosmological symbols, and a red headband with five loops. His right trouser leg was rolled up, and his left trouser leg was rolled down, and he wore a shoe on his right foot and a sandal on his left. He laid his left hand across his chest with the little and middle fingers extended, and he slid his right hand back inside the sleeve of his robe. The sleeve began to flutter in peculiar patterns as he wriggled the concealed fingers.

Four of the thugs grabbed their leader and forced him forward. Cut-Off-Their-Balls Wang was shaking so hard that he could barely stand, but he managed to slide his own right hand inside his sleeve, and the sleeve began to flutter in response. Master Li's sleeve moved faster and faster, Cut-Off-Their-Balls Wang replied in the same silent fashion, and so it went for many minutes. At last Li Kao extracted his hand from the sleeve and gestured dismissal, and to my astonishment the thugs and their leader backed out of the room on their knees, humbly banging their heads against the floor.

Li Kao smiled and opened a jar of better wine and motioned for me to join him at a table.

"The lower the criminal, the more impressed he is with the childlike mumbo-jumbo of the Secret Societies," he said complacently. "For some reason Cut-Off-Their-Balls Wang is under the impression that I am a great grand master of the Triads, and that I intend to cut his gang in for a share of the loot when I make my move against the Ancestress. In the latter respect," said Master Li, "he is absolutely right."

Two days later some aristocratic ladies who were returning to the estate of the Ancestress were ambushed by villains whose appearance was so terrifying that the guards fled and left the ladies to their fate. Things were looking very bad for them until two intrepid noblemen rode to the rescue.

"On your knees, dogs, for you face the rage of Lord Li of Kao!" Master Li yelled.

"Cower, knaves, before the fury of Lord Lu of Yu!" I shouted.

Unfortunately, our lead horse slipped in some mud, and our carriage crashed into the ladies' carriage, and we were pitched on top of half-naked females who were screaming their heads off. We gazed groggily at a pretty jade pendant that was dangling between a pair of pretty pink-tipped breasts, and it took a moment for us to remember what we were doing there. Then we jumped down to engage the ruffians.

Li Kao stabbed right and left with his sword, and I swung away with both hands—he was missing, of course, and I was pulling my punches short—and the thugs remembered that they weren't actually supposed to rob and rape anybody and began to do a very good job of acting. Once, when my foot slipped in the mud, a punch accidentally landed and sent the leader of the bandits sprawling. I forgot about the accident, and soon the bandits fled in terror and we turned to accept the gratitude of the rescued ladies.

Cut-Off-Their-Balls Wang had already lost his nose and both of his ears in back-alley battles, and he did not appreciate losing several teeth as well. He crept up behind me with a log in his hands.

"A present for Lord Lu of Yu!" he yelled, and he swung with all his might, and I saw a glorious burst of orange and purple stars, and then everything turned black.

I awoke in a very expensive bed surrounded by very expensive women who were battling for the honor of bathing the bump on my skull.

"He wakes!" they shrieked at the tops of their lungs. *"Lord Lu of Yu opens his divine eyes!"*

I had been brought up to be courteous, but there are limits.

"If you don't stop that infernal racket, Lord Lu of Yu will strangle you with his divine hands," I groaned.

They paid no attention to me, and the ear-splitting babble continued, and gradually I began to make some sense out of it. Our miraculous intervention had saved them all from rape and ruin, and the esteem in which we were held was not diminished by our fine tasseled hats, green silk tunics, jade-bordered silver girdles, Szech'uen fans, and money belts that bulged with Miser Shen's gold coins. This was all according to plan, but I was rather puzzled by repeated references to "the bridegroom," and I was trying to get up enough strength to ask a few questions when I began to realize that my wounds were far more serious than I had thought.

I was sick enough to imagine that the floor was shaking, and that my bed was starting to bounce up and down. The hallucination was accompanied by a dull, rhythmic, pounding noise that gradually increased in volume, and the ladies suddenly stopped babbling. They turned pale and tiptoed quietly from the room through a side door and I began to smell a revolting odor of rotting flesh.

The bedroom door crashed open, and the woman who marched inside weighed approximately five hundred pounds. The floor shook as she marched toward my bed. The coldest eyes that I had ever seen, even in nightmares, glittered between puffy rolls of sagging gray flesh, and a massive swollen hand shot out and grabbed my chin. The icy eyes moved over my face.

"Satisfactory," she grunted.

She grabbed my right arm and probed the biceps.

"Satisfactory," she grunted.

She jerked the covers down and squeezed my chest.

"Satisfactory," she grunted.

She ripped the covers all the way down and prodded my private parts.

"Satisfactory," she grunted.

Then the creature stepped back and I stared pop-eyed at a leveled finger that resembled a gangrened sausage.

"They call you Lord Lu of Yu," she growled. "I know Yu well, and there is no Lord Lu. They call your antiquated companion Lord Li of Kao, and the province of Kao does not exist. You are frauds and fortune hunters, and your criminal activities do not interest me in the least."

She slapped her hands to her hips and glared at me.

"My granddaughter has taken a fancy to you, and I want great-grandchildren," she snarled. "The wedding will take place as soon as your wounds have healed. You will present me with seven great-grandchildren, and they will be boys. I intend to overthrow the T'ang Dynasty and restore the Sui, and boys are more suitable for the purpose. In the meantime you will not annoy me by showing your silly face any more than is absolutely necessary, and you will not speak unless spoken to. Insolence in my household is punishable by immediate decapitation."

The monster turned and plodded from the room, and the door slammed viciously behind her. For a moment I lay there paralyzed, and then I jumped from the bed and ran across the floor and started to climb out of the window. The view made me stop. That immense estate boasted no less than seven pleasure gardens, and one of them, in the tradition of great houses, was a pretty, artificial peasant village. I gazed at simple thatched roofs, and crude waterwheels and green fields, and pigs and cows and chickens and water buffaloes. I felt tears well in my eyes and trickle down my cheeks.

My village was praying for a ginseng root.

I made my way back to the bed, and I lay there wrapped in misery and terror.

A Great House

When I had recovered enough to take stock of my surroundings it gradually dawned on me that the monster had decided upon seven great-grandchildren some time ago and that her granddaughter would be ordered to see to it that they were twelve years old at birth. I was lying in the dormitory of the boys who were going to aid in overthrowing the Tang Dynasty, and I will confess that I wept when I considered the life that my poor children were to lead.

Seven small beds were aligned side by side with geometric precision. Seven small desks were placed precisely in front of them, and the writing brushes lay exactly three inches to the right of the ink stones. Nothing in that cold inhuman room was so much as an eyelash out of alignment, and that included the signs on the walls. Some were *kung kuo-yo*, Tables of Demerits, and I will give an example.

EACH DEMERIT IS TO BE PUNISHED
BY STROKES OF THE BIRCH ROD

Exciting lustful thoughts in oneself	5
Showing one's nakedness when easing nature at night	2
Lewd dreams	2
If such dreams occasion lewd actions	10
Singing frivolous songs	5
Studying frivolous songs	10
Not yielding the way to a woman	10
If at the same time one looks at the woman	20
If one looks longingly at her	30
If one conceives lewd thoughts about her	40

Insolence to a woman	50
Insolence to the Ancestress	500
If such insolence is recurrent	Decapitation

Other signs were lessons to be memorized, and my frightened eyes jerked from one to another. Now and then in my dreams I find myself in a classroom with fragments of lessons plastered all over it.

> The effectiveness of the flame throwers known as *meng huo yu* may be enhanced by the addition of pulped bananas and coconuts to the oil, which will cause the fiery mixture to stick to the flesh….
>
> The Fire Drug will release deadly gas upon explosion with the addition of five ounces of *langtu*, two and one half ounces of pitch, one ounce of bamboo fibers, three ounces of arsenic oxide….
>
> An excellent poison can be swiftly produced under field conditions by boiling two baskets oleander leaves, distilling the essence, and adding three ounces of dried aconite tubers. At sea a simple extraction of the sac of the blowfish….
>
> A more subtle approach was employed by Wang Shih-chen, who presented his victims with pornographic novels after smearing the edge of each page with arsenic, and when the victim licked his finger to turn the pages….
>
> Testicle crushers are easily manufactured by….
>
> Severed heads may be preserved for display by….

I slid down and pulled the covers over my head, and I did not emerge until I heard the door open and a familiar voice said, "What a stroke of luck! Your engagement is a godsend—incidentally, how did you like the winsome damsel who recently ruled China?"

I jumped up and embraced him. "Master Li," I sobbed, "if my fiancée resembles her grandmother in any way, I can never go through with this!" A happy thought suddenly occurred to me. "But if we're engaged, I won't even see her until the wedding."

"Normally that would be the case, but an exception has been made because you've already seen almost all of her," he said. "She was the one in the carriage with

the pretty jade pendant between the pretty breasts. Don't worry about it. All you have to do is to take an occasional stroll with her in the gardens, while I figure out whom we have to kill in order to get the Root of Power."

"But the Ancestress…." I quavered.

"Has not recognized me," said Master Li. "Her natural distaste for fortune-hunting criminals has been reinforced by my unfortunate habit of rolling my eyes, drooling saliva, giggling at inopportune moments, and popping my cheek with an unwashed finger. I doubt that she will seek out your company, and all you'll have to worry about will be your fiancée, her father, and the butler."

❁ ❁ ❁

My future father-in-law turned out to be the sweetest and gentlest of men, and as a scholar he bowed only to Li Kao. Ho Wen had earned second place in the *chin-shih* examinations, and I would have had to enter Hanlin Academy to find two such minds under one roof. The contrast between them was fascinating.

Li Kao would toss an idea into the air and watch it sparkle, and then he would toss a second one, and then he would send handfuls of associated ideas spinning into space, and when they returned to earth they would be neatly linked into a necklace that fit perfectly around the throat of the subject. Ho Wen, on the other hand, was a plodding one-step-at-a-time scholar who never made a mistake, and whose memory was so prodigious that not even Li Kao could match it. I once asked him the name of a distant mountain, and this is the answer that I received.

"The sacred mountains are five in number: Hengshan, Changshan, Huashan, Taishan, and Sungshan, with Taishan leading in rank and Sungshan in the center. Mountains not sacred but very distinguished include Wuyi, Wutang, Tienmu, Tienchu, Tienmuh, Niushi, Omei, Shiunherh, Chichu, Chihua, Kungtung, Chunyu, Yentang, Tientai, Lungmen, Keuiku, Chiuyi, Shiherh, Pakung, Huchiu, Wolung, Niuchu, Paotu, Peiyo, Huangshan, Pichi, Chinshu, Liangfu, Shuanglang, Maku, Tulu, Peiku, Chinshan, Chiaoshan, and Chungnan. Since the mountain to which you refer is none of these—"

"Ho," I moaned.

"—it might not be too rash to conclude that it is Kuangfu, although I would not like to be quoted in the presence of the Ancestress because the slightest mistake can mean instant decapitation."

Li Kao immediately grasped the potential of Ho's memory. He told him to drop our titles when we were alone and address us as Li Kao and Number Ten Ox, and at the first opportunity he turned the subject to ginseng. Ho's eyes lit up, but before he could begin a discourse that might last several weeks Li Kao asked him if he had ever

heard of a Great Root of Power. Even Ho Wen had to stop and think about that, and then he said, slowly and hesitantly,

"I was four years old, visiting a cousin at the Blessings of Heaven Library in Loyang." He paused for more thought. "Third basement, fifth row on the left, second rack from the top. Behind *Chou-pi Mathematics* I found *Chang Chi's Typhoid Fever and Other Diseases*, behind which I found the sixteen volumes in fifty-two rolls of Li Shih-chen's *Outline of Herb Medicine*, behind which I found a mouse's nest. I was chasing the mouse at the time. In the nest was a scrap of parchment with a pretty picture that was labeled 'Great Root of Power,' but the parchment had been so badly chewed that I could not make out what species the root belonged to."

He squinted and pursed his lips as he tried to visualize the picture.

"It was a very strange root," he said. "There were two tiny tendrils that were the Legs of Power, two more that were the Arms of Power, and a fifth tendril that was the Head of Power. The central mass of the root was labeled the Heart of Power, which was labeled 'The Ultimate.' Unfortunately the mice had devoured everything else, so I do not know what the word 'ultimate' referred to. I very much doubt that the root was ginseng, because I have never heard of ginseng that resembled it."

His interest in ginseng had a specific origin. One day a grave was being dug in the family cemetery and a shovel had pitched out some fragments of clay tablets. Ho Wen had instantly recognized ideographs of immense antiquity. He had persuaded the workmen to gather every fragment that there was, and then he had settled down to an impossible task. The fragments were almost illegible, but he was determined to decipher the text or die in the attempt. His face was flushed with pride when he took us to his workshop and showed us the tiny clay fragments and the theories of mathematical probability that he had devised to suggest the sequence of characters in the ancient script. He had been working on it for sixteen years and already he had deciphered ten whole sentences, and if he lasted another sixteen years he hoped to have four whole paragraphs.

One thing he was sure of. It was a ginseng folk or fairy tale, and it was one of the oldest known to man.

Ho Wen had no money of his own. In my innocence I assumed that the distinction of his scholar's rank was worth more than money, but I soon learned otherwise. I suspect that the rich are the same in every country in that money is their sole standard of value, and was Ho Wen referred to as Master Ho? Venerable Scholar Ho? Second-Most-Learned-of-Mortals? Not exactly. He was referred to as Henpecked Ho, and he lived in mortal terror of the Ancestress, his wife, her seven fat sisters, and his daughter. In a great house a poor scholar's status is just slightly higher than that of the boy who carries away the night soil.

There was no resemblance whatsoever between Henpecked Ho and his daughter. My bride-to-be was a startlingly pretty girl whose name was Fainting Maid. I assumed that the unusual name came from a line of poetry, but I learned better on our first stroll through the gardens when we were chaperoned by Li Kao and her father.

"Hark!" cried Fainting Maid, pausing on the path and pointing dramatically. "A cuckoo!"

Well, I am a country boy.

"Nay, my beloved," I chuckled. "It is a magpie."

She stamped a pretty foot. "It is a cuckoo!"

"Precious one, the magpie is imitating a cuckoo," I said, pointing to the magpie that was imitating a cuckoo.

"It is a *cuckoo*!"

"Light of my life," I sighed, "it is a magpie."

Fainting Maid turned red, turned white, reeled, clutched her heart, and screeched, "Oh, thou hast slain me!" Then she staggered backward, lurched to the left, and gracefully swooned.

"Two feet back, six to the left," her father sighed.

"Does she ever vary it?" Li Kao asked with scientific interest.

"Not so much as an inch. Precisely two feet back and six feet to the left. And now, dear boy, you are required to kneel and bathe her delicate temples and beg her forgiveness for your intolerable rudeness. My daughter," said Henpecked Ho, "is never wrong, and I might add that never in her life has she been denied anything that she wanted."

Is it possible that among my illustrious readers there may be one or two who are contemplating marriage for money? I have a very clear memory of a golden afternoon when the butler was instructing me in the etiquette of a great house, Henpecked Ho's beloved wife and her seven fat sisters were sipping tea in the Garden of Forty Felicitous Fragrances, Fainting Maid was insulting the intelligence of her ladies-in-waiting in the Gallery of Precious Peacocks, and the Ancestress was chiding a servant who had dropped a cup on the Terrace of Sixty Serenities.

"The cook hands the guest a ladle with an engraved handle and a stand which is placed west of the tripods," said the butler. "The guest takes the handle of the ladle alongside the stand."

"Off with his head!" roared the Ancestress.

"Then," continued the butler, "he faces east, at the west of the tripods, to receive the food that is his due and that is determined by his attire, beginning with the state umbrella that is displayed by his servants."

"Gabble-gabble-gabble-gabble-gabble!" squawked Henpecked Ho's wife and her seven fat sisters.

"The umbrella of First and Second Rank officials have yellowish-black gauze covers, red raw silk linings, three tiers, and silver spires, and the umbrellas of the Third and Fourth Rank officials are the same, except that the spires are red."

"Forgive me, My Lady! Of *course* The Gentlewoman's Guide to Needlepoint *was written by Confucius!"* wailed a lady-in-waiting.

"The umbrellas of the Fifth Rank," said the butler, "have blue gauze coverings, red raw silk linings, two tiers, and silver spires, and those of the Sixth through Ninth Rank have blue oiled, raw silk coverings, red raw silk linings, one tier, and silver spires."

"Deposit the corpse in the pigsty!" roared the Ancestress.

Enough.

Dancing Girl

One night Li Kao and I stopped by Henpecked Ho's workshop and found him in tears, holding a cheap silver comb in his hands while he wailed. When he had recovered enough to speak he asked us to hear his story, because he had no one else with whom to share joys or sorrow. Li Kao made him drink some wine, and then we sat down to listen.

"A few years ago I managed to please the Ancestress in some way," said Henpecked Ho. "She graciously allowed me to take a concubine, but I had no money of my own. I could not aspire to a lady of quality, or even the maid of a lady of quality, so I chose a dancing girl from Hangchow. Her name was Bright Star, and she was very beautiful and very brave, and I loved her with all my heart. She did not love me, of course, because I am old and ugly and something of a worm, but I never forced myself on her and I think that she was reasonably happy. I gave her this comb as a token of my love. As you can see, it is not a very good comb, but it was all that I could afford, and she wore it in her hair to please me. I had never been in love before, and in my foolishness I thought that my joy would last forever.

"One night the Ancestress entertained some officers from the fort, and among them was a young captain whose family was so distinguished that it was common knowledge that the Ancestress would choose him to wed Fainting Maid. For some reason the name of Bright Star was mentioned, and suddenly the captain was all attention. She was no common dancing girl, he said excitedly. Bright Star had become a living legend in Hangchow through her skill and courage at the Sword Dance, and the young captain, who was a very famous swordsman himself, said that he would give anything to meet such an opponent. Since no distinctions of rank are allowed in the Sword Dance, the Ancestress ordered Bright Star to perform. When she opened an old wicker case and took out two swords I could see that she kept her heart in those glittering blades. She allowed me to oil her body, and I marveled at the pride

and happiness in her eyes, and my beautiful dancing girl walked out the door like a queen.

"Sword Dancers wear only loincloths, of course, and I could not bear to see Bright Star displayed like a piece of meat for the soldiers to leer at. I did not attend the dance, but I did not have to. The wind drifted down from the mansion and with it came a clash of steel blades that grew louder and louder and faster and faster. I heard cheering, and then I heard the audience roaring at the tops of their lungs. The drums pounded like thunder, and when the sand clock ran out the audience continued to cheer in delight and wonder for nearly ten minutes. The judges refused to declare a winner. Only gods, they said, had the right to choose between gods, and the palm was cut in two and half was given to each contestant.

"That night I lay in my bed and listened to the sobs of a dancing girl. She had fallen in love with the young captain, but what was she to do? Her social status was so low that it would be quite impossible for a gentleman of his rank to take her as a secondary wife, and she would be forced to see him as the husband of my daughter but never could she reach out and touch him. All night long she wept, and in the morning I made my way to the fort and had a long talk with a young captain who had not slept a wink, because whenever he closed his eyes he saw the face of Bright Star. When I returned that evening I clasped a gold chain around the throat of a dancing girl, and on the end of it was a beautiful jade pendant that was the token of the captain's love.

"Am I not a worm?" said Henpecked Ho. "I had so little pride that I would even play panderer for the woman I loved. All that mattered was her happiness, and I went about it quite methodically. I discovered that there were two brief periods when the corridor between the walls was unguarded. At sunset, when the guards went off duty, the men in the kennels waited for a few minutes to make sure that everyone was out before they released the dogs and at sunrise the guards waited for a few minutes before entering the corridor, to make sure the dogs were safely locked up. There was a small door in the inner wall at the north end of the estate, and I stole the key and gave it to Bright Star. That evening at sunset I gave the signal that the corridor was clear, and the young captain scaled the outer wall and raced across, and Bright Star opened the door. At sunrise he was able to return to the fort in the same way.

"For nearly a month she lived in Heaven. I lived in Hell, of course, but that was scarcely important on the relative scale of things," said Henpecked Ho. "Then one evening I heard a terrible scream. I raced to the wall and found Bright Star frantically tugging at the door. She had just opened it, but somebody had approached and she had been forced to hide, and when she came back she discovered that the door had been closed and locked and that the key had been taken. I raced to the kennels to try to stop the men from releasing the dogs, but I was too late. The terrible baying

pack raced down the corridor, and the young captain was able to kill a great many of them but he could not kill them all. As Bright Star desperately tugged at the door, she was forced to listen to the death of her captain. She could not stand it. When I ran back, I discovered that my beautiful dancing girl had thrown herself into an old well beside the wall.

"It was no accident. They knew at the fort that the captain was slipping away at night, and everyone who had attended the Sword Dance had seen the light in his eyes. From the joy in the eyes of Bright Star it was obvious that the captain had found a way to cross the corridor, but who could have been so cruel as to lock the door and take the key? It was the murder of two innocent young people."

Henpecked Ho began to weep again, and it was nearly a minute before he could continue.

"Bright Star may have wanted to die, but her fate was far worse," he sobbed. "So great had been her desire to reach the young captain that even in death she must continue to try to get through the door in time, but of course she cannot do it. The following night I returned to the well that had claimed her life, and I discovered that my beautiful dancing girl had been trapped in a ghost dance. Now I fear that she must suffer the agonies of the damned throughout eternity."

Li Kao jumped to his feet and clapped his hands sharply together.

"Nonsense!" he said. "There has never been a ghost dance that couldn't be broken, and there never will be. Ho, take us to the scene of the tragedy and you and I and Number Ten Ox will take care of the problem immediately."

It was almost the third watch, the hour of ghosts, when we walked through the garden in the moonlight. The breeze sighed sadly through the leaves, and a lonely dog barked in the distance, and an owl drifted down like a falling leaf across the face of the moon. When we reached the wall I saw that the door had been removed and the hole had been bricked up. The old well was covered over, and the path was overgrown by weeds.

Li Kao turned to me. "Ox, have you been taught how to see ghosts?" he asked quietly.

I blushed bright red. "Master Li," I said humbly, "in my village young people are not introduced to the world of the dead until they have become civilized enough to respect the living. The abbot thought that I might possibly be ready for instruction after the fall harvest."

"Don't worry about it," he said reassuringly. "The world of the dead is immensely complicated, but seeing ghosts is simplicity itself. Take a look at the wall where the door used to be. Take a very close look, and keep looking until you see something strange."

I stared until my eyeballs hurt.

"Master Li, I see something that puzzles me," I said finally. "That faint shadow above the rose bush cannot possibly be caused by branches, or by clouds passing the face of the moon. Where does it come from?"

"Excellent," he said. "You are looking at a ghost shadow. Ox, listen carefully because what I am about to say will sound silly, but it is not. Whenever you see a ghost shadow, you must realize that the dead are trying to show you something, and you must think of the shadow as being a soft comfortable blanket that you would like to pull over you. It is quite easy. Calm your heartbeat, and clear your mind of everything except a comfortable blanket. Now reach out with your mind and pull it toward you, and then up over your head. Gently…gently…gently…. No. You are trying much too hard. It requires no effort at all. Think of the comfort and warmth. Gently…gently…gently…. Good. Now tell me what you see."

"Master Li, the patch in the wall is gone and the door is back in place!" I whispered. "It is standing open, and the well is uncovered, and the path is clear of weeds!"

And so it was, although it was like a picture with a hazy frame around it that flickered at the periphery of my vision. Faint in the distance I heard the watchman rap three times with his wooden knocker, and the three of us sat upon the grass beside the path. Henpecked Ho reached out and squeezed my shoulder.

"Dear boy, you are about to see something very beautiful, and you will learn that there is beauty that can break the heart," he said quietly.

The Great River of Stars was sparkling above us, like a diamond necklace clasped around the black velvet throat of the sky. The cassia trees sparkled with dew, and the high brick wall appeared to be painted with silver, and bamboos lifted like long fingers that waved in a soft breeze as they pointed toward the moon. A flute began to play, but it was like no flute that I had ever heard before. The same few notes were repeated over and over, softly and sadly, but with subtle variations in pitch and tone that caused each note to flutter in the air like the petal of a flower. A strange flickering light moved slowly through the trees.

I caught my breath.

A ghost was dancing toward us to the hypnotic rhythm of the flute. Bright Star was so lovely that my heart felt as though a hand were squeezing it, and I found it difficult to breathe. She wore a long white robe that was embroidered with blue flowers, and she was dancing down the path with indescribable grace and delicacy. Every gesture of her hands, every movement of her feet, every subtle swirl of her robe gave meaning to the word perfection, but her eyes were wide and desperate.

Li Kao leaned over. "Look behind you," he whispered.

The door was closing. Closing very slowly, but just slightly faster than the unchanging song of the flute, and now I realized that the music was a chain that

bound a dancing girl. Her eyes were agonized as she watched the door swing slowly shut, and two ghost tears trickled down her cheeks like transparent pearls.

"Faster," I prayed silently. "Beautiful girl, you must dance faster!"

But she could not. Bound to a rhythm that she could not break, she floated toward us like a cloud, feet barely touching the ground, whirling with exquisite grace and pathetic desire. Her arms and hands and long, flowing robe formed patterns that were as subtle as smoke, and even the fingers that reached toward the door were positioned in the pattern of the dance. She was too late.

The door closed tight, with a cold cruel click of a lock. Bright Star stood motionless, and a wave of agony flowed over me like a harsh winter wind. And then she was gone, and the music was gone, and the well was covered, and the path was overgrown by weeds, and I was staring with wet eyes at a bricked-up patch in a wall.

"Every night she dances, and every night I pray that she will be able to get through the door to her captain, but she cannot dance faster than the music allows," Henpecked Ho said quietly. "Thus Bright Star must dance until time comes to an end."

Li Kao was softly humming the flute song as he thought, and then he slapped a knee with a hand.

"Ho, the chain of a ghost dance is woven from the victim's own desire, but that magnificent young woman is ruled by more than one desire," he said. "No power in life or in death can prevent her from honoring her art and it is artistry that will free a dancing girl. Your job will be to steal two swords and a couple of drums. Ox, I'd do it myself if I could be ninety again, but it looks as though you can have the honor of chopping off your arms and legs."

"Of doing what?" I asked in a tiny voice.

"It is said that the challenge of the Sword Dance is stronger than death itself, and now is the time to prove it," said Master Li.

I quivered in my sandals, and I saw myself trundling upon a trolley with a begging bowl clutched in my two remaining fingers. "Alms for the poor! Alms for a poor legless cripple…."

❁ ❁ ❁

Every year there are well-meaning officials who attempt to ban the Sword Dance on the grounds that it kills or maims hundreds, if not thousands, and though the dance will continue as long as the great T'ang sits upon the throne (the Son of Heaven devotes an hour a day to practice with the swords) I suppose that I should explain a "barbaric ritual" that may someday become as obsolete as scapulimancy.

There are two contestants, two drummers, and three judges. The drums set the pace, and once the dance begins it is forbidden to break the rhythm in any way. The

contestants are required to perform six mandatory maneuvers in sequence, each with an increasing level of difficulty, and all maneuvers are performed while leaping—both feet must leave the ground—and require precise slashes with two swords over, under, and around the body, that are graded according to grace, accuracy, closeness of blades to the body, and elevation of leap. These mandatory maneuvers are very important because the judges must beware of mismatches, and if one of the contestants is clearly outclassed, they will refuse to allow the dance to continue.

The contestants begin quite far apart and move closer with each maneuver, and at the completion of the six mandatory maneuvers they are practically face to face. If the judges are satisfied they signal for the drummers to sound the beat of the seventh level, and now the dance becomes art, and occasionally it becomes murder.

Seventh-level maneuvers are free-form, and the only requirement is that they must be of the highest difficulty. The dancers attempt to express their souls, and the fun lies in the fact that once a maneuver has been completed the dancer is free to clip the hair from his opponent's head, if he can do so before his feet touch the ground. The opponent is free to parry and thrust, but only after his own maneuver has been completed and only before his own feet touch the ground. A dancer who attempts a stroke while so much as a toe is touching the earth is immediately disqualified. Masters disdain such easy targets as the hair on the head and attempt to barber their opponent's beard or mustache, if he wears such adornments, and the loss of noses and eyes and ears is considered to be an occupational hazard of no great importance. Of course if a dancer panics and breaks the rhythm he will probably be killed, because he will be leaping up when he should be coming down and his opponent will aim for his hair and cut off his head.

During the mandatory maneuvers the drummers play together, but with the seventh level they split, one for each dancer, and it is said that a truly great drummer is the equivalent of a third sword. Sample gymnasium conversation:

"I hear that Fan Yun has challenged you. Who's your drummer?"

"Blind Meng."

"*Blind Meng!* Great Buddha, I must sell my wife and wager the proceeds! Orderly, be so kind as to order flowers for Fan Yun's widow."

Of course that is at the master level, and the enemy of the raw amateur, such as Number Ten Ox, is not his opponent but he himself. The swords are as sharp as razors, and terrific force is required to whip them around the body in a seventh-level maneuver, and the amateur is likely to beam with pride after a successful maneuver only to discover that he has left one of his legs lying upon the ground.

It is quite impossible to describe the beauty of the Sword Dance in words. It is skill and pride and courage and grace and beauty rolled into one, and when two consummate masters go at it their bodies seem to float effortlessly into the air and

hang suspended in space, and their swords are flashing blinding blurs—particularly at night, in the light of torches—and the clash of steel meeting steel is like the songs of gongs that thrill the heart as well as the ears. Each brilliant maneuver inspires a counter maneuver even more brilliant, and the drummers drive their rhythms into the hearts of their champions and force them past human limitations into the realm of the supernatural. The audience screams as a blade slips through and blood spurts, but the dancers laugh out loud, and then the sand clock runs out and the drums fall silent, and even the judges leap to their feet and cheer as the panting contestants drop their swords and embrace.

One might assume that this dangerous sport requires the strength of a man, but speed and suppleness can counterbalance strength. It is said that among the six greatest dancers of all time there was one woman, and I insist that figure must be revised. Two of them were women, and I am in a position to prove it.

❁ ❁ ❁

That night Li Kao carried two sharp swords up the path toward the wall. They had to be sharp because an expert would spot dull blades in a second. Henpecked Ho carried two drums, and I carried two thousand pounds of sheer terror. My flesh was all goose bumps as I stripped to my loincloth, and my fingers were like icicles as I took the swords from Li Kao. They hid in the shrubbery, and I have never known time that passed so slowly yet reached midnight with such appalling swiftness.

The watchman's knocker rapped three times, and I turned to see the faint outlines of a ghost shadow upon the patch where the door had been. The shadow blanket slipped easily over my head, and the door stood open and the well was uncovered and the path was clear of weeds, I walked up the path to meet Bright Star.

The flute began to play its haunting melody. A light moved toward me. The exquisite girl came dancing down the path, and again I caught my breath as I watched the agony of her perfection as she honored her art, even while her heart was breaking. She did not see me.

Henpecked Ho began pounding his drum, and at first I couldn't imagine what he was doing. He certainly wasn't sounding the challenge to the Sword dance, but finally my pulse told me the answer. The gentle scholar was playing the song he loved most on earth and that he had learned during the lovesick sleepless nights; the heartbeat of a dancing girl. He leaned over his drum and put his weight into it, and the insistent heartbeat thudded and thundered through the trees, and the first flaw in the dance of Bright Star was the faintly puzzled expression that began to appear in her eyes.

Li Kao's drum rang out with the challenge to the Sword Dance, weaving in and out and over and around the steady beat of a heart, and an awareness, a growing

wonder, began to shine in the eyes of the dancing girl. I stepped forward and raised my swords in the salute, and then I knew that the legend was true, and that the challenge to the dance is stronger than death itself, because her eyes began to sparkle, and as the challenge and the heartbeat pounded louder and louder her hands lifted gracefully to the clasp of her throat and her robe fell to the ground and she danced toward me in her loincloth, with the jade pendant that her captain had given her hanging between her small firm breasts on a golden chain, and Henpecked Ho's silver comb in her hair.

Then she saw me. She spread her hands wide and two ghost swords suddenly sparkled in the moonlight. The heartbeat thudded even louder, and Li Kao began to pound the command for the mandatory maneuvers.

A master would never consent to dance with an amateur. It would be murder. I plastered a silly smile on my face and pretended that I was making a joke of boring classroom exercises, and then I launched into the air with the Tiger, the Kingfisher, Dragon's Breath, the Swan, the Serpent, and Night Rain. Bright Star didn't suspect that I was doing the very best that I could. She laughed and promptly imitated me, even to the slight stumble that I made after Dragon's Breath. We were moving closer and closer together, and Henpecked Ho's drum joined Li Kao's as they thundered the command for seventh-level maneuvers.

I sent a fervent prayer to the August Personage of Jade, and then I leaped off the ground with the Eight Drake Under the River Bridge. The August Personage of Jade must have heard me, because I managed to complete the eight savage slashes around my body and between my legs without castrating myself, but when I saw Bright Star's response I nearly fainted. She lifted effortlessly into the air and floated like a leaf as she slashed her swords around her body in Ice Falling from a Mountaintop—which is very nearly impossible—and still had time before her toes touched the ground to take a couple of playful swipes that would have neatly trimmed my eyebrows if her ghost swords had been real. I managed to complete Stallion Racing in the Meadow, and Bright Star tripled the level of difficulty with Storm Clouds, but her eyes narrowed suspiciously when she saw that I had left myself wide open.

It was now or never. I leaped into the air with Widow's Tears, and Bright Star turned pale with shock and horror. I was dancing *backward*, out of reach of her swords. The drums continued, and she almost lost her balance. My cowardice was plain to see, but the judges had not stopped the contest, and there could be only one explanation. They had been bribed, and the Sword Dance had been defiled, and her whole world was crashing down around her ears.

"What? You break the rhythm of the dance?" I sneered. "Are you afraid of me, base-born dancing girl?"

That did it. The beautiful ghost uttered a piercing scream of rage, and her lithe body shot up into the air, and her swords began to flicker around her body

like tongues of flame as she pursued me down that path, performing seventh-level maneuvers that I could not possibly believe, even though the blades were flashing right in front of my face. I puffed and panted and danced backward as fast as I could, but nothing on earth could persuade a dancer to continue if the opponent failed to complete a maneuver, and now I was slicing myself to ribbons.

Henpecked Ho began to pound Bright Star's heartbeat so powerfully that blood was spurting from the palms of his hands, and Li Kao's drum was drowning out the ghost flute as it commanded: *Faster! Faster! Faster!* I glanced behind me. The door was already half-closed, and I danced faster, but my lungs were filled with hot coals and there were black spots before my eyes. Somehow I managed to complete Eagle Screams without leaving my severed feet upon the ground. Bright Star contemptuously countered with Eagle Screams Above the Lamb—which has been successfully performed no more than five times in the two thousand years of the Sword Dance—and had time for two swipes that would have removed my ears and a third that was intended to emasculate me. Her eyes were on fire and her hair was standing up like the fur of a big beautiful cat. The ghost swords were whipping around her leaping body with unbelievable force, and they slashed out to remove my eyes and my nose, and her toes barely touched the ground before she was airborne again.

Now and then she comes to dance for me in my dreams. I do not believe that many men are so honored.

Faster! the drums thundered. *Faster! Faster!* I danced faster, and then my swords got all tangled up as I attempted Tenth Dive of the Blue Heron, and I backed into a log upon the path and tripped and fell. The beautiful ghost leaped over me and her swords flashed out to remove my hide from my nose to my toes, and she landed on the other side. The drums stopped instantly. Bright Star shook her head dazedly, and then her eyes widened with wonder and hope as she realized that the log that had tripped me had been placed directly in front of the door, and it was still partly open, and she had leaped right through the gap.

Li Kao and Henpecked Ho came running up the path as the dancing girl slowly turned to her captain. He was a tall, handsome ghost, and in life he must have been very heroic because he was able to turn from Bright Star and lift his clenched fist in the soldier's salute, and to hold it for the full seven seconds before he swept his dancing girl into his arms. Then the ghosts faded away, and the flute faded away, and the door faded away, and the cover returned to the well, and the weeds returned to the path, and we were looking at a bricked-up patch in a wall.

The hands of Master Li and Henpecked Ho were dripping with blood, and I looked like something that the cat had dragged from a slaughterhouse. We made a rather bedraggled group for such solemn ceremonies, but we doubted that anyone would mind. At Henpecked Ho's workshop we cut paper silhouettes of the happy

couple. We burned paper money for the dowry and food for the guests, and we spilled wine upon the ground. Henpecked Ho spoke for the bride, and I for the groom, and Li Kao chanted the wedding vows, and when the cock crowed we thanked the newlyweds for the banquet and let them go at last to the bridal bed. Thus Bright Star married her captain, and Henpecked Ho's gentle heart was finally at rest.

"All in all," said Master Li as he helped me limp down the path, "it has been a rather satisfactory evening."

A Brief Interlude for Murder

As soon as my wounds had healed, Master Li suggested that I should take another stroll through the gardens with Fainting Maid, with her father and himself as chaperones, and Ho and I were quite surprised when he led the way up the path toward the old well and the bricked-up patch of wall. Fainting Maid was in good form.

"Roses! My favorite flowers!" she squealed, pointing to some petunias.

Master Li's voice was as sweet and smooth as warm honey. "Beautiful roses indeed," he cooed, "but as Chang Chou so charmingly put it, women are the only flowers that can talk."

Fainting Maid simpered coyly.

"Stop!" cried Master Li. "Stop right here, with your exquisite feet against this mark in the path! Here the light strikes you perfectly, and never has your beauty been more breathtaking."

Fainting Maid posed prettily.

"Absolute perfection," Master Li sighed happily. "A lovely lady in a lovely setting. One can scarcely believe that so tranquil a spot could have been the scene of tragedy, yet I have heard that here a door was locked, and a key was stolen, and a handsome young man and the girl who loved him lost their lives."

"A stupid soldier and a slut," Fainting Maid said coldly.

Her father winced, but Li Kao at least partially agreed.

"Well, I'm not so sure about the slut, but the soldier was stupid indeed," he said thoughtfully. "He was honored with the opportunity of marrying you, O vision of perfection, yet he dared to prefer a lowly dancing girl. Why, he even gave her a valuable jade pendant that should rightfully have been yours!"

I was beginning to sense a certain menace behind Li Kao's beaming smile.

"I would imagine that it was the first time in your life that you had been denied something that you wanted," said Master Li. "You know, I find it rather odd that Bright Star wasn't wearing the captain's pendant when they fished her body from the water. She would scarcely have paused to take it off before seeking a watery grave, unless, of course, she wasn't seeking a watery grave at all. Meaning that somebody hired a pack of thugs to lock a door and steal a key and murder a dancing girl."

His hands shot out and jerked a gold chain from Fainting Maid's neck, and up over her head. At the end of the chain was a jade pendant, which he bounced in the palm of his hand, and I realized with a sick sense of shock that I had seen it twice before. First between Fainting Maid's breasts in the carriage, and then in ghost form between the breasts of Bright Star.

"Tell me, dear child, do you always wear this next to your sweet little heart?" Master Li asked, smiling as warmly as ever.

Henpecked Ho was staring at his monstrous daughter with horror and revulsion, and I suppose that the expression on my face was similar. Fainting Maid decided that Li Kao was the safest.

"Surely you do not mean to suggest—"

"Ah, but I do."

"You cannot possibly suspect—"

"Wrong again."

"This incredible nonsense—"

"Is not nonsense."

Fainting Maid turned red, turned white, clutched her chest, reeled and screeched, "Oh, thou has slain me!" Then she lurched two steps back and six to the left and disappeared.

Li Kao gazed at the spot where she had vanished. "Captious critics might tend to agree with you," he said mildly, and then he turned to her father. "Ho, you are perfectly free to hear whatever you choose, but what I hear is a magpie that is imitating the sounds of a scream and a splash."

Henpecked Ho's face was white, and his hands trembled, and his voice was unsteady, but he never flinched.

"Clever little creature," he whispered. "Now it is imitating the sound of somebody screaming 'Help!'"

Li Kao linked arms with Henpecked Ho, and the two of them strolled up the path while I trotted nervously behind.

"What a talented magpie," Master Li observed. "How on earth can it manage that sound of thrashing in the water, and the gurgle that sounds strikingly like somebody sinking down into a deep pool?"

"Nature is full of remarkable talents," Henpecked Ho whispered. "Yours, for example."

"There is a slight flaw in my character," Master Li said modestly.

When we returned an hour later I judged from the silence that the talented magpie was no longer with us.

"I think that I had best remove this mark from the path, lest busybodies wonder why it is precisely two feet in front and six feet to the right of an old well from which somebody has rashly removed the cover," said Master Li. "Ready?"

"Ready," I said.

"Ready," said Henpecked Ho.

We rent our garments and tore our hair as we raced back toward the mansion.

"Woe!" we howled. *"Woe! Woe! Woe! Poor Fainting Maid has fallen into a well."*

Li Kao and I were viewed with suspicion, but since the girl's own father had been with us there could be no question that it had been an accident.

10

It Was A Grand Funeral

Li Kao was delighted that he had been able to murder somebody who thoroughly deserved it, and his reason for murder was that the Ancestress, in her own inimitable way, was deeply religious. An example of her piety was the immense mausoleum that she had erected for herself assuming that someday she would condescend to join the gods. It was a giant iron pillar more than a hundred feet high, with the burial chamber in the center and the message that she wished to preserve for posterity engraved in huge characters above the entrance. If the history of the Ancestress is lost in the passage of time, I imagine that the scholars of the future will be rather puzzled by her epitaph.

> HEAVEN PRODUCES MYRIADS OF THINGS TO NOURISH MAN;
> MAN NEVER DOES ONE GOOD TO RECOMPENSE HEAVEN.
> KILL! KILL! KILL! KILL! KILL! KILL! KILL!

Another example of her piety was her fondness for lohans. I don't mean the statues of Buddhist saints, such as the 142,289 that can be found in Lung-men. I mean real lohans.

A real lohan is a saintly monk who has given up the ghost while seated in the meditative mudra. This is considered to be a sign from Heaven, and when the deceased is discovered contemplating his navel, with his legs crossed, the soles of his feet turned up, and his hands lying limply upon his lap with the palms up, his body is carefully wrapped in layers of burlap. The burlap is treated with successive coats of lacquer and the finished product is a real saint whose preserved body will last for centuries. (If the lacquer is properly applied and the body is placed in water, it will last forever.) Such lacquered lohans are extremely rare, but the Ancestress possessed no less than twelve of them. Those with nasty minds suspected that more than one of

the saints had been peacefully contemplating when an agent of the Ancestress slipped a knife between his ribs. This may or may not have been true, but the Ancestress was unquestionably proud of them and brought them out for all great ceremonial occasions.

In the days that followed the demise of Fainting Maid mourners gathered from all over, and the most illustrious erected sacrificial tents along the road that the funeral procession would take to the cemetery. They brought private orchestras, and even troupes of actors and acrobats, and there was a great deal of socializing among the nobility. More and more people poured into the estate, including countless bonzes who were employed by the Ancestress to pray day and night for her soul, and the affair rather resembled a festival.

The great day dawned with a drizzle. Clouds hovered overhead throughout the morning and early afternoon, and it was hot and humid with a sulphurous smell in the air. Henpecked Ho, who had willingly agreed to help us, muttered grim warnings about evil signs as he walked from count to marquis to duke. Shaggy black beasts with eyes like fire had been seen in the woods, said Henpecked Ho. Servants had seen two ominous ghosts—"A woman in white and a woman in green!"—who had warned of demons, and when a search was made of the pleasure pavilions the carving of a demon had indeed been found with an iron band around its head and a chain around its neck. A bronze candelabrum had floated through the air beside the Lake of the Fifth Fragrance: "With seven flames!" hissed Henpecked Ho, and I hope that no one will judge that sweet old man rashly when I report that at the funeral of his daughter he was having the time of his life.

A great roll of drums signaled the approach of the funeral procession. First came outriders in double rows, followed by servants waving phoenix banners and musicians playing mournful music. They were followed by long lines of priests who swung lighted censers of gold, and then by the coffin with the sixty-four bearers that designated a princess. As the bereaved fiancée I had the place of honor, wailing and tearing my hair as I walked beside the coffin. Next came soldiers from the army of the Ancestress, who carried an immense canopy of phoenix-embroidered yellow silk, and beneath the canopy were bonzes who pulled twelve bejeweled carts. In each cart, seated in the meditative mudra, was a lacquered lohan.

The saints were looking down approvingly at the visible signs of piety and grief of the Ancestress. She had opened her treasure chambers to provide suitable offerings to the spirit of the departed, and items of immense value were placed at the lohans' feet. Of course everyone understood that the Ancestress had no intention of burying her wealth with Fainting Maid, but the display was customary, and it was also designed to make lesser mortals turn green with envy. After the burial gifts came four soldiers who were carrying the state umbrella of the Ancestress, and beneath the umbrella

marched her chief eunuch, who was carrying the great crown of the Sui Dynasty upon a silken pillow. Then came the great lady herself. An army of servants groaned beneath the crushing weight as they carried her sedan chair, which was covered with a canopy of phoenix-embroidered yellow silk, with silver bells at the sides and a golden knob in back.

In case anyone wonders why she used the phoenix symbols of an imperial consort rather than the dragon symbols of an emperor, the answer is simple. The imperial dragons were embroidered all over a large silken pillow, and the Ancestress was sitting on it.

I will not describe the ceremony of the burial in detail because I would have to begin with the 3,300 rules of *chu* etiquette, which would send my readers screaming into the night, but I will mention that the body of my beloved had been covered with quicksilver and "Dragon's Brains," and that I had been quite disappointed when I had discovered that the latter was merely Borneo camphor.

Fainting Maid could not presume to share the mausoleum with the Ancestress. Like all other family members she was buried in the common dirt, in order to spend eternity at the great lady's feet, and I was required to pour handfuls of dirt over my head and wail like a man demented as I hung myself upon the grave, while the aristocracy made critical comments concerning the artistry of my performance. Hooded monks surrounded the grave, banging bells and gongs and spraying incense in all directions. Their leader had his hands clasped piously in prayer, or so I thought until his real hands slipped slyly from his robe and neatly picked the pockets of the Marquis of Tzu.

Henpecked Ho ran around with wild eyes, babbling about evil spirits and demons, and who could doubt it? Lightning flickered evilly in the distance, and terrible things began to happen. Prince Han Li, for example, was engrossed in a profound theological discussion with one of the hooded monks, and when the prince was next seen he was lying in a ditch with a large bump on his head, divested of his purse, jewelry, red leather belt studded with emeralds, silver-winged cap with white tassels, and knife-plated white mourning garment with a gold-threaded design of five-clawed dragons. Screams and roars of rage were lifting from the pavilions of the wealthy, whose valuable funeral gifts had miraculously disappeared. Lady Wu, whose beauty was said to rival that of the semi-legendary Queen Feiyen, was carried into the bushes by a creature who had no ears or nose, and whose eyes were as yellow as his teeth.

We all have our little weaknesses, but I must question the judgment of Cut-Off-Their-Balls Wang when he abandoned his fellow hooded monks to disport in the bushes with Lady Wu. He missed a great deal of excitement.

It was obvious that Henpecked Ho's warning had been correct, and that the funeral of Fainting Maid had been attacked by demons. Only an immediate exorcism could

save the lives of one and all, and Henpecked Ho was nothing less than magnificent as he led the Grand Master Wizard and the forty-nine assistants—who had fortuitously arrived with the hooded monks—and soon the cemetery was shrouded by rolling clouds of incense. Henpecked Ho bravely waved the banners that represented the five directions of Heaven, while wizards who wore cosmological mantles and seven-starred tiaras sprayed the graves with holy water. Drums nearly deafened us as Ho and the wizards grappled with invisible demons, swinging peachwood whips and swords that were engraved with the Eight Diagrams and the Nine Heavenly Spheres. They stuffed the nasty demons into jars and bottles, which were stoppered and sealed and stamped with closure decrees that forbade them to be opened throughout all eternity.

In the middle of all this a miracle occurred that could have converted the most stubborn atheist in the whole world.

An exceptionally saintly lacquered lohan was admiring the diamond-encrusted imperial sceptre that the Ancestress had placed at his feet, and apparently he feared that the other funeral gifts might be defiled by demons. So he stood up from the meditative mudra and began making a tour of inspection. Bonzes screamed and fainted in droves, and even the Ancestress, who had been screaming "Off with their heads!" turned pale and drew back in fear. The lacquer glinted like dull gold in the sultry light, and the saint appeared to be floating through the clouds of incense as he drifted among his fellow lohans and inspected each gift to make sure that it was safe. The last gift was inside a small jade casket, which the saint picked up and opened.

"Got it!" he exclaimed happily.

Unfortunately the light coat of lacquer had wiped fifty years of wrinkles from the lohan's face, and the Ancestress sat up straight.

"You!" she screamed. "You and your damned praying mantises nearly ruined me with Emperor Wen! Soldiers, seize this fraudulent dog!"

Master Li took to his heels, clutching the jade casket, and I hopped up from Fainting Maid's grave and raced in pursuit. The army of the Ancestress ran after us, and the diversion was a godsend to Cut-Off-Their-Balls Wang, who emerged from the bushes and gathered his men and began stealing everything in sight, and confusion degenerated into chaos. Then the storm that had been hovering all day broke with a bang, and lightning and thunder joined the drums of the wizards and the howls of the victims and the blinding rain became an even better cover than rolling clouds of incense. We escaped quite easily and reached our hiding place, a small natural cave in the riverbank. Then we stripped and dried off, and Li Kao opened the casket and held it out to me.

Inside was the most magnificent ginseng root imaginable. No wonder the Ancestress had included it among her most valuable possessions, as Master Li had foreseen, and the aroma that came from it was so powerful that it made my head spin.

"Ox, this is truly extraordinary, but the Root of Power in no way resembles the Great Root that Henpecked Ho described," said Master Li. "Of course Ho doubts that his root was ginseng, and we must pray that this will do the job."

I was convinced that the children were as good as cured, and I cannot describe the joy in my heart. The rain soon ceased and the clouds drifted away, and we tiptoed through a thick swirling mist. Henpecked Ho was waiting for us at the entrance to the cemetery, and his eyes were sparkling as they had been when Bright Star passed safely through the door. We started off through the graves, and as we approached the mausoleum of the Ancestress we heard the faint sound of shovels.

"Ho, I rather suspect that some of the scum of the earth that Cut-Off-Their-Balls Wang recruited are digging up your daughter," Master Li said thoughtfully. "Do you have any objection to having her coffin plundered?"

"None whatsoever," said Henpecked Ho. "My beloved wife and her seven fat sisters provided some rather expensive jewelry, and I seriously doubt that my dear daughter deserved to take it with her."

There was a good deal of iron beneath his meek exterior. We heard the sound of shovels striking the coffin, and then the sound of the lid being removed.

"This stuff any good?" asked a voice that was oddly familiar.

There was a pause for inspection, and then another oddly familiar voice answered, "First-rate."

The mist cleared enough so that I could see a blade glint in the moonlight.

"You use the knife," said the first voice. "I'm scared of corpses."

"Ho, we can't let them desecrate your daughter's body!" I whispered.

"Hair and fingernails," he whispered back.

"What?"

"Hair and fingernails," Master Li said quietly. "It's a very ancient practice. Grave robbers dig up the bodies of ladies of quality and clip their silken tresses and flawless fingernails, which they sell for a high price to an expensive courtesan. The courtesan claims the hair and fingernails to be her own, and gives them as a fidelity gift to a wealthy lover. The lover assumes that the lovesick lady has handed him the power of life and death—any decent witch could use such things to destroy the donor—and is inspired to reply in kind with immensely valuable fidelity gifts, and thus many a departed beauty has continued to bankrupt lovers long after her demise. A rather interesting form of immortality," said Master Li.

The shovels were pitching earth back into the grave, to delay discovery and pursuit, and I stuck my head through some bushes. My eyes very nearly popped out of their sockets.

"Who, pray tell, is shoveling earth so that it piles up neatly on the other side of the hole?" snarled Pawnbroker Fang.

"In answer to your question, my esteemed colleague," hissed Ma the Grub, "I would advise you to piss upon the ground and examine your reflection in the puddle!"

Li Kao stuck his head out beside me, and his eyes narrowed as he examined the unlovely pair.

"Strange," he said thoughtfully. "Destiny, perhaps, since Pawnbroker Fang is not the sort of man who would write down all he knows in his files. How do I look?"

"Look?" I asked stupidly.

"Lacquer holding?"

I examined him with a slight shudder. The lacquer was cracking, and he resembled a six-month corpse.

"You look ghastly," I whispered.

"Careful with that shovel!" yelped Ma the Grub, leaping back in fear, "you almost trapped my shadow inside the grave!"

"Why don't you tie your shadow to your body with a cord, like a sensible person?" Pawnbroker Fang grumbled.

"Splendid. Superstition has its uses," Master Li said happily.

Li Kao slipped from the bushes, and a lacquered lohan drifted eerily through the mist. "Ooooooooooooooooooo," the horrible spectre moaned.

Ma the Grub toppled upon the half-covered coffin in a dead faint, and Pawnbroker Fang dropped to his knees and covered his eyes, and a hollow haunted voice with a thick Tibetan accent vibrated through the night.

"I am Tso Jed Chonu, the Patron of Ginseng. Who dares to steal my Root of Power?"

"Spirit, spare me!" howled Pawnbroker Fang. "I knew that the Ancestress possessed such a root, but I swear that I did not know where it was hidden!"

"Not the lesser root!" roared the Patron of Ginseng. "I mean the Great Root!"

"O Spirit, only one Great Root of Power exists in all the world, and no lowly pawnbroker would dare to touch it," Fang sobbed.

"Who has my root? Where has he hidden it?"

"I dare not say!" Fang wailed.

Tso Jed Chonu lifted his horrible face to Heaven and extended his hand for a lightning bolt.

"The Duke of Ch'in!" screamed pawnbroker Fang. *"It's hidden in his labyrinth!"*

The terrible lohan stood lost in thought for nearly a minute. Then he flicked a finger.

"Begone!"

Ma the Grub's faint was not what it appeared to be. He vaulted from the coffin and passed Pawnbroker Fang in twenty steps as they raced away into the mist. Li Kao was looking thoughtfully down into the grave, and then he got down on his

knees and reached for something. He stood up with an object in his hands, which he turned this way and that in the moonlight, and then he walked back and handed it to Henpecked Ho, who helped in delight. It was a fragment of a clay tablet, and it was covered with the same ancient ideographs as the fragments that Ho had been working on for sixteen years, but it was big enough to contain whole paragraphs.

In the distance we could hear that his wife and her seven fat sisters had joined the Ancestress. "Off with their heads!" they howled, and Henpecked Ho wondered whether his joy might be made complete.

"Li Kao, in your journeys around the estate did you happen to encounter any more old wells?" he asked hopefully.

"I would advise using an axe," said Master Li.

"An axe. Yes, an axe by all means."

We started off again, toward the wall beside the well. Li Kao hooted like an owl, and a dog replied with three yelps and a howl. We said our farewells to Henpecked Ho, rather tearfully on my part, and Li Kao climbed upon my back. The patch in the wall was now a cleverly painted piece of canvas, and I pulled it aside and raced across the empty corridor. As I began to climb a rope ladder up the side of the opposite wall, I glanced back and saw that Henpecked Ho was holding the precious clay tablet in one hand while his other hand wielded an imaginary axe.

"Chop-chop!" he chanted happily. "Chop-chop-chop-chop-chop!"

The mist swallowed him up, and I swung down the other side to Cut-Off-Their-Balls Wang and his scum of the earth. It had been twenty years since they had enjoyed a windfall like the funeral of Fainting Maid, and they begged Master Li to stay as their leader. We had other things to do. I was off like the wind, racing across the hills toward the village of Ku-fu, while Master Li rode upon my back clutching the Root of Power.

A Tale I Will Thee Tell

It was early afternoon, and dust danced in the sunlight that filtered into the monastery. The only sounds came from Li Kao and the abbot as they prepared the essence, and from bird songs that drifted with the breeze through the windows. The children had not moved so much as an eyelash since we had left, and the bonzes had been able to do no more for them than to bathe them and move them to different positions at regular intervals. It was hard to believe that the small pale bodies could still show faint vital signs, and the parents were as silent as the children.

An alchemist's stove burned beneath a bubbling vial of sugared water, in which Master Li had placed the Root of Power. The water began to turn orange, and the ginseng root took on a copperish-orange color that was almost translucent, like amber. Master Li moved the root to a fresh vial that was filled with mild rice wine. The abbot heated the liquid, and as it slowly bubbled down Master Li replaced it with the orange liquid from the first vial. Then the level of the liquid lowered until the root was barely covered, and the liquid turned saffron, and Master Li sealed the vial and placed it in a pan of boiling water. Both the liquid and the root began to turn orange-black, and then jet black. Only a small puddle of liquid remained, and Master Li removed the vial from the pan and opened the seal. An incredible fresh and pungent aroma filled the room, like a whole forest of mountain herbs just after a rain.

That's all there is to it, and now we will see what we will see," he said calmly.

The abbot and Li Kao walked from bed to bed. The abbot parted the children's lips and Li Kao dipped the blackened root into the liquid and carefully applied three drops to each tongue. Three times the treatment was repeated, and there was just enough of the ginseng essence to go around.

We waited while the sounds of chickens and cows and water buffaloes drifted upon the breeze, and willows brushed their branches against the gray stone walls, and a woodpecker hammered in the garden.

Color was returning to the pale faces. The bedcovers began to lift and fall with strong regular breathing, and warmth flushed the cold limbs. Fang's Fawn sighed, and a wide smile spread across the face of Bone Helmet. All the children began to smile happily, and with a sense of humble awe I realized that I had witnessed a medical miracle. Parents wept for joy as they embraced their sons and daughters, and the grandparents danced, and the bonzes ran to the ropes and swung lustily up and down as they rang every bell in the monastery. The abbot was dancing a jig while he bellowed, *"Namo Kuanshiyin Boddhisattva Mahasattva!"* which is how good Buddhists say "hallelujah."

Only Li Kao remained unmoved. He walked from bed to bed, examining each child with analytical coldness, and then he signaled for me to pry Big Hong loose from his son. He bent over the boy and began testing his pulse: first the left wrist for the functions of the heart, liver, kidneys, small intestine, gall bladder, and ureter; then the right wrist for the lungs, stomach, parta ulta, large intestine, spleen, and vital parts. He beckoned for the abbot to come and repeat the same process and compare results.

The abbot's face turned puzzled, and then anxious, and then desperate. He ran for his pins and began testing acupuncture and pain points, with no reaction whatsoever from the children. Little Hong's color remained high, and his pulse remained strong, and the happy smile remained on his lips, but when Master Li lifted one of his arms and released it, the arm remained suspended in air. He moved the arm to different positions, and it stayed precisely where he placed it. The abbot grabbed Fawn and shook her violently, and she did not even register a change in her pulse.

Li Kao straightened up and slowly walked back to the table and stared blankly down at the empty alchemist's vial. All eyes were fixed on him. He was immeasurably weary, and I could tell that in his tiredness he was struggling to think of words that would soften the fact that there is no such thing as an almost miracle. The Root of Power had almost done it, but it simply wasn't strong enough.

I couldn't bear it if his eyes turned to mine. I knew that he had only one thing to tell me, and the words of the ancient Tibetan text echoed in my mind. "Only one treatment is effective, and this will succeed only if the physician has access to the rarest and mightiest of all healing agents, the Great Root of Power." I saw the terrified face of Pawnbroker Fang as he swore that only one Great Root existed in all the world, and I heard him scream, "The Duke of Ch'in! It's hidden in his labyrinth!" Even an ignorant country boy knew that the Duke of Ch'in was ten thousand times more dangerous than the Ancestress and that copper coins do not purchase suicide. If

I went after the Great Root, it would be on my own, and never in history had anyone returned alive from the duke's labyrinth.

I turned and walked rapidly out the door and down the maze of corridors that I knew like the back of my hand and then I jumped from a low window to the grass below and began running across the hills.

I had no goal or purpose whatsoever, or perhaps I did in that I was subconsciously saying farewell to the village of Ku-fu. All I knew was that when I am depressed or frightened, I must do something physical, which is all I am good at, and if I keep at it long enough, I can usually forget my cares. I ran for hours through the hills and fields and forest, and lonely dogs began to follow me. I had quite a pack of them at my heels when my feet took me up a tiny winding path to a dense clump of shrubbery on a hillside, and I got down on my knees and wriggled through a tunnel into a small cave. The dogs squeezed in after me, and we sat down upon piles of bones.

They were called dragon bones, because it had once been believed that dragons periodically shed their bones as snakes shed their skins, but they actually were the shoulder bones of domestic animals that had been used for prophecy. Scapulimancy is very ancient, and the abbot had told me that the oracle bones of An-yang are the only solid proof that the semi-mythological Shang Dynasty had actually existed.

Do other people revert to childhood when they are frightened? I know that I did. The cave had been headquarters for youthful desperadoes when I was a small boy, and we had brought all important questions to the infallible dragon bones. Now I lit a fire in the old brazier and placed the poker in it. The dogs crowded around me and watched with interest while I searched for a bone with a smooth unmarked side. I wrote Yes on the left and No on the right, and I cleared my throat.

"O Dragon, will I find the Great Root of Power in the labyrinth of the Duke of Ch'in and get out of there alive?" I whispered hoarsely.

I wrapped my hand in an old piece of horsehide and picked up the hot poker. The point sizzled as it bored into the bone, and the crack started slowly, lifting toward the answer. Then it split neatly in half, and the left crack shot up and speared Yes while the right half impaled No. I stared at the message. I would find the root, but wouldn't live to tell the tale? I would live to tell the tale, but wouldn't find the root? I was quite upset until it occurred to me that I was no longer ten years old, and I blushed bright red.

"Idiot," I muttered.

The sun had set. Moonbeams reached into the cave and touched my left hand, and the small scar on my wrist gleamed like silver. I threw back my head and laughed. The childhood friends who had passed the knife around the circle as we became blood brothers would have died from envy had they known that the skeleton of Number Ten Ox was destined to rattle in the duke's mysterious labyrinth, and I

hugged a few dogs as I solemnly chanted the sacred vow of the Seven Bloody Bandits of the Dragon Bones Cave.

"Bat shit, rat shit, three-toed-sloth shit, bones and blades and bloody oath writ—"

"Now that has real merit," a voice said approvingly. "It beats the scholar's oath by a mile and a half."

The dogs barked excitedly as Master Li crawled into the cave. He sat down and looked around.

"Scapulimancy was a racket," he observed. "With a little practice a soothsayer could make a bone crack any way he wanted to, or jump through a hoop, for that matter. Did you ever cheat when you were a boy?"

"It would have spoiled our game," I mumbled.

"Very wise," he said. "The abbot, who is also very wise, told me that I would find you here, and if not, I should simply sit and wait. Don't be ashamed of reliving your childhood, Ox, because all of us must do it now and then in order to maintain our sanity."

He was carrying a large flask of wine, which he extended to me.

"Have a drink, and a tale I will thee tell," he said.

I sipped and choked on the fiery liquid. Li Kao reclaimed the flask and swallowed about a pint.

"It was a dark and stormy night," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "A cold wind howled, and lightning flickered across the sky like the tongues of snakes, and thunder roared like dragons, and rain fell in torrents. Piercing through the gale came the sound of wheels and hoofbeats, followed by the most dreaded sound in all China: the high-pitched hunting horns of the soldiers of the Duke of Ch'in."

This time I choked without benefit of wine, and Li Kao pounded my back in a kindly fashion.

"A mule was pulling a buggy down a mountain path at a suicidal rate, and a man and a woman were bouncing upon the seat," he said. "The woman was nine months pregnant, and she clutched a large burlap bag while the man wielded a buggy whip. Once more the terrible horns sounded behind them, and then a volley of arrows shot into the night. The mule staggered and fell, and the buggy crashed into a ditch. Apparently the soldiers were after the bag that the woman carried, because the man tried to take it from her so that the soldiers would attack him while she escaped, but the woman was equally brave and refused to relinquish the bag, and they were tugging back and forth when the second volley of arrows reached them. The man fell back mortally wounded, and the woman staggered away with the shaft of an arrow protruding from beneath her left shoulder blade, and the rain mercifully covered the small determined figure as she crawled up the winding path that led to the Monastery of Sh'u."

Master Li hoisted the flask and drank thirstily. I had no idea why he was telling me the story, but at least he was taking my mind off my troubles.

"The arrow was her passport," he said. "It was stamped with the tiger emblem of the Duke of Ch'in, and the Monastery of Sh'u hated the Duke of Ch'in. They did all they could for her, and with the first faint light of dawn the tiny wail of a newborn babe lifted above the walls. The abbot and the midwife had worked a small miracle to save the child, but nothing could be done for the mother.

"'Brave Soul,' the abbot whispered, wiping the sweat from her fevered brow. 'Brave rebel against the evil Duke of Ch'in.'

"The midwife lifted the wailing child. 'A thousand blessings, my lady, for you have given birth to a healthy son!' she said.

"The dying woman's nostrils twitched, and she opened her eyes. With an immense effort she lifted a hand and pointed to the midwife.

"'Kao,' she panted. 'Li…Li…Li…Kao….'"

I jerked up my head and looked wide-eyed at Master Li, who winked at me.

"Tears blurred the abbot's eyes. 'I hear, my daughter,' he sniffled. 'Your son shall be named Li Kao.'

"'Kao!' the woman gasped. 'Li…Li…Li…Kao….'

"'I understand, my daughter,' the abbot sobbed. 'I shall raise Li Kao as my own son, and I shall place his tiny feet upon the True Path. He shall be instructed in the Five Virtues and Excellent Doctrines, and at the end of his blameless life his spirit shall surely pass through the Gates of the Great Void into the Blessed Regions of Purified Semblance.'"

Master Li swallowed another pint and offered me another sip, which produced the same choking result.

"The woman's eyes blazed with a strong emotion that strangely resembled fury," he said, "but her strength was spent. Her eyes closed, and her hand fell limply to her side, and her soul departed to the Yellow Springs Beneath the Earth. The midwife was greatly moved, and when she whipped a small goatskin flask from her robe and drank deeply, the smell of the stuff brought a cold chill to the abbot's heart. That revolting odor could only come from the finest paint remover and worst wine ever invented: Kao-liang. Repeat: *Kao-liang*. Was it possible that the dying woman had not been naming a baby but demanding a snort? It was indeed possible, and it further developed that she had not been pursued by the duke's soldiers because she was an heroic rebel, but because she and her husband had stolen the regimental payroll. My parents were the most notorious crooks in China, and my mother could have escaped quite easily if she had not tried to battle my father for the loot."

Master Li shook his head wonderingly.

"Ox, heredity is a remarkable thing. I never knew my parents, yet at the tender age of five I stole the abbot's silver belt buckle. When I was six I made off with his jade ink stone. On my eighth birthday I stole the gold tassels from the abbot's best hat, and I still take pride in the feat because he happened to be wearing the hat at the time. When I was eleven I exchanged the abbot's bronze incense burners for a couple of jars of wine and got royally drunk in the Alley of Flies, and at thirteen I borrowed his silver candlesticks and tiptoed into the Alley of Four Hundred Forbidden Delights. *Youth!*" cried Master Li. "How sweet yet sadly swift pass the halcyon days of our innocence."

He buried his nose in his wine flask again, and burped comfortably.

"The abbot of the Monastery of Sh'u was truly heroic," he said. "He had vowed to raise me as his own, and he kept his word, and so well did he pound an education into my head that I eventually did quite well in my *chin-shih* examination. When I left the monastery, it was not in pursuit of scholarship, however, but in pursuit of an unparalleled career in crime. It was quite a shock for me to discover that crime was so easy that it was boring. I reluctantly turned to scholarship, and by the accident of handing in some good papers I was entombed in the Forest of Culture Academy as a research fellow, and I escaped from that morgue by bribing the court eunuchs to get me an appointment as a military strategist. I managed to lose a few battles in the approved manner, and then I became one of the emperor's wandering persuaders, and then Governor of Yu, and it was in the last occupation that the light finally dawned. I was trying to get enough evidence to hang the loathsome Dog-Meat General of Wu-san, but he was so slippery that I couldn't prove a thing. Fortunately the Yellow River was flooding again, and I managed to convince the priests that the only way to appease the river god was through the custom of the ancients. So the Dog-Meat General disappeared beneath the waves tied to a gray horse—I was sorry about the horse, but it was the custom—and I tendered my resignation. Solving crime, I had belatedly discovered, was at least a hundred times more difficult than committing it, so I hung the sign of a half-closed eye above my door and I have never regretted it. I might add that I have also never left a case half-finished."

I gulped noisily, and I suppose that the hope in my eyes was shining as brightly as the moon.

"Why do you think I've been telling you this?" said Master Li. "I have a very good reason to be angry at the Duke of Ch'in, since one of his ancestors killed my parents, and if nothing else, my various careers have uniquely prepared me for the task of stealing ginseng roots."

He patted my shoulder.

"Besides, I'd take you for a great-grandson any day," he said. "I would never dream of allowing you to go out on your own to be slaughtered. Get some sleep, and we'll leave at dawn."

Tears blurred my eyes. Master Li called to the dogs and crawled from the cave, and they gamboled happily around him as he danced down the path toward the monastery, waving his wine flask. The high-pitched four-tone liquid-voweled song of High Mandarin drifted back upon the night breeze.

Among the flowers, with a flask of wine,
I drink all alone—no one to share.
Raising my flask, I welcome the moon,
And my shadow joins us, making a threesome.

As I sing, the moon seems to sway back and forth.
As I dance, my shadow goes flopping about.
As long as we're sober, we'll enjoy one another,
And when we get drunk, we'll go our own ways.

Thus we'll pursue our own avatars,
And we'll all meet again in the River of Staaaaaaars!

I wished that I could have seen him when he was ninety. Even now his leaps and capers were magnificent in the moonlight.

The Flute, The Ball, And The Bell

Of Castles and Key Rabbits

At the suggestion of the abbot I will explain for the benefit of barbarians that my country is Chung-kuo, which can mean Central Country or Middle Kingdom, whichever one prefers. The point is that it is the country in the exact center of the world, and the only country that lies directly beneath Heaven. "China" is a barbarian invention that was coined in awe and honor of the first Duke of Ch'in, who took over the empire in the Year of the Rat 2,447 (221 B.C.). He was a remarkable reformer. Mass murderers are usually reformers, the abbot tells me, although not necessarily the other way around.

"We are being strangled by our past!" roared the Duke of Ch'in. "We must make a new beginning!"

What he had in mind was the suppression of every previous philosophy of government and the imposition of one of his own, called Legalism. The abbot says that the famous first sentence of the Book of Legalism is, "Punishment produces force, force produces strength, strength produces awe, awe produces virtue; thus virtue has its origin in punishment," and that there is little need to read the second sentence.

The duke began his reforms by burning every book in the empire, with the exception of certain technical and divinatory works, and since the scholars were burned along with the books, there were vast areas of knowledge that vanished from the face of the earth. He disapproved of certain religions; temples and priests and worshippers went up in flames. He disapproved of frivolous fables; professional storytellers were beheaded, along with vast numbers of bewildered grandmothers. The leading Confucians were decoyed into a ravine and crushed by falling boulders, and the penalty for possession of one line of the Analects was death by slow dismemberment. The problem with burning and beheading and crushing and dismembering is that it is time consuming, and the duke's solution was a masterstroke.

"I shall build a wall!" cried the Duke of Ch'in.

The Great Wall of China did not begin with the duke, nor did it end with the duke, but it was the duke who first used it for the purpose of murder. Anyone who disagreed with him was marched away to the desolate north, and men died by the millions as they labored on the public works project that insiders call the Longest Cemetery in the World. More millions died as they built the duke's private residence. The Castle of the Labyrinth covered seventy acres, and it was actually thirty-six separate castles connected by a labyrinth of underground passageways. (The idea was that he would have thirty-six imperial bedrooms to choose from, and assassins would never know where he slept.) Beneath the artificial labyrinth was a real one, running deep through a sheer cliff, and it was said that it was the home of a horrible monster that devoured the screaming victims of the Duke of Ch'in. True or not, the thousands of people who were tossed into it were never seen again.

The duke produced another masterstroke when he had the finest craftsmen in the empire fashion a great golden mask of a snarling tiger, which he wore on all public occasions. His successors continued to wear it for more than eight hundred years. Did a duke have watery eyes, a weak chin, and facial tics? What his subjects saw was a terrifying mask, "the Tiger of Ch'in," and the abbot explained that the barbarian rulers of Crete had used the mask of a bull for the same reason.

Mystery and terror are the bulwarks of tyranny, and for fourteen years China was one vast scream, but then the duke made the mistake of raising taxes to the point where the peasants had to choose between starvation or rebellion. He had confiscated their weapons, but he was not wise enough in the ways of peasants to confiscate their bamboo groves. A sharpened bamboo spear is something to avoid, and when the duke saw several million of them marching in his direction he hastily abandoned the empire and barricaded himself in the Castle of the Labyrinth. There he was invulnerable, and since he still controlled the largest private army in the country it was tacitly agreed that Ch'in would exist as a state within the state.

Emperors came and emperors went, but the Dukes of Ch'in seemed destined to go on forever, crouched and snarling in the most monstrous monument to raw power known to man.

The Castle of the Labyrinth lies in ruins now, a great gray mass of shattered slabs and twisted iron scattered across the crest of a cliff overlooking the Yellow Sea. There the tide is the strongest in China, and the tumbled stones shudder with the force of the waves. Vines have covered the splintered steel gates, and lizards with rainbow bellies and turquoise eyes cling to the fragments of walls, and spiders scuttle through the eternal shadows cast by banana and bamboo. The spiders that currently occupy the castle are huge, hairy, and harmless. The previous occupants were equally grotesque but not so harmless, and when I first saw the Castle of the Labyrinth it was standing in all its glory.

The barge that we traveled on was inching through a dense morning fog toward the junction with the Yellow Sea, and harsh commanding voices seemed to be shouting right in my ears. The air vibrated with great metallic crashes and the clash of a thousand weapons, and the heavy tread of marching feet. Then the fog began to lift, and my eyes lifted with it up the side of a sheer cliff to the most powerful fortress in the world; vast, moated, turreted, impregnable. I stared in horror at towers that scraped the clouds, and at immense steel gates that glittered like terrible fangs, and at a central drawbridge that could accommodate four squadrons of cavalry riding abreast. The great stone walls were so thick that the men who patrolled on top on horseback looked like ants riding small spiders, and ironshod hooves dislodged rocks that tumbled down the cliff and splashed in the water around the barge. One of them banged upon the roof of the cabin where Li Kao was sleeping off an overdose of wine, and he stumbled out on deck and gazed up, rubbing his eyes.

"Revolting architecture, isn't it?" he said with a yawn. "The first duke had no aesthetic sense whatsoever. What's the matter, Ox? A slight hangover?"

"Just a mild headache," I said in a tiny terrified voice.

As the fog continued to fade away, I gazed fearfully toward what must surely be the gloomiest and ghastliest city on earth, and I began to question my sanity when I heard the happy songs of fishermen and sniffed a breeze that was fragrant with a billion blossoms. And then the fog lifted completely and I stared in disbelief at a city so lovely that it might have been the setting of a fairy tale.

"Strange, isn't it?" said Master Li. "Ch'in is beautiful beyond compare, and it is also the safest city in all China. The reason, oddly enough, is greed."

He took a morning-after sip of wine and belched contentedly.

"Every single one of the first duke's successors has lived only for money, and at first their methods of acquiring it were crude but effective," he explained. "Once a year the reigning duke would choose a village at random, burn it to the ground, and decapitate the inhabitants. Then the duke and his army would set forth upon the annual tax trip. The severed heads led the way, mounted upon pikes, and the eagerness with which peasants lined up to pay taxes was a source of great gratification to the Dukes of Ch'in. Sooner or later an enlightened duke was bound to appear, however, and it is said that the one who has gone down in history as the Good Duke suddenly jumped to his feet during a council with his ministers, shot a hand into the air, and bellowed, 'Corpses cannot *pay* taxes!' This divine revelation produced a change of tactics."

Li Kao offered me some wine, but I declined.

"The Good Duke and his successors continued to murder peasants for fun and profit, and the annual tax trip continues to this day, but the wealthy were allowed to fill the dukes' coffers as a matter of free choice," he explained. "The Good Duke

simply transformed his gloomy coastal town into the greatest and most expensive pleasure city on earth. Ox, every luxury and vice known to man is available at Ch'in at exorbitant prices, and the cost is more than offset by the fact that the dukes will not tolerate crime, which might divert coins from their pockets. As a result the rich do not have to hire large private armies of guards, and in Ch'in and in Ch'in alone a wealthy man can lead a carefree existence. So long as a man spends freely, he has nothing to fear from the rulers of the Castle of the Labyrinth, and it is only a slight exaggeration to say that you and I are about to enter Paradise on Earth."

I will describe the city later on, but our first task was to find out who might be able to get us into the labyrinth and out again, and we discovered him inside an hour after we docked.

Every place of business was equipped with an iron chest with the duke's tiger emblem stamped upon it. Half of the coins from every transaction went into the chest and half into the proprietor's cash box, and somebody had to collect the duke's share. The position of Assessor of Ch'in had to rank very high among the most miserable occupations on earth, and the fellow who was stuck with it was universally known as the Key Rabbit—inescapably so, because he was a cringing little man with pink-rimmed eyes and a long pink nose that twitched in permanent terror, and as he pattered through the streets he was festooned with jangling chains of keys.

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!" the poor fellow whimpered as he trotted into wineshops and brothels and gambling dens. "Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!" he wailed as he trotted back out again.

He was followed by a platoon of soldiers and two carts, one to hold the loot and the other to hold the massive scrolls that listed every rule and regulation in the duke's domain. Magistrates could impose sentences, but only the Assessor could impose fines, and it was generally agreed that if the Key Rabbit missed a point of law that cost the duke one penny he would shortly be missing his head.

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!" he whined as he trotted into the Lucky Gambler Cricket Fighting Arena. He searched through his thousands of keys for the right one, unlocked the chest, counted the coins, checked the records to see if the amount was suspiciously low, conferred with spies to confirm that no cheating had taken place, relocked the chest, and pattered down the street to the next place of business. "Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!" he whimpered, which was a reasonable comment because if the duke's share was off by a penny, his head would be off.

As the sun set over the Castle of the Labyrinth the Key Rabbit pattered up the path to the duke's treasure chambers, where clerks counted the coins, and then as often as not he would be forced to spend the night recounting the loot to make sure that the clerks hadn't pocketed a penny. Who had to accompany the Duke of Ch'in on the annual tax trip and determine how much was owed by each village? The Key

Rabbit, of course, and it was common knowledge that if he failed to squeeze the final grain of rice from the peasants he would fail to keep his head.

That should have been enough grief for anyone, but not for the Key Rabbit. In a moment of raving insanity, he had married.

"Don't misunderstand me," said the old lady who was filling our ears with the gossip of the town. "Lotus Cloud is a dear, sweet country girl with the kindest heart in the world, but she was not prepared for the seductions of city life, and she has fallen victim to insatiable greed. Her husband, who has not one penny to call his own, cannot even relax when his wife takes a wealthy lover, because she is sure to bankrupt the fellow in a week. The Key Rabbit has decided that he committed some horrible crime in a previous incarnation, and he is being punished by marriage to the most expensive woman in the whole world."

For once my ignorant mind was keeping pace with that of Li Kao.

"The key to the labyrinth is the Key Rabbit, and the key to the Key Rabbit is his wife," said Master Li as we strolled away. "I'd do it myself if I were ninety, but it appears that Lotus Cloud will be your department. You may console yourself with the thought that the most expensive woman in the world is likely to be the most beautiful."

"Master Li, I shall do my duty," I said bravely.

"Yes indeed," he sighed. "Ox, you aren't going to make much of an impression upon a walking case of insatiable greed with what's left of Miser Shen's gold coins. We must get our hands on a fortune."

The Art of Porcupine Cookery

Li Kao led the way to the customs shed, and an hour later he found what he wanted. Everything that was shipped in or out of the port of Ch'in was heavily taxed, and an enormous fat merchant was paying an export tax that amounted to an emperor's ransom. A small army of guards—a rare sight in Ch'in—was positioned around four rectangular wooden cases, and since it would be several hours before his ship sailed, the merchant waddled away to enjoy a light lunch.

"Ox, follow that fellow and come back and tell me what he eats," said Master Li.

"What he eats?"

"What he eats."

When I returned I was rather shaken. "Master Li, you won't believe this, but that merchant began with four large tureens of pimento and dumpling soup," I said. "Then he devoured three bowls of mussel stew, a pound of pickled mallows, two pounds of steamed snails, three servings of soft-shelled crab, two plates of sweetmeats, ten honey cakes, and a watermelon. The proprietor wondered whether the esteemed guest might care for six or seven quarts of peaches in heavy syrup, but the merchant explained that he was on a diet and would be forced to settle for a gallon of green tea flavored with pine kernels."

"Where is he now?"

"He's having a steam bath and a massage, while two waiters from the restaurant stand ready with a stomach pump."

"Splendid," Master Li said happily. "Come along, Ox. We have to find the most unscrupulous alchemist in town and procure a jar of the Elixir of Eighty Evil Essences, and then we have to buy a coffin."

When the merchant waddled back from the massage parlors a truly pathetic sight met his eyes. I was draped over a coffin, sobbing my heart out, while Li Kao wailed and tore his hair.

"Woe!" I howled.

"The bride of my beloved great-grandson is dead!" howled Master Li.

"Speak to me, my beloved!" I screamed, pounding the coffin lid.

"Ten million maledictions upon the chef who persuaded me to serve porcupine at my great-grandson's wedding feast!" shrieked Master Li.

The merchant was at his side in an instant.

"Porcupine? Did you say porcupine?"

"Porcupine," Master Li sobbed.

"But Venerable Sir, were you not aware that porcupine can be fatal unless properly prepared?"

Li Kao drew himself up affronted. "Do you take me for a fool?" he snapped. "I myself supervised the preparations, and every step was taken according to the instructions of Li Tsening."

"Surely not!" the merchant gasped. "Why, the great Li Tsening wrote *The Book of Porcupine Cookery*!"

"Why do you think I followed his instructions, you idiot?" Master Li shouted.

The merchant's eyes were glazed, and saliva flowed in streams. "Was it young, fresh porcupine?" he whispered.

"Barely one year old, and trapped the day before," Master Li sniffled.

A mighty spasm shook the merchant's vast belly. "From Yushan?" he whispered.

"Straight from the river," sobbed Master Li.

That was too much for the merchant. He tottered over to his guards, opened a large sack, extracted a pickled carp, devoured it noisily, and tottered back.

"The paste!" he gasped. "The paste was made one year before?"

"One year precisely," said Master Li. "Only the purest yellow beans were used."

"You are positive that all black and brown beans were removed? The slightest trace of such imperfection can be fatal!"

All black and brown beans as well as those with purple markings were removed by hand," Master Li said huffily. "The remainder was sifted fifteen times, and carefully scrutinized. I was perfectly aware of the danger!"

"Venerable Sir, I am not accusing you," the merchant said contritely, "but I need scarcely point out that some error must have been made, since your great-grandson's poor bride…ah…. Is it possible that rice flour was used?"

"Don't be an ass, young man!" Master Li said angrily. "Rice flour would have assassinated every single guest at the banquet! Only the pure Hua wheat flour was used, mixed with a little salt and exposed precisely six hours to the sun."

"With a veil to keep out the dust! Dust can be fatal!"

"With a veil to keep out the dust. Then the flour and beans were mixed into the paste and placed into a jar which was in turn covered by an earthenware basin and

sealed with lime, and I need not mention that only pure river water was used, since the slightest trace of well water would have been fatal."

"I cannot understand it," the merchant whispered. "Everything done properly, yet…. Wait! What month was it?"

"Are you a raving lunatic? To prepare porcupine paste in any month but June is to commit suicide!" Master Li yelled.

The merchant had turned very pale. It was dawning on him that unless a flaw could be found, he himself could never safely enjoy the delicacy of all delicacies.

"Extraordinary," he whispered. "Everything done according to the instructions of the great Li Tsening, yet the porcupine proved fatal after all. We must find the error! Venerable Sir, I beg you to describe the precise method by which your chef cooked the porcupine."

It occurred to me that I had become too interested in porcupine cookery to mourn my departed bride properly. "Woe!" I shrieked. "Woe! Woe! Woe!"

Li Kao patted my shoulder. "To think that such tragedy should strike the only one of the great-grandsons who is neither mentally deficient nor morally degenerate," he sniffled. "But you are right; the error must be found. My chef began by removing the eyes, stomach, internal organs, and embryos, if any were present. While he cut the meat into pieces, my poor great-grandson cleaned every clot of blood from each piece with his own noble hands. Then the chef boiled the meat in pure river water—"

"With the skin still attached?"

"With the skin still attached. He then removed the meat from the pot and placed it upon a cutting board—"

"A wooden cutting board?"

"Merciful Buddha, I am perfectly aware of the fact that a metal or ceramic cutting board can be fatal!" Master Li snarled. "My chef picked out every bristle and quill with fine pincers, cut the flesh into smaller pieces—and I assure you that they were square pieces—and sautéed them in pork fat. Then and only then did he mix in the bean paste and fry the mixture in hot oil. He took infinite care to keep dust from the pot, and when he judged the meat to be done, he dipped a paper roll into the sauce and held it to the flame of a candle. Not until the paper caught fire easily did he remove the porcupine from the pot and serve it to the guests."

Not a flaw. Not one single error. The merchant's gluttonous world was crashing around him, and he buried his face in his hands—oddly enough he reminded me of Bright Star when she thought that the Sword Dance had been defiled. His passion was not so noble, but it was equally sincere. Li Kao took the opportunity to lift me to my feet and I wept upon his shoulder while he patted my back.

"How many died?" the merchant whispered.

"Only my bride!" I howled. "Woe! Woe! Woe!"

"She alone among two hundred," Master Li sobbed. "And I myself selected the porcupines! I myself made the bean paste! I myself supervised the preparation of the meat! My beloved great-grandson removed the clots of blood with his own hands! It was he who selected the choicest piece to present to his bride! It was I who—"

"Wait!" cried the merchant. He grabbed my shoulders. "My dear tragic boy," he whispered, "when you cleaned the blood from the meat, what kind of pin did you use?"

I was really quite touched. Li Kao had done all the work to bring the whale alongside, and now he was letting me use the harpoon.

"What kind of…why, I don't remember!" I said.

"You must remember!" the merchant howled. "Was it or was it not a silver pin?"

"Yes, it was," I said thoughtfully. "Now I remember clearly. It was a pin of the purest silver, although it fell to the ground as I came to the final piece of meat, so of course I had to use another one."

"Silver?" he asked breathlessly.

I let the tension mount while I wrinkled my brow in thought. "Gold," I finally said.

The abbot has always warned me against judging by appearances, and the merchant was a classic example. His hoggish appearance suggested self-indulgence at the expense of all else, yet he did not rejoice because his gluttonous world had been saved. Tears streamed down his cheeks and his belly shook with sobs.

"Oh my boy, my poor tragic boy, the slightest contact between porcupine and gold is fatal," he wept. "By the evil curse of some malign spirit, you used gold for that one last piece, and then with loving hands you placed it upon the plate—"

"Of the woman I loved!" I shrieked. "My stupidity has slain my beautiful bride!"

I fell over the coffin in a faint, which allowed me to open the jar of the Elixir of Eighty Evil Essences that was concealed on the other side.

"To think that my beloved great-grandson could have been responsible for such a ghastly death!" Master Li gasped.

"I have often heard of porcupine poisoning, but I confess that I have never seen it," the merchant said in a tiny voice. "Is it very terrible?"

The guards and customs officials had been edging closer, with quivering ears, and they glanced nervously at the coffin.

"She began by breaking out in red spots, which spread until every inch of her skin was covered," Master Li whispered. "Then the red began to turn green."

The Elixir of Eighty Evil Essences was performing splendidly, and an unbelievable stench was lifting from the coffin.

"Gllgghhl" gagged the Chief of Customs.

"Then the ghastly glaring green began to turn black," Master Li whispered.

"Black?" the merchant said, waving fumes from his face.

"Well, to be pedantically accurate, it was a greenish-purplish-yellowish black that tended to run at the edges," Master Li said thoughtfully. "Then the smell began."

"Smell?" said the Chief of Customs, gagging through the noxious cloud.

"I cannot describe that loathsome smell!" Master Li wept. "Guests began to run for their lives, and my beloved great-grandson reached out to touch his bride—oh, how can I describe the horror of that moment? *His fingers actually entered her body, for her smooth and supple skin had become soft jelly from which green and yellow corruption oozed. And the smell, the smell, the hideous toxic stench that caused dogs to collapse in spasms and birds to topple lifelessly from trees….*"

For some reason we appeared to be alone.

A few minutes later we staggered from the customs shed and joined the others, who were heaving their guts out over the rails of the pier. Allow me to inform you that the Elixir of Eighty Evil Essences can make a stone vomit. The merchant, the guards, and the customs officials held a conference and voted to toss us, along with the coffin, into the sea before corruption killed them all, but Li Kao appealed to their patriotism by pointing out that if my bride landed in the sea, she would destroy the Chinese fishing industry for at least three thousand years. A compromise was reached, and they provided us with a wheelbarrow for the coffin, a couple of shovels, and a terrified bonze who led the way to the lepers' cemetery, banging upon a gong and bellowing "Unclean! Unclean!" The bonze took to his heels, and we watched the sails of the merchant's ship appear in the mist as he sped away with his four wooden cases, one of which was a coffin from which the funeral decorations had been removed.

We ripped the funeral decorations from the merchant's case and I pried the lid open. Inside I found a small bag lying upon a canvas cover, and I dumped the contents into my hand and stared in disbelief.

"Pins? Master Li, why would that merchant hire an army of guards to protect some cheap iron pins?"

"Great Buddha, that fellow couldn't possibly have been working alone. He must be the representative for a consortium of the richest companies in China!" Master Li gasped.

I didn't know what he was talking about. Li Kao jerked the canvas cover aside and scooped up a strange object from a pile—we later discovered that there were 270 of them—and began attaching pins to it. The iron practically jumped to the surface, and the next pin stuck to the end of the first one.

"Ten pins," he prayed. "If it will hold ten pins! Seven…eight…nine…ten…eleven…twelve…thirteen…fourteen…fifteen…sixteen…seventeen…."

The eighteenth pin fell to the ground, and Li Kao turned to me with wonder in his eyes.

"Number Ten Ox, barbarian merchants and navies will sell their very souls for Chinese magnetic compasses that are pure enough to hold ten inch-long pins attached end to end, and we have hundreds that are pure enough to hold seventeen! My boy, I have made some hauls in my day, but this is ridiculous," he said gravely. "You and I have just become the two wealthiest men in all China."

Lotus Cloud

The first order of business was to establish our credentials as gentlemen of vast wealth and generosity, and I have a blurred memory of flowers and gongs and incense and silver bells, boat races and dice games and cricket fights, brawls and banquet and tangles of luscious bare limbs. We sailed upon brightly painted brothel barges that floated over azure lakes—and docked at artificial emerald islands where pallid priests with flabby faces and twitching hands sold the strangest things in peculiar pagodas—and we rode through the streets in a palanquin so huge that it was carried by sixty swearing servants. Naked dancing girls were draped around us, and we scooped handfuls of silver coins from a brass-bound chest and hurled them to the adoring mobs that followed our every step.

"Buy clean clothes!" we yelled. "Sweeten your foul breaths with decent wine! Get rid of your loathsome lice! Bathe!"

"Long Live Lord Li of Kao!" the mobs howled. *"Long Live Lord Lu of Yu!"*

I have probably given the impression that I had forgotten the importance of our quest. Such was not the case. Every night I dreamed of the children of Ku-fu, and I began to be tortured by guilt, and it was with immense relief that I heard Master Li say that our status was well enough established and it was time to make our move. He decided that the fastest way to get to the Key Rabbit would be to burn our palace to the ground, since it was rented from the Duke of Ch'in at a ruinous rate, and I was roasting a goose over the embers when the little fellow pattered up.

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!" he wailed. "Regulation 226, paragraph D, subsection B: palaces, rented, accidental destruction thereof—"

"Willful. I found the view boring," Master Li yawned.

"Subsection G: palaces, rented, willful destruction thereof. Full value plus fifty percent, plus firefighting costs, plus wreckage-removal costs, plus triple the normal

fine for disturbing the peace, plus fifty percent of the total for defaming the view provided by the dukes, plus—"

"Stop babbling, you idiot, and give me the grand total!" Master Li roared.

I thought that the little fellow was going to die. He rolled his pink-rimmed eyes toward heaven and screamed: "Nineteen thousand seven hundred and sixty-two pieces of gold!"

Li Kao shrugged and pointed toward a long row of chests. "Take one of the blue ones," he said indifferently. "Actually the blue ones each contain twenty thousand pieces of gold, but Lord Li of Kao and Lord Lu of Yu can scarcely be bothered with change."

The Key Rabbit toppled over backward. It took a few minutes to revive him, but he grasped the possibilities instantly.

"Alas!" he panted. "Lord Li of Kao and Lord Lu of Yu have no place in which to spend the night, and while my humble abode is scarcely suitable…. You see, I will probably have to stay in the castle all night counting the duke's money, and my dear wife will be all alone and unprotected. Women require protection, among other things."

He fell to his knees and began kissing the tips of our sandals. *"Such as pearls,"* he wailed. *"Jade!"* he howled.

"May we offer you some roast goose?" Master Li said not unkindly. "It is Lord Lu of Yu's own recipe, marinated twenty-four hours in the lees of fine wine, with honey and crushed apricots. Lord Lu of Yu, incidentally, is a disciple of Chang Chou, who said that he preferred his own cooking, but other people's wives."

"Joy!" shrieked the Key Rabbit.

❁ ❁ ❁

That night I prepared to meet the most expensive woman in the world. The moon was playing tag with fingers of clouds, and the breeze was warm and fragrant with flowers, and crickets chirped in the shadows of the Key Rabbit's garden. The path of pearls and jade that I had strewn upon the grass sparkled like a reflection of the Great River of Stars, and I found it difficult to breathe as I watched a young woman trot toward me, exclaiming with wonder as she picked up each glittering bauble. Then she got close enough so I could see her clearly.

"Number Ten Ox," I said to myself, "you have been robbed!"

She wasn't even pretty. Lotus Cloud was pure peasant, with big feet, short thick legs, large square hands, and a plain flat face. She stopped short and examined me with her head cocked at an angle, and she looked for all the world like a country girl who was trying to decide whether or not to buy a pet at a fair. I could almost hear her

think, Yes, I'll take this cute thing home with me. And then she grinned.

I cannot describe that grin. It was as though all the hope and joy and love and laughter that there was in the whole world had gathered into a fist that reached out and belted me in the heart, and the next thing I knew I was on my knees with my arms wrapped around her legs and my head pressed against her thighs.

"My surname is Lu and my personal name is Yu, but I am not to be confused with the eminent author of *The Classic of Tea*, and everyone calls me Number Ten Ox," I moaned.

She laughed softly, and her fingers played with my hair.

"I shall call you Boopsie," she said.

The measure of my enchantment may be judged from the fact that I enjoyed being called Boopsie. In fact, I felt like wagging my tail whenever Lotus Cloud came into view.

"Key Rabbit," I said a couple of days later, "your beloved wife is not witty, and she is not wise, and she cannot read or write, and she has no social graces whatsoever, and she isn't even pretty, and I worship the very ground that she walks on."

"That," sighed the Key Rabbit, "is what all her protectors say."

"Master Li, have I lost my mind?" I asked.

"Well, beauty is a ridiculously overrated commodity," he said. "Over the past eighty or ninety years I have known a great many beautiful women, and they've all been the same. A beauty is forced to lie late in her bed in the morning in order to gather strength for another mighty battle with nature. Then, after being bathed and toweled by her maids, she loosens her hair in the Cascade of Teasing Willows style, paints her eyebrows in the Distant Mountain Range style, anoints herself with Nine Bends of the River Diving-Water Perfume, applies rouge, mascara, and eye shadow, covers the whole works with two inches of the Powder of the Nonchalant Approach, squeezes into a plum-blossom-patterned tunic with matching skirt and stockings, adds four or five pounds of jewelry, looks into the mirror for any visible sign of humanity and is relieved to find none, checks to make sure that her makeup has hardened into an immovable mask, sprinkles herself with the Hundred Ingredients Perfume of the Heavenly Spirits who Descended in the Rain Shower, and minces with tiny steps toward the new day, which, like any other day, consists of gossip and giggles."

"That's part of it!" I cried. "Lotus Cloud hops out of bed and plunges her head into a pail of cold water, bellows *'Aaarrrggghhh!'* runs a comb through her hair, and looks around to see if there's anyone handy who feels like making love. If such is the case, she hops back into bed. If not, she jumps into whatever clothes are lying around and leaps out the door—or window, it doesn't matter—to see what wonders the new day will bring, and since she views the world with the delighted eyes of a child, the day is bound to be marvelous."

"That," sighed the Key Rabbit, "is what all her protectors say. How I wish that I could afford my dear wife for myself."

"*Nobody* can afford your dear wife," Master Li snarled.

He had a point, although Lotus Cloud was not promiscuous in her greed. At an early age the dear girl had become a specialist. Diamonds did not interest her. Emeralds bored her to tears. I once gave her a casket filled with gold and she promptly handed it to a friend.

"Why did you do that?" I asked.

"Because she wanted it, Boopsie," said Lotus Cloud, and it was clear that she thought I was an idiot to ask such a stupid question.

Ah, but fill that same casket with pearls and jade! Never before or since have I known anything to match Lotus Cloud's reaction to a gift of pearls and jade. Her eyes grew wide with wonder, and her hands reached out reverently. A soul-shaking desire wracked her whole body, and her face was transfigured by indescribable longing. The sheer force of her greed would practically knock you off your feet, and she would fling herself into your arms and vow to adore you throughout eternity.

A man will do practically anything to get a reaction like that, and that was the trouble. Within ten minutes Lotus Cloud would forget all about your wonderful gift, and if you wanted to produce another reaction, you had to produce another casket of pearls and jade.

"Like all classic swindles it is simplicity itself," Master Li said with grudging respect.

"I greatly admire her technique, even as it drives me toward bankruptcy," I said.

"That," sighed the Key Rabbit, "is what all her protectors say."

Li Kao was making splendid progress with the Key Rabbit. It was only a matter of time before he would be able to persuade the duke's assessor to sneak us into the labyrinth and get us out again, but in the meantime I had to keep Lotus Cloud supplied with pearls and jade. Our chests of gold were melting like snow in August, and one terrible morning I stared in disbelief at the tiny handful of coins that was all that remained of the largest private fortune in China.

"Ox, don't look so guilty," Master Li said comfortingly. "The dear girl's pigeon-plucking technique is quite remarkable. Let's go pluck a few pigeons ourselves."

Not long afterward a splendid fellow named Liverlips Loo, who was attired as the major-domo of a great house, banged a gold-tipped staff against the door of the stingiest miser in town. Behind Liverlips Loo was a palatial palanquin, upon which rode two elegant aristocrats, a cart loaded with garbage, and a goat.

"Throw open the doors!" roared Liverlips Loo. "Ten thousand blessings have

descended upon you, for Lord Li of Kao and Lord Lu of Yu have condescended to rest in your miserable hovel!"

I have decided that the problem with poetic justice is that it never knows when to stop.

The door crashed open and we stared at a gentleman who owned six different houses in six different cities, and who was blessed with a pair of glittering little pig eyes, a bald and mottled skull, a sharp curving nose like a parrot's beak, the loose flabby lips of a camel, and two drooping elephant ears from which sprouted thick tufts of coarse gray hair.

"What have you done with my five hundred pieces of gold?" screamed Miser Shen.

Liverlips Loo escaped quite easily, but when Li Kao and I jumped from the palanquin we landed on top of the Key Rabbit and his platoon of soldiers. Somehow we became entangled in a chain that was around the Key Rabbit's neck, and he tugged frantically at his end. "Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!" he wailed, and I assume that he thought that we were trying to steal the key to the duke's front door. The single key on the end of the chain was shaped like a flower, with sixteen tiny points that had to make contact with precisely the right amount of force before the lock would open, and a pressure lock costs several fortunes. The soldiers descended upon us. We were hauled off to court, but since Liverlips Loo had taken the cart and the goat with him, there was no evidence. Miser Shen could do little more than bellow accusations, but Miser Shen wasn't the problem. The problem was that we were no longer in a position to pay the mandatory fine for disturbing the peace, and the penalty for not paying a fine in the duke's city was death.

"Woe!" wailed the Key Rabbit. "Woe! Woe! Woe! To think that I should be partly responsible for the decapitation of my dearest friend and the most generous protector that my dear wife has ever had!"

Eventually he calmed down enough to find a bright side.

"Do not worry about Lotus Cloud," he told me comfortingly. "I have discovered that Miser Shen is the wealthiest man in town. I will invite him to tea, and unless my dear wife has suddenly lost her touch, she will be rolling in pearls and jade."

"Splendid," I said.

There was no room in my heart for any more misery. Whenever I closed my eyes I saw the children on Ku-fu lying as still as death, and the abbot praying, and the parents telling each other not to worry because Master Li and Number Ten Ox were sure to return with the wonderful root that could cure *ku* poisoning.

The Labyrinth

It was to see Lotus Cloud one more time before we faced the headman's axe. We were chained to a long line of condemned convicts and marched through the streets, and the mobs that had sung the praises of Lord Li of Kao and Lord Lu of Yu gathered around us once more, to jeer and throw garbage. Lotus Cloud somehow made her way through the crowd. She slipped past the soldiers and ran up to me and tossed something that settled around my neck. I couldn't see what it was, and the jeers were so loud that I could only hear part of her message.

"Once when he was drunk, my miserable husband told me…. Boopsie, I stole this because if the duke is playful…." Soldiers were dragging her away. "Follow the dragon!" Lotus Cloud yelled. "You must follow the dragon!"

Then she was gone, and I had no idea what she was talking about. The soldiers lashed the mob out of the way, and we were marched up the hill to the Castle of the Labyrinth.

I was so terrified that I have no memory at all of approaching the castle. Gradually I became aware of the fact that we were crossing the great drawbridge and passing through immense steel gates, and we entered a courtyard that was vast enough to hold several thousand soldiers. The murderous iron bolts of countless crossbows pointed at us through slits in the massive walls, and above us smoke and flames were lifting from vats of boiling oil. The clash of weapons and the roar of harsh voices and the tramp of marching feet was deafening, and when we entered a maze of long stone tunnels an infinity of echoes battered my ears. Ten times we reached checkpoints where guards demanded secret signs and passwords, and then iron gates crashed open and whips lashed us as we marched through. A dull gleam of light was ahead of us, and soldiers lined the walls, and I realized that we were approaching a door of solid gold.

It swung silently open. The soldiers prodded us across an acre of polished lapis lazuli toward a huge golden throne, and I trembled with fear as I approached the

Duke of Ch'in. The hideous mask of a snarling tiger loomed larger and larger, and the duke was so big that the breadth of his shoulders matched the bulk of his mask. He wore gloves of gold mesh and a long cloak of feathers, and I saw with a shudder that the feathers at the bottom of the cloak were darkly stained. The chopping block and the basin that caught the heads and blood were almost directly at his feet, and apparently he enjoyed the view.

Soldiers lined all four walls, and two rows of dignitaries flanked the throne. The executioner was a huge Mongol who was stripped to the waist, and his glittering axe was almost as big as he was. A bonze administered the last rites, and it seemed to me that the ceremony was proceeding with unseemly haste. The chain that linked the convicts together was unlocked, although our hands remained manacled behind us, and the first condemned man was shoved forward. The sergeant at arms bellowed the charge against him and the death sentence, and soldiers neatly kicked the poor fellow's feet out from under him so that he fell with his neck stretched across the chopping block. The bonze muttered the shortest prayer that I had ever heard, and the sergeant at arms asked if the victim had any last words. The condemned man began a desperate plea for mercy, which the bonze cut short by nodding to the executioners.

The great axe lifted, and the vast room was hushed. There was a metallic blur and a dull thud, and blood spurted and a head landed in the stone basin with a sickly wet splash. The dignitaries applauded politely, and the Duke of Ch'in uttered a little whinny of pleasure.

To my amazement Li Kao fainted, or so I thought until I realized he was using the opportunity to reach his left sandal. He slid half of the heel aside and came up with a couple of lock picks, and then the swearing soldiers jerked him back to his feet. Li Kao managed to slip one of the tiny picks into my hands.

"Ox, we can't possibly escape from here," he whispered. "I'm afraid that we can do nothing for the children of your village, but one of the Dukes of Ch'in killed my parents, and if you have no objection, we will try to slit this bastard's throat."

I had no objection, but the lock pick was a bit too small and it was difficult to work with it while my hands were manacled behind my back. Again and again the great axe flashed through the air, and the applause of the dignitaries was nearly continuous, and the line of condemned men was steadily moving toward the throne. The duke was laughing as the heads splashed into the basin and the soldiers joked with the sergeant at arms as they carried the carcasses away. Sometimes the legs were still twitching, and spurts of blood from the severed necks caused sticky red puddles to slide across the floor, joined by dark trickles from the overflowing basin. The feathers at the bottom of the duke's robe were dripping with scarlet. Then only one prisoner stood between me and the axe. He was a middle-aged man,

slim and slightly stooped, and he had been viewing the massacre with an air of ironic calm.

"Chin Shengt'an, who dared to protest the peasant taxes imposed by the Duke of Ch'in. The sentence is death!" roared the sergeant at arms.

That must have taken incredible courage. I was later to learn that Chin Shengt'an was one of the greatest writers and critics in the empire, and that his name meant "Sigh of the Sage," because when he was born a deep sigh was heard from the Temple of Confucius. His feet were kicked out from under him. His neck lay on the block, and the bonze mumbled a prayer, and the sergeant at arms asked if he had any last words. The ironic eyes lifted.

"Eat pickled turnips with yellow beans," he said politely. "It gives the taste of walnut."

I deeply regret that I never had the opportunity to know him. The axe flashed through the air, and the head of the man who had dared to protest an unfair tax joined the others in the basin. The soldiers shoved me forward.

"Lord Lu of Yu, who failed to pay his fine for disturbing the peace. The sentence is death!" roared the sergeant at arms.

My feet were kicked from under me and my neck landed neatly upon the block. The ironic eyes of Shengt'an looked up at me from the basin, and while the bonze mumbled the prayer I tried to think of an exit line that would be worthy of his.

"Any last words?" asked the sergeant at arms.

I was only Number Ten Ox, so I lifted my head to the Duke of Ch'in. "I hope I splatter blood all over you, you son of a sow!" I yelled. Oddly enough I felt much better, and I stopped gagging at the thick sweet smell of blood.

To my astonishment the duke lifted a hand and stopped the executioner. He beckoned, and soldiers lifted me and dragged me so close to the throne that my face was almost touching the tiger mask. Surely the great and powerful Duke of Ch'in could not be interested in Number Ten Ox. He wasn't. He was interested in whatever it was that Lotus Cloud had tossed around my neck, and the gold-meshed fingers of his right hand reached out and touched it. Then he leaned forward, and I felt the eyes behind the slits in the mask boring into mine, and with a sick sense of terror I realized that he was looking right through my eyes into my brain! The voice that came through the mouthpiece was a voice of metal.

"So, the wife of my Assessor gave you this," the duke whispered. "He shall be punished for his careless words." I could feel his mind crawling over mine, probing and peering and searching. "You do not know what it means," he whispered. "You know nothing of importance. I see a foolish abbot, and I see children whose deaths will serve to decrease the surplus population, and I see a ghost who dances with swords, and I see your antiquated companion dancing and singing songs. I can find

no awareness of meaningful things, and although you seek the right ginseng root, you do so for the wrong reason." The terrible tiger mask was lifted. "Soldiers, continue with the execution," ordered the Duke of Ch'in.

My fingers had automatically continued to fumble with the pick and suddenly I felt it turn in the lock.

"Master Li!" I yelled, as I jerked my hands apart and lashed out at the soldiers with the manacles. His hands were already free, and he used the chain of his manacles to trip the executioner, who toppled toward me. "Get him, Ox!" Master Li roared.

I grabbed the axe and whirled to the throne and struck with all my might, and to my astonishment that huge blade bounced off the flimsy cloak of feathers as though it had hit the strongest steel. My hands turned numb with the shock, and I swore and swung again. This time the duke was not so lucky. The blade plunged right through his chest to his heart, and I turned to die like a gentleman at the hands of the soldiers. What I saw made me doubt my sanity.

The soldiers were laughing. The dignitaries were laughing. The bonze was laughing. The executioner got to his feet and began laughing. I turned dazedly to the throne, and there sat the Duke of Ch'in with the huge axe buried in his heart. He was laughing.

"Both the young fool and the old fool are fit for nothing more serious than bouncing balls and playing games! Very well, we will play a game," he chortled. His fingers closed around an ornament on the arm of his throne. The soldiers next to us scrambled hastily away. "You seek the Great Root of Power? It can indeed be found, so find it."

The floor suddenly dropped out from under us.

❁ ❁ ❁

Down, down, down, plunging head over heels into darkness—just when felt that I might fall forever, I landed with a shock in icy water, and I popped up to the surface and spat out a mouthful of brine.

"Master Li!" I cried.

"Right behind you," he panted.

Li Kao grabbed my belt. A light was flickering in the distance. The pool in which we had landed was about fifty feet in circumference, and I swam across and climbed up upon a flat rock ledge. The light was coming from a single torch, and Li Kao lifted it from the brackets and swung it around.

We were in a large cavern carved from black stone. The air was moist and heavy, and it reeked of something unpleasant. Ahead of us was an archway, and when Master

Li lifted the torch we saw that the first duke's famous maxim had been chiseled in the stone above the curve of the arch:

> PUNISHMENT PRODUCES FORCE, FORCE PRODUCES STRENGTH.
> STRENGTH PRODUCES AWE, AWE INSPIRES VIRTUE.
> THUS VIRTUE HAS ITS ORIGIN IN PUNISHMENT.

We stepped through the archway and saw that an infinity of narrow tunnels branched out from the central path. We were walking upon human bones, and the reek came from decaying flesh, although I saw no recent bodies. I stared at shattered skulls, and at thigh bones that had been snapped like bamboo twigs.

"Master Li, the thing that did this had to be stronger than twenty dragons," I whispered.

"Oh, far stronger than that." He reached out and touched his finger to the wall, and when he held it to my nose I smelled seaweed. Then he lifted his torch high above his head, and when my eyes lifted with it I saw the corpses that were causing the horrible smell. They were crammed into crevices in the stone ceiling. Half of a face looked down at me, and a dangling leg dripped blood.

"The monster that stalks the labyrinth is simply the tide," Master Li said calmly, "and if the tide can get out of it, so can we. Ox, was that some sort of trick axe, like the fake swords used in carnivals?"

"No, sir," I said firmly. "That was a real axe, and it really entered the duke's heart."

He scratched his head thoughtfully. "Strange," he muttered. "If we get out of here alive, we most certainly must take another crack at killing him, purely in the interest of science."

"Master Li, the duke can read minds," I whispered, trembling all over. "He looked through my eyes, and I could feel his brain crawling over mine. It was wet and clammy, and it was like being nuzzled by cold, slimy lips."

"Your powers of description are commendable," he said, but I could tell that he didn't believe a word of it. "What was he so interested in?"

I had almost forgotten it, but now I lifted the thing that Lotus Cloud had tossed around my neck. It was a silver chain with a large piece of coral at the end of it. The coral was a beautiful deep red, and a cleverly carved green jade dragon was winding through the holes. I wondered how the Key Rabbit had managed to acquire such a beautiful pendant, because it must be very expensive. I searched for some sort of message that might be written on it, but there wasn't one.

Li Kao shrugged. "Well, at any rate we've arrived in the labyrinth, which is what we intended all along. Getting out may be a bit of a problem, however, and I suggest that we start immediately."

He strode forward, ignoring the side tunnels. The main passageway led on and on through the dank dripping rock and finally I saw something gleam ahead of us. As we came closer, I saw that it was a huge copy of the tiger mask, perhaps ten feet tall, and it was set into a wall that formed a dead end. The mouth gaped wide, and the glittering teeth were solid steel, and behind them was a black hole. Li Kao moved the torch over a curious network of metal baffles that surrounded the tiger's mouth.

"Sound effects," he finally said. "The tide, or part of it, pours through this hole and shoots through the baffles, and as the tide increases, the noise gets louder. I would imagine that it is the scream of a raging tiger, and we had better find another exit before we hear it."

He started back, studying the rock walls for smooth worn surfaces that would indicate the passage of the water, and then he turned and darted into a side tunnel. The torchlight flickered over more bones, and the ceiling was so low that I had to duck not to strike my head against a corpse that was plastered above me in a crack. The reek of rotting flesh was indescribable. Li Kao turned into another low tunnel, and then another, and we twisted and turned until I had lost all sense of direction. He strode confidently ahead, however, following minute signs that indicated water rushing toward an exit, and finally he grunted in satisfaction.

The low tunnel was widening and rising, and ahead of us loomed a large black archway. Master Li trotted through it and stopped dead in his tracks, and I stared in horror at a large cavern and a pool of water that was about fifty feet in circumference. In the ceiling high above that pool was the trapdoor that led to the throne room of the Duke of Ch'in. We were right back where we had started, and the hair lifted upon my head as I heard a faint snarling growl in the darkness behind us. Slim dark shapes were sliding across the stone floor like snakes. It was water, and the tide was coming in.

Li Kao stood quite still, with his forehead wrinkled in thought. "Ox, what did Lotus Cloud say to you when she gave you that dragon pendant?" he asked quietly.

I repeated the fragmentary words that I had heard, and they still didn't make any sense to me. The water was rising with terrible swiftness, lapping my ankles, and the tiger at the end of the tunnel was beginning to roar.

"The Duke of Ch'in lives only for money," Master Li said slowly, thinking out loud. "He piles the stuff in treasure troves, and who beside the duke must have access to them? The man who has to collect the loot and count it, that's who, and Lotus Cloud happens to be married to him. Apparently he made an indiscreet remark about the pendant, and it might explain why the Key Rabbit was allowed to keep something so valuable. Ox, bend over."

I bent over and he climbed upon my back. With one hand he held the torch and with the other he lifted the dragon pendant.

"Lotus Cloud said that if the duke was playful you should follow the dragon, and when the duke dropped us into his labyrinth he said that we would play a game. Since we have no other hope, we will assume that the Key Rabbit indiscreetly told his wife that the locket enables him to get to the duke's treasure troves."

He held the torch close.

"The dragon skips the first two holes in the coral and winds through the third hole on the left," Master Li said grimly. "Start through the archway, take the third tunnel to the left, and run like hell."

I ran as fast as I could, but the water was almost up to my knees. I darted into the third tunnel on the left and Li Kao held the flickering torch close to the pendant. "Take the second tunnel on the right!" he yelled. The tide was rushing in so swiftly that shattered bones were flying across the boiling surface, and the tiger was roaring so loudly that I could barely hear Master Li. "Third left! …. First right! …. Second right! …. Fourth left!"

The tiger was screaming in lunatic rage. The water was rising over my chest as I squeezed through another narrow opening, and then I collided with a blank wall. "Master Li, we must have made a wrong turn!" I shouted. I tried to turn and go back, but it was hopeless. Water had reached my chin, and the tide shoved like a giant hand and plastered me against the wall. Flying bones were smashing around my head, and one of them knocked the torch from Li Kao's hand. Now we were in total darkness, and the boiling water lifted over my mouth.

Li Kao's fingers found what his eyes had not. "Ox, the dragon goes straight up!" he yelled in my ear. "Don't fight the tide. Let it carry you to the ceiling!"

The tide scraped me against the wall as I lifted with it, and Li Kao's hands reached high and groped for an opening. He found it. A narrow chimney wound up from the ceiling through solid rock, and I barely managed to squeeze into it. I braced my feet against the sides and started to climb, but the tide was climbing faster than I was, boiling up over my head while my shoulders tried to wriggle through narrow openings, and my lungs were bursting. I had nearly lost consciousness when the tide reached its peak and my head broke through the water. I gulped air and climbed, and it seemed that hours had passed when the first faint light appeared in the pitch-blackness. A small glowing circle appeared high above us, and I used the last of my strength to reach it and to climb over the edge of the opening to the floor of a small cave.

The sun had set and the light came from the rising moon. A small opening looked out over the sea, and as the moon lifted higher, its pale rays reached farther and farther back into the blackness of the cave, and something began to glitter.

"Great Buddha, how Lotus Cloud would love this place!" I yelped.

She would not have been interested in the gold, or the diamonds and emeralds and rubies that were heaped in mounds, but most of all there were pearls and

jade. Tons of them, and I do mean tons. As the moon lifted even higher and the whole incredible mass of loot appeared I decided that no single duke could possibly have piled up so much wealth. This had to be the collective effort of all the Dukes of Ch'in, right back to the first one, and they had not been snobbish when it came to money.

Cheap copper coins rubbed cheeks with gold, and semi-precious stones were piled with the choicest gems. A broken wooden doll was gazing with tiny turquoise eyes at a sceptre that would have bankrupted most kingdoms, and beside a huge jeweled crown was a set of false teeth carved in ivory. Li Kao was gazing at that incredible monument to greed with narrowed eyes, and he reached out and squeezed my shoulder.

"I would hate to think how many corpses this stuff cost, and I rather believe that one of them wants to say something about it," he whispered.

I followed the direction of his eyes, and finally I saw it. At the top of the pile was a shadow where no shadow should be. Li Kao continued to hold my shoulder.

"Ox, don't move so much as an inch until we see what lies behind the ghost shadow. It may be a very important warning," he whispered.

I tried to calm the beating of my heart. I closed my mind to everything except a nice warm comfortable blanket, and then I reached out gently with my mind and drew it over my head. What happened then was very strange.

I was gazing at a girl who had almost certainly been murdered, because blood stained her dress where a blade had pierced her heart. Her clothes were in the style of a thousand years ago, and I sensed with every nerve in my body that she was making a terrible effort to appear before us. Her gaze was beseeching, and when she parted her lips I felt a hot searing wave of agony.

"Take pity upon a faithless handmaiden," she whispered. "Is not a thousand years enough?" Two transparent ghost tears slid slowly down her cheeks. "I swear that I did not know what I had done! Oh, take pity, and exchange this for the feather," she sobbed. "The birds must fly."

And then she was gone. Li Kao relaxed his grip on my shoulder. I could not possibly have heard correctly, and I sat up and tilted my head and pounded water from my left ear.

"Exchange something for a feather?"

"Oddly enough, I heard the same thing," said Master Li. "Also something about birds that must fly, which doesn't make much sense unless she was referring to travelers' tall tales about flightless birds, such as penguins and ostriches and other mythological beasts."

"I think that she was cupping something in her hands," I said.

I climbed to the top of the pile, slipping and sliding over sapphires, and slid back down with a tiny jade casket in my hands. Li Kao took it and turned it this way and that in the moonlight, and when he opened the lid I cried out in joy. A powerful

fragrance of ginseng reached my nostrils, but Li Kao's exclamation was not joyful. He tilted the casket and two tiny tendrils with rather familiar shapes fell into the palm of his hand.

"Legs, bent at the knees," he sighed. "According to Henpecked Ho, these would be the Legs of Power," and we must pray they will be strong enough to carry the children to safety. I assume that the duke broke up the Great Root, and that pieces are hidden in treasure troves all over China."

He turned the casket upside down and one other object fell into his hand. It was a miniature tin flute, not much bigger than his thumbnail.

"What did she want us to exchange for a feather, the root or the flute?" I asked.

"How would I know? Ox, did the Duke of Ch'in really read your mind?"

"Yes, sir," I said firmly.

"I don't like this at all," Master Li said thoughtfully. He stared at the place where the ghost had been. Nearly a minute passed in silence. "Perhaps we'll figure it out in two or three hundred years," he finally said. "Let's get out of here."

It was easier said than done. It would be suicide to go back into the labyrinth, and the only other exit was the small mouth of the cave. We stood there and gazed down a hundred feet of sheer cliff that could not possibly be negotiated without ropes and grappling hooks at an angry sea where waves smashed against jagged rocks that lifted through the foam like teeth. There was one small calm pool almost directly beneath us, but for all I knew it was six inches deep. The moon was reflected in it, and I gazed from the moon to Master Li and back again.

"My life has been rather hectic, and I could use a long rest," he sighed. "When I get to Hell to be judged, I intend to ask the Yama Kings to let me be reborn as a three-toed sloth. Do you have any preference?"

I thought about it. "A cloud," I said shyly.

He was wearing a smuggler's belt that was studded with fake seashells, and he snapped one of them open and put the Legs of Power inside. On second thought he took the tiny flute as well, and I filled my pockets with pearls and jade on the odd chance that I might live long enough to give them to Lotus Cloud. Li Kao climbed up upon my back and wrapped his arms around my neck, and I discovered that I was beginning to feel undressed unless I wore my ancient sage like a raincoat. I perched on the edge and took aim.

"Farewell, sloth."

"Farewell, cloud."

I held my nose and jumped. The wind whistled around our ears as we plunged toward the pool, and toward a jagged rock that we hadn't noticed.

"Left! Left!" Master Li yelled, pulling on my pendant chain like the reins of a bridle.

I frantically flapped my arms, like a large awkward bird, and the reflected moon grew larger and larger, and then so huge that I almost expected to see Chang-o and the White Rabbit stick their heads out and shake their fists at us. We missed the rock by six inches. The moon appeared to smile, and the warm waters of the Yellow Sea opened to embrace us like long-lost friends.

16

Children's Games

The monastery was hushed and the tension was such that the warm air crackled as though touched by invisible lightning. The color of the liquid in the alchemist's vial had changed from saffron to black, and the essence was almost ready.

Li Kao lifted the vial from the pan of boiling water and removed the stopper, and when he and the abbot emerged from the cloud of steam they both appeared to have been reborn, with rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes, and the ginseng aroma was so strong that my heart began to pound furiously. I remembered that even the most skeptical physicians admitted that ginseng could have an astonishing effect upon the cardiovascular system, and my eyes were wide with hope as the abbot and Master Li moved down the line of beds. Three drops upon each tongue, repeated three times. The parents held their breaths.

The effect of the Legs of the Great Root of Power was quite extraordinary. The pale faces of the children flushed and the heartbeats strengthened, and the covers lifted with deep easy breathing, and then the parents cried out in joy as child after child sat up and opened his eyes! They began to laugh and giggle, and then all the boys began to shake their shoulders up and down and make quick snatching gestures. When the girls began to make swooping pulling gestures I realized with a sudden shock of recognition that I was watching a ritual that I had performed at least a hundred times myself.

Li Kao strode up to Bone Helmet and waved a hand in front of her face. Her wide bright eyes never moved. He snarled and snatched a candle from a holder and lit it, but when he thrust it forward so that it was almost touching her nose the pupils of her eyes did not constrict. The abbot grabbed a boy called Monkey and shook him vigorously and got no reaction whatsoever. The children of Ku-fu continued to laugh and giggle and swoop and shake and snatch, completely unaware of their surroundings. They had awakened, but into a world of their own.

Bone Helmet suddenly stopped her swooping pulling gestures and sat silently, with the happy smile still on her face. Girl after girl, and a few boys, followed her example. Finally only Fang's Fawn continued her gestures, and the boys redoubled their efforts, and at last Fawn stopped and sat still. The children made a muffled sound that might have been a cheer, and then all of them except Fawn and Little Hong closed their eyes tightly. Little Hong's lips began to move, slowly and rhythmically, and the others started giggling again and began feeling the air with their fingers, with their eyes still closed. Only Fawn sat as before, completely still and silent.

I said that I recognized the ritual, but what happened next was totally unexpected. All the children suddenly stopped feeling the air, and all the heads jerked to the east. They were still and intent, and I sensed that they were listening to a sound that only they could hear. Bone Helmet parted her lips. When her small thin voice lifted through the hush of the monastery every one of us, including Master Li, who was an authority on the folklore of every corner of China, jerked our heads toward the windows and stared with wide eyes at the distant looming outline of Dragon's Pillow.

"Jade…plate…" she whispered.

"Six…eight…" whispered Little Hong.

"Fire that burns hot…" Monkey whispered.

"Night that is not…" whispered Wang Number Three.

"Fire that burns cold!" all the boys said together.

"First silver, then gold!" all the girls said together.

Little Hong turned back and resumed moving his lips rhythmically, and the animation returned tenfold as the others resumed groping through the air with their fingers. Only Fang's Fawn continued to sit silently. The giggles and laughter grew louder, and they chanted happily, over and over: *"Jade plate, six, eight, fire that burns hot, night that is not, fire that burns cold, first silver, then gold!"* Monkey lifted his right arm and began to swing it back and forth through the air. One of his fingers touched Fawn's forehead, and instantly Little Hong stopped moving his lips. The others opened their eyes and began to cheer and a wide happy smile spread over Fawn's face. She yawned drowsily. Her eyes closed. Fawn sank back up on her bed, and child after child followed her example, and the weeping of parents again filled the monastery of Ku-fu as the children once more lay as still as death.

The Legs of Power had almost done it, but those two tiny tendrils could not carry the children to safety. The abbot took the arms of Li Kao and myself and led us into his study and slammed the door upon the sounds of grief. His wrinkles and worries had returned, and his hands were shaking, and he took a deep breath and turned to Master Li.

"Will you continue?" he asked quietly.

"Well, I don't seem to have anything else to do at the moment," Master Li said with a shrug of his shoulders. Then he smiled wryly. "No, the truth is that I'm becoming fascinated with this weird case, and if somebody tries to pull me off it, I will scream like a baby who has been robbed of a bright shiny new toy. It would help if I could figure out what those children were doing in there."

"They were playing the Hopping Hide and Seek Game," I said.

"The what?"

"The Hopping Hide and Seek Game," said the abbot.

The monastery supported itself by manufacturing a very good brand of wine, although the abbot and the bonzes were forbidden to touch it themselves, and he poured cups for Li Kao and me.

"It's a sex and courtship game, and it's been played by the children of Ku-fu for as long as anyone can remember," the abbot explained. "The object is to get possession of the girls' red hair ribbons. A large circle is drawn upon the ground, or perhaps natural barriers are used. The boys try to snatch the ribbons from the girls, but they must hop on one leg, which is what they were doing when their shoulders shook up and down. The girls try to trip the boys with the ribbons, thus the swooping pulling gestures. A boy who is tripped becomes the girl's prisoner and drops out of the game, and a girl who loses her red ribbon becomes the boy's prisoner and drops out of the game."

Li Kao was far more interested than I would have expected. "Considering the boys' one-legged handicap, the girls should win easily," he said.

"They should, except that they instinctively know that the best way to begin a long campaign in the battle of the sexes is to surrender, and the real point of the game is that there is a great deal of giggling and grappling and feeling of bodies," the abbot said dryly. "Thus its longevity. Eventually only one girl will be left, and when she is captured she becomes the queen, and the boy who gets her ribbon becomes the king. In this case it was Fang's Fawn and Little Hong. The other children put on blindfolds. The king hides the queen somewhere in the circle, and the others must try to find her by touch. This leads to more giggling and grappling and feeling of bodies, but there is a time limit. When Little Hong moved his lips, he was slowly counting to forty-nine."

"Is the count ever changed?" Master Li asked.

"No, sir," I said.

"Do they have formal titles, such as King of X and Queen of Y?"

"No, sir," I said.

"The peculiar thing," said the abbot, "was that suddenly they broke off and listened, and then they repeated that ancient nonsense rhyme that is said to have come from the Dragon's Pillow. That is *not* part of the Hopping Hide and Seek Game."

Li Kao helped himself to more wine, and then he walked to the window and gazed out at the strange stretch of wall where the ghost of Wan was said to keep watch.

"Yet when they repeated that rhyme, they were able to find the queen," he said thoughtfully.

"Yes, sir," I said. "Monkey touched Fawn before the count reached forty-nine, and she smiled because she had won the game."

Li Kao swallowed his wine at a gulp and turned back to the room.

"Those children were completely unconscious. Then they had one tiny taste of the Great Root, and how did they react? Every single one of them instantly started playing the Hopping Hide and Seek Game, and every single one of them recited a nonsense rhyme that children from this village had first heard many centuries ago at Dragon's Pillow. I am beginning to suspect that the simple quest for a ginseng root is wrapped in more riddles than that Mysterious Mountain Cavern of Winds, where the White Serpent crushes heroes in the cold coils of enigmas, and while I am probably hallucinating, I am willing to bet that the ghost of a murdered maiden fits in here somewhere."

He turned to the abbot. "Reverend Sir, in your studies of myth and folklore, have you ever encountered a ghostly handmaiden who pleads that birds must fly?"

The abbot shook his head negatively.

"Or ghosts who beg people to exchange things for feathers? Possibly things like this?"

He took the tiny flute from his smuggler's belt. The abbot studied it with interest but without recognition, and Li Kao sighed and lifted it to his lips and blew gently into the mouthpiece. Then he hurled the flute to the floor and all three of us jumped back and stared at it as one might view a cobra.

No flute sound came from that incredible thing. Instead we heard an old woman whose voice was so rich and warm that she might have been the grandmother of the entire human race.

"Aiieee! Aiieee! Come closer, my children! Spread ears like elephants, and I will tell you the tale of a girl named Beauty, and of her wicked stepmother and her good fairy godmother, and of the magic fishbone and the carriage and the little slipper that fell from Beauty's foot and led her to a handsome prince!"

Li Kao lunged. He grabbed the flute and covered the first of four tiny fingerholes and the voice stopped abruptly. He covered the second fingerhole and blew lightly into the mouthpiece.

"Aiieee! Aiieee! Come closer, my children! Spread ears like elephants, and I will tell you the tale of the old woman and her little boy, and of the cow and the corn and the peddler, and of the beanstalk that grew to the clouds, and what happened when the little boy climbed it into a world of wonders!"

Li Kao tried the other fingerholes, and each one produced a tale that had been delighting Chinese children for at least two thousand years, and which have even spread to the barbarian tribes. He stopped the last tale and glowered at the marvelous thing.

"Master Li, we could exchange that flute for ten thousand tons of feathers," I whispered.

"With the island of Taiwan tossed in for good measure," the abbot said shakily.

Master Li looked from the flute to the infirmary where the children lay, and back to the flute.

"That does it!" he snarled. "Ox, we have an evil duke who reads minds and laughs at axes, treasure troves that are hidden in labyrinths that are supposedly guarded by monsters, flutes that tell fairy tales, an incomprehensible ghost who might have come from one, an ancient children's game, and a ghostly message from Dragon's Pillow. If you're wondering about the wicked stepmother, just wait, because she's bound to turn up."

He replaced the flute in his belt, and shook a finger in front of my nose.

"Nothing on the face of this earth—and I do mean nothing—is half so dangerous as a children's story that happens to be real, and you and I are wandering blindfolded through a myth devised by a maniac. Mark my words!" he shouted angrily. "If the Key Rabbit can slip us into another one of the duke's treasure troves, we will most certainly shake hands with a two-hundred-foot-armor-plated winged water moccasin that can hit the eye of a gnat with a spit of venom from twenty miles away, and that can only be slain by a hero who was born inside a knitting needle during a total eclipse of the moon on the thirty-first day of February."

I flushed and looked down at my toes.

"If it's all right with you, I'd rather worry about real heads splashing into real basins filled with real blood," I said meekly.

"You have a point," he sighed.

Master Li looked wryly at the abbot and shrugged his shoulders.

"The supernatural can be very annoying until one finds the key that transforms it into science," he observed mildly. "I'm probably imagining complications that don't exist. Come on, Ox, let's go out and get killed."

The Duke of Ch'in had left on his annual tax trip, with the Key Rabbit and Lotus Cloud, and we caught up with them in Chuyen. Unfortunately, the Key Rabbit's apartment was high in an unclimbable tower in the palace of the duke's provincial governor. There were no vines to cling to, and no foot or handholds,

and every entrance was guarded by soldiers. Master Li did not appear to be greatly disturbed.

"Ox, I learned a valuable lesson in natural history when I was exiled to Serendip," he said. "When a foraging ant discovers something of value, it grabs a sample and dashes back to the colony screaming 'Awake! Arise! Beat the drums! Sound general quarters! I have discovered wealth beyond the dreams of avarice!' Then the whole colony follows the ant back to the treasure, but are they content to take what they see? Not if it is a trail of something. Ants that find trails of something they like will follow those trails to the source, even if it means crossing half of the world. Do you see the significance of that?"

"No, sir," I said.

"You will," said Master Li.

In the marketplace he bought a large jar of honey and a box that contained a colony of ants. Then he bribed a maid to bring a message to Lotus Cloud, and on the first cloudy night we scaled the outer walls of the governor's palace, slipped past the guards, and made our way to the tower. I hooted three times like an owl. Lotus Cloud, who was enjoying the game immensely, opened her window and poured the jar of honey that the maid had brought down the wall, and when the thick sweet trickle reached us Li Kao opened the box and released the ants. They plunged into the honey with bulging squeals of delight, discovered that it was a trail, and started to climb.

The last ant was the biggest, and it was towing a gauze thread that was lighter than a feather. It scrambled over Lotus Cloud's windowsill, and she detached the thread and tugged three times. Li Kao tied a fine length of string to his end of the thread and tugged back, and Lotus Cloud began pulling it up. Then came a cord tied to the end of the string, and a rope tied to the end of the cord, and Lotus Cloud tied her end of the rope to something sturdy inside the apartment. Li Kao hopped upon my back and in a matter of minutes I had climbed an unclimbable wall and flopped over the windowsill.

"Boopsie!" Lotus Cloud squealed happily.

I dumped my pearls and jade at her feet. "Do I have a story to tell you!" I panted.

"Later," Li Kao said warningly.

Footsteps were approaching the door. I took Master Li on my back and swung back out the window, and then I clung to the rope and lifted my eyes back up over the windowsill. A pasty-faced lout crashed through the door, staggered across the room, dumped an armload of pearls and jade on top of my pearls and jade, fell to his knees, wrapped his arms around Lotus Cloud's legs, and buried his face against her thighs.

"My surname is Chia and my personal name is Chen and it is my unhappy lot to serve in this miserable rathole as the duke's provincial governor, and I have worshipped you ever since you grinned at me in the garden this morning," he moaned.

Lotus Cloud laughed happily; her fingers played with his hair.

"I shall call you Woofie," she said.

I sighed and sadly climbed back down the wall.

"Woofie?" said Master Li. "Ox, far be it from me to interfere with your affairs, but there would appear to be certain drawbacks in forming a close relationship with Lotus Cloud."

"I love her as much as ever." I sighed.

He patted my shoulder comfortingly. "At least you will never be lonely," he said. "You and her other admirers can hold annual conventions. Perhaps the imperial elephant stables might be large enough for the purpose, and if not, you can rent an impoverished province. I hear that the grain harvest in Hua has been miserable this year and the peasants should be delighted to entertain sixty or seventy thousand visitors with money in their pockets. Although I am talking nonsense, since every one of you will be bankrupt."

"Great Heavens!" the lout yelled above us. "There is a rope tied to your bed!"

"Rope? What rope?" said Lotus Cloud.

The pasty-face peered over the windowsill, and under the circumstances there was little that we could do except smile in a friendly fashion and wave. The provincial governor pointed down at us and squawked.

"*Burglars!* Fear not, my beloved, I have my trusty sword!"

And then the bastard cut the rope.

We had ample time to survey the landscape as we plunged toward the courtyard. In another part of the palace a banquet was breaking up and the departing guests were climbing into carriages and sedan chairs. We were plunging straight toward one of the latter, and we landed upon the vast belly of an enormously fat fellow. I bounced off to the cobblestones, but Li Kao was much lighter and he continued to bounce up and down like a ball while the fat fellow's dinner sprayed into the air.

Pigeon-egg soup, with lotus roots and dumplings and crushed pine kernels, was followed by ducks' tongues cooked in sesame oil with mushrooms and bamboo shoots which were followed by the ducks themselves—at least three—which had been stuffed with shellfish and steamed inside a cover of hardened bean curd which were followed by spider crabs simmered in sweet white wine which were followed by lamb kidneys sautéed with minced walnuts, which were followed by honeycakes, which were followed by candied fruits, which were followed by sweetmeats, which were followed by green tea, which was followed by plum wine, which was followed by Daffodil Digestive Tonic, which was followed by Seven Spirit

Regulating Tonic, which was followed by Fragrant Fire Vitality Tonic, which was followed by hiccups, which were followed by a pair of hands that clamped around Li Kao's throat.

"What have you done with my case of compasses?" screamed our porcupine merchant.

A Miraculous Transformation

In a way we were quite lucky. The Duke of Ch'in was continuing his tax trip with the Key Rabbit—Lotus Cloud was to rejoin them in a week or so—and in his absence we received a very considerate death sentence from the provincial governor, who was understandably annoyed because we had delayed his entrance into Lotus Cloud's bed.

"You may choose your own method for departing this earth!" he yelled.

Then we were marched up to the roof of the tallest tower and the door was bricked up. This left us the choice between slowly starving to death or jumping to the cobblestones one hundred feet below, and I sat down miserably and buried my head in my hands. How much longer could the children last? Two months? Three? The keen-eyed bonzes that the abbot had posted would stare in vain from the roof of the monastery, because Master Li and Number Ten Ox were not going to return with the rest of the Great Root of Power. I wept until I realized that some of the sounds were coming from below me, and with a startled sense of hope I saw that the soldiers were unsealing the door.

Hope faded quickly when I understood that they were merely opening the door in order to shove another condemned prisoner up upon the roof, and as they bricked it up again Master Li took note of a pair of little pig eyes, a bald and mottled skull, a sharp curving nose like a parrot's beak, the loose flabby lips of a camel, and two drooping elephant ears from which sprouted thick tufts of coarse gray hair.

"Would you care to buy a goat?" he said with a polite bow.

To our astonishment Miser Shen ran to embrace us with cries of joy.

"What good fortune!" he cried. "I had feared that I would never have the opportunity of thanking my benefactors in person!"

"Benefactors?" I said.

"Thanking us?" said Master Li.

"For saving my life!" cried Miser Shen. "If it had not been for you, the Key Rabbit would not have determined the extent of my wealth, and if he had not determined the extent of my wealth he would not have invited me to tea, and if he had not invited me to tea I would still be the stingiest and most miserable miser in China. Lotus Cloud," he said proudly, "made a new man of me."

"Let me guess," Li Kao said. "She bankrupted you in a week?"

Miser Shen drew himself up proudly.

"Great Buddha, no! Why, such was the extent of my wealth that it took the dear girl almost a month to reduce me to abject poverty. Of course I owe a good deal to luck," he added modestly. "After Lotus Cloud ran through my countless chests of buried gold I was able to get very good prices for my eight businesses, my six houses, my ten pigs, my twenty chickens, my eight savage guard dogs, my seven half-starved servants, my— Dear boy, do you happen to remember my young and beautiful concubine?"

"Vividly," I said.

"I was very lucky there, because I was able to buy three more days of Lotus Cloud by selling Pretty Ping to an up-and-coming young fellow in the brothel business. Lucky for Pretty Ping, too, because one of her customers fell in love with her and made her his number-three wife, and now he showers her with the gifts and affection that she never received from me. Poor girl, I treated her terribly." Miser Shen sighed. "But then I was not truly human, because I had not yet met Lotus Cloud."

"I am finding this fascinating," said Master Li. "What did you do when you had nothing left to sell?"

"Why, I turned to crime, of course," said Miser Shen. "I am particularly proud of my performance during the Dragon Boat Festival. It occurred to me that the boats originally raced to sacrifice to the spirit of Ch'u Yuan, who drowned himself as a protest against corrupt government, but that the festival has degenerated into little more than a professional boat race upon which vast sums are wagered. Well, there was the betting boat with the bookmakers and other dignitaries on board, and there came the dragon boat skimming across the water, and there I came, walking upon the surface. I was on stilts, of course, and I wore an exact copy of the ancient ceremonial costume of Ch'u Yuan, and I had a long staff and a big black beard.

"'Insolent dogs!' I roared. 'You dare to turn the occasion of my honorable death into a sporting event? I shall smite you with pestilence, typhoons, and earthquakes!'

"It was very effective because I had covered my head with protective ointment and my false beard with pitch, and at that moment I set fire to the beard," said Miser Shen. "When Ch'u Yuan came striding across the waves with a halo of flames around his head, the people on the betting boat dived into the water and swam for their lives and I cut the ancient rope and climbed on board and sailed away with all the money.

I spent every cent on pearls and jade, but the soldiers caught me before I could give it to Lotus Cloud, so here I am."

Li Kao turned and stared at me.

"This happy, vibrant fellow with an admirable talent for crime is Miser Shen?" he said incredulously. "Ox, this transformation is nothing short of miraculous!"

He turned back to Miser Shen and bowed.

"We must dispense with titles," he said. "My surname is Li and my personal name is Kao, and there is a slight flaw in my character, and this is my esteemed client, Number Ten Ox. We have something important to do, so we must escape from this tower as soon as possible, and we would be honored if you would care to accompany us."

Miser Shen wiped tears from his eyes. "It has been forty years since anyone wanted me to accompany them anywhere," he sniffled. "Unfortunately there is no way to escape from this tower."

"Something will turn up," Master Li said confidently.

He was right, although when it turned up he was as astonished as I was. There was a loud commotion at the gates and a mob burst into the courtyard and demanded to see the governor. The governor stepped out, along with our porcupine merchant, and the mob parted to reveal a furious farmer, a cow, and two gentlemen of low appearance. A babble of voices drifted up to us, and we were able to piece together the following account:

The farmer had heard a commotion in his pasture and he had rushed out to discover that a bald gentleman was down on his knees with his arms wrapped lovingly around the legs of one of the farmer's prize cows. A fat gentleman, who was carrying a small funeral urn, was weeping his eyes out, and he turned and wept on the farmer's shoulder for a while. Then he recovered enough to relate a marvelous tale.

The bald fellow's beloved mother had expired some time ago, and her son had honored her rather unusual request to be cremated. One night the ghost of his mother came to see him in a dream, and she expressed the wish to have her ashes placed among the lohans at Lung-men. So the bald fellow and his dear friend had set forth with the ashes on the pious pilgrimage, only to discover that the ghost had something else in mind. The road to Lung-men passed by the farmer's pasture, and the cow had been waiting for them. The bald fellow had recognized the soft brown eyes immediately.

"Mother!" he screeched. "My beloved mother has been reborn as a cow!"

The reunion had been emotional, and the farmer was forced to shed a few tears himself as he watched it. The cow's eyes were streaming with tears of joy as she lovingly licked the bald fellow's skull. "Mother! What joy to see you again!" he sobbed, kissing her hairy legs.

What choice did the farmer have? He felt the warm glow of a deed well done as he watched his cow dwindle in the distance with the arms of the two gentlemen wrapped around its neck. He was only a gentleman farmer, and he was quite surprised when he was informed that cows always weep when they lick salt.

"And that includes salt that has been sprinkled upon a bald skull!" the farmer yelled.

"How dare you accuse us of fraud?" screamed Pawnbroker Fang.

"We shall sue!" howled Ma the Grub.

When the farmer took off in pursuit he was joined by neighbors who had also experienced the wiles of Ma and Fang, and now they wanted the governor to hang these crooks from the highest tree.

"Lies, all lies!" screamed Pawnbroker Fang.

"We demand compensation for slander!" howled Ma the Grub.

"Ox, you know these creatures well. What will they do now?" asked Master Li.

"They will go on the offense," I said firmly. "I don't know how, but they'll manage it."

"Splendid. Gentlemen, let's get out of here."

There was a huge silk flag with the duke's tiger emblem fluttering from a pole on top of the tower, and the soldiers were too interested in Ma and Fang and the lynch mob to notice when I cut it loose and hauled it down. From the wreckage of an old bamboo pigeon coop we made a basket to stand in, and the lanyard from the pole attached the basket to the flag.

"The principle is the same as that of a falling leaf, which drifts down gently because the air that pushes up against its surface almost counterbalances the weight that pushes it down," Master Li explained. "This flag may just be large enough to hold enough air, although I would be happier if the tower were another hundred feet high."

We tiptoed back to the other side of the tower to see how Ma and Fang were coming along. Bees were droning beside the wall, and Ma the Grub was surprised to see a trail of honey. His fingers slid slyly toward the stuff. Our porcupine merchant had brought out a plate of sweetmeats, and he was automatically lifting them to his gaping mouth as he listened to the members of the mob bellow one accusation after another. Ma the Grub craftily covered the ashes in the funeral urn with honey. He slid the urn beneath the merchant's fat fingers, and the hand lifted again and again to the insatiable maw….

"Monster!" Ma shrieked in horror. "Fang, look what these fiends are doing! First they try to steal the incarnation of your beloved mother, and now they devour her very ashes!"

"Cannibals!" screamed Pawnbroker Fang. He pried the merchant's mouth open and peered into the black hole. *"Mother, speak to me!"* he howled.

Chaos ensued and the soldiers in the courtyard converged upon the screaming pandemonium, and we dragged the flag and the basket to the rear of the roof. We climbed in, and I grasped the lanyards.

"I have decided to ask the Yama Kings to let me be reborn as a three-toed sloth, and Ox wishes to become a cloud. Do you have any preference?" Li Kao asked Miser Shen.

"A tree," Miser Shen said promptly. "In this life I have done nothing but foreclose mortgages, and when I am reborn I would like to provide free shade for the weary, free roosts for the birds, free fruit for the hungry, and free firewood for woodcutters when I am old and useless. Peasants name their favorite trees, and it is the dearest wish of Miser Shen to be known as 'Old Generosity.'"

"I shall hang by my tail from one of your branches," said Master Li.

"I shall drift overhead and bring rain for your roots," I said.

"I am overcome," Miser Shen sniffled.

"Farewell, tree."

"Farewell, cloud."

"Farewell, sloth."

I pushed off, and we plunged toward the cobblestones like three bugs clinging to a boulder. I consigned my soul to Heaven, and then the flag billowed wide, and we halted in midair so suddenly that my arms were nearly pulled from their sockets.

"We really must stop somewhere and collect some pearls for Lotus Cloud," said Miser Shen.

"And jade," I agreed.

"Incredible," sighed Master Li.

The wind caught the flag and we drifted lazily away across the treetops toward a green valley where a river sparkled in the distance. The tower dwindled behind us and we landed quite gently, and in the first village we bought a small boat and a great deal of wine.

❁ ❁ ❁

The Duke of Ch'in, like all his predecessors, continued his tax trip past the terrible Desert of Salt, and after drifting uneventfully downstream for six days Li Kao found the landmark he was looking for. It was a tiny trail that ran from the bank toward a low hill, and the boat was light enough so that I could carry it over my head until we reached water again. It was a small, rapid stream, and as the days passed it grew narrower and shallower. The air became very hot and we began to perspire freely, and on the fourth day we floated around a bend and I realized that the stream was disappearing, vanishing into cracks in the hard-caked earth. A blinding white glare

was all that I could see of the horizon. The boat scraped bottom, and we climbed out to the bank, and Li Kao pointed ahead to the glare.

"The Desert of Salt," he said. "Peasants swear that when the Duke of Ch'in passes this way on his tax trip, his army reaches this point and then vanishes for days."

He searched for another landmark, and pointed to a faint line that was barely visible beneath the white expanse of salt.

"Too straight to be the work of nature," he said. "Swirling salt will cover hoofprints and wheel tracks, but the underlying traces of a road will remain if it is used every year."

"Do you think that it leads to another treasure trove?" I asked.

"Well, it's an idea, and even a bad idea is better than none," said Master Li. "Error can point the way to truth, while empty-headedness can only lead to more empty-headedness or to a career in politics. Miser Shen, now is the time when a wise man would turn back. If we keep chasing the duke we will eventually get back to Lotus Cloud, but the Desert of Salt has swallowed whole caravans, and our deaths are not likely to be pleasant."

"What is life without Lotus Cloud?" Miser Shen asked, quite reasonably from my point of view. "Besides, after a lifetime of disgrace, the least I can do is die with dignity."

I was really astonished to see what a splendid fellow had been lurking behind a skinflint's exterior, and that night I learned a great deal about Miser Shen. We emptied our wine jars and filled them water, and I cut the sail off the boat to make a tent. Then we followed the faint path into the desert, and just before dawn we crawled into the tent to protect ourselves from the direct rays of the sun. Miser Shen was afraid that we might think badly of Lotus Cloud for having accepted the love of someone as old and ugly as him, and he begged to be allowed to tell his story.

"Many years ago I was a happy man," he said in a shy, halting voice. "I was a peasant, and I was poor, but I had a small farm and a wife who loved me and the most adorable little daughter in the world. We almost always had enough to eat, and I never dreamed of asking for more. Then our village fell on hard times. The rain would not fall, or if it did, it fell so hard that our dikes broke and our crops were washed away. Our animals fell sick, and bandits bullied us and stole our rice, and then one day we learned that the Duke of Ch'in, the father of the present duke, had doubled the taxes. We could not possibly pay such a tax. The men of the village drew lots, and I was the unlucky one who was sent to plead to the duke.

"There were many peasants waiting to plead for lower taxes, so I spent hours rehearsing my speech. When my time came, I fell upon my knees in front of the throne and I told the duke of all the hardships that had come to my village. I know that I told my story well. When I had finished I raised my eyes to the

terrible tiger mask, the voice of metal frightened me but the words brought joy to my heart.

"'Shen Chunlieh,' said the duke, 'today I have heard many tales from those who wish to cheat me, but your story rings true. I am convinced that you cannot pay my tax, and I will grant you a very special favor. Go home to your village, and tell your family and friends that never again shall the village of Shen Chunlieh be asked to pay taxes to the Dukes of Ch'in, not so long as the stars shine in the sky and fish swim in the sea.'

"I kissed the floor and bowed backward from the presence of the duke, and my feet had wings as I raced over the hills. I could not run as fast as his horsemen could ride, however, and when I had climbed the last hill I stared down at smoldering ruins. The duke had sworn that never again would we pay taxes, and then he had destroyed my village as an example to others. The only villagers who had been spared were those who had been away, fishing at a nearby lake, and one of those was my wife. We wept in each other's arms, but do you remember that I had a little daughter? Her name was Ah Chen, and I loved her more than anything in the world, and she had been left behind in the village and had been killed with the others.

"I was wild with grief. I saw the face of my little girl everywhere, and at night I would hear her crying in the woods and I would run out and shout, 'Ah Chen, your father is here!' They said that I would feel better if I sent a prayer to her. I could not read or write, so I went to a priest who wrote down my prayer and burned it to send to Hell, where my little girl had gone to be judged. I did not feel better. I could not work and I could not sleep, and one day a traveler told of a great magician who lived in a cave at the end of Bear's Path, high in the Omei Mountains. 'He is called the Old Man of the Mountain,' the traveler told me. 'He is the wisest man in the world, and he can surely bring your little girl back to life, but you must bring money. You must bring a great deal of money, because the Old Man of the Mountain does not sell his secrets cheaply.'

"I had no money, so I set out to make some. Like anyone else who sets out to make money I lied and cheated and I ruined my friends, but nothing mattered except getting enough money to bring little Ah Chen back to life. 'Beloved husband, you must forget our daughter,' my wife told me. 'If you continue this way, you will surely go insane.' Then she fell ill, but I was too busy making money to care for her. She died, and I wept, but I went right on making money. The money mattered, only the money, and I could not spend a penny of it because I would need it all for the Old Man of the Mountain. I was not aware of losing my mind, but as the years passed I forgot what the money was for. Now and then I would remember, but I would tell myself that I needed twice as much money to pay the wisest man in the world to bring my daughter back to life. I buried gold in chests and ran out to

grab for more. I became Miser Shen, the greediest and most miserable of men, and so I would have remained if Lotus Cloud had not bankrupted me and brought me to my senses.

"Noble Sirs, there are women who can see right into the heart of a man, and I would like you to know that Lotus Cloud never accepted the love of Miser Shen. She accepted the love of a poor peasant who loved his little girl too much, and who went insane."

18

The Hand of Hell

We traveled at night, and spent the days huddled in the tent while we fried in the heat. When we peeped through the folds we saw multiple images of the sun reflected in the glaring white salt, surrounded by orange and violet halos that spun round and round and made us sick to our stomachs. Whirlwinds danced in mad patterns, and the wind howled horribly. Even at night the heat never released us from its blazing fingers, and often the moon and stars were obscured by flying salt. The faint trace of what we hoped was a road ran on and on, seemingly without end, and it was a relief when the mirages began, because they gave us something to look at.

I would see a castle with a silver dome, standing in the center of an emerald lake. "No, no!" Miser Shen would say. "It is a large rock in the middle of a river, and the rock is covered with nesting birds. Seagulls, I think, although I cannot imagine what seagulls are doing in a desert." Master Li would snort and say, "Nonsense. I can clearly see a large pleasure barge floating in a pond, and the banks are lined with bright green trees."

Then the mirage would dissolve into nothingness, and we would gaze at an endless expanse of white salt.

We saw cities and cemeteries and armies arrayed in battle formation, and always there was water and a green oasis of some sort. As the days passed we had to ration water, and thirst began to torment us. Then one day Miser Shen pointed ahead.

"Look at that ghastly mirage!" he exclaimed.

"Mirage?" I said. "Shen, it's the nightmare of a demented baboon."

Li Kao studied the shimmering image carefully and said. "Tell me what you see."

"Well, I see the usual green oasis, but it is standing in the middle of a mess of shattered stones," said Miser Shen. "Geysers of steam are hissing up from the bowels of the earth, and I smell a horrible stench of sulphur."

"The whole mirage is surrounded by a broad belt like a moat, and it's filled with a strange fiery liquid that makes a sickening sort of bubbling sound," I said.

"My friends, I regret to report that I see precisely the same thing," Master Li said grimly. "That is not a mirage, and the path we are following leads straight to it."

As we came closer we realized that we were looking at the ruins of a once great city, but what a terrible catastrophe had befallen it! The walls were tumbled ruins. One narrow span of what had once been a mighty stone bridge still crossed a moat that had formerly held blue water and white swans and golden fish, and now bubbled with fiery red-black lava. On the other side a pair of enormous bronze gates stood open, but bent and twisted by some unimaginable force, and when we nervously crossed the moat and passed through the gates a terrible sight met our eyes. Steam hissed like the breath of angry dragons through great gaping holes in the earth, and pools of murderous lava heaved and bubbled, and it seemed to me that the harsh wind that howled through the ruins was wailing death, death, death. A lunatic tangle of side streets branched from both sides of a central avenue—if one could call them streets, since not one building remained standing—and in the distance we saw a great mass of tumbled stones. It had probably been the palace of the king, and we decided to climb to the top of it to try to find the green oasis that we had glimpsed from a distance.

It had certainly been a palace. We climbed over smashed statues and beautiful stone friezes, and then we stopped dead in our tracks and stared. Ahead of us was a wall about thirty feet high and perhaps five times as long, and the three of us had the same thought at once.

"That wall could not possibly have survived the catastrophe!" I cried. "It must have been built afterward, from the toppled stones."

"I would not like to meet whatever it was that knocked a hole in it," Master Li said thoughtfully.

Nor would I. Some incredible force had jerked out enormous stone slabs and tossed them aside like pebbles. A great gaping hole confronted us like a screaming mouth, and when we cautiously stepped through it we stared at great piles of human bones. Miser Shen turned quite pale.

I swear that those poor souls were chewed!" he gasped.

He was right. Nothing but monstrous grinding teeth could have shredded bones like that, and not only bones. Armor had been pulverized as well, and Miser Shen and I were greatly relieved when Li Kao examined it with critical eyes and said:

"This armor is in the style of five hundred years ago, or more. Perhaps a thousand years would be closer. Whatever the creature was, it has been dust for centuries."

He bent over and examined the mangled skeletons.

"You know, I recall a monster that could have done this to armed warriors," he said thoughtfully. "It was discovered frozen in the ice of a Mongolian glacier. Half mammal, half lizard, one hundred feet from head to tail, and equipped with teeth like steel doorposts. The sages wanted to preserve it for scientific study, but we had an exceptionally idiotic emperor at the time, and I regret to say that the imperial dolt had the beast cut up and boiled for a state banquet. The fact that it smelled like two thousand old unopened rooms and tasted like diseased whale blubber didn't bother the Son of Heaven one bit. He happily awarded himself the medal 'Heroic Slayer of Inedible Monstrosities,' which he wore on all state occasions."

I was staring at a large toppled slab.

"Master Li, I think this is covered with writing, but the script is so ancient that I can't make any sense of it," I said.

He examined the slab with interest, and brushed a layer of salt from it. Time and the wind had made much of the writing illegible, but enough remained to make my hair stand up on my head.

"It begins with a prayer to the gods," he said. "Then some words are missing, and then it says: '…punished for our sins, and the earth opened with a great roar and flames engulfed us. Fiery black rock sprayed up like water, and for eight days the earth heaved and shuddered, and on the ninth day the earth vomited forth the Hand That No One Sees, from the very depths of Hell.'"

"The what?" Miser Shen asked.

"The Hand That No One Sees, but don't ask me what it means," said Master Li. "More words are missing, and then it says: '…sixth day of our doom, and we labor on the wall but we are faint of heart. We pray and sacrifice, but the gods remain implacable. The queen and her ladies have chosen the more merciful death, and have jumped into the lake of fiery molten rock. We did not try to stop them. The Hand moves closer. Our spears are hurled at nothingness and bounce away from nothingness. The wall is beginning to shake. The Hand…'"

Li Kao straightened up. "That's all there is," he said quietly.

"Whoof!" Miser Shen gasped. "I don't care how many centuries ago that happened. I want to get out of here."

So did I. I scrambled up to the top of the wall and peered around.

"I see the oasis!" I cried. "There's a lake of lava covering the back of the palace, so we'll have to try to reach the oasis through the side streets."

That wasn't as simple as it sounded. Time and again we came to dead ends where scalding steam or bubbling lava blocked the way, and we were not the only ones who had reached dead ends. Skeletons, chewed to pieces in their useless armor, littered almost every side street.

"Whatever that thing was, it certainly ate well," Miser Shen said nervously.

We tried street after street with no success, and finally we were almost back where we had entered the city. Li Kao looked at the huge bronze gates and the narrow span of bridge and shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps we had better go back across the moat and see if there is another bridge on the side where the oasis is," he said.

We started forward, and then we stopped and gaped with eyes that nearly popped from the sockets. Those gates weighed tons. Nothing was touching them, but they were creaking shut! They came together with a terrible crash of metal, and a mark appeared in the layer of salt upon the ground. It took several moments for my brain to believe what my eyes were showing me. I was staring at the print of an enormous thumb, and four huge fingerprints followed, and then an immense sliding mark. An enormous invisible hand was crawling toward us, dragging the palm and heel behind the terrible fingers!

Miser Shen and I stood rooted to the spot in horror, but Master Li whirled around and gazed back at the tangle of the side streets. Then he yelled, "Ox, pick us up!"

I scooped up Master Li in one arm and Miser Shen in the other, and Master Li grabbed the dragon pendant that dangled from the chain around my neck. His fingers found the place where the dragon had stopped after leading us to the treasure trove.

"I should have realized at once that this place was another labyrinth," he said grimly. "Turn into the second street on the right, and I would advise you to hurry."

Even though I was carrying the two of them I doubt that my record for the course will be surpassed until a Tibetan snow leopard tries it, but the Hand That No One Sees was almost as fast. Those great invisible fingers were stretching out twenty or thirty feet, and salt was billowing up behind the sliding palm. "First left!" Master Li yelled. "Second left! … Fourth right! … Third left! … First right! …." I panted through the maze, leaping over lava and darting around geysers of steam, and at last I saw the tops of green trees and realized that the dragon was leading us to the oasis. Then I skidded to a halt.

"May the Buddha have mercy on our souls!" howled Miser Shen.

There was the beautiful green oasis, right in front of us, but it was encircled by a moat of bubbling lava. A narrow stone bridge led safely across the fiery rock, but the Hand That No One Sees had taken a shortcut. The bridge was far too narrow for the monster to cross, but that would do us no good unless we were on the other side, and I stared in horror at the salt on the ground in front of the bridge. Great invisible fingers pawed, and salt billowed, and then the Hand from Hell began crawling toward us, blocking any path to the oasis.

At the edge of the moat was the only upright building that we had seen, a watchtower, probably, tall and narrow and teetering upon cracked stone slabs. I unceremoniously dumped Li Kao and Miser Shen and raced up and put my shoulder

to the thing. I heaved with everything that I had, and the tower began to tilt. Then I heaved with more than I had, and when I heard a snapping sound I assumed that my spine had split in half. Instead it was one of the supporting slabs that had split, and the tall tower dissolved into a shower of stones that toppled down into the moat.

The lava was nearly as dense as the stones, and they sank very slowly. I ran back and scooped up Li Kao and Miser Shen, and then I raced to the edge of the moat and jumped. My feet touched the first stone and I vaulted to the second. My sandals were smoking and my lungs were raw from bubbling sulphur as I hopped from stone to stone, and the last one had nearly sunk out of sight. I sent a prayer to the August Personage of Jade and leaped, and my toes touched the searing surface and I leaped again, and perhaps the August Personage of Jade gave me a helpful shove because I landed with my face buried in green grass.

I was dimly aware that Master Li and Miser Shen were shouting in my ears and pounding my back, but the world was spinning before my eyes, and I felt as thought I were falling down a hole that had no end. Then a cool, peaceful blackness closed around me.

Bamboo Dragonfly

I awoke to see Li Kao smiling down at me, and Miser Shen tilted a gourd filled with delicious spring water to my lips. It revived me as if by magic. Soon I was able to get up and examine the little oasis, which had clearly been used as a pleasure garden.

Trees and shrubs from every corner of the empire had been planted there, and the variety was astonishing. Silver bells had once tinkled in the branches, and paper lanterns had glowed in the night like fireflies, and lovers had walked hand in hand through mazes of moonflowers. Then the horrible eruption, and the Hand That No One Sees. I wondered what terrible crime the city had committed to deserve such a fate, but then I decided that I didn't want to know. I turned around and shuddered as I saw the marks of invisible fingers angrily pawing in the salt at the other end of the narrow bridge. The Hand was waiting.

A clear path led through wildflowers toward the bronze roof of a pagoda that sparkled in the light of the setting sun. We started toward it, and as we drew closer we saw that the pagoda had escaped destruction because it was nearly solid stone. Only the wooden doors had rotted away. The sun sank below the horizon, but the moon had already lifted into the sky, and a pale path of moonbeams reached through the hole where the door had been and touched something that sparkled. Tears began to trickle down Miser Shen's cheeks as he stared at a pile of treasure that was even larger than the one at the Castle of the Labyrinth.

"Cured!" he cried joyfully. "I could not be sure before, but now when I look at this loot, my fingers itch only for the pearls and jade, and that is because I would like to give them to Lotus Cloud."

Li Kao's eyes met mine, and I nodded. Both of us had instinctively studied the top of the pile of treasure for a ghost shadow, and there it was. I was getting rather good at it, and the shadow blanket lifted easily over my head.

I was looking at the same ghost! No, not the same, but dressed in the same ancient fashion, and with the same streak of blood where a blade had pierced her heart. Again I sensed that she was making a terrible effort to appear before us, and I felt the same searing wave of agony when her lips parted.

"Take pity upon a faithless handmaiden," she whispered "Is not a thousand years enough?" Ghost tears like transparent pearls trickled down her cheeks. "I swear that I did not know what I had done!" she sobbed. "Oh, take pity, and exchange this for the feather. The birds must fly." Then she was gone.

Miser Shen had seen nothing, and he gazed in wonder at the stunned expressions on our faces. I snarled and scrambled up the pile, and slid back down with an identical jade casket in my hands. I jerked the lid open, and then I cried out in despair.

Inside was not the Heart of Power, which was supposed to be the ultimate, but two more tiny tendrils. They were the Arms of the Great Root, and if the Legs had failed, what more could we expect from the Arms? The ginseng aroma made my eyes water, and I turned the casket upside down. Something else fell to the floor.

Li Kao got down on his knees and carefully examined a tiny crystal ball, about the size of the miniature flute.

"Miser Shen, I would advise you to sit down and prepare for a rather unusual phenomenon," he said grimly. Then he spat on his hand and reached out and cautiously rubbed the crystal surface.

The ball began to glow with a strange inner light. Then it began to expand. It grew until it was several feet in diameter, and the inner light grew brighter and brighter, and then we all cried out in wonder as a picture appeared, and then we heard sounds.

We were looking at the interior of a pretty little cottage where an old lady snoozed on a stool. We could hear her peaceful snores, and the sounds of chickens and pigs, and the gentle murmur of a stream. Birds sang and bees droned drowsily, and the sun-dappled leaves of a tree rustled outside the window.

An ant scurried across the floor, carrying a tiny crust of bread. After a moment a roach took notice, and began to scuttle after the ant. A rat stuck its head from a hole and dashed after the roach. A cat bounded after the rat, and then a dog bounded through the door and raced after the cat. The whole procession charged beneath the old lady's stool and tipped it over, and she sat up and rubbed her eyes, unleashed a torrent of peasant profanity, grabbed a broom, and started in hot pursuit of the dog that was chasing the cat that was chasing the rat that was chasing the roach that was chasing the ant that was carrying the crust of bread.

It is difficult to describe in words, but the scene that unfolded was incredibly comic. Around and around they went, racing through the door, climbing back inside through the window, smashing through the flimsy walls, reappearing through a

hole in the roof, and reducing the furniture to splinters. The variations appeared to be endless, and they were so ingenious that Miser Shen and I held our sides as we howled with laughter. At one point, the old lady's slashing broom sent every piece of pottery flying into the air, and they all came together with a crash. The fragments fell to the floor, and as one piece landed upon the other, they formed a solemn statue of the Sacred and Venerable Sage of Serenity. The mad procession raced outside and splashed through a pond, and when they crashed back inside through another ruined wall there was a huge bullfrog squatting upon the old lady's head, croaking indignantly.

Miser Shen and I might have laughed ourselves to death if Li Kao hadn't reached out and touched the crystal ball. The glow faded, and the sounds and the picture vanished, and the ball shrank down to its former size.

"Shen, have you ever seen anything like this?" Master Li asked, as soon as Miser Shen had recovered enough to breathe.

Miser Shen scratched his head and said, "Well, I can't be sure. Surely I have never seen anything like that incredible scene, but I once saw a tiny crystal ball that resembled this one in an ancient painting. It was in the Cavern of Bells. An old lame peddler with his back to the viewer was facing three young ladies who were dressed in the style of many centuries ago. In one of his hands he held three feathers—"

"Feathers?" Master Li yelped. "Girls dressed in the ancient style?"

"Ah…yes," said Miser Shen. "In the other hand the peddler was holding a ball that resembled this one, a tiny bell, and a miniature flute."

Li Kao grunted in satisfaction and unsnapped one of the fake shells on his belt.

"Like this?"

Precisely like that," said Miser Shen as he examined the tiny tin flute. "I don't remember much else about the painting except that it was said to be very mysterious and that the old lame peddler was thought to be divine. The Cavern of Bells has become a shrine in his honor, and it is tended by a small order of monks."

Li Kao placed the flute back into the shell, and added the crystal ball and the Arms of the Great Root of Power to his smuggler's belt.

"Let's get some sleep. In the morning we'll find out how to get off this island, and our first stop will be the Cavern of Bells," he said.

He spoke too soon. When we made a circuit of the oasis the following morning we discovered that it was indeed an island, completely encircled by murderous lava, and the narrow bridge was the only exit. Fingerprints pawed in the salt, and my heart sank to my toes as I realized that we would never be able to get back to the children of Ku-fu. I could not stop the tears that welled in my eyes and trickled down my cheeks, and Miser Shen looked at me and then hastily averted his eyes.

"Number Ten Ox, this is not such a bad place in which to spend the rest of our days," he said shyly. "We shall live like kings on fruits and berries and pure spring water, while the rest of the world enjoys war, famine, and pestilence."

And death, I thought. I heard weeping and mournful bells, and I saw a long row of small coffins disappearing into the ground.

"Of course, the rest of the world will also be enjoying Lotus Cloud," Miser Shen said thoughtfully.

"You have a point," I sniffled.

We were sitting upon the grass with our backs against the trunk of a huge palm tree. Li Kao trotted up and joined us, and I saw that his eyes were sparkling.

"Gentlemen, how much do you know about the great Chang Heng?" he asked.

I dimly recalled schoolroom lessons. "Didn't he invent the seismograph, about five hundred years ago?"

"And the Fire Drug," said Miser Shen.

"He did indeed, and his achievements did not stop there," said Master Li. "The great Chang Heng was a superb poet, a competent painter, an engineer and astronomer without equal, and the world's greatest student of the phenomenon of flight. He perfected the science of latitude and longitude, determined the value of pi, revolutionized the armillary sphere, and constructed kites that could carry men through the air for long distances. One day he happened to be sitting as we are, with his back against a tree, and something brushed his face."

Li Kao lifted his right hand and opened it, displaying a tiny object.

"A sycamore seed?" said Miser Shen.

"Precisely," said Master Li. "Chang Heng had seen thousands of them, but never before had he thought to examine one closely. The more he studied it, the more convinced he became that he was gazing at one of the marvels of nature."

Miser Shen and I stared fixedly at the seed. It was nothing but a tiny stem and a circle of fan-shaped blades.

"Observe," said Master Li.

He blew gently into the palm of his hand. The fan-shaped blades began to revolve, faster and faster, then the seed lifted straight up into the air. The breeze caught it and away it went, spinning into the sky, sailing over the treetops, dwindling to a tiny speck in the distance.

"Chang Heng was gazing at one of the most efficient flying machines in the world, and he immediately began to build a sycamore seed that could carry a man," said Master Li. "The emperor graciously provided pilots from the ranks of criminals who had been sentenced to death, and one after another the wailing wretches were strapped into Chang Heng's flying machines and pushed off the tops of cliffs. One of them encountered a strong updraft and actually flew for several hundred feet, but

the end result was the same. The blades could not whirl fast enough to compensate for the weight, and the pilots all crashed to their deaths. Do you know what Chang Heng did then?"

"We are as ignorant as apples," sighed Miser Shen, speaking for both of us.

"The great Chang Heng mixed sulphur, saltpeter, and charcoal, and invented the Fire Drug," Master Li said. "We use it mostly for fireworks, but he had something else in mind. By adding resin, he managed to produce a compound that would burn steadily instead of exploding, and he packed it into long tubes of bamboo. He built a wicker carriage and attached it to a revolving pole. On top of the pole he placed fan-shaped blades and at the bottom he added a wheel to which he attached his tubes of Fire Drug. The emperor and all the top officials gathered to watch what promised to be a spectacular execution, and the weeping convict was strapped to the seat in the carriage. Chang Heng lit the fuses. There was a spurt of flame, and then another and another, and a great cloud of black smoke obscured everything. When the smoke cleared, the astonished audience saw that the contraption had lifted straight up into the air, with the blades whirling furiously. A trail of smoke and flame stretched out behind as it flew through the air, and the screams of the pilot could faintly be heard as the thing streaked toward one of the palace towers. The emperor cheered and the audience applauded madly as it hit the tower and exploded with a great roar, and it was said that pieces of pilot rained down for a week, although that may be a slight exaggeration. The great Chang Heng locked himself in his workroom, and one month later he had completed the final design of the most marvelous of all his inventions: the incredible Bamboo Dragonfly."

Li Kao smiled happily. "The plans for which I have seen in the Forest of Culture Academy in Hanlin," he said.

There was a moment of silence.

"You can't possibly mean…." Miser Shen whispered.

"Right above us is a circle of palm branches that are light, strong, and fan-shaped," said Master Li.

"Surely you don't intend to…." I said weakly.

"Bamboo is all around us, and so is resin. The lava is full of sulphur. There are natural deposits of saltpeter all over China, and probably on this very island, and if a former peasant like Miser Shen can't make a little charcoal, I will be very surprised indeed."

"But it would be suicide!" I exclaimed.

"Insanity!" cried Miser Shen.

"We will have no hope of survival at all," Master Li agreed. "Ox, you get the palm branches and resin and bamboo. The charcoal will be Miser Shen's department, and I will search for saltpeter and extract the sulphur from the lava. I suggest

that we hurry, because with every passing moment I grow closer to expiring from old age."

For a week a series of explosions shook the little island, followed by the furious screams of Li Kao. His beard was singed and blackened and his eyebrows were nearly scorched off. So many fires had started in his clothes that he looked as though he had been attacked by a million starving moths, but finally he found the right formula and his tubes of Fire Drug began to behave. Miser Shen and I were rather proud of our handiwork. The basket was woven from reeds, and quite comfortable to sit in, and the palm-leaf blades revolved very nicely around the bamboo pole. The bamboo wheel to which the tubes were attached was balanced carefully and although we had no steering mechanism, we hoped to be able to control our flight by shifting our weight.

"Of course this is madness," I said as I climbed into the basket.

"Moronic," said Miser Shen, as he climbed in beside me.

"We are totally deranged," Li Kao agreed as he lit the fuses.

He hopped into the basket, and I covered my eyes and waited for death. The basket shuddered as the tubes of Fire Drug began to spurt flames. The wheel started to revolve, and the blades began to whirl round and round. I peeked through my fingers and peered through a cloud of black smoke and saw that the grass beneath us was bending beneath a blast of wind.

"We are rising!" I yelled.

"We are falling!" howled Miser Shen.

Both of us were right. We had suddenly lifted into the air, and now we were dropping back down. Unfortunately we had also moved fifty feet to the left, and we were dropping straight toward bubbling lava.

"Lean back!" Master Li yelled.

We shifted our weight and the Bamboo Dragonfly suddenly straightened out and began to skim just above the fiery surface toward the other side of the moat, and we stared with horrifying eyes at the prints of immense fingers that were eagerly pawing the salt.

The Hand That No One Sees almost got us. A slashing invisible finger ripped off one of the palm-leaf blades, which proved to be a blessing because we had apparently used one too many. As soon as it was gone our flying machine lifted into the air and began to perform very nicely indeed, except that it was flying around in circles. Around and around it flew, moving slowly across the ruins of the city, while great lunging marks of furious fingers kicked up clouds of salt beneath us.

"That horrible thing is crawling up on top of the ruins of the palace!" Miser Shen yelled. "If it gets on top of the wall and we keep circling like this we'll run right into it!"

He was right, but nothing could persuade the Bamboo Dragonfly to change course. Flames and black smoke spurted out behind us, and with one more circle we would be in the clutches of the Hand from Hell.

"Take off your tunics!" Master Li yelled. "Try using them as rudders!"

We ripped off our tunics and spread them behind us to catch the wind, and by some miracle it worked. Just as we reached the wall we suddenly veered to the left, and the Hand must have snatched at us because the slabs on top of the wall began to teeter precariously. Then the wall fell apart, and the stones tumbled down into the lake of lava, and then there was an enormous splash that sent fiery molten rock a hundred feet into the air.

The monster slowly rose to the surface. What had been invisible was now covered with black lava, and we gazed in terror at an enormous hairy hand, perhaps sixty feet long. The palm was up, and the fingers were tightly clenched, and suddenly it jerked convulsively and the fingers opened. They weren't fingers at all, but the legs of a giant spider and the heel and palm was a loathsome bloated sac! A cluster of evil eyes glared up at us and a hideous round mouth opened and displayed a circle of gigantic pointed teeth, and then lava poured into the mouth and the Hand That No One Sees sank forever beneath the fiery surface of the lake.

The Bamboo Dragonfly flew steadily on, and the tragic shattered city faded behind us. We sat in shaken silence, and finally Li Kao cleared his throat.

"I suspect that it was simply an oversized relative of the common trapdoor spider," he said thoughtfully. "Invisible, because before the eruption it had lived underground, where there is no need for sight perception. Nature is astonishingly adaptable, and there are a great many sea creatures that have become transparent to the point of invisibility, and a few insects."

He turned and gazed back as the city dwindled to a tiny speck in an endless expanse of white salt.

"It really is a pity that we couldn't keep the body to study. I would have liked to learn how it managed to eat during the centuries after it devoured the inhabitants of the city, and whether its eyes were atavistic or acquired. A remarkable specimen! Nonetheless," said Master Li, "I do not think that we will mourn its passing."

20

The Cavern of Bells

Hour after hour the palm-leaf blades whirled overhead and flames and smoke spurted out behind us as the incredible Bamboo Dragonfly flew across the searing white salt. We used our tunics to guide us around whirlwinds, and the heat from the desert was like fiery fingers that pushed us higher and higher into the sky. With the last light of the setting sun, Miser Shen pointed ahead to a long dark line on the horizon.

"Those are trees!" he exclaimed. "The Desert of Salt is coming to an end."

The best proof of that lay in the dark clouds that were building up. Lightning flickered in the distance, and I doubted that it had rained in the desert for a thousand years.

"Gentlemen, we could be in bad trouble if the basket that we're riding in fills with water," Li Kao pointed out.

We pried three bamboo pieces from the framework at the bottom of the basket, which not only made a drainage hole but also provided us with three poles for umbrellas. Thin strips from the circular rim provided the frames, and our trousers served as the covers. We finished just in time. Lightning flashed and thunder roared and rain fell in torrents, but we clutched our umbrellas and sailed through the storm quite comfortably.

"I have always wanted to fly through a thunderstorm!" Master Li shouted happily.

"Magnificent!" Miser Shen and I yelled as one.

It really was spectacular, and we were rather disappointed when the storm passed and the moon and stars came out. Wind whistled around our ears and a river gleamed like silver far below us. The Bamboo Dragonfly flew steadily on, and flames and smoke spurted out behind us as we drifted gently across the deep purple sky of China; a tiny spark that flicked beneath the glow of a million billion trillion stars.

Miser Shen dozed off, and then Master Li, and I rode through the night staring up at the stars and down at the moonlit earth far below. The sensation of flight was

far different from that which I had experienced in my dreams, and to tell the truth, I far preferred dream flight. Then I was like a bird, using the wind like the current of a stream, delighting in almost total freedom, but now I was simply a passenger riding in a basket beneath whirling blades, and I silently chided myself for being too cloddish to appreciate properly an experience that was very close to being miraculous. Master Li was also chiding himself, as I learned when he began to mutter in his sleep, but for a different reason.

"Fool," he muttered. "Blind as a bat. Use your head." Then he shifted restlessly and scratched his nose. "Why not *on* the island waiting at the end of the bridge?" he muttered angrily. "Stupid! Makes no sense."

He fell silent again and it occurred to me that if he was dreaming about the Hand That No One Sees, he had a good reason to think that it made no sense. Assuming that the Hand guarded the duke's treasure trove as the tide had guarded the first one, why not put the monster on the island silently and visibly waiting at the other end of that narrow bridge? Anyone who approached the treasure would simply be serving breakfast in bed to a hungry spider.

"Children," Master Li muttered, restlessly turning and shifting. "Games. Stupid or childish? A little boy?"

He sighed and his breathing grew more regular and then I heard nothing but deep snores. Miser Shen was dreaming too, and a tear was trickling down the sharp curve of his nose. He was making faint sounds, and I leaned close.

"Ah Chen," he whispered, "your father is here."

He said no more, and finally I too fell asleep. When I awoke I discovered that we were flying through pink and orange clouds, pale against a turquoise sky, and the morning sun was shining upon mountain peaks all around us as Li Kao and Miser Shen used their tunics to guide the Bamboo Dragonfly through a narrow pass where fantastic trees precariously perched, spreading their branches to capture wisps of clouds and to weave them into the patterns of dreams, like the landscapes of Mei Fei. I yawned and spread my tunic behind me like a rudder, and we passed so close to one high jagged peak that I let go with one hand and reached out and scooped up a handful of snow, which tasted delicious. Then we sailed through the pass and began to fly over a beautiful green valley, where tiny wisps of smoke drifted up from fields where farmers were burning weeds, and the breeze was fragrant with wet earth and trees and grass and flowers.

Around midmorning the tubes of Fire Drug began to sputter and fizzle. The palm-leaf blades whirled slower and slower, and we began to descend toward a small village nestled beside a broad river. You may be sure that peasants gathered from miles around to watch the gradual descent of a fire-breathing bird from Heaven. We hovered above the village square, and the Fire Drug produced one final spurt of

flame and puff of black smoke, and then we settled lightly to earth. The crowd gaped at three Chinese gentlemen, tastefully attired in loincloths and money belts, who stepped grandly from the basket clutching umbrellas.

"My surname is Li and my personal name is Kao, and there is a slight flaw in my character," said Master Li with a polite bow. "This is my esteemed client, Number Ten Ox, and this is Old Generosity, formerly known as Miser Shen. We hereby donate the incredible Bamboo Dragonfly to your delightful village. Build a fence around it! Charge admission! Your fortunes shall be made. And now you may direct us to the nearest wineshop, for we intend to stay drunk for a week."

Miser Shen would have liked to do just that, but by some incredible stroke of luck our flying machine had brought us very close to the Cavern of Bells. It was only a short distance downstream, so we bought a boat and shoved off into the current, and two days later Miser Shen pointed ahead.

"Stone Bell Mountain," he said. "The entrance to the Cavern of Bells is at the water's edge, and we should be able to sail right inside."

Li Kao nudged my arm.

"Ox, I have heard that the duke's tax trip takes him past Stone Bell Mountain," he whispered. "If the painting in the Cavern of Bells is as Miser Shen described it, then the Duke of Ch'in may have more than a casual interest in the place."

I remembered his earlier warning, and I peered around fearfully for two-hundred-foot armor-plated winged water moccasins as our little boat glided through the dark entrance. But then I cried out in wonder and delight. It was like sailing into one of those beautiful undersea palaces in Buddhist fairy tales. Sunlight from the entrance struck emerald water that glittered like green fire, and then the rays bounced up the stone walls that were studded with crystals that sparkled with every color of the spectrum. It was a world wrapped in rainbows. The strangest rocks that I had ever seen pointed up through the water and down from the roof. They were like spears, but turned around so that the thick handles pointed out. Li Kao had never visited the cavern before, but he had read a great deal about it.

"The bell stones," he said. "When the water rises, it strikes the stones on the bottom, which ring like bells, and the vibration causes the stones on the ceiling to respond with bell sounds of their own. The phenomenon is called sympathetic resonance. Deeper in the cavern are other stones formed from soft rock, through which tiny holes have been worn, and when the water rushes through the holes it provides more music to accompany the bells. Su Tung-po has written an interesting monograph on the subject."

We reached a wooden pier and tied our boat to one of the posts. A flight of stone steps led up to the great hall of the cavern, where a shrine had been set up. We appeared to be the only visitors, and the shrine was tended by four monks. Three of

them wore black robes, and the fourth wore crimson, and the one in crimson came trotting up. He was a tiny fellow with a high squeaking voice.

"May Buddha be with you," he said with a deep bow. "I am the custodian of the Temple of the Peddler, and my three brother monks belong to a different order nearby. In the passage to your left you will find the sacred painting of the deity of the Cavern of Bells. It is very ancient and very mysterious, and neither I nor my predecessors truly understand it. It is undeniably divine, and I live in hopes that some day a visitor will be able to explain it to me. May you be the wise visitors I seek," he said with another bow. "Will you forgive me if I do not accompany you? My brothers and I are slowly going mad as we attempt to balance our subscription books."

The little monk pattered back to join the others, and we walked down the passageway that he had indicated. At the end of it there were flickering torches that framed something upon the wall, and Miser Shen pointed to it.

"The painting that I spoke of," he said, while Li Kao and I stared at ghosts.

There could be no question about it. The painting depicted an old peddler with his back to us who was facing the murdered maiden whose ghost we had seen at the Castle of the Labyrinth. To her left stood the murdered maiden whose ghost had appeared on the island, and to her right stood a third girl who could have been their sister.

Li Kao snatched one of the torches from the brackets and went over the painting inch by inch. The peddler's robe was covered with colored pearls and lotus blossoms, and he was supported by a crutch beneath his left armpit. His hands were extended to the maidens. In the left hand he held three tiny white feathers, and in the right hand he held a miniature flute and crystal ball that were precisely like the ones in Li Kao's belt, as well as a tiny bronze bell. The painting was very ancient, but what did it mean?

"The emblems on the lame peddler's robe usually signify Heaven, in which case this might be a painting of T'ieh-kuai Li, the Fourth Immortal," Master Li said thoughtfully. "But two things are wrong, and one of them rules out such an interpretation. He should be carrying a large calabash on his back, and he could not possibly be leaning upon a wooden crutch. After all, the name means Li with the Iron Crutch."

He went back over the painting, with his eyes no more than an inch from the surface.

"On the other hand, the emblems on the robe can signify the supernatural, and that includes the evil supernatural," he muttered. "We know that two of the girls were murdered, and I am willing to lay enormous odds against the possibility that the third girl died peacefully in bed. The maddening thing is that I can find no trace of something that should be included."

I looked at him inquiringly.

"Ginseng," he explained. "Ox, for some mysterious reason our quest for the Great Root and the ghosts of the handmaidens are linked together, and so are the games of the children, the village of Ku-fu, Dragon's Pillow, nonsense rhymes, feathers, birds that must fly, the Duke of Ch'in—all of the dukes, come to think of it—and Buddha knows what else."

He straightened up and shrugged.

"If we ever figure it out, it should make a marvelous story," he sighed. "Let's go see if those monks can tell us something useful."

The three monks in black had disappeared, but the little monk in crimson was more than helpful. "No, we have never been able to grasp the meaning of the trinkets and the feathers," he said. "The feathers are particularly puzzling, because there is another painting deeper in the cavern that depicts feathers. It is so old that most of the paint has worn away, but one can clearly make out feathers and the symbol of the constellation Orion. Again I have no idea what it means."

Li Kao's eyes were sparkling. "Ox," he whispered. "In ancient times a roof, three beams, and the number three formed the ideograph for Orion. It was also used to signify ginseng, particularly when the symbol for heart was at the point of the beams, and that would mean the Heart of the Great Root of Power."

I was beginning to catch some of his excitement myself, and we eagerly followed the little monk to the opening of another tunnel. He offered us torches from the wall brackets.

"You will find the painting at the end, and in the meantime you learn why we are certain that the peddler is divine," he said. "Fortunate! You have arrived during the rainy season, and the water has begun to rise in the Peddler's cavern. Soon it will strike the bell stones, and only Heaven could produce such music. The stones are deep beneath the tunnel, but there are side passages that will enable you to hear the music clearly."

Miser Shen's previous visit had been during the wrong season for bell music, and he was rather skeptical about it. As we moved down the low dark tunnel the slap of our sandals was joined by the sound of water lapping against rocks far below us and to the left side. Then the water rose high enough and we knew that the monk had not lied. This was the music of Heaven.

A stone bell chimed. Just as the echo was fading away it was answered by a second bell that was soft and sweet and slightly blurred, as though the sound were sifted through honey. Another bell answered, higher and clearer and perfectly in harmony, and then bell after bell chimed in: big bells, small bells, loud bells, soft bells, clear bells, cloudy bells, and we walked along in enchantment while our torches cast immense shadows upon the stone walls. I cannot describe the beauty of the stone

bell song. Then the water reached the soft rocks and began to rush through tiny holes, and the bells were joined by the sound of a thousand silver lutes being stroked by a million murmuring bees. The combination of sounds was lifting our souls right out of our bodies, and ahead of us was a side passageway that was large enough to enter. The music poured from it, and we turned as one and trotted down the passageway toward the ravishing song. Tears were streaming down Miser Shen's cheeks. He began to run, with his arms spread wide to catch and embrace the music, and we were right at his heels while our shadows leaped and jumped all around us. A rock moved beneath Miser Shen's foot, and I heard a harsh metallic *whang*.

Miser Shen lifted into the air and flew backward into my arms, and I stared stupidly at the iron shaft of a crossbow bolt that was protruding from his chest.

21

A Prayer to Ah Chen

We dived to the floor, but no more bolts flew. I laid an ear against Miser Shen's chest. His heart was still beating, but faintly. "The painting is a trap," Master Li whispered in my ear. "The acoustics of the tunnel permit the monks to hear what's being said, and when they heard that we recognized the maidens and linked them to the Duke of Ch'in, the monks in black slipped ahead to cock a crossbow and set the trigger."

He cautiously lifted his torch and waved it around, and finally we spotted it. A single crossbow, fixed in a wall bracket and aimed at the center of the passageway.

"Why only one?" Master Li muttered. He carefully felt beneath the stone that Miser Shen's foot had pressed. There was a metal rod which ran back beneath the surface of the path. "Ox, do you see that large flat white stone?" Master Li whispered. "It has raised slightly, and I rather believe that we are supposed to step on it as we run for our lives."

I picked up Miser Shen and we carefully inched around that stone as we made our way back to the main tunnel. Li Kao picked up rocks and hurled them, and on the third try he hit the raised white stone. With a horrible crash a good fifty feet of the roof collapsed, and a great cloud of dust and whining splinters of rock shot from the mouth of the passageway. Anyone in there would have been crushed like an ant beneath an elephant's foot.

"We can't trust the acoustics," Li Kao whispered in my ear. "If we go back, they'll probably be ready for us. We have to follow the tunnel and trust to luck."

He led the way with a torch in one hand and his knife in the other. The tunnel was sloping up, and the beautiful bell song was growing fainter. The only other sounds were the hiss of the torch and the slap of our sandals, and then Miser Shen groaned. His eyes opened, but they were feverish and puzzled and he did not seem to recognize us. We stopped and I set him down, with his back propped against the tunnel wall, and his lips moved.

"You are the priest?" he said hoarsely to Li Kao. "My little girl has been murdered by the Duke of Ch'in, and they tell me that I will feel better if I burn a prayer and send it to her, but I do not know how to write."

For Miser Shen it was forty years ago, when the death of his daughter had begun to drive him insane.

"I am the priest," Master Li said quietly. "I will write down your prayer for you."

Miser Shen's lips moved silently, and I sensed that he was rehearsing. Finally he was ready, and he made a terrible effort to concentrate on what he wanted to say to his daughter. This is the prayer of Miser Shen.

"Alas, great is my sorrow. Your name is Ah Chen, and when you were born I was not truly pleased. I am a farmer, and a farmer needs strong sons to help with his work, but before a year had passed you had stolen my heart. You grew more teeth and you grew daily in wisdom, and you said 'Mommy' and 'Daddy' and your pronunciation was perfect. When you were three you would knock at the door and then you would run back and ask 'Who is it?' When you were four your uncle came to visit and you played the host. Lifting your cup, you said 'Ching!' and we roared with laughter and you blushed and covered your face with your hands, but I know that you thought yourself very clever. Now they tell me that I must try to forget you, but it is hard to forget you.

"You carried a toy basket. You sat at a low stool to eat porridge. You repeated the Great Learning and bowed to Buddha. You played at guessing games, and romped around the house. You were very brave, and when you fell and cut your knee you did not cry because you did not think it was right. When you picked up fruit or rice, you always looked at people's faces to see if it was all right before putting it in your mouth, and you were careful not to tear your clothes.

"Ah Chen, do you remember how worried we were when the flood broke our dikes and the sickness killed our pigs? Then the Duke of Ch'in raised our taxes and I was sent to plead with him, and I made him believe that we could not pay our taxes. Peasants who cannot pay taxes are useless to dukes, so he sent his soldiers to destroy our village, and thus it was the foolishness of your father that led to your death. Now you have gone Hell to be judged, and I know that you must be very frightened, but you must try not to cry or make loud noises because it is not like being at home with your own people.

"Ah Chen, do you remember Auntie Yang, the midwife? She was also killed and she was very fond of you. She had no little girls of her own, so it is all right for you to try to find her, and to offer her your hand and ask her to take care of you. When you come before the Yama Kings, you should clasp your hands together and plead to them: 'I am young and I am innocent. I was born in a poor family, and I was content

with scanty meals. I was never willfully careless of my shoes and my clothing, and I never wasted a grain of rice. If evil spirits bully me, may thou protect me.' You should put it just that way, and I am sure that the Yama Kings will protect you.

"Ah Chen, I have soup for you and I will burn paper money for you to use, and the priest is writing down this prayer that I will send to you. If you hear my prayer, will you come to see me in my dreams? If fate so wills that you must yet lead an earthly life, I pray that you will come again to your mother's womb. Meanwhile I will cry, 'Ah Chen, your father is here!' I can but weep for you, and call your name." *

Miser Shen fell silent. I thought that he had died, but then he opened his eyes again.

"Did I say it right?" he whispered. "I practiced for a long time, and I wanted to say it right, but I am confused in my mind and something seems to be wrong."

"You said it perfectly," Master Li said quietly.

Miser Shen appeared to be greatly relieved. His eyes closed and his breathing grew fainter. Then he coughed and blood spurted from his lips and the soul of Miser Shen departed from the red dust of earth.

We knelt beside Miser Shen and clasped our hands. In my mind the image of Ah Chen was mingled with the images of the children of Ku-fu and I could not speak through my tears, but the voice of Li Kao was firm and strong.

"Miser Shen, great is your joy," he said. "Now you are released from the prison of your body, and your soul is reunited with little Ah Chen. Surely the Yama Kings will allow you to be reborn as a tree, and for miles around the poor peasants will know you as Old Generosity."

I finally found my tongue.

"Miser Shen, if fate so wills that I am reunited with Lotus Cloud, I will tell her your story, and she will weep for you and she will not forget you, and so long as I live you will live in the heart of Number Ten Ox."

We said prayers together and made the symbolic sacrifice, but we could not bury the body in solid rock, so we begged his spirit to forgive us for not observing the customary decencies. Then we stood up and bowed, and Li Kao picked up the torch.

"Master Li, if you ride on my back we can move quickly if we have to make a run for it," I suggested.

He climbed up and I started down the tunnel. It continued to slope upward, and in an hour the song of the bells faded away. (If any of my readers happen to be in the vicinity, I urge them to visit the Cavern of Bells, because the music truly comes from Heaven and was simply put to evil use by evil men who are no longer with us.) The beautiful song had just dwindled into silence when I turned a corner in the

* Lin Yutang has translated Miser Shen's prayer to Ah Chen slightly differently. See *The Importance of Understanding* (World Publishing Co., New York, 1960).

tunnel, and the light from the torch in Li Kao's hand reached out to touch a familiar figure. The little monk in the crimson robe was standing in front of us with a smirk on his face.

"Stop, you idiot! Have you learned nothing from the death of Miser Shen?" Master Li yelled as I leaped forward.

I tried to pull up, but it was too late. My hands were outstretched to strangle the monk and my weight was forward, and I took one more step and landed upon a reed mat that had been cleverly painted to resemble rock. I fell through it as though it were water, and tumbled down head over heels and landed with a crash that knocked the breath from my body. The torch fell with us, and when I had recovered enough to look around I saw that we had fallen into a pit that was about eight feet wide and fifteen feet deep, with walls made from large stone slabs fitted tightly together. I heard a grating metallic sound and looked up, and my heart nearly stopped beating.

The little monk was pulling a heavy chain with all his might, and an iron lid was slowly sliding across the top of the pit.

Li Kao's hand was cocked behind his right ear. "A present from Miser Shen!" he yelled, and torchlight glinted upon the blade of his knife as it flashed through the air. The monk dropped the chain. He clutched at his throat and clawed at the hilt that was buried there, and his eyes rolled to the top of his head and blood spurted, and he gurgled horribly and toppled over the edge of the pit.

I lifted my hands to catch him, but he never landed. His legs became entangled in the chain and he jerked to a halt in midair, and I gasped as I saw that his weight was pulling the iron lid farther and farther across the opening of the pit, and then it slammed shut with a harsh metallic clang. In an instant I had grabbed the chain and had climbed up over the dangling monk. I shoved at the lid with all my might, but it was wasted effort. That sheet of iron had slid into grooves in solid rock, and I had no leverage at all.

"Master Li, I can't budge it!" I panted.

I dropped back to the floor, which was solid stone. Our torch was burning yellow, but soon it would burn orange, and then blue, and then it wouldn't burn at all. The last thing we would see before we suffocated would be the blackness of the tomb.

I have a horror of small closed places. *"Saparah, tarata, mita, prajna, para—"* I mumbled hoarsely.

"Oh, stop that mumbo-jumbo and get to work," Master Li said testily. "I have no objection to Buddhism, but at least you can babble in a civilized language—either that or learn something about the one that you're massacring."

He picked up a couple of rocks and handed me one. Li Kao worked carefully around the circumference of the pit, tapping the slabs higher up. On his second tour around the walls Li Kao heard a faint hollow echo as he rapped with his rock. He

peered closely and saw that the slab had not been perfectly cut and joined and that a tiny strip of mortar ran around the edges.

I jumped down, and he turned and bowed politely to the dangling corpse. "Many thanks for returning my knife to me," he said, and he jerked the knife from the monk's throat, which produced quite a mess on the floor. Half an hour later the mortar was gone and the slab was loose, but were we supposed to work it out of the hole? My large clumsy fingers couldn't possibly fit into those narrow cracks, and even Li Kao's fingers were too large. When he tried to shift the slab with his knife, the only result was that the blade snapped in half. We were no better off than before, and that damned dangling monk was grinning at us. I growled and slapped the silly smile on his face, and as the corpse swung back and forth the creaking chain produced a sound like mocking laughter.

Li Kao watched the monk with narrowed eyes. "Ox, smack him again," he commanded.

I smacked the corpse again, and the chain laughed even louder as it creaked back and forth.

"Got it," said Master Li. "Something about our dear friend was trying to speak to me when I watching him swing around. Unless I'm greatly mistaken, he was born for the job of pulling stones from walls."

I shoved the little monk over to the slab, and his tiny fingers easily slid into the cracks. I forced the fingers in as far as possible and pressed his thumbs around the edges and held them tight. How long I squeezed the cold corpse hands I cannot say, but it seemed several eternities before the body turned rigid. It was our last chance. The flickering flame of the torch was turning blue when I gently pulled the monk backward. His fingers clutched that slab with the rigid grasp of death, and the slab slid out with no effort at all and crashed to the floor.

We did not rejoice. No fresh air had come out of the hole with the slab, and when Master Li inserted the torch, we saw a long low tunnel with many passageways branching out on both sides.

"It's another labyrinth, but my old lungs won't last much longer," Li Kao panted, and I could believe it because his face was nearly as blue as the torchlight. "Ox, tie me to your back with the cord from the monk's robe. We'll have to extinguish the torch, so you must follow the dragon by feel."

I tied him to my back, and we barely fit through the hole in the wall, and when Li Kao extinguished the torch my throat constricted so tightly that I nearly suffocated then and there. Blackness was pressing down upon me like a heavy shroud as I began to crawl, and what little air was left was foul. My fingers traced the path of the green jade dragon as it wound through the holes in the red coral pendant, while I groped for openings in the walls with the other hand. Third left…. First left….

Fourth right…. Li Kao was almost unconscious, and the words that he muttered faintly in my ear made no sense.

"Ox…not a tiger but a little boy…games…rules of games…."

Then he sighed, and his body lay limply upon my back, and I could scarcely sense a heartbeat. There was nothing to do but crawl ahead, and my own consciousness was slipping away with every gasp of my aching lungs, and death was beckoning me to join my parents in the Yellow Springs Beneath the Earth. Second right…. Second left….

"Master Li, the dragon can lead us no farther!" I panted.

There was no answer. The ancient sage was out cold, if not dead, and now everything depended upon the slow wits of Number Ten Ox, but what was I to do? The last direction of the dragon had led me against the stone wall of a dead end, and the dragon had wound all the way to the bottom of the pendant. It went no farther, so how could I? To turn back would be suicide, and I frantically felt around in the darkness. There was nothing but smooth unbroken stone, although my fingers found one small crack in the floor that might have been big enough for a mouse. Nothing else. No slab with mortar around the edges, no lever to pull, no keyhole. I lowered my head and wept.

It was some time before I was able to think about the strange words that Master Li had muttered in my in my ear, and even longer before I remembered how he had muttered in his sleep while we flew on the Bamboo Dragonfly. "Why not on the island, waiting at the end of the bridge?" he had muttered. "Games. A little boy?" Was he saying that the duke was not the Tiger of Ch'in but a child and that the Hand That No One Sees had not been waiting for victims at the end of the narrow bridge on the oasis because the victims would have no chance, and that would ruin a game?

My head seemed to be packed with wool, and my ears were ringing. In my mind I saw the dying face of Miser Shen as he prayed to his little girl. "You played at guessing games…. You played at guessing games…. Guessing games…. Guessing games…."

What was the name of the game that we were playing with the Duke of Ch'in? Follow the Dragon, that's what, and what is the rule that a child must learn when playing a follow game? Keep following. Never assume and never give up. You *can* continue to follow, if only you try hard enough. The dragon had stopped, but was it possible that it could still go somewhere, and somehow I would be able to follow?

My fingers crawled across the floor to that one tiny crack in the stone. It was a couple of inches long and irregularly oval. Lack of air had turned me into a small child, and I actually giggled as I removed the red coral pendant from the chain around my neck. It was a couple of inches long and irregularly oval and it fit precisely into the crack.

"Follow the dragon," I giggled, and I released the pendant.

The dragon dropped down. I waited for the sound when it landed, and waited and waited, and finally, far below, I heard a click as though it had landed like a key in a lock, and then I heard a second click, as though tumblers had turned.

The stone floor tilted beneath me. I slid toward a side wall, and as the floor tilted more steeply a hole opened, and then I followed the dragon, with Master Li tied to my back, shooting out and down into moonlight and starlight and air. My lungs felt as though they were touched with fire as I gulped and gasped, and Master Li moaned softly, and I felt his lungs begin to heave. We tumbled down the side of a steep hill and landed upon something that glittered.

Moonlight shone down upon a tiny glade, sunken way down in the center of Stone Bell Mountain, and upon an immense mountain of treasure. Instinctively my eyes lifted to the top of the pile to a shadow where no shadow should be. Then the third girl from that painting was gazing at me beseechingly, and blood stained her dress where a blade had pierced her heart.

"Take pity upon a faithless handmaiden," she whispered. Ghost tears trickled slowly down her cheeks. "Is not a thousand years enough?" she sobbed. "I swear that I did not know what I had done! Oh, take pity, and exchange this for the feather. The birds must fly."

Then she was gone.

I crawled up a slope of diamonds and ripped the lid from the small jade casket that the ghost had cradled in her hands. Ginseng aroma stung my nostrils, but it was not the Heart of the Great Root of Power. It was the Head, and beside it lay a tiny bronze bell.

My heart sank wearily and I closed my eyes, and sleep cradled me like a baby. I did not dream at all.

PART THREE

The Princess of Birds

The Dream of the White Chamber

Night rain is falling on the village of Ku-fu, glinting through moonbeams that slide through thin clouds, and the soft splashing sound outside my window blends with the drip of ink from the mouse-whiskered tip of my writing brush. I have been trying as hard as I can, but I am unable to express my emotions when the Arms and the Head of Power brought the children back from death's doorstep, and then failed to complete the cure.

Once more they awoke, but into the strange world of the Hopping Hide and Seek Game, and once more they smiled and laughed and chanted the nonsense rhyme from Dragon's Pillow. Then once more they yawned, and their eyes closed, and they sank back upon their beds. Once more they dropped into the depths of their trances.

People with nothing else to turn to must revert to the superstitions of their ancestors, and grandparents began to tie mirrors to the children's foreheads so that the demons of sickness would see the reflections of their own ugly faces and flee in terror. Fathers shouted their children's names while they waved favorite toys tied to long poles, hoping to entice the wandering souls, and mothers stood tensely at the bedsides with cords that would tie the souls to the bodies should they return. I turned and ran into the abbot's study and slammed the door.

Nothing but the Heart of the Great Root of Power could save the children of my village. I was sick with fear, and my eyes lifted to a framed quotation from The Study of the Ancients:

All things have a root and a top,
All events an end and a beginning.
Whoever understands correctly

What comes first and what follows
Draws nearer to Tao.

I was a long way from drawing nearer to Tao, and children's games and nonsense rhymes and ginseng roots and birds and feathers and flutes and balls and bells and agonized ghosts and terrible monsters and the Duke of Ch'in whirled round and round in my brain without making any sense at all.

The door opened and Li Kao walked into the study. He drank three cups of wine, one after another, and then he sat down across from me and took the little bronze bell from his belt and gently rang it.

We listened to the beat of a drum, and then the beautifully trained voice of a young woman began to chant and sing the story of the great courtesan who grew old, and who was forced into the indignity of marrying a businessman. A second ring of the bell produced a lively tempo, and the hilariously pornographic tale of Golden Lotus, a third ring brought sarcasm and suppressed rage, and the story of Pi Kan, who was put to death because an idiot emperor wanted to see if it was true that the heart of a wise man is pierced by seven openings.

We had a flute that told fairy tales, a ball that showed funny pictures, and a bell that sang Flower Drum Songs. And we were supposed to exchange them for feathers.

Li Kao sighed. He replaced the bell in his belt and poured another cup of wine.

"I am going to complete this task if I have to unscrew the roots of the sacred mountains, hoist a sail on top of Taishan, and steer the world across the Great River of Stars to the Gates of the Great Void," he said grimly. "Ox, the slight flaw in my character has proved to be a godsend. When I run into something that is really foul, I can counter with the potential for foulness that resides in the depths of my soul, and that is why I can go into a place like the Cavern of Bells and come out of it with a song on my lips. You, on the other hand, suffer from an incurable case of purity of heart."

He paused to consider his word carefully, but I was ahead of him.

"Master Li, it would take twenty tons of Fire Drug to pry me loose from the quest," I said as firmly as I could, which was not very firmly. "Besides, we'll have to try to get to the Key Rabbit, and that means Lotus Cloud, and I will happily battle a tiger for the honor of hopping into her bed."

To my astonishment I discovered that what I had said was true. It was amazing what a tonic the thought of Lotus Cloud was, and I stared in wonder at hands that were no longer shaking.

"I will battle a regiment of tigers," I said with real conviction.

Li Kao looked at me curiously. We sat in silence while the sound of two fighting cats drifted into the room and then the sound of Auntie Hua going after them with

a broom. Li Kao shrugged and reached out and pressed a finger to my forehead, and quoted Lao-tzu.

"Blessed are the idiots, for they are the happiest people on earth. Very well, both of us will commit suicide, but it's Ching Ming and you must honor your dead. We'll leave in the morning," he said.

I bowed and left him to his thoughts. I took some food and wine from the bonzes' pantry and went out into the bright sunshine, and I borrowed a hoe and a rake and a broom from the tool-shed. It was the most perfect spring imaginable, glorious weather for the Festival of Tombs, and I made my way to my parents' graves. I raked and pruned and swept until their resting place was spotless, and then I made an offering of food and wine. I had saved the tassels and ornaments from the fine hat that I had worn during our visit to the Ancestress, and the silver belt with the jade trim and the gold-spattered fan. I placed the tassels and ornaments and belt in the bowl that I used for special offerings. Then I knelt to pray. I asked my mother and father to send me courage so that I would not disgrace my ancestors, and I felt much better when I had finished. Then I got to my feet and ran toward the eastern hills.

Centuries ago the great family of the Lius had ruled our valley. The estate still stood at the crest of the largest hill, although the house was seldom visited by the owners now, and gardeners still maintained the famous park that had been lovingly described by such writers as Tsao Hsueh Chin and Kao Ngoh. I knew it like the back of my hand, and I crawled through my secret tunnel in the high wall into a gardener's paradise. The ground was shimmering with yellow chrysanthemums, and the hills were thick with silver poplars and nodding aspens. A stream arched down the side of a cliff in a foaming waterfall that splashed into a bright blue lake. The banks were lined with flowering peach, and chiching trees with violet flowers growing directly from the trunks and branches, and behind them was a shady bamboo grove, and then the pear trees, and then a thousand apricot trees that were flaming with a million scarlet blossoms.

I followed the path around the moon terraces, and then turned off to a rough trail that led down through deep gorges with creepers and moss-covered great gray rocks. The trail dropped sharply down to the darkness of a cypress grove, where a quiet stream rippled past the Sandbank Harbor of Blossoming Purity, and I crawled beneath some low bushes and untied a small boat. I climbed in and pushed off, and drifted down a long winding gorge where willows bent the branches to brush the water, and spirit creepers wound over rocks, and clusters of fruit like red coral peeped beneath frost-blue foliage.

When I had tied the boat to a tree trunk and picked up the trail again it climbed toward bright clearings where winding brooks sparkled in green meadows, and always I reached hills or rocks that blocked the view and then opened to even more beautiful

vistas on the other side. The path climbed steeply through masses of boulders toward a great glorious rock that reached to the clouds, and on the other side was another gorge that was spanned by a narrow wooden bridge. Then the path climbed again, and suddenly leveled to a small ridge where orchids grew, and orioles sang, and grasshoppers chirped in the bright sunshine. Far below I could see my village, spread out like a picture from a book.

At the end of the ridge was a willow grove. I slipped inside to a small green glade where a single grave lay among the wildflowers.

The head gardener's daughter was buried there. Her name had been Scented Hairpin, but since she had been a shy, quiet girl, who was timid with strangers, everyone had called her Mouse. She had the most beautiful eyes that I had ever seen, and she had not been timid when we played the Hopping Hide and Seek Game. Mouse almost always lasted longest and became the queen, and she had also not been timid when she decided that some day we would be man and wife. She had fallen ill when she was thirteen. Her parents had let me hold her hand on her deathbed, and she had whispered the last words of Mei Fei: "I came from the Land of Fragrance; to the Land of Fragrance I now return."

I knelt at the grave. "Mouse, it is Number Ten Ox, and I have something for you," I said.

I placed the gold-spattered Szech'uen fan in her offering bowl, and I prayed, and then I sat on the grass in the golden sunlight that filtered through the leaves and told her my story. I could not explain it, but somehow I knew that Mouse wouldn't mind the fact that I was in love with Lotus Cloud. I poured out my heart and felt it grow lighter, and the sun was setting as I finished. The breeze always picked up at the approach of evening, and I stayed to watch the willows.

Mouse's heartbroken father had used his art to honor his daughter. The wind sighed through the trees, and the willows began to bend, and then one branch after another reached out and gently swept the young girl's grave.

That night I had a very strange dream. At first it was a tangle of images: Henpecked Ho weeping with a silver comb in his hands, and Bright Star dancing down the path toward a door that always closed, and Miser Shen praying to his daughter, and the Hand of Hell and the Cavern of Bells. Again and again I fled from a great golden tiger mask, and then I ran through a door into a world of whiteness, milky and soft and glowing, and I felt comfortable and safe. Something was forming in the whiteness. I smiled happily, because Mouse had come to see me. She carried the Szech'uen fan, and her beautiful young eyes looked fondly at me.

"How happy I am," she said softly. "Ever since we held hands and recited the Orphan's Song, I knew that you would fall in love with Lotus Cloud."

"Mouse, I love you too," I said.

"You must trust your heart," she said gravely. "Ox, you have grown very strong. Now you must use all of your strength to touch the queen before the count reaches forty-nine. It must not reach forty-nine, which can mean for ever and ever and ever." Mouse was fading back into the milky whiteness. "Is not a thousand years enough?" she said faintly, as though from very far away. "The birds must fly…. The birds must fly…. The birds must fly…."

Mouse was gone, and for some reason I knew that it was important for me to understand the glowing whiteness around me. Suddenly I understood that the world was white because I was inside a giant pearl, and with awareness came awakening, and I sat up and blinked in the morning sunlight.

Doctor Death

"The extraordinary effect of the tendrils of the Great Root leads to a basic assumption, and that is that the Heart of Power is indeed the ultimate healing agent in the whole world," said Master Li. "The Duke of Ch'in would never hide such a thing in a treasure trove where he might have to cross all China to get to it. He would keep it with him, right next to his loathsome skin, and you and I are going to have to murder the bastard and take the root from his corpse."

We were passing once more through the shadow of Dragon's Pillow, where crows gathered to watch us and make rude comments.

"Master Li, how are we going to murder a man who laughs at axes?" I asked.

"We are going to *experiment*, dear boy. Our first order of business will be to find a deranged alchemist, which should not be very difficult. China," said Master Li, "is overstocked with deranged alchemists."

In the city of Pingtu, Li Kao examined the faces of street vendors until he found an old lady with gossip written all over her.

"A thousand pardons, Adoptive Daughter, but this humble one seeks an eminent scientist who may be living nearby," he said politely. "He is a devout Taoist, somewhat seedy in appearance and rather wild of eye, and there is an excellent chance that his house is placed halfway between a cemetery and a slaughterhouse."

"You seek Doctor Death!" the old lady gasped, fearfully glancing toward a ramshackle house that teetered at the top of a hill. "None but the criminally insane dare climb that path to his House of Horrors, and few ever return!"

We thanked her for the warning and started briskly up the path.

"Almost certainly a gross slander," Master Li said calmly. "Ox, Taoists are guided by a rather peculiar blend of mysticisms. On the one hand they exalt sages like Chuang Tzu, who taught that death and life, end and start, are no more disconcerting

than the passage of night and day, but on the other hand they engage in frantic quests for personal immortality. When a scientific genius becomes involved in the mystical mumbo jumbo, the result is likely to be a lunatic whose quest for eternal life massacres everything in sight, but such poor souls wouldn't willingly harm a fly. Besides," he added, "it's a perfect day for a visit to a House of Horrors."

There I could agree with him. Trees in the cemetery sighed in the wind like a moan of mourners, and behind the slaughterhouse a dog howled horribly. Black clouds muttered dark spells above the mountains, and sulphurous lightning streaked the sky, and the ramshackle house upon the hill creaked and groaned in a rising gale that dripped with a thin, weeping rain. We walked through the open door into a room that was littered with carcasses, and where a little old man with a bloodstained beard was attempting to install a pig's heart into a man's cadaver while cauldrons burped and kettles bubbled and seething vials emitted green and yellow vapors.

Doctor Death sprinkled the heart with purple powder and made mystical gestures with his hands. "Beat!" he commanded. Nothing happened, so he tried yellow powder. "Beat, beat, beat!" He tried blue powder. "Ten thousand curses, why won't you beat?" he yelled, and then he turned around. "Who you?" asked Doctor Death.

"My surname is Li and my personal name is Kao, and there is a slight flaw in my character, and this is my esteemed client, Number Ten Ox," Master Li said with a polite bow.

"Well, my surname is Lo and my personal name is Chan, and I am rapidly losing patience with a corpse that absolutely refuses to be resurrected!" Doctor Death yelled, and then his face and voice softened until he looked to be as gentle as a snowflake and as innocent as a banana. "If I cannot resurrect a stubborn corpse, how can I hope to resurrect my beloved wife?" he said softly.

He turned toward a coffin that had been set up as a shrine, and tears trickled down his cheeks.

"She was not pretty, but she was the most wonderful wife in the whole world," he whispered. "Her name was Chiang-chao, and we were very poor, but she could make the most delicious meals from a handful of rice and the herbs that she picked in the woods. She sang beautiful songs to cheer me when I was depressed, and she sewed dresses for wealthy ladies to help pay for my studies. We were very happy together, and I know that we will be happy together again. *Don't worry, my love, I'll have you out of that coffin in no time!*" he yelled.

He turned back to us.

"It's simply a matter of finding the purest ingredients, because I already have an infallible formula," he explained. "You use ten pounds of peach fuzz—"

"Ten pounds of tortoise hairs," said Master Li.

"Ten pounds of plum skins—"

"Ten pounds of rabbit horns—"

"Ten pounds of membranes of living chickens—"

"One large spoonful of mercury—"

"One large spoonful of oleander juice—"

"Two large spoonfuls of arsenic oxide—"

"For the toxin generates the antitoxin—"

"And in death there is life, as in life there is death."

"A colleague!" Doctor Death cried happily, and he wrapped Li Kao in a bloody embrace. "Tell me, Venerable One, do you know of some better method? This one is bound to work sooner or later, but it has been such a very long time, and I fear that my dear wife is growing weary of her coffin."

"Alas, I am only aware of the classic formula," Master Li sighed. "My own specialty is the Elixir of Life, but I have foolishly left home without an adequate supply, which is why I have come to you."

"But how fortunate! I have just made a fresh batch." Doctor Death rummaged in a drawer and pulled out a greasy vial that was filled with thick purple liquid. "One spoonful after each meal and two at bedtime and you will surely live forever," he said. "I need scarcely mention to a colleague that the Elixir of Life can occasionally have distressing side effects, and that it is best to try it first on a rat."

"Or a cat," said Master Li.

"Or a crow."

"Or a cow."

"And if you happen to have a useless hippopotamus—"

"Actually, I was planning to try it on an elephant," said Master Li.

"A wise decision," Doctor Death said approvingly.

"A small donation," Master Li said, piling gold coins on a table between somebody's lymph glands and lungs. "May I suggest that you employ a professional grave robber? Digging up corpses can be terribly hard work."

Doctor Death looked down at the gold with a strange expression on his face, and his voice was so soft that I barely heard him.

"Once there was a poor scholar who needed to buy books, but he had no money," he whispered. "He sold everything he had to buy a tiny piece gold, which he then concealed in the hollow handle of an alchemist's ladle; and then he went to the house of a rich man and pretended to turn lead into gold. The rich man gave him money so that he could learn how to turn large pieces of lead into gold, and the scholar happily ran to the city to buy the books that he needed. When he returned he

discovered that thieves had broken into his house. They had heard that he knew how to make gold, so they had tortured his wife to make her tell where he had hidden it. She was barely alive. He held her in his arms and wept, and she looked at him but she did not know him. 'But gentlemen,' she whispered, 'surely you do not mean to kill me? My husband is a brilliant scientist and a dear sweet kindly man, but he needs someone to look after him. What will he do when I am gone?' And then she died."

Doctor Death turned to the coffin and shouted, *"Don't worry, my love! Now I can afford to buy a better grade of corpses, and…."* He clapped a hand to his mouth. "Oh dear!" he gasped, and he turned and trotted over to the cadaver on the table.

"I did not mean to offend you," he said contritely. "I'm sure that you will do splendidly, and perhaps it would help if you realized how important it is. You see, my wife was not pretty but she was the most wonderful wife in the world. Her name was Chiang-chao, and we were very poor, but she could make the most delicious meals from a handful of rice…."

He had forgotten that we existed, and we tiptoed out and started down the hill in the rain. Li Kao had been quite serious about trying the Elixir of Life on an elephant. At the bottom of the hill was a poor old beast that was used to haul logs to the sawmill, and its master was not kind. There were cruel goad marks on the elephant's shoulders, and it was nearly starved. We climbed the fence and Li Kao put one tiny drop of the elixir on the tip of his knife blade.

"Do you consent?" he asked softly.

The elephant's sorrowful eyes were more eloquent than words—for the love of Buddha, they said, release me from this misery and return me to the Great Wheel of Transmigrations.

"So be it," said Master Li.

He gently pressed the blade against an open wound. The elephant looked surprised for an instant. Then it hiccupped, hopped high into the air, landed on its back with a mighty crash, turned blue and peacefully expired.

We raised reverent eyes to the House of Horrors. "Genius!" we cried, and the thin rain wept softly, and an old, cracked, crazy voice drifted upon the cold wind:

In front of our window
Are the banana trees we planted,
Their green shadows fill the yard.
Their green shadows fill the yard,
Their leaves unfold and fold as if
They wish to bare their feelings.

Sadly reclining on my pillow
Deep in the night I listen to the rain,
Dripping on the leaves.
Dripping on the leaves—
That she can't hear that sound again
Is breaking my heart.

I decided that the oceans had been formed from tears and when I thought of the tears that had been shed and the hearts that had been broken to serve the greed of the Duke of Ch'in, I was delighted that we were going after him with mayhem on our minds.

❁ ❁ ❁

We caught up with the duke in Tsingtao, where he was staying at the palace of an enormously wealthy woman whose oldest son served as the duke's provincial governor, and with lavish bribes Li Kao arranged for us to slip past the guards one night. My heart was in my mouth as I grabbed the vines and began to climb, but then the breeze shifted, and an unmistakable fragrance reached my nostrils. I quivered all over.

"Lotus Cloud!" I panted. "Master Li, my heart will break if I don't see her!"

Under the circumstances there was little that he could do except swear and box my ears as I swung rapidly across the vines. When I lifted my head over the windowsill I saw that Lotus Cloud was all alone, but then my joy turned to ashes.

"What's wrong with you?" Master Li whispered.

"I forgot to bring my pearls and jade," I said miserably.

Li Kao sighed and fished in his pockets. At first he found only diamonds and emeralds, which didn't interest Lotus Cloud at all, but finally he came up with a pearl that he had saved because of its rarity: jet black, with one small white flaw in the shape of a star. I would have preferred a ton of the stuff, but it was the symbol that mattered, so I leaned over and rolled the pearl across the floor toward my beloved's feet. Soon she will see it, I thought. She will look up and grin and yell, "Boopsie!" and all my cares will vanish.

She looked up all right, but not at me.

"Fear not, my turtledove!" some lout bellowed. "Your beloved Pooh-Pooh approaches with yet another hundred pounds of pearls and jade!"

The door crashed open and the provincial governor staggered inside with an armload of loot, which he dumped upon my black pearl. I sighed and sadly climbed back down the vines.

"Pooh-Pooh?" said Master Li. "Pooh-Pooh? Ox, it may be none of my business, but I must strongly advise you against getting involved with women who call their lovers Boopsie, Woofie, and Pooh-Pooh."

"She likes to keep pets," I explained.

"So I have noticed," he said. "Thank Heaven she doesn't keep all of you in the same kennel. The noise at feeding time would be deafening. And now, if you have no objection, I suggest that we return to the matter of disposing of the duke and getting that ginseng root."

I climbed rapidly to the duke's window and cautiously raised my eyes above the sill. The Duke of Ch'in was all alone in the room, seated upon a stool in front of a desk. Candlelight glinted upon his great golden tiger mask, and the feathers in his cloak shimmered like silver, but his gold mesh gloves lay upon the desk and his surprisingly small hands were bare as he added up on an abacus the amount of treasure that his tax trip had accumulated. Li Kao's eyes glistened as he looked at the duke's bare fingers.

"He lives for money, so he can die for money," he whispered.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the most valuable of his diamonds. The moon was very bright. Part of the vines were wild rose, which I had been careful to avoid because of the thorns, and he found a sharp cluster just below the windowsill. Li Kao placed the diamond in the center, and it turned it this way and that until the moonbeams caused it to explode with blue-white brilliance, and then he doused the thorns with the vial of the Elixir of Life.

I slid back until we were concealed behind vines, and Li Kao began scratching the stone wall with his dagger—a very annoying sound. For some time we heard only the click of the beads as they slid rapidly over the strings of the abacus, but then a table scraped against the floor as it slid back, and heavy footsteps approached the window. I held my breath.

The terrible tiger mask leaned out and peered down, and the diamond was sparkling like cold fire. The bare fingers hovered like a hawk, and then they pounced. I could clearly see punctures. At a modest estimate the Duke of Ch'in had received enough Elixir of Life to assassinate all of China and half of Korea and Japan, and I waited for him to topple over and turn blue. Instead he lifted the gem to the eye-slits in the mask and turned it appreciatively, and the metal voice that oozed through the mouthpiece held a definite note of pleasure.

"Cold!" whispered the Duke of Ch'in. "Cold…cold…cold…."

I was so stunned that I forgot to hold on to the vines, and we plunged forty feet before I managed to grab them again and break our fall. Unfortunately we were then dangling about ten feet above the heads of some soldiers who were leaning against the wall swapping war lies.

"Wait for a cloud," Master Li whispered.

It seemed forever, but eventually a black cloud covered the moon, and I swung over the vines to the nearest window and crawled into a room that was pitch black. The darkness vibrated with heavy snores. Li Kao slipped off my back and tiptoed across the floor and cracked the door open. He closed it hurriedly.

"Soldiers guarding the halls," he whispered.

We started back toward the window and froze. That damned cloud decided to move away from the moon, and we were pinned in bright yellow beams, and the snores stopped suddenly, and a grotesque figure sat up in bed and leveled a gangrened finger.

"What have you done with that ginseng root?" roared the Ancestress.

There Are No Accidents in the Great Way of Tao

Soldiers dragged me across the floor toward the throne upon which sat the Duke of Ch'in, and thrust my face forward so that it practically touched the terrible mask. A hissing sound came from the mouthpiece as the clammy mind crawled over mine, and then the golden tiger jerked back.

The great and powerful Duke of Ch'in was terrified. Saliva trickled from the mouthpiece, and the gold-meshed gloves trembled upon the arms of the throne, and an acrid stench of fear stung my nostrils.

"I see the three handmaidens!" the metal voice whispered. "I see the ball and the bell and the flute! I see the Legs and the Arms and the Head of Power!"

The duke was trembling so hard that his cloak of feathers fluttered as if for flight, but he finally forced himself to lean forward once more. The slimy brain moved fearfully over mine, and then I sensed relief and growing joy.

"But I do not see the birds, or the feathers, or anything else of importance," he said wonderingly. "I see only those useless children, and the right quest for the wrong reason. You and your antiquated companion have followed paths that cannot be followed, defeated guardians that cannot be defeated, escaped from places where escape was impossible, and you have not had the slightest idea of what you were really doing, or where you were really going, or why!"

Now the metal voice held a cruel gloating pleasure.

"You have managed to annoy me, and you shall discover what it means to annoy the Duke of Ch'in." The mask moved to the soldiers. "Take the old man and the boy to the torture chambers. They shall die by inches in the Shirts of Iron," he commanded.

Only the duke could have ordered such an execution, and I hasten to point out that in every other part of China the Shirts of Iron had long been relegated to museums that displayed the ghastly aberrations of the Dark Ages. Actually they aren't

made from iron at all, but from steel mesh that can be uniformly tightened by means of a neck loop or a screw in back. The shirts are tightened around the victim's bare torso until flesh bulges through the holes in the mesh, and then the executioner picks up something hard and rough, a rock will do, and slowly scrapes across the shirt until there are no bulges. The flow of blood is carefully stopped, and the next day the shirt is shifted slightly and the process is repeated—and the next day and the next. A competent executioner can keep a victim alive for months, and the only hope the victim has is that he will go stark staring mad fairly early in the game.

Li Kao and I had been wrapped in so many chains that we couldn't move a finger, and the soldiers groaned under the weight as they carried us down a seemingly endless flight of stone steps. I counted eleven landings, each one guarded by more soldiers. The air grew thicker and fouler and slimy green water dripped from the black stone walls. Finally we reached the bottommost dungeons. Brassbound doors crashed open, and the panting soldiers carried us into a torture chamber that was decorated with blood and entrails. The executioner did not view us with friendly eyes. He was a fat fellow with a bald gray skull, a bright red nose, four yellow teeth, and a grievance.

"Work, work, work!" he snarled as he bustled around us with a tape measure. "Do you realize that each Shirt of Iron must be individually tailored for the victim? Do you realize that it takes two full days to make a decent one? Do you realize that the duke has ordered me to finish your shirts in two *hours*? And then I have to give you your first scraping, and do you realize that a decent job of scraping takes another two hours?"

He stepped back and leveled an indignant finger.

"Look at those chains!" he snarled. "Do you realize that it will take another hour just to unlock, unwrap, rewrap, and relock those things? And do you realize that the Ancestress has ordered me to draw and quarter another prisoner? And do you realize that a decent job of drawing and quartering takes another two hours? When am I to rest, I ask you? Is there no pity? Is there no concern for the welfare of the working man?"

He was not the only one with a grievance.

"How about us?" the soldiers yelled. "We have to stand guard in this slimy hole until the prisoners die, and if you're halfway decent at your job, that will take months! And that crud of a master sergeant refused to issue earplugs, and we'll be stone deaf from the screams inside of a week! Look at those cockroaches! Look at those leeches! Look at that slimy dripping water! There's fever down here as sure as you're born, and even if we live to return to our wives, what good will it do us? The duke made us wrap these poor bastards in so many chains that they can't move, and carry them down eleven flights of stairs, and quadruple hernias have made eunuchs of us all!"

It appeared to be a day of grievances.

"Woe!" somebody howled as feet pattered down the stairs. "Woe! Woe! Woe!" wailed the Key Rabbit as he trotted into the torture chamber. "The duke has ordered me to be present at the torture of my dearest friend and the most generous protector that my dear wife has ever had, and to make a full report of their sufferings! Good evening, Lord Li of Kao. Good evening, Lord Lu of Yu. It is delightful to see you again, but how can the duke to this to me?"

The little fellow posed dramatically, one forearm across his brow and the other hand outflung.

"I become violently ill in butcher shops!" he howled. "I faint when I cut my finger! Crimson sunsets make me dive beneath my bed! Bloodhounds drive me into screaming fits! I once threw up all over a very distinguished nobleman who introduced me to his blood brother! I disgraced myself at a state banquet when I was informed that I was eating blood pudding! And now I must witness the bloodiest execution ever invented by man! Woe!" wailed the Key Rabbit. "Woe! Woe! Woe!"

"Damn it, get out of the way and let a man work," the executioner snarled.

He began to bang furiously on strips of steel mesh, and the soldiers panted and groaned as they carried us into an adjoining dungeon and dumped us upon the floor. They staggered out, clutching their hernias, and slammed the door, and we stared at the fellow who was to be drawn and quartered. He was attached to the wall with a leg chain, and he was eating a bowl of rice.

"What are you doing here?" Master Li asked.

"At the moment I am eating my last supper," said Henpecked Ho. "Good evening, Li Kao. Good evening, Number Ten Ox. It is a great pleasure to see you again, although one rather regrets the circumstances. May I offer you some rice? They have even given me a small jar of wine. Quite decent of them, don't you think?"

"Wine, by all means," said Li Kao.

Henpecked Ho's leg chain was just long enough for him to reach us and pour wine down our throats. They really were treating him with consideration because it was a very expensive wine: Wu-fan, which is jet black and so sweet that it tastes like molasses flavored with engraving acid.

"Have you really been sentenced to be drawn and quartered?" I asked.

"It's a very distressing story." He sighed. "Do you remember that I had spent sixteen years trying to decipher fragments of clay tablets?"

"A very ancient ginseng fairy tale," said Master Li.

"Precisely, and do you remember that those grave robbers dug up a very large clay tablet? Well, it turned out to be the key to the whole thing. I could scarcely believe how quickly the pieces fell into place, and the story that emerged was so interesting that I could scarcely wait to see what came next. Then one day I entered

my workshop and discovered that every clay fragment was gone, and I ran around weeping and tearing my hair until my dear wife told me to stop making a fool of myself. The Ancestress had remarked that fiddling with clay tablets was a frivolous hobby for a grown man, so my dear wife had ordered the servants to dump the tablets into the river, where, of course, they dissolved into mud."

"I would have slit her miserable throat," Master Li growled.

"Indeed you would have, and I thought about you a great deal," said Henpecked Ho. "You had advised me to use an axe, so I stole an axe and went after my dear wife."

"Did you get her?" I asked.

"I chopped her into pieces, and then I chopped her seven fat sisters to pieces. It was delightful," said Henpecked Ho. "Then I came here to try to chop the Ancestress to pieces, but her soldiers caught me first. Oh well, I suppose that one can't have everything."

"Ho, you did splendidly!" Master Li said.

"Do you really think so? Some people might consider my behavior rather gross," Henpecked Ho said dubiously. "I was maddened beyond endurance because now I will never know how the story came out, and it concerned two delightful deities that I had never heard of, even though I am familiar with the entire Heavenly Pantheon."

Li Kao thoughtfully chewed a wisp of his scraggly beard, which was about all the movement that he could manage.

"Ho, as a matter of rather academic curiosity, have you ever encountered a deity called the Peddler? He wears a robe covered with Heavenly or supernatural symbols, he leans upon a crutch, and he carries a flute and a ball and a bell."

"The Peddler is not one of the six hundred named gods, but our knowledge of the Pantheon is incomplete," Ho said thoughtfully. "It must be remembered that the first Duke of Ch'in destroyed the temples and priests and worshippers of any cult that annoyed him, and knowledge of many minor deities disappeared from the face of the earth. The Peddler might have been among them, and I am morally certain that the two delightful deities in the story on the tablet also suffered the duke's displeasure. After all, peasants treasure ginseng fairy tales, and they would never willingly abandon a story about the handsomest god in Heaven and the most beautiful girl in the world and a crown and three feathers and—"

"What!" Master Li yelped.

"Er…and a crown and three feathers."

"And three faithless handmaidens?"

"Well, I don't know about faithless, but three handmaidens were indeed briefly mentioned. Their names were—"

"Ho, let's hear it in sequence," said Master Li. "Your unmatched memory has surely retained every word, and I cannot imagine a better way to pass the time before being tortured to death than to listen to a fairy tale."

"Would you really like to hear it?" Henpecked Ho said eagerly. "I had so hoped to be able to share it with somebody, and perhaps my years of labor won't have been wasted after all. Even in half-completed form it's a very good story."

One of my clearest memories of the whole baffling affair is that of lying upon a dungeon floor, wrapped in chains from my neck to my toes, listening to the gentle voice of Henpecked Ho while the executioner banged upon our Shirts of Iron in the next room.

It was, as Henpecked Ho promised, quite a good story.

❁ ❁ ❁

"Long ago there was a little girl who lived in a little village with her loving parents. Her name was Jade Pearl. One day the village was raided y bandits, and Jade Pearl was picked up and carried off by a bandit who thought that he might be able to sell her, and several days later they reached a beautiful city, but the bandits were recognized and had to run away, and in the confusion Jade Pearl managed to escape.

"The little girl wandered into a park where beautiful flowers were growing, and Jade Pearl sat down beside the loveliest plant of them all and began to weep. Now this was a very long time ago, before men had recognized the ginseng plant for what it was, and the lovely plant beside Jade Pearl was nothing less than the Queen of Ginseng. The queen listened to the sobs of the frightened child and her heart was moved, and when Jade Pearl uncovered her eyes and looked up she saw to her astonishment that a tall woman with a cheerful brown face and laughing eyes was smiling kindly at her.

"'Little girl, are you lost?' the queen asked.

"Jade Pearl told the kindly woman what had happened, so far as she understood it, and the Queen of Ginseng took her by the hand and told her not to worry because she was going home. Many days later they reached the little village, and the little girl's parents ran out joyfully to greet her, but when Jade Pearl turned to introduce the kindly lady who had brought her home the queen had vanished into thin air. The queen returned to the other plants that grew in the beautiful city, but after a while she realized that she had grown very fond of the little girl and would like to see her again.

"One day, Jade Pearl heard somebody call her name, and she ran into a bamboo grove and there was the kindly lady with the laughing eyes. The queen became the little girl's godmother, and visited her often, and it was because of the contact with ginseng that Jade Pearl grew in health and comeliness. By the time she was eighteen she was the most beautiful girl in the whole world, although she did not know it, and it was then that she had another marvelous visitor.

"During the rainy season in Heaven, the Great River of Stars is filled with raging water. The young god who is called the Star Shepherd must stride through the waves day and night, guiding the stars to safety with his long shepherd's crook, but during the dry season he is free to travel as he pleases. One day during the dry season the Star Shepherd decided to visit earth, so he floated down from Heaven and landed beside a small village. He wandered around admiring the sights, and then he came to a lovely grove of bamboo and he found a path and strolled inside. In the center of the grove was a clearing where wildflowers grew, and in the center of the clearing was a pool where tiny fish of many colors swam, and in the center of the pool was a peasant girl who was bathing. Her skin was ivory brushed with honey, and her eyes were black almonds flecked with gold, and her hair was a cloud of soft swirling smoke, and her lips were ripe and full and bursting with sweetness, like plums. There were many other items of interest about the peasant girl, and you may be sure that the Star Shepherd didn't miss any of them. 'Oh!' cried Jade Pearl as she saw a face reflected in the water, and when she looked up, the most beautiful girl in the world was gazing at the handsomest god in Heaven.

"One thing led to another, as it usually does, and one day in Heaven an old retainer who had been granted the right to fish in the Great River Stars came panting into the palace of the emperor and demanded an audience with the August Personage of Jade. 'Your Heavenly Majesty, the rainy season is upon us but the Star Shepherd has not returned from earth!' he wailed. 'The Great River is filled with wild waves, and terrified stars are crashing into the great black rocks, and many are badly damaged and some have even sunk!'

"The August Personage of Jade could not believe that his favorite nephew would so neglect his duties, but he rushed outside to see for himself and when he saw that it was just as the old retainer had said, he uttered a great roar of rage and flew down to earth and landed with a terrible clap of thunder in the middle of the bamboo grove. The emperor grabbed the Star Shepherd by the hair and swung him around like a toy on the end of a string, and then he hurled him clear up to the constellation Aquila.

"'Back to your duties, you insolent puppy!' he roared. 'I swear by the name of my predecessor, the Heavenly Master of the First Origin, that never again will you be allowed to visit earth!' Then he turned to Jade Pearl. 'On your knees, strumpet!' he yelled. 'Prepare to face the wrath of Heaven!'

"Jade Pearl fell upon her knees and clasped her hands together. 'Your Heavenly Majesty, there is no need to punish poor Jade Pearl,' she sobbed. 'I have given my heart to the Star Shepherd, and if I am never to see him again I shall die.'

"The August Personage of Jade took a close look at Jade Pearl, and remembered that he too had once been young. He took a second look, and remembered that only recently he had sworn that the Star Shepherd had more common sense in his little

finger than his other nephews had in their whole bodies. He took a third look, and he began to think deep thoughts about his beloved wife, the Queen Mother Wang, who used more powder and paint with less effect than any other woman he had ever known. He took a fourth look and said, 'Ten thousand curses!'

"The emperor sighed and sat down beside the pool, and after a moment he patted the grass beside him. 'Come sit here beside me, my child,' he said.

"So the peasant girl sat down beside the Emperor of Heaven, and he took off his sandals and they dangled their feet in the water. The emperor watched tiny gold and scarlet fish glide around his toes like brightly painted snowflakes, and then he said, 'Jade Pearl, I have sworn upon the sacred name of the Heavenly Master of the First Origin that the Star Shepherd will never again be allowed to visit earth. That oath cannot be broken.'

"Jade Pearl began to weep bitterly.

"'Well, you should see what that boy did to the Great River of Stars!' the emperor yelled. 'Every hospital in Heaven will be filled with broken stars for at least six months, and you don't know what misery is until you try to bandage a broken star!'

"Jade Pearl continued to weep, and the emperor's eyes softened as he looked at her. Finally he shrugged his shoulders and muttered, 'I'm going to regret this. I feel it in my bones.' Then he reached into the left sleeve of his robe and pulled out a small golden crown. 'Peasant girl, since the Star Shepherd cannot visit you on earth, I will allow you to visit him in Heaven,' he said.

"'Your Majesty honors me far beyond my worth!' cried Jade Pearl.

"'That is precisely true, and I do not want to think of what will happen when my beloved wife, the Queen Mother Wang, finds out about it,' he muttered grimly. 'However, Heaven could use a little brightening up, and you have at least confirmed my suspicion that the Star Shepherd is the most sensible of my nephews.' The emperor cheered up at another thought. 'Besides, my wife owes me something after that disgraceful affair with her blasted Peaches of Immortality, and Chang-o, and that loathsome White Rabbit that keeps twitching his nose at me when I fly past the moon. Take my advice, young lady, and stay away from rabbits!'

"The August Personage of Jade reached into the right sleeve of his robe and pulled out three tiny white feathers which he carefully placed upon the rim of the crown. 'What day is it?' he asked.

"'Your Majesty, it is the seventh day of the seventh moon,' said Jade Pearl.

"'Very well,' said the emperor. 'Jade Pearl, these are three feathers from the Kings of Birds. So long as you wear them on your crown, you will be Princess of Birds, and all the birds of China will be your loving subjects. I hereby decree that on the seventh day of the seventh moon you will be allowed to summon the birds, who will build a bridge for you to climb so that you may rejoin the Star Shepherd in Heaven, but

it is illegal for one who has not completed the full cycle around the Great Wheel of Transmigrations to spend a full year in Heaven. On the first day of the first moon you must summon the birds once more, and they will build the bridge that will return you to earth, and on the seventh day of the seventh moon you will be allowed to climb once more to Heaven, and so it will continue throughout eternity because if the Star Shepherd doesn't give you the Peach of Immortality, he's a greater fool than I think he is.

"The August Personage of Jade waggled a finger in front of the girl's nose to emphasize the importance of what he was saying.

"'Jade Pearl, do not forget the seventh day of the seventh moon! The conditions will be entered in the Imperial Book of Etiquette, which not even I am allowed to disobey, and if you fail to return to the Star Shepherd on the appointed day you will pass from the protection of Heaven. The Imperial Book of Etiquette does not allow for excuses,' the emperor said urgently. 'The gods will be forbidden to help you, and none but a mortal can restore you to Heaven, and at a conservative estimate the odds against somebody pulling off a trick like that are one in ten thousand billion trillion. Do you understand me?'

"'I hear and obey,' Jade Pearl whispered.

"So the peasant girl knelt before the Emperor of Heaven and he placed the little gold crown upon her head. 'Arise, Princess of Birds!' he commanded, and when Jade Pearl stood up she was astonished to see that she shone with a divine light. 'Call your subjects!' the emperor commanded, and when she called to the birds a great song of joy arose, and all the birds of China came flying toward their princess. They carried green twigs and branches and with these they built a bridge that stretched up to the stars. Jade Pearl climbed the bridge to Heaven, and the Star Shepherd married the Princess of Birds and gave her the Peach of Immortality, and on the first day of the first moon they parted with many tears and the beautiful Bridge of Birds returned Jade Pearl to earth.

"Heaven saw to it that her little village lacked for nothing, so that the princess could spend her time singing songs and weaving daisy chains. She had three girls from her own village as handmaidens, Snowgoose, Little Ping, and Autumn Moon, and she had a goat and a cat and a little dog to help her pass the time. Still, it seemed an eternity before the seventh day of the seventh moon arrived. Jade Pearl kissed her handmaidens and bowed to her parents. Then she called to the birds, and the peasants of China gazed up in wonder and delight as the Bridge of Birds ascended to the stars, and the Princess of Birds ran to the arms of the Star Shepherd, and they lived…"

Henpecked Ho sighed and shrugged.

"Happily ever after?" he said. "You see, that's as far as I had gone when my dear wife had the fragments destroyed. If they lived happily ever after, I cannot imagine why half of the tale remained to be deciphered, but at some point it would most certainly have returned to ginseng lore. What do you think, Li Kao?"

"Ho, they did not live happily ever after, and I strongly suspect that your tablets did not preserve an ancient fairy tale," Master Li said grimly. "When history crumbles into dust, the events of history are sometimes preserved in the form of myth or fable, and I am rash enough to believe that if Ox and I can get our hands on one or two more missing pieces, we will have the solution to a rather baffling puzzle."

Li Kao chewed though thoughtfully on his beard, and then he said, "Ho, Ox and I are wrapped in so many chains that we can't move, you are attached to the wall by a leg chain, this dungeon is solid rock, the torture chamber is crammed with soldiers, we are eleven stories beneath the earth, and each landing is guarded by more soldiers. The palace is swarming with the army of the Ancestress, the army of the Duke of Ch'in is camped outside the walls, and Ox and I must escape from here immediately. Unless you look forward to being drawn and quartered, I suggest that you accompany us."

"I think that's a splendid idea," said Henpecked Ho.

The Triumph of Henpecked Ho

You who know so much more about the world than does Number Ten Ox will have already figured out six or seven different ways to escape from that place, and if you will bear the momentary indignity of imagining that you are soldiers in the service of the Duke of Ch'in we will see if any of your methods are similar to that of Li Kao.

Very well, you are soldiers who have been forced to stand guard in a loathsome torture chamber deep in the bowels of the earth, where slimy green water drips from black stone walls, and sickly white cockroaches crawl through puddles of blood, and fetid feverish odors mingle with the stench of discarded intestines and eyeballs. A horrible scream splits the air! The Key Rabbit topples over in a dead faint, and you follow the executioner into an adjoining dungeon where a ghastly spectacle greets your bulging eyes.

An elderly gentleman of scholarly mien lurches in lunatic circles at the end of a leg chain, frantically clawing at his throat. His face and hands are covered with loathsome black splotches, and his blotched black tongue protrudes most unpleasantly, and black saliva spurts and dribbles from his blotched lips. His eyes roll up until only the whites are visible, and he does an acrobatic somersault and lands upon his back. His hands spastically pound the floor. He bounces rigidly up and down, jerks, twitches, spurts more saliva, and finally comes to rest as stiff as a board.

Another gentleman who is even more ancient, and who is rapped in so many chains that he can't move, views the scene with eyes that bulge in terror and screams, "The cockroaches! For the love of Buddha, look at the cockroaches!"

The black wine called Wu-fan is invisible upon a black stone floor and you cannot possibly see that the pounding hands of the deceased scholar have uncovered a trail of it, and that the trail leads to large invisible ideographs that are traced upon

a black stone wall. What you do see is that ten thousand repulsive white cockroaches are scrambling frantically across the floor, dashing up the wall, and writhing in artistic patterns upon thick sweet invisible lines that spell out the following message from the Board of Health:

RUN FOR YOUR LIVES
IT IS THE PLAGUE OF
THE TEN THOUSAND
PESTILENTIAL PUTRESCENCES!

I sincerely doubt that you will stand there and make learned comments concerning the calligraphy of insects.

It was all up to Henpecked Ho, and his timing couldn't have been better. The executioner turned and fled. Ho jerked his leg chain taut and the executioner tripped and fell to the floor, where he was pounded into jelly by the feet of the fleeing soldiers who dashed back into the torture chamber, scooped up the Key Rabbit, who had just regained his consciousness and his feet, and carried him up the stairs like a minnow riding the quest of a tidal wave. "Run for your lives!" they screamed. "It is the plague of the ten thousand pestilential putrescences!" The pounding feet and shrieking voices faded away and Henpecked Ho collected the keys from the flattened form of the executioner. His eyes were worried as he unlocked his leg chain and started to work on ours.

"Do you think that I overdid the saliva?" he asked in a small voice.

"It was perfect," I said.

"Do you really think so? I was afraid that the final spurt and dribble might appear to be in poor taste."

"When you do it again, don't change a single spurt or dribble," Master Li said firmly.

The last chain fell away, and it felt marvelous to stand up and stretch my limbs. We walked into the torture chamber and collected weapons. Li Kao filled his belt with daggers, and I took a sword and a spear. Henpecked Ho had his heart set on the monstrous axe that was used for decapitation, but since he was quite incapable of lifting it, he was forced to settle for a small double-bladed model. Li Kao started leisurely for the stairs.

"There is no hurry," he explained. "The soldiers from the torture chamber will have collected the soldiers on the landings, and by the time they burst into the palace they will have become a large screaming mob. Anyone who isn't trampled flat will dash into the courtyard, where they will collect a couple of divisions from the army of the Ancestress, and when they hit the wall I doubt that a stone will remain standing. They

will then collect the army of the Duke of Ch'in and bolt hysterically through the city and reduce it to rubble, and the citizens who survive will follow in their wake. It is quite possible that we will have to walk to Hangchow before we see another living soul."

There was a flaw in his reasoning. We climbed the stairs and saw nothing but a few flattened bodies, but when we stepped through the door to the throne room, we ran right into a creature who would not have blinked an eye if the South China Sea had suddenly turned into soy sauce. A bloated figure with a crown on her head leveled a finger like a sausage.

"There is no such thing as the plague of the ten thousand pestilential putrescences," the Ancestress snarled. "Soldiers, chop these dogs to pieces!"

Her bodyguards closed in on all sides, and we would have been killed instantly if it hadn't been for Henpecked Ho. He whooped with joy and charged straight toward the throne, and his axe was whirling so swiftly above his head that if he had spurted a little flame and smoke he would have resembled the Bamboo Dragonfly.

"Chop-chop!" he howled happily. "Chop-chop-chop-chop-chop!"

Of course he ran right into the spears of the soldiers. We gave him up for dead, but the distraction allowed us to clear a path. Li Kao filled the air with flying daggers and four soldiers fell. "Quick, Master Li, climb upon my back!" I yelled. He hopped up and I raced straight toward the throne, planted the butt of my spear, vaulted over the head of the Ancestress, and took to my heels.

It was a losing game. The soldiers knew the palace and we did not, and sooner or later we were going to reach a dead end. I raced up staircases while Li Kao snatched vases from pedestals and smashed them over the heads of the soldiers below, but there were simply too many soldiers. I ran down a long hallway and tugged at a pair of massive bronze doors. They were locked. I turned and started back, and skidded to a halt as the hallway filled with soldiers. Two columns of men started toward us along the walls, while the captain of the bodyguards led a double rank down the center. We stared at a solid line of glittering spears, and I consigned my humble soul to the August Personage of Jade.

Then an elephant charged into the hall and squashed the captain flat. At least I thought it was an elephant until I realized that it was the Ancestress, and I gaped at an incredible sight.

"Chop-chop!" yelled Henpecked Ho. "Chop-chop-chop-chop-chop!"

He had no right to be alive. Blood spurted from twenty wounds with every step that he took, but he kept right on taking them. "Save me!" The Ancestress howled, and then her five hundred pounds flattened three more soldiers who might have saved her. It was over in a few minutes.

The Ancestress ran around in circles and squashed everything in front of her, and Henpecked Ho swung his axe and whacked everything in sight, and Li Kao

slipped through the carnage slitting throats, and I flailed with my sword. Toward the end it became rather messy, because we were slipping and sliding upon pieces of the Ancestress, and there was a lot of Ancestress to go around. Then we staggered away from the last fallen soldier and knelt beside Henpecked Ho.

He lay on his back with his axe still clutched in his hands. His life was draining away in red rivulets, and his face was ashen, and his eyes strained to focus on us.

"Did I get her?" he whispered.

"Ho, you chopped that monster into a hundred pieces," Master Li said proudly.

"I am so happy," the gentle scholar whispered. "Now my ancestors will not be ashamed to greet me when I arrive in Hell to be judged."

"Bright Star will be waiting for you," I said.

"Oh no, that would be far too much to ask," he said seriously. "The most that I dare ask of the Yama Kings is that I may be born as a beautiful flower, so that sometime, somewhere, a dancing girl might choose to pluck me and wear me in her hair."

I blinked through my tears, and he patted my hand. "Do not weep for me, Number Ten Ox. I have grown so weary of this life, and I long to return to the Great Wheel of Transmigrations." His voice was very faint, and I leaned down to hear his last words. "Immortality is only for the gods," he whispered. "I wonder how they can stand it."

His eyes closed, and the axe fell to the floor, and the soul of Henpecked Ho took leave of his body.

We carried him outside to the garden. It was cold and overcast, and a tiny silver rain pattered down as I dug the grave. We gently placed the body into the hole and I recovered it with earth, and then we knelt and clasped our hands.

"Henpecked Ho, great is your joy," said Master Li. "Now your soul has been released from the prison of your body, and you are being greeted with great honors in Hell. You have rid the world of a woman who was an abomination to men and gods alike, and surely the Yama Kings will allow you to see Bright Star again. When it is time for you to be reborn, your wish will be granted, and you will become a beautiful flower that a dancing girl will wear in her hair."

"Henpecked Ho," I sniffled through my tears, "I will miss you, but I know that we will meet again. Master Li will be a three-toed sloth, and Miser Shen will be a tree, and you will be a flower, and I will be a cloud, and some day we will come together in a beautiful garden. Probably very soon," I added.

We said the prayers and sacrificed, and Li Kao stood up and stretched wearily.

"Immortality is only for the gods, I wonder how they can stand it," he said thoughtfully. "Ox, the last words of Henpecked Ho may be significant in more ways than one."

Master Li stood lost in thought for a moment. Then he said:

"If I were to try to count the incredible coincidences of our quest on my fingers, I would wind up with ten badly sprained digits, and I am far too old to believe in coincidences. We are being led toward something, and I strongly suspect that Henpecked Ho has also supplied the question that we must ask before we continue the quest. Only the wisest man in the world could answer it, and can it be a coincidence that we happen to know where to find the wisest man in the world?"

I stared at him stupidly.

"Miser Shen," he explained. "Ox, it was no accident that Miser Shen told us that when he was trying to bring his little girl back to life, he learned that the wisest man in the world lives in a cave at the end of Bear's Path, high in the Omei Mountains."

"Are we going to the Omei Mountains?" I asked.

"We are indeed, and we will begin by looting this palace. The Old Man of the Mountain," said Master Li, "does not sell his secrets cheaply."

Rain still fell, but one corner of the sky was turning blue, and as a final tribute to Henpecked Ho I shoveled the largest pieces of the Ancestress into a wheelbarrow and trundled them to the kennels and fed them to the dogs. In the distance a rainbow formed.

Three Kinds of Wisdom

Should you decide to travel to the end of Bear's Path, high in the Omei Mountains, you will eventually reach a small level clearing in front of a cliff. In front of the black gaping mouth of a cave you will see a stone pillar, upon which hangs a copper gong and an iron hammer, and carved upon the pillar is a message:

HERE LIVES THE OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN.
RING AND STATE YOUR BUSINESS.
HIS SECRETS ARE NOT SOLD CHEAPLY.
IT IS PERILOUS TO WASTE HIS TIME.

I hope that you will carefully consider the last sentence. The wisest man in the world is not to be trifled with, not even by those who are so distinguished as are my readers, and I myself have no intention of ever again traveling to the end of Bear's Path. I am only Number Ten Ox, who had no business being there in the first place, but it is said that the great leaders of men have been making that journey for three thousand years and will be doing so three thousand years from now, and that one only has to look at the state of the world to prove it.

The panting mules who hauled our cartload of treasures were nearly exhausted when they plodded around the last bend in the path and arrived at the clearing in front of the cave. Li Kao read the message on the pillar, and then he lifted a goatskin flask and swallowed some wine.

"Admirable conciseness," he said, nodding at the inscription. "Not one wasted word." Then he picked up the iron hammer and rang the gong. And when the echoes died away he took a deep breath and yelled, *"Old Man of the Mountain, come forth! I have come to purchase the Secret of Immortality!"*

The echoes shouted immortality, immortality, immortality, and then they faded away into silence. For many minutes we listened to the tiny sounds of small animals and the sighing wind, and the distant scream of an eagle, and finally we heard one faint slap of shuffling sandals. A voice that sounded like gravel scraping across iron drifted from the blackness of the cave.

"Why does everyone ask for immortality? I have so many other secrets to sell. Beautiful secrets, beastly secrets, happy secrets, horrible secrets, lovely secrets, lunatic secrets, laughing secrets, loathsome secrets…."

The man who shuffled from the cave and blinked in the bright sunlight looked like the oldest and ugliest monkey in the world. Pieces of filthy straw were tangled in his matted hair, and his beard and robe were stained with spilled food. His seamed and pitted face was even older than Li Kao's, but his eyes were jet black and so piercing that I caught my breath and instinctively stepped backward. He dismissed me as unimportant, and looked with interest at Li Kao.

"A sage, I perceive, with a slight flaw in his character," he said with a little snicker. "Surely a sage can think of a more interesting secret to buy from the Old Man of the Mountain? I can teach you how to turn your friends into flowers and your enemies into cockroaches. I can teach you how to transform yourself or anything else into whatever you like, or how to steal the spirits of the dead and make them your slaves, or how to control the creatures that lurk in the black bowels of the earth. I can teach you how to remove varicose veins or cure pimples, yet you come to me for the Secret of Immortality, which is so simple that it is scarcely a secret at all."

"I will give all I have for that one secret," said Master Li, and he brushed away the straw that covered the pile of loot in the cart. The Old Man of the Mountain plunged his hands into the treasure.

"Cold!" he said delighted. "It has been years since I touched treasure as cold as this! In fact, this treasure is so cold that I will tell you the secret at once instead of toying with you as is my usual custom."

Li Kao bowed and offered the wine flask, and the Old Man of the Mountain drank and wiped his lips with his beard.

"You know the seamless robes of the gods? The jade girdles and golden crowns? Any of those items will do," he said. "Simply wait until the New Year, when the gods descend to earth to make their tour of inspection, and steal a robe or a crown. So long as you possess it, you will never age, but I would advise you to hurry. I myself was well past two hundred when I stole a jade girdle, and not even the Old Man of the Mountain has learned the secret of restoring youth."

Master Li threw back his head and laughed.

"Do you take me for an idiot? What use is it never to age when you can be extinguished in an instant by the bite of a mosquito or a slip upon the stairs? Immortality

is a meaningless word unless invulnerability goes with it. Old Man of the Mountain, I am beginning to suspect that you are a fraud."

The Old Man of the Mountain winked at him, and passed the wine flask.

"You would goad me into indiscretion, my friend with the flaw in his character? Do you think that I cannot sense that in your pocket you carry a business card with the sign of a half-closed eye? Or that I would not wonder what an old fox is doing traveling with a young chicken?" He turned and crooked a finger at me. "Boy, come here," he commanded.

The jet-black eyes burned a hole in my heart and I had no will of my own. I found myself walking toward him like a mechanical toy, and his eyes looked into my mind. What the Duke of Ch'in had done was but a feeble imitation of the Old Man of the Mountain.

"Well, I'll be the Stone Monkey!" he exclaimed. "There are those three handmaidens, and the flute and the ball and the bell, and the feathers and the crown too, although dimly perceived. So you hope to steal the Great Root of Power, do you? Boy, you are nothing but a walking corpse."

He sniggered and released my mind, and I staggered backward and nearly fell.

"Let the chicken go ahead and get killed," he said softly to Li Kao. "He couldn't tell a turd from a turnip, but you appear to have some common sense. Go steal something that belongs to a god, and then return with ten times this much treasure, and if it is as cold as this stuff I will sell you the Secret of Invulnerability, which, as you have correctly pointed out, gives meaning to the word immortality."

Li Kao tilted the wine flask, and passed it back to the Old Man of the Mountain.

"But is there such a secret?" he wondered. "Anything with a heart can be killed, and though there are hundreds of peasant stories about men without hearts, I have always considered them to be allegorical fables. Quite sophisticated fables, at times, but depicting character rather than actual physiology."

"Not one in a hundred of such stories is true, but when you hear one that is you may be sure that the wisest man in the world is involved, for I alone have found the secret," said the Old Man of the Mountain. "You doubt it, my slightly flawed friend? Marvel at the man who rivals the gods!"

When he opened his robe I nearly fainted, because there was a hole where his heart had been. I could look right through it and see the stone pillar behind, shining in the sunlight, and the gong and the hammer, and the black gaping mouth of the cave.

"Fantastic," Master Li said admiringly. "You are truly the wisest man in the world, and a dolt like myself must bow before your genius."

The Old Man of the Mountain simpered with pleasure and passed the wine flask, and Li Kao bowed and drank thirstily.

"It would seem to me that your heart must still be beating somewhere," Master Li said thoughtfully. "Would it be safe to transform it into a pebble or a snowflake? A heart that is transformed is no longer a heart. A simplistic statement, but perhaps intuitively true."

"Almost entirely true," the Old Man of the Mountain said approvingly. "A heart cannot be transformed into a snowflake without killing it unless the entire person is transformed into a snowflake. But a heart can be hidden. Of course the value of that depends upon how well it has been hidden, and you cannot believe the stupidity of some of the pupils that I've had. Why, one of those dolts was so mindless that he hid his heart inside the body of a lizard that was inside a cage that was on top of the head of a serpent that was on top of a tree that was guarded by lions, tigers, and scorpions! Another cretin, and may Buddha strike me if I lie, concealed his heart inside an egg that was inside a duck that was inside a basket that was inside a chest that was on an island that was in the middle of an uncharted ocean. Needless to say, both of those numbskulls were destroyed by the first half-witted heroes who came along."

He took the flask and drank deeply, and passed it back again.

"Now you would not be so stupid," he said. "Try to find treasure that is as cold as this stuff—a man who has no heart likes things cold, and there is nothing colder than treasure—and when you return, I will remove your heart and you will hide it well. So long as it beats, you cannot be wiled, and nothing is worse than death."

I suddenly realized that Li Kao was controlling himself with an immense effort. He was clenching and unclenching his hands, and he could no longer keep a trace of revulsion from creeping into his voice.

"Some things are far worse than death," said Master Li.

The Old Man of the Mountain stiffened. I drew back in fear as I saw his eyes burn with cold fire.

"My secrets are not sold cheaply," he said softly.

The Old Man of the Mountain stamped his foot, and a great crack appeared in the earth, and our poor mules brayed in terror as they plunged down into blackness with the cartload of treasure; he waved his hand, and the crack closed as though it had never been.

"It is perilous to waste my time," he whispered.

The wisest man in the world lifted a finger to his lips and blew. The light was blacked out by a dense cloud, and wind howled, and we were scooped up and sent flying into the air, whirling around and around inside a black funnel that was thick with dirt and broken branches and small screaming animals. The cyclone whirled down the mountainside, and I tried to shield Li Kao's frail body with my own as branches buffeted me and shrieking wind deafened me. Down and down and around

and around, and then the earth leaped up at us and we landed with a crash that separated me from my senses.

When I regained consciousness I saw that we had landed in soft shrubbery, but if we had been blown another ten feet we would have sailed over the side of a steep cliff. Far below I could see a river shining in the sunset, and a boy standing motionless upon the bank, and a village half-hidden by trees. Birds swooped high and low in the chilly wind that sighed down from snow-capped peaks, and somewhere a woodcutter was singing a slow sad song.

Li Kao had bandaged the bump on my head. He was sitting cross-legged at the edge of the cliff, cradling his wine flask. When I gazed up at the distant mountain peaks, I seemed to hear faint laughter that was like pebbles rattling in an iron pan.

"Master Li, forgive my impertinence, but if the pursuit of wisdom leads to the Old Man of the Mountain I cannot help but think that men would be better off if they stayed stupid," I said.

"Ah, but there is more than one kind of wisdom," said Master Li. "There is wisdom to take, and there is wisdom to give, and there is the wisdom of Heaven that is inscrutable to man." He tilted his flask to his lips. "In this case, Heaven is becoming scrutable," he said when he came up for air.

To my astonishment I saw that Master Li was happy as a small boy with a large puppy.

"Henpecked Ho gave us a third of the solution to this weird quest, and now the Old Man of the Mountain has made it two-thirds," he said with satisfaction. He pointed down to the riverbank, where the boy had been joined by his friends. "What are those children doing?"

I gazed down and shrugged. "Playing games," I said.

"Children's games!" Master Li chortled happily. "Rituals, riddles, and nonsense rhymes!" Then, to my astonishment, he jumped to his feet, waved his wine flask toward Heaven, and bellowed, *"August Personage of Jade, you have the guts of a first-class burglar!"*

I nervously awaited a bolt of lightning, but none came.

"Come along, Ox, we must hurry back toward your village to collect the third piece of the puzzle," said Master Li, and he started down the mountainside at a trot.

❁ ❁ ❁

The Old Man of the Mountain had blown us to the very edge of civilization, and we found ourselves trudging through a very strange landscape. Flat cracked earth stretched toward distant mountains with fantastic shapes, like deformed mushrooms, and a cold wind sighed across twelve hundred miles of empty steppes. Once

in a while we would reach a desolate plain where endless mounds of dirt were laid out with almost geometric precision, and on top of each mound a gopher stood on its hind legs and watched us pass with bright wondering eyes. Once an enormous army of rats raced toward us, but when they swept around and past us I saw that they were not rats but roots, the famous rolling roots of the peng plant, which were being blown by the wind toward some unimaginable destiny at the outer edge of the world.

Gradually the bare mountains acquired scattered trees, and we reached valleys that had touches of green, and finally the landscape turned into the one I knew so well. Then we climbed a hill and I saw the outline of Dragon's Pillow, hazy in the distance, and I was greatly relieved when Master Li said that it was our destination. I could not have borne the eyes of the parents if we went on to Ku-fu with no ginseng for the children.

We reached the wall as soft purple shadows were creeping like cats across the green valley, and the birds began to sing the last songs of the day while we climbed the ancient stones to the Eye of the Dragon. Li Kao sat down upon the floor of the watchtower and uncovered a bowl of rice that he had bought in the last village. For a few moments he ate in silence, and then he said:

"Ox, mysteries cease to be mysteries when they are viewed from the proper angle. In this case we must find the proper angle by recalling a comment that was made by the Duke of Ch'in not once but twice. 'You seek the right root, but for the wrong reason.' Doesn't that suggest that we might have unwittingly wandered into a completely different quest when we started after the Great Root of Power? We can assume that the duke thought that we might be trying to do something else, and the idea scared him half to death. What sort of a quest could terrify a tyrant as mighty as the Duke of Ch'in?"

He ate some more rice and watched the shadows climb the wall, and he pointed a chopstick at the songbirds.

"Let's begin by assuming that Henpecked Ho's story was factual in the sense of history that over the centuries has been cloaked in the conventional trappings of myth," said Master Li. "There really was a minor deity called the Princess of Birds, although not necessarily as described in the story, and she really did wear a crown that was decorated with three feathers from the Kings of Birds. We would have to be as blind as neo-Confucians not to guess what happened," he said. "The Duke of Ch'in went to the Old Man of the Mountain for the Secret of Immortality, and he learned that he must begin by stealing something that belonged to a deity. He tricked and murdered Jade Pearl's handmaidens, captured her, and stole her crown. Then the Old Man of the Mountain removed his heart, which is why the jovial fellow laughs at axes and fatal dosages of poison. It's been the same duke all along, of course. The tyrant

who burned the books of China has been squatting in the Castle of the Labyrinth ever since, concealed behind the mask of a snarling tiger."

My heart was sick as I thought of the duke and his playmates, such as the Hand That No One Sees. He had paid the wisest man in the world for more than heart surgery. The Duke of Ch'in had also bought the secrets of reading minds and controlling the creatures who lurk in the dark bowels of the earth. What chance would we have against a pupil of the Old Man of the Mountain?

"Jade Pearl had something that was almost as valuable as her crown," Master Li continued. "She had a godmother. Surely a fellow as greedy as the duke would not miss the fact that the Queen of Ginseng had to be the most valuable plant on the face of the earth, and with Jade Pearl as his captive, he would probably have been able to capture her godmother as well. Now I will make one more assumption. The Great Root of Power is the Queen of Ginseng, and that is why two quests are intertwined."

Li Kao gazed thoughtfully up at Heaven.

"Ox, the Heaven of the Chinese is superior to all other because nothing is absolute except the rule of law. The supreme deity is bound by the rules of the Imperial Book of Etiquette, and if he breaks those rules, he will be promptly replaced. Thus the Heavenly Master of the First Origin gave way to the August Personage of Jade, and the Heavenly Master of the Dawn of Jade of the Golden Door stands ready in the wings to ascend to the throne the moment the August Personage of Jade gets too big for his sandals. When the emperor's pet goddess lost her crown and failed to return to the Star Shepherd she passed from the protection of Heaven, and the Imperial Book of Etiquette does not allow for excuses. What could the emperor do? Direct intervention would cost him his throne, so if he did anything it would have to be very sneaky indeed."

Master Li bent over and laughed until the tears flowed.

"I can just see his Heavenly Majesty sitting there with that damned nursemaid of a book on his lap!" he chortled. "I can see his eyes scanning the earth, and I can see him sit bolt upright when two splendid fellows named Li Kao and Number Ten Ox set forth to find the Great Root of Power. 'What's wrong with trying to help the poor children of the humble village of Ku-fu?' he says reasonably. 'After all, things like that are the reason for my existence!' So Pawnbroker Fang and Ma the Grub pop up to tell us that the duke has the root—and if they uncover a tablet that tells the story of Jade Pearl? 'Accidents will happen,' sighs the August Personage of Jade. Fang and Ma pop up again to help us escape from a tower, along with Miser Shen—and if Shen tells us about the Old Man of the Mountain? 'Accidents will happen,' sighs the August Personage of Jade. The Bamboo Dragonfly heads straight toward the Cavern of Bells, and after we get a good look at the painting of the Peddler we are reunited with Henpecked Ho,

who has deciphered the story of the Princess of Birds. 'Accidents,' the emperor sighs, 'will happen, and after all, I'm only trying to help them find the root that might save the children of Ku-fu.' So far, so good, but now let's take a look at something truly sneaky, which should not be difficult to do because we're sitting on it."

I nervously looked around the wall for something truly sneaky, but the only sneaky thing I saw was a lizard stalking a bug.

"Centuries ago, a general just happened to dream that he had been summoned to Heaven, and when he returned he discovered that his plans had been altered to place Dragon's Pillow in this ludicrous position," said Master Li. "Then a reading of the Trigrams just happened to provide a ghostly watchman named Wan, and a couple of centuries after that some of the local children began playing a game."

Master Li finished his rice and pointed a chopstick at me.

"The Duke of Ch'in very nearly eliminated all trace of the Princess of Birds when he burned the books, destroyed priests and temples and worshippers, and decapitated professional storytellers, but he forgot about a children's game," said Master Li. "Ox, there is such a thing as racial memory, which preserves events long after conventional histories have turned to dust. One of the ways in which this memory is expressed is through the games and songs of children, and when the children came to the wall that day, they began to play the Hopping Hide and Seek Game, which happens to be the history of the Duke of Ch'in and the Princess of Birds."

I stared at him stupidly.

"Jade Pearl was a ginseng child, in the sense that her godmother was the Queen of Ginseng," said Master Li. "How do you capture a ginseng child?"

"With a red ribbon," I said.

"How did the duke disguise himself when he approached her handmaidens?"

I thought of the painting in the Cavern of Bells. "As a lame peddler who leaned upon a crutch," I said.

Li Kao began to imitate the sick boys in the infirmary at the monastery, shaking his shoulders and snatching at the air. Then he imitated the girls, making swooping pulling gestures.

"The boys are pretending to be lame peddlers who must hop on one leg, although they are not consciously aware of it," he said. "They are trying to get the girls' red ribbons, and while the girls are not aware of it, they are ginseng handmaidens who are being killed. The last girl becomes Jade Pearl, but the Princess of Birds cannot be killed because she has eaten the Peach of Immortality. So the boy who takes her red ribbon hides her. He is now the duke, and the other children become the birds of China, blindfolded because the birds cannot see their princess after she has lost her crown. They try to find and rescue her by touch, but there is a time limit. All right, why does the duke count to forty-nine?"

I am not usually so intelligent, but the answer popped unbidden into my mind.

"Seven times seven," I said. "Jade Pearl could escape if she reached the Star Shepherd before the seventh day of the seventh moon. But, Master Li, why couldn't there be ten or twenty other interpretations of the Hopping Hide and Seek Game?"

"Ginseng," he said promptly. "The moment that the children of your village took the tiniest taste of the Great Root their racial memory was stirred, and instinctively they began to play their ginseng game. A slightly stronger taste dredged up a deeper racial memory, and an understanding that had eluded the conscious minds of the children who had first experienced it. The moment that they began to chant a nonsense rhyme, they were able to find the Princess of Birds. Ox, that was no accident when Monkey reached out and touched Fang's Fawn."

Li Kao began a slow rhythmic beat upon the rim of his rice bowl with his chopsticks.

"The ghost of poor Wan must have been very lonely," he said. "Ghosts also share racial memories, and when he saw the children play the Hopping Hide and Seek Game he realized that the question that the game asks is 'Where is the Princess of Birds? Where has the lame peddler taken her?' Wan knew the answer. He wanted to join the game, but he was determined to play fair—how many times had he listened to the riddle games of children?—and his impromptu effort was so good that I strongly suspect that he had been far more than a simple soldier.

"Jade plate,
Six, eight.
Fire that burns hot,
Night that is not.
Fire that burns cold,
First silver, then gold."

Master Li tossed the chopsticks into the bowl and winked at me.

"Ever since the standard was set by Yang Wan-li, what has been the common metaphor for the moon?"

"A plate of jade," I said. "Sailing across ten thousand miles of blue-black sky."

"In relation to the moon, what can you make of 'six, eight'?"

"The sixth day of the eighth moon?" I guessed.

"Try it the other way around."

"The eighth day, the sixth moon—why, that is today!" I exclaimed.

"It is indeed. We've begun with the moon, so what about the fire that burns hot?"

"The sun?" I said.

"And the night that is not?"

I scratched my head. "An eclipse?"

"It could be, but I don't recall any eclipse of the sun on the eighth day of the sixth month. Try something simpler."

"Sunset," I said. "The sun has gone but the light remains."

"Excellent," said Master Li. "So in their game the children were asking, 'Where is the Princess of Birds?' and Wan told them that if they looked from his watchtower when the sun sank below the horizon on the eighth day of the sixth moon, they would see where the lame peddler had taken Jade Pearl. Specifically, they would see something that looked like cold fire, and that first burned silver and then burned gold. In a few minutes," said Master Li, "that is precisely what we are going to look for."

I felt myself flush, and I said, almost angrily.

"Master Li, we are trying to find the Great Root of Power for the children of Ku-fu! We are not trying to find a little goddess for the Emperor of Heaven!"

"Dear boy, don't you think the emperor realizes that? Be patient for a few minutes more," Master Li said soothingly.

The sun slowly sank behind distant mountain peaks, and the clouds began to glow with the colors of sunset. I saw nothing like cold fire. The light began to fade, and I could see faint stars, and still I saw nothing. It was almost dark, and to tell the truth, I had no faith at all in Master Li's analysis of the nonsense rhyme.

Suddenly the concealed sun sank to an invisible gap in the western mountain range. A brilliant shaft of light shot like an arrow across the valley to the eastern mountains. At no other time in no other day of the year would the angle have been perfect, but now a small circular spot that was concealed among peaks began to glow like cold fire. It shimmered like silver, and then it faded to dull gold, and then it vanished.

Master Li motioned for me to get down on my knees and clasp my hands together.

"Well done, Wan!" he cried. "You have fulfilled the mission for which you were chosen by the Emperor of Heaven, and surely your spirit will be allowed to ascend to the stars. There you will find many children who will ask you to join their games, and the goddess Nu Kua will be delighted to have such a sentinel to help her guard the Celestial Walls."

We performed the three obeisances and the nine kowtows and then we got to our feet. Li Kao grinned at me.

"Ox, what do you think that we're being sent to find?"

I stared at him. "Isn't that the place where the peddler took the Princess of Birds?" I asked.

"He undoubtedly took her there, perhaps to find the city where her godmother lived, but it would be quite useless for us to search for Jade Pearl," Master Li said patiently. "If the Duke of Ch'in had a brain in his head, he would also take her to the Old Man of the Mountain. She couldn't be killed, but she could be transformed, and

the Princess of Birds might now be a raindrop hidden in a thunderstorm, or a petal in a field of flowers, or one special grain of sand among a billion on the beach. No, you and I and the August Personage of Jade are engaged in mutual back-scratching because there is one thing upon the face of the earth that we can use to force the duke to hand over the Great Root of Power, and it can also force him to hand over Jade Pearl: I will bet you anything you like that the Emperor of Heaven will see to it that we can't get one without the other."

He stretched and yawned and scratched his scraggly beard.

"Let's get some sleep. In the morning we'll go after the sick slimy heart of the Duke of Ch'in," said Master Li.

The Lake of the Dead

We left at dawn, and by the fourth day we reached the foothills. When we began to climb the mountains we left summer behind, and the green trees and fragrant flowers and rippling streams were replaced by the most depressing landscape that I had ever seen.

A strange chill gripped that mountainside. It was dead and stale, as though a monstrous iceberg had been scooped up and deposited upon a peak, where it had lain lifeless and unmelting for a thousand years. Sometimes we went for an hour without seeing a squirrel or hearing the song of a bird, and on the third day of the climb all signs of life vanished. We looked in vain for so much as an ant on the ground or an eagle in the sky.

We had been hearing the faint sound of falling water, and we finally reached the source. A meager waterfall was trickling down one side of a chaotic cliff, and when we climbed to the top we saw that the cliff was part of a gigantic rockslide that had blocked the narrow mouth of a valley many centuries ago. In the distance we could see another waterfall trickling down a higher cliff, and the entire valley in between had become a vast lake. It was the coldest, grayest, most unappetizing body of water that I had ever seen, and I knew in my bones that it was evil. Li Kao sat down and made some rapid calculations.

"Ox, this lake is the right size, the right shape, and at the correct angle," he said. "This is what we saw that first burned silver and then burned gold, and it very much looks as though we'll have to find out what's on the bottom of it."

It turned out to be more difficult than he expected. We made a raft and paddled to the center of lake, but when we tried to reach bottom with a stone tied to a rope of vines we went down two hundred feet without touching anything. For practical purposes the lake had no bottom at all and Master Li turned bright red while he scorched the air with the Sixty Sequential Sacrileges with which he had won the

all-China Freestyle Blasphemy Competition in Hangchow three years in a row. Finally he decided to climb the cliff at the other end of the lake and look at the problem from a different perspective.

It was a hard climb and very dangerous. The cliff was mostly shale that was held together by clay, and when we reached the top we found that the ground was soft and porous except for the path where the stream ran along a bed of solid rock. Master Li teetered at the cliff's edge and gazed down nearly five hundred feet to the gold-gray lake glinting dully in the sunlight.

"Why, it's a matter of elementary hydraulic engineering!" he exclaimed. "We can't reach bottom, so we'll bring the bottom up to us. The first order of business is to get hold of a lot of strong backs."

We had to go a long way down the other side of the mountain before we reached a village, and the village wanted no part of a job that required getting close to the lake. They called it the Lake of the Dead, and swore that not even a fish could live in the water.

"Once a year, at midnight on the fifth day of the fifth month, a ghostly caravan approaches the Lake of the Dead," an old woman said in a quavering whisper. "Once in my grandmother's time some foolish men crept out to spy upon that evil process, and they were found with their bellies slit open and their guts ripped out! Since then we lock the doors in our village and hide beneath the beds on the fifth day of the fifth moon."

Master Li glanced at me and I knew what he was thinking. That should be the time when the Duke of Ch'in completed the final leg of his tax trip and started home again, and his route should pass the cold mountain and the Lake of the Dead.

It wasn't easy to persuade them, but we could offer more money than they could hope to earn in twenty lifetimes, and at last the men gathered picks and shovels and fearfully followed us back to the cliff. They worked like demons in order to get out of there as fast as possible. We began by digging a trench from the bank of the stream to a deep ravine, and then we ran connecting trenches to other ravines until we had a ditch that ran from one end of the cliff to the other. We felled trees and made a dam. It wasn't easy to persuade the stream to move to a new home, but eventually the water roared angrily from its bed of rock and began snarling through the porous earth at the bottoms of the ravines. We gave the men bonuses, but they barely paused to thank us before taking to their heels. Master Li and I moved to the other side of the lake and pitched a tent. We had no idea how long it would take, and we passed the time by making divers' equipment: air tanks from the bladders of wild pigs, and breathing tubes from the intestines. We fashioned bamboo spears, and made loops in our belts for the rocks that would give us extra weight. It happened far faster than either of us thought possible.

I was looking out across the smooth cold surface of the lake toward the cliff that was shimmering in the moonlight, and Li Kao was at a table writing down songs in

the light of a lantern. Suddenly the lantern began to move. We stared in astonishment as it slid all the way down the table and crashed to the earthen floor, and then the floor started to buck beneath us like a wild horse. We ran from the tent and gazed at the cliff, and there was a rumbling, grinding sort of sound, and the cliff moved in the moonlight. Not even Master Li had expected something so spectacular, but the stream had tunneled so deeply into the spongy earth that almost half of the mountain leaned out, hovered in the air, and then plunged five hundred feet straight down into the Lake of the Dead.

We grabbed a tree and hung on for dear life. I saw a huge mass of water, silver in the moonlight, rise into the air like a cloud. The monstrous wave appeared to move very slowly toward the dam, and we felt a blast of icy wind, and then the wave plunged over the dam and smashed into the valley below. We saw a forest turned instantly to pulp, we saw enormous boulders picked up and hurled through the air like grains of sand. The mountain beneath us shuddered and huge rocks ground together and screamed deep in the bowels of the earth, and an icy mist closed around us. The tree that we were clinging to jerked and pitched and strained at its roots, and it seemed forever until the earth stopped bucking and the roar of water faded away.

The mist gradually dissolved, and we stared at an incredible sight. A forest of domes and spires and towers had lifted through the shallow water that remained, and my brain finally accepted the fact that the Lake of the Dead had been covering an entire city! Li Kao whooped with delight and grabbed my waist and began dancing around in a circle.

"What a lovely place to hide a heart!" he yelled. "Absolutely lovely!" I danced with Master Li, but I could not agree that the place was lovely. The ghostly spires were reaching up to claw at the moon like the fingers of drowning men, and the water dripped from the turrets like tears.

The night passed, and the bright sun of morning that shone upon our little raft could warm us, but nothing could warm the water of the Lake of the Dead. I checked my pig bladders and breathing tubes, and the rocks in my belt and my spear.

"Ready?" asked Master Li.

"Ready," I said. I put the breathing tube from the first bladder in my mouth, held my nose, and jumped.

The water was very cold, but my body was covered with pig grease and it was bearable until I encountered a strange icy current that nearly sent me back to the surface—I could see the tips of my fingers turn blue—but it was a very narrow current and I soon left it behind. I was sinking faster than seemed safe, so I jettisoned rocks until I was drifting down easily. A rope of vines led up from my belt, and Li Kao counted the knots as they slid through his fingers, and when my feet touched bottom, I had gone down thirty feet.

I expected total darkness, but phosphorescent rocks produced an eerie greenish glow that enabled me to see quite easily, and I walked down one of the streets of the drowned city, waving my arms like a swimmer to battle the weight of the water. The air from the pig bladder tasted terrible, but the breathing tube worked and I had two more bladders tied to my belt. I came to a house and cautiously peered through the door, and it took quite some time for me to realize that what I was seeing was impossible.

I switched to my second bladder of air and began moving as fast as I could through the city, and everywhere I saw the same impossible sight. When that bladder ran out I switched to the third one, and retraced my steps until the rope tied to my belt was leading almost straight up. Then I jettisoned rocks until I drifted up and broke water a few feet from the raft.

"Master Li!" I gasped. "Master Li!"

He told me to shut up, and hauled me aboard and rubbed me down. Then he made me drink some wine before I told my tale. I began with the strange icy current and the phosphorescence, and then I said:

"Master Li in the first house I saw the skeletons of a woman and her baby. That lake must have taken years to build up behind the rockslide, but the woman had drowned so quickly that she hadn't had time to grab her baby from the crib!"

Everywhere it had been the same. I had seen gamblers drowned with dice in their hands, and blacksmiths tumbled over forges, and women whose bones were mingled with the pots that they had been using to cook dinner.

"Master Li, that city was destroyed in an instant!" I gasped. "If the Duke of Ch'in was responsible for such a massacre, he must have the coldest heart in the world!"

Li Kao grabbed my arm. "Repeat that," he ordered.

"Er…if the Duke of Ch'in is responsible, he must have the coldest heart in the world," I mumbled.

The expression on Li Kao's face was rather odd, and I decided that he reminded me of a cat that was creeping up behind a large complacent bird. He waved at the thicket of towers and spires.

"Ox, this is another labyrinth, and we no longer have the dragon pendant," he said. "But do we need it? It occurs to me that when the Old Man of the Mountain told us about the stupidity of some of his pupils, he may have been saying something about the Duke of Ch'in."

Li Kao hurriedly greased his body and grabbed his diving equipment.

"After all, the wisest man in the world could scarcely be pleased with a pupil who chose a vast city as the hiding place for his heart, buried it beneath hundreds of feet of water, and then left a path that would lead straight to the rather peculiar nature of the extracted organ. Ox, lead me to that strange icy current," purred Master Li.

28

The Coldest Heart in the World

We drifted down into the eerie greenish glow, and in a minute I found the current. It nearly froze us to death before we learned that that we could follow it from a safe distance by watching a tiny trail of bubbles. We followed it for hours, through a tangled maze of streets. I would swim back up to the surface and paddle the raft ahead, and then Master Li would break water and climb on board and we would rest and replenish our air bladders. We were slowly working our way toward the center of the city, and in late afternoon we paddled the raft toward a copper dome that lifted through the water in the center of four stone towers. A boulder from the fallen cliff had crashed through the dome, and that trail of tiny bubbles was oozing up through the hole.

We squeezed through the hole and drifted down toward a pile of treasure that was so huge that it was ten times larger than the other hoards added together!

Above the loot was a large copy of the duke's tiger mask, hanging upon a stone wall. The tiger's mouth was wide open, and behind the teeth was a niche where the choicest gems were piled. I swam closer and saw that the gems were heaped around a golden casket, and my heart leaped joyfully when I saw that the bubbles were trickling out from the keyhole. My hand reached out, but Li Kao grabbed it. He nodded urgently at the mask. I noted that the tiger's teeth were pointed steel, and I swam to one of the towers and managed to pry a stone slab from the wall. I swam back and shoved it between the terrible jaws.

The teeth snapped together and began grinding through the stone with a screech that seemed to be magnified by the water, but the stone held long enough for me to reach through the gap and grab the casket. I dropped it into a sack that was tied to my waist, just as the stone dissolved into powder and the teeth snapped shut with a terrible crash. We turned to swim back to the surface, and my heart nearly stopped beating. Three pearly figures were drifting toward us in the greenish glow,

and if I had not had the breathing tube in my mouth I would have cried out in pity. They were the three murdered handmaidens of the Princess of Birds, and their bodies were uncorrupted after all the centuries, and the horror in their eyes was blended with a strange helpless pleading. They moved through the water like fish, with small wriggles of their hips and legs, and their long black hair drifted behind them like clouds.

The hair defied the pressure of the water. It reached out in front of the girls and floated toward us like masses of snakes. The cold wet coils curled around our breathing tubes and jerked them from our mouths, and then the tendrils closed around our faces and clogged our mouths and noses. We turned turtle and dived, and jerked out the second pig bladders and inserted the breathing tubes in our mouths, and then we flipped over and swam back up, thrusting at the girls with our bamboo spears. We were wasting our time. The limp bodies had been lifeless for centuries, and the clouds of hair passed through the spears and reached out again. The second tubes were ripped from our mouths and air bubbled away from the bladders. Again we dived, and we inserted the tubes of our last bladders, but even as I fixed my tube in my mouth I felt heavy coils of writhing wet hair crawl over my shoulders. Then the last tubes were ripped away. I thrust desperately at the handmaidens, and I saw that their pleading eyes appeared to be weeping, but their hair lifted to form an impenetrable cloud. We could not pass.

I grabbed Master Li and swam to the tower and used my spear to pry out another stone slab. The hole was just big enough, and I shoved Master Li through it and squeezed in after him and wedged the spear in the gap to delay the handmaidens. I jerked rocks from our belts and we began to rise. My lungs were bursting, and my eardrums were exploding, and my eyeballs seared with pain. I was nearly unconscious when our heads broke through the surface of the water into a small air pocket just below the copper roof. I held Li Kao's head above water while I gulped air, and I screamed when it touched my tortured lungs. Finally I could breathe well enough to start thinking again and I saw that the wall to my left had nearly crumbled into nothingness. A few kicks knocked a hole in it, and I carried Li Kao through the hole and climbed up upon the flat roof.

Master Li was in inert weight in my arms. I laid him on his face and began to apply artificial respiration. I wept when I thought it was too late but soon I heard him cough. I cried out for joy and kept at it while water spurted from his mouth, and finally he began breathing on his own. Then I fell back on the roof and we lay side by side, gasping like beached fish. Finally we were able to sit up and look around, and we saw that we were still in bad trouble. It was more than a mile to the shore, and those handmaidens were swimming around the tower like sharks. Master Li pounded some water from his ears and pointed a quivering finger.

"Number Ten Ox, we are witnessing a crime so terrible as to transcend belief," he said hoarsely. "The Duke of Ch'in murdered those poor girls, and then bound them with a spell that would force them to defend the heart of their murderer. Since he fully intends to live forever, he has sentenced three innocent girls to eternal damnation."

He was so angry that he was turning purple.

"Not even the Emperor of Heaven has the right to sentence anyone to eternal damnation!" he said furiously. "There must be a trial, and the accused must be defended, and the Yama Kings must concur in the verdict before such a terrible sentence can be imposed!"

I growled and pulled the casket from the sack at my waist. When I held the icy thing to my ear I heard a faint thump…thump…thump….

"Shall I slice it or squeeze it?" I snarled.

The question was academic. Li Kao went to work with the lock picks, but he had never encountered a lock like that one. It was the most complicated pressure lock that he had ever seen, and nothing but the proper key could open it. A dagger could not scratch the casket. I smashed it to the stone with all the strength that I had, and I couldn't even dent it. Friction could not produce the slightest trace of warmth upon the icy surface. I hurled the casket down and we sat there and stared at it. Apparently when I had grabbed the casket from the niche I had taken a few jewels as well, and Li Kao slowly reached out and picked them up: a diamond, a ruby, a pearl, and an emerald. He stared at them wonderingly.

"Checkmate," he said softly. "I told you that the August Personage of Jade was going to tie the two questions into a nice neat knot. There is only one way that we can escape from this tower, and we are going to have to make a sacred vow."

I had no idea what he was talking about.

"To find a raindrop in a thunderstorm, or a petal in a field of flowers, or a grain of sand concealed among a billion on a beach," Master Li whispered. "I am a dolt. My poor brains have turned to butter. Ox, since I can no longer trust what I used to call a mind, do you happen to remember the names of the handmaidens of the Princess of Birds?"

"Snowgoose," I said slowly. "Little Ping…and Autumn Moon."

Li Kao put the jewels into a seashell on his smuggler's belt and had me replace the casket in the sack and tie it securely to my waist. Then he painfully got to his feet and faced the poor girls who slowly circled the tower.

"Snowgoose," he said quietly, "Little Ping, Autumn Moon, listen to me. The quest is almost at an end. We have the flute and the ball and the bell. I know where to find the three feathers of the Kings of Birds. I know where to find the golden crown. Now I know where to find the Princess of Birds. You must let us pass. You must fight as no one has ever fought before, and let us safely reach the shore."

I stared at him stupidly. He took a deep breath.

"Handmaidens, if you can defeat the spell and let us pass, I swear by all that is holy, and in the sacred name of the August Personage of Jade, that the birds will fly!" Master Li yelled. *"On the seventh day of the seventh moon the birds of China will fly!"*

I doubt that I can ever again be decently impressed by courage, because I have been privileged to witness courage that passes mortal comprehension. Li Kao's voice echoed back from the spires of the tragic city and faded into silence. Then the bodies of the murdered girls began to spin in the water. At first I thought that they were out of control, but then I realized that they were spinning in order to wrap their hair tightly around their bodies.

I felt a searing wave of pain that nearly knocked me into the water, and while I could not hear the screams of the handmaidens in my ears, I could hear them in my heart. Master Li hopped upon my back and I dived into the water and swam toward the distant shore. A soul-shaking agony surrounded the spinning girls, and scream after scream ripped through my heart, and the water turned choppy from the jerks of their bodies. I passed so close to one of them that I could see her tears and see that she was jerking in agony hard enough to snap her spine. And then I plowed ahead and they faded behind me. The handmaidens did not give up their terrible fight until I crawled up to safety upon the sandy bank.

We faced the maidens and banged our heads against the ground, but Li Kao did not have time to honor them properly.

"Ox, we are bound by a sacred vow, and it's time to find out how much strain those muscles of yours can bear," he said grimly. "The Castle of the Labyrinth is halfway across China, but we must reach it by the seventh day of the seventh moon. Can you do it?"

"Master Li, get on my back," I said.

He climbed up and I turned and faced south, and then I set off at a gallop.

❁ ❁ ❁

In the late afternoon of the seventh day of the seventh moon we stood upon a sandy beach and gazed across the water toward a sheer cliff upon which loomed the great hulking mass of the Castle of the Labyrinth. Sunlight was shining through dark clouds and turning the Yellow Sea into molten gold, but a high wind was whipping the bay into hard choppy waves, and seagulls were sailing like snowflakes across a sky that promised rain. I could not possibly carry Master Li across those waves without killing one or both of us, and I stared at him with stricken eyes.

"I rather think that help is on the way," he said calmly pointing toward a small flotilla of boats that was rapidly skimming toward us.

The lead boat was a tiny fishing vessel with a bright red sail, and it was being bombarded by spears and arrows. The wind whipped screams of rage toward our ears. "My purse! …. My jade belt buckle…. Grandmother's life savings! …. Powdered bat manure does not cure arthritis! …. My gold earrings! …. There wasn't a pea under any of those shells! …. Bring back my false teeth!"

The little boat ran aground practically at our feet, and two gentlemen of low appearance climbed out and shook their fists at the pursuing fleet.

"How dare you accuse us of fraud!" screamed Pawnbroker Fang.

"We shall sue!" howled Ma the Grub.

The howling mob scrambled ashore, and Ma and Fang took to their heels. We climbed into the little fishing boat and shoved off, and the wind obligingly shifted around and caught the sail. We raced across the waves while the sunlight was extinguished, and lightning flickered across the sky, and rain began to fall. The cliff loomed in front of us, and I steered between jagged rocks and found a place where we could land.

The wind was shrieking around us, and the rain was so heavy that I could barely see as I swung a rope around my head and sent a grappling hook flying up the side of the cliff. On the third try I caught a rock that held the hook securely, and Master Li hopped up on my back and I began to climb. The sheer stone was slippery in the rain, but we had to take chances if we were to reach the labyrinth before the tide did.

We just made it. I climbed over the ledge into the little cave where we had found the first of the duke's treasure troves, and I secured a hook and a rope and climbed down the stone chimney into the labyrinth. Li Kao lit a torch and looked around thoughtfully.

"It's a pity that we no longer have the dragon pendant," he observed mildly. "If ever I could use the ironclad memory of Henpecked Ho, it would be now."

Master Li's mental processes were as alien to me as the inner thoughts of Buddha. He never wavered, even though he had to retrace every twist and turn and do it backward, and I trotted behind him listening nervously for the first metallic snarl of the tiger. The duke had not been idle since his return from the tax trip. The air reeked with blood and rotting flesh, and fresh corpses stared blindly down at us from crevices in the ceiling. I stared in terror at dark streaks that were sliding across the floor, and back in the blackness a tiger began to growl.

Li Kao grunted with satisfaction, and trotted through an archway to the cavern where a pool of water lay beneath a trapdoor high overhead. I tied a rope to a jutting rock on one side of the pool, and another rope to another rock on the other side. Then I secured both ends around my waist with a slipknot that I could release with a jerk, and I glanced up fearfully at the darkness where the trapdoor should be. If it didn't work from this side, we were going to join those happy fellows wedged in crevices.

The water was rushing in faster and faster, climbing around my thighs. I began to float upward, treading water, with Master Li riding on my back. I heard the tiger screaming, and then the full force of the tide struck us. We were buffeted from all sides, but the ropes held firmly and we continued to lift straight up. Master Li got as high as he could on my shoulders and reached up. I could hear him strain and grunt, and then there was a screech of metal as a bolt slid through grooves. He ducked and the falling trapdoor missed his head by an inch, and I jerked the slipknot and released the ropes and climbed through the hole into the throne room of the Duke of Ch'in.

From a chance comment by the Key Rabbit some time ago, we knew that the throne room was locked at sunset, and nobody but the duke was allowed to enter. Li Kao's torch flickered palely in the darkness, and I heard the clash of weapons and the heavy tread of the soldiers who patrolled outside the golden doors. Then the storm passed as swiftly as it had come, and the wind drew the clouds as though opening curtains in front of the rising moon, and light poured through the windows. I gasped in horror and stopped dead in my tracks.

The Duke of Ch'in was seated upon his throne, and the terrible mask was glaring straight at us.

Li Kao continued to trot ahead without a care in the world. "Don't worry, Ox, it's just an empty shell," he said reassuringly, and when I forced my feet to move again I saw that he was right. Moonbeams stretched out like pale gold fingers and reached through the eyeholes in the tiger mask and touched the back of the throne. It was just a mask and a long cloak of feathers propped upon a light metal framework.

"Well, Ox, we have a promise to keep before we *c*an worry about ginseng roots," Master Li said. "That means that we have only a few hours to find the feathers of the Kings of Birds, the golden crown, and the Princess of Birds. We'll also need the key to a casket, so let's get started. The first time you hit the duke with that axe, it bounced right off him. Do you remember where the blade struck?"

I reached out toward three tiny white feathers that were woven into a cloak of feathers.

"Feathers that stop axes?" I whispered. "Master Li, are these the feathers of the Kings of Birds?"

"We'll soon find out," he said. "Try to pull them out."

The feathers could not be pulled, and they could not be cut, and Li Kao's torch couldn't even scorch them. He opened shells in his smuggler's belt and handed me three trinkets. I placed the tiny tin flute upon an arm of the throne with trembling fingers, and I reached out to the cloak.

"Snowgoose returns the flute in exchange for the feather," I whispered, and the first feather slid from the cloak as smoothly as straw sliding from warm butter. I placed the crystal ball upon the arm of the throne.

"Little Ping returns the ball in exchange for the feather," I whispered.

The second feather slid out as easily as the first. I placed the little bronze bell upon the arm of the throne.

"Autumn Moon returns the bell in exchange for the feather," I whispered, and the third feather practically jumped into my hand.

Li Kao put the feathers in his smuggler's belt.

"The rest of it isn't going to be so easy," he said grimly. "We're going to need help, so let's go find it."

We waited for the tide to go out. Then we jumped back down into the pool and Li Kao retraced our steps through the labyrinth. The rope and hook had held, and I hauled us up the stone chimney to the cave. Then we used the ropes and hooks to swing back down the side of the cliff to a sea that had calmed enough to allow me to swim across the bay to the city.

The greatest pleasure city in the world was coming to life. Laughter and oaths and the cheerful sound of smashing wine jars followed us through the streets, and lurching merrymakers swarmed around us, but we shoved them aside and hurried on. We climbed a wall to a small garden. The guard dogs knew us well, and after a few pats they made no objection when we climbed through a window. Sometimes one can find help in the strangest places, such as a modest little house where a meek little man and his gloriously greedy wife were enjoying a rare evening of domestic tranquility.

"Boopsie!" Lotus Cloud yelled happily, and the Key Rabbit screamed *"Ghosts!"* and dived beneath the bed.

The View Through a Half-Closed Eye

It took some time to persuade the Key Rabbit that we had really survived the terrible plague of ten thousand pestilential putrescences, but when we coaxed him out from under the bed, we made quite a happy little family group. He was even inspired to bring jars of wine from his meager cellar, and we sat around the table sipping wine and nibbling grapes. When the little fellow's long nose had stopped twitching in terror, Li Kao said as gently as possible:

"Lotus Cloud, will you catch your husband before he hurts himself? You see, Ox and I have decided to assassinate the Duke of Ch'in."

Lotus Cloud grabbed the Key Rabbit just before his head hit the floor. After several applications of smelling salts he was able to sip some wine, and color began to return to his face.

"You are going to help us," said Master Li.

Lotus Cloud grabbed her husband in the nick of time, and I ran for more smelling salts.

"Feel better?" Master Li said sympathetically when the Key Rabbit had regained some color. "Perhaps I should begin by explaining why the duke deserves to be assassinated. It all begins with a charming story that Lotus Cloud is sure to enjoy, because it involves the handsomest god in Heaven and the most beautiful girl in the world."

"And her wicked stepmother!" Lotus Cloud said, with shining eyes.

"Oddly enough, the wicked stepmother doesn't appear. I can't imagine why," Master Li said thoughtfully.

"Thank goodness!" the Key Rabbit exclaimed. "Wicked stepmothers terrify me. Come to think of it, most things do," he added sadly.

Li Kao played the host and refilled our wine cups and then he followed Henpecked Ho's account almost word for word as he told the tale of the Star Shepherd and the

Princess of Birds. No one could ask for a better audience than Lotus Cloud, who hopped up and down in excitement when the August Personage of Jade placed the crown upon the head of Jade Pearl, and who wept for joy when the princess stepped from the beautiful Bridge of Birds and ran to the arms of the Star Shepherd. It didn't take a genius to see that my darling Lotus Cloud was daydreaming that she could be the most beautiful girl in the world, and become a goddess who could climb to the stars.

"And they lived…" Master Li refilled his cup. "No, I am sorry to say that they did not live happily ever after. You see, there was a slimy fellow who wanted to live forever. He learned that if he stole something that belonged to a god he would never age so long as he possessed it, and that he would be invulnerable if the wisest man in the world, the Old Man of the Mountain, removed his heart. So he set a trap for the most innocent and gullible deity that he could find, meaning Jade Pearl, the Princess of Birds."

"Oh no!" Lotus Cloud cried.

"Oh yes," said Master Li. "She had three handmaidens who were as innocent as she was. The slimy fellow bought three marvelous trinkets from the Old Man of the Mountain, as well as three feathers that precisely resembled the feathers of the Kings of Birds. Then he disguised himself as a lame peddler and he approached the handmaidens with some sort of tale—he worshipped the princess from afar, for example and would give anything to own something that she had touched—and he offered to give one small favor. Simply substitute the feathers in his hand for the feathers on Jade Pearl's crown, and bring the real ones back to him."

"They would never do such a thing!" Lotus Cloud said indignantly.

"Did the girls know that the feathers on the crown were important?" the Key Rabbit wondered.

"The Key Rabbit has put his finger on it," Master Li said approvingly. "The handmaidens didn't know that the feathers were those of the Kings of Birds, and one should remember this was a thousand years ago, when feathers were used to decorate headgear of all sorts, including crowns. Why should it be a terrible crime to substitute new decorations for old ones? Besides those trinkets were truly irresistible. But the handmaidens were firm on one point. The peddler must swear a binding oath that if for any reason the princess wanted her old feathers back, he must return them in exchange for the trinkets. Of course, he took no chance of that happening. One by one they returned with the feathers, and one by one he handed them the trinkets, and one by one he stabbed them to the heart."

Lotus Cloud began to cry. "Poor girls," she sniffled. "Poor faithless handmaidens."

"And poor Princess of Birds," said Master Li. "I would imagine that the slimy fellow committed his crimes on the seventh day of the seventh moon, so that Heaven

would have no warning. Jade Pearl had been commanded to return to her husband, so she called to the birds of China, but the birds could no longer hear her because she no longer wore the feathers. Poor little princess. Calling birds that did not come, turning around helplessly, gazing up at the Great River where her husband waited—and waited in vain, because the seventh day of the seventh moon had come and gone. A vow had been made, a vow that had been broken, and the Princess of Birds passed from the protection of Heaven. Then it was a very easy matter for a sly fellow in a peddler's robe to steal a crown from a simple peasant girl."

"Tragedies terrify me!" the Key Rabbit wailed.

"I'm afraid that it gets worse," Master Li sighed. "The slimy fellow returned to the Old Man of the Mountain, who removed his heart. Now he was invulnerable, and so long as he held the crown, he would never age. As the centuries passed he bought many secrets from the Old Man of the Mountain, and his power grew. And you, my dear Key Rabbit, know him better than any of us, because he became the Duke of Ch'in, and he has been sitting upon the throne ever since, concealed behind a golden mask."

I grabbed the Key Rabbit in mid-fall, and Lotus Cloud waved smelling salts.

"The same duke through the centuries!" he gasped when he had recovered. "One thing I beg of you. Do not force me to see the face behind the mask, for it must be the most terrible face in the world!"

"Well, maybe not, because we are talking about a very unusual man," Master Li said thoughtfully. "He burned the books of China and massacred millions to erase all records of the Princess of Birds, but why did he bother? She had already passed from the protection of Heaven, so millions died for no good reason whatsoever. He built a castle with thirty-six imperial bedrooms to confuse assassins, but the assassins couldn't harm him because he was invulnerable. He lives only for money, but does he guard his hoards with iron vaults and armies? He does not. He guards them with labyrinths and monsters that might have come from children's books, and while the monsters are frightening, they are not very effective. Buddha, any half-witted staff sergeant could plan better defenses!"

"Do you think that he is crazy?" Lotus Cloud whispered.

"Oh, not at all," said Master Li. "This is a fellow who arranged things so that anyone who went after him would have to wander through the landscape of a homicidal fairy tale, which makes no sense if you think of him as a great and powerful ruler, but which makes perfect sense if you think of him as he once was: a cowardly little boy lying in bed at night starting in terror at every noise and seeing monsters in every shadow. He grew older, but it can scarcely be said that he grew up, because he was so frightened at the thought of death that he was willing to commit any crime, and even to lose his heart if it would keep him from the Great Wheel of

Transmigrations. There is one more thing about the Duke of Ch'in that is perhaps the strangest of all."

Li Kao reached into his belt and pulled out the gems that I had picked up along with the casket: a diamond, a ruby, a pearl, and an emerald. He placed them upon the table.

"Key Rabbit, look at this stuff," he said. "We have been talking about a little boy who lives only for money yet he employs you as Assessor of Ch'in. You are forced to impose his fines, and collect his share of every transaction, and accompany him on tax trips and determine what every village owes. Night after night he forces you to stay in his treasure chambers and count every penny of his loot. The mysterious Duke of Ch'in, who lives only for money, has arranged matters so that his Assessor must spend far more time with it than he does. Peculiar, isn't it?"

"Lotus Cloud was right. He's crazy," I said firmly.

"As a matter of fact, he isn't," Master Li replied. "You see, everything would fit neatly into place—the money, the monsters, the labyrinths and other trappings of fairy tales, the lack of sensible precautions and the ridiculous precautions where none are needed—if the right kind of face were concealed behind a mask. Suppose that hiding behind a terrible snarl of a tiger…."

Master Li leaned forward. His voice was hypnotic, and his eyes were cold as a cobra's.

"Was the face of a frightened rabbit," he whispered.

Li Kao's eyes had warned me to leap, and all I needed to know was where. I smashed the Key Rabbit to the floor, and Li Kao's hands darted out and snatched a chain and jerked a key up over the Key Rabbit's head. We had once become entangled in that chain, and at the end of it was a key that was shaped like a flower, with sixteen tiny points. Li Kao pulled a golden casket from beneath his tunic. A casket that contained the heart of the Duke of Ch'in, and that was secured by a pressure lock shaped like a flower, with sixteen tiny slits. Each point had to fit into each slit with precisely the right amount of pressure, and Li Kao's forehead wrinkled with concentration as he applied the key to the lock.

Lotus Cloud, who was not the screaming type, was screaming her head off, and outside in the garden the dogs were going insane. When I lifted from the floor I was not riding upon the back of a man, but on the back of a snarling, clawing tiger.

I was in the best position that I could manage, with my arms wrapped around the tiger's throat and my teeth buried in the fur on its neck, and we went bounding around the room while Master Li struggled with the lock, and I am alive today because the Duke of Ch'in was unquestionably the stupidest of all the pupils of the Old Man of the Mountain. When he discovered that he was not dislodging me as a tiger he transformed himself into a serpent, and then into a wild boar, and

then into an enormous spider, and all the while I was praying: "August Personage of Jade, cleanse this idiot's mind of all memory of scorpions!" I could almost feel the lethal tail whipping around to impale me like a bug. "Wipe his brain of all images of porcupines, cacti, quicksand, and carnivorous plants!" I don't know whether or not the August Personage of Jade had anything to do with it, but certainly the duke wasn't reading my mind at the moment because he obligingly transformed himself into a crocodile. Unfortunately, the lashing tail knocked Li Kao beneath a heavy table that collapsed on top of him, and the casket and the key went spinning across the floor. I spat out a mouthful of tiger fur, boar's bristles, spider hair, and crocodile scales.

"Lotus Cloud, open the casket!" I yelled.

The Duke of Ch'in transformed himself into a giant ape. We went bounding around the room again while Lotus Cloud, her eyes glazed with shock, slowly reached down toward the casket at her feet. Then the duke transformed himself into a boulder. We crashed to the floor, and the huge heavy thing slowly rolled over on top of me. I gasped for breath while a pair of pink-rimmed Key Rabbit eyes appeared in the boulder. A pair of Key Rabbit lips opened, and piece of the rock quivered like a long twitching nose.

"I can grow heavier," the duke giggled. "Heavier and heavier and heavier."

The breath was being squeezed out of me, and my ribs were cracking. I could see Li Kao wrestling with the heavy table, and Lotus Cloud dazedly trying to fit the key into the lock. The top of her tongue protruded from between her lips, and she looked for all the world like a little girl who was tying to thread a needle for the first time. Above me the pink-rimmed eyes were glittering, and I realized that sheer terror was driving the Duke of Ch'in to the edge of insanity, as it had done so often in the past.

"I shall hang you and the old man in a cage beside my bed," he whispered. "My dear friends *shan bsiao* shall rip your flesh with their claws and beaks, and your flesh will grow back, and the claws and beaks shall rip again, and your screams will soothe me to sleep at night, and thus you will spend eternity."

I had no breath left. The room was swimming before my eyes, and my ears were throbbing with hurtful heartbeat sounds. The boulder grew heavier and heavier, and I could stand it no more.

Lotus Cloud screamed. She screamed so piercingly that a thin porcelain bowl broke in half. The open casket fell to the floor, and a wet throbbing heart lay sickeningly at her feet.

In an instant the boulder had become the Key Rabbit and he frantically tried to reach his heart. I clung to his ankles with the last bit of strength that I had, and he wailed in fear as he slowly dragged me across, the floor. The Key Rabbit's

hand reached out, and Lotus Cloud watched him with eyes that were wide with horror. Then that marvelous girl reached down and scooped up the slimy thing at her feet, and she wound up in the manner of a peasant girl who had been the terror of crows, and she hurled the heart on a dead line across the room and through the window to the garden. The hysterical guard dogs descended upon the heart of their master.

The Key Rabbit stood quite still. Then he slowly turned to his wife, and he reached out with a strangely tender gesture, and his lips parted. I will never know what he wanted to say. The flesh withered upon the face of the tyrant who had given his name to China, and I stared at the clean white bones of a skull, and then the bones themselves dissolved into the dust of centuries, and an empty robe slowly floated down and settled limply upon the floor.

❁ ❁ ❁

I managed to crawl over and lift the table from Li Kao, and he staggered to his feet and dived for the wine jar.

"The Yama Kings have been waiting a long time, and I would imagine that the Duke of Ch'in is receiving a rather warm welcome in Hell," he said when he came up for air.

Master Li handed me the wine jar. I drank deeply and passed it to Lotus Cloud, who swigged like a soldier. The wonder had overcome the horror and her eyes were wide and bright and filled with marvels. Master Li walked over to the robe on the floor. He bent down and reached inside it, and his right hand lifted with a small golden crown.

"What better place to keep the greatest of all treasures than the hole where a heart has been?" he said.

His left hand lifted, and I cried out in joy as an unbelievably powerful aroma of ginseng reached my nostrils. It was so strong that it revived me in an instant.

"Master Li, has our quest come to an end?" I cried.

"Not quite yet," he cautioned. "This is indeed the Heart of the Great Root of Power, but we must remember that it is also the Queen of Ginseng. Her Majesty must never be forced. If she is to help the children it must be of her own free will, and we must ask her goddaughter to transmit her wishes."

Master Li clasped his hands together and bowed deeply to Lotus Cloud.

"Meaning your Highness, the Princess of Birds," he said.

Lotus Cloud stared, but her eyes were not as wide as mine.

"Master Li, you can't be serious!" I gasped.

"I have never been so serious in my life," he said calmly.

"Me? With my thick legs and flat face?" Lotus Cloud exclaimed. Her sense of the fitness of things was outraged, and she flushed with indignation. "The Star Shepherd fell in love with the most beautiful girl in the world!"

"Mere literary convention," Li Kao said, with an airy wave of a hand. "Beauty is ridiculously overrated, and if that was all that the Star Shepherd wanted, he had the young goddesses of Heaven to choose from. The Star Shepherd had enough sense to want a peasant girl whose eyes held all the hope and joy and wonder in the world and whose grin could fell an ox at fifty paces. Ask this ox here," he said with a wink in my direction. "Ox, remind me to change my business sign so that the eye is nine tenths closed. I should have known that Lotus Cloud was immortal the moment that Miser Shen reacted to her exactly as you did."

Lotus Cloud stamped her foot. "I refuse to believe one word of this nonsense," she said angrily.

"Why should you? The Duke of Ch'in took you to the Old Man of the Mountain, who removed your memory," Master Li said reasonably.

He strolled over to the table and sat down, and placed the little crown and the Great Root of Power beside the wine jug. Then he opened his smuggler's belt, and the three feathers of the Kings of Birds jumped eagerly into place when he touched them to the rim of the crown.

"It is truly said that men die like trees, from the top down," Master Li sighed. "If my poor brains had not been riddled by wood rot and little green worms I might have considered the fact that Miser Shen was not jealous of Number Ten Ox, and Number Ten Ox was not jealous of Miser Shen. None of Lotus Cloud's lovers was ever jealous. Now that simply isn't human if we're talking about love, but it is very human indeed if we're talking about worship. One is not jealous of a fellow worshipper, and the pure in heart will always recognize a goddess. I have had occasion to mention the purity of Ox's heart, and beneath his repulsive exterior Miser Shen was solid gold. I have no doubt that her other lovers were equally admirable, which is why I was unable to recognize the young lady myself."

He stood up and bowed to Lotus Cloud again.

"There is," said Master Li, "a slight flaw in my character."

He sat down and filled two cups from the wine jar and slid them across the table toward Lotus Cloud and me. Then he picked up one of the jewels that he had shown to the Key Rabbit.

"My stupidity was such that I remained unaware of the obvious until I found this," he said sadly. "It is a very rare pearl, jet black, with one small white flaw in the shape of a star. Lotus Cloud, I once gave this pearl to Ox, who rolled it toward your feet. The next time I saw it was in a drowned city, where it was lying beside the casket that contained the duke's heart. Dear girl, I knew very well that you forgot about a

gift of pearls and jade ten minutes after you received it, but it never occurred to me to wonder what happened to the stuff."

He turned and thoughtfully examined the crumpled robe upon the floor.

"The Duke of Ch'in was abysmally stupid, but on one occasion he showed real intelligence," Master Li said. "After removing the memory of the Princess of Birds, the Old Man of the Mountain almost certainly offered to transform her into a raindrop or a rose petal, for a stiff price, but the duke knew better. He lived only for money, and if he left Jade Pearl precisely as she was he would have something that was worth a thousand gold mines. You see, it is in the nature of men to worship a goddess and to bring her valuable offerings, and it is in the nature of a goddess to accept their worship and their offerings. The men are not being lecherous. The goddess is neither greedy nor promiscuous. They are merely acting out roles that were ordained at the beginning of time, and to my own certain knowledge Lotus Cloud has collected more pearls and jade than the entire army of the Duke of Ch'in. Every bit of it has wound up in treasure troves guarded by monsters."

Cold fingers were crawling over my spine, and I lifted my cup and drained it at a gulp. Lotus Cloud stood frozen, with her cup halfway to her lips.

"I don't believe it," she whispered.

"I'll bet that the duke also struggled with disbelief," Master Li said. Then he began to laugh—a real belly laugh, with a happy whoop at the end. "There is something indescribably comic about the greediest man in the whole world who gets his hands on the least acquisitive goddess in history," he panted, wiping tears from his eyes. "Ox, the duke must have suffered terribly from ulcers until he discovered Lotus Cloud's one weak spot. Think about it. Think very carefully about pearls and jade, because it may help you to do something unpleasant."

He refilled my cup while I tried to think about pearls and jade. My mind refused to function at all, but something from deep down was trying to work its way up, so I stopped trying to think and let whatever it was take over. I closed my eyes tightly, and then I was inside a strange world of glowing milky whiteness, and a thirteen-year-old girl was looking at me gravely.

"Ever since we held hands and recited the Orphan's Song, I knew that you would fall in love with Lotus Cloud," Mouse said softly. "Ox, you must use all of your strength to touch the queen before the count reaches forty-nine. Forty-nine can mean for ever and ever and ever." Mouse was fading into the whiteness. "Is not a thousand years enough?" she said faintly. "The birds must fly…. The birds must fly…. The birds must fly…."

The image was gone, and I remembered that the world had been white because in my dream I had been inside a pearl, and with a sudden shock I understood the meaning of the pearl.

I opened my eyes to find Li Kao looking at me with a stern expression, but kindly eyes.

"Number Ten Ox, in a little while the watchman will rap three times, and the seventh day of the seventh moon will have come and gone," he said quietly. "For the thousandth time the Star Shepherd will gaze down from the Great River at an empty sky, and for the thousandth time he will weep bitter tears. Thus he will weep throughout eternity, considering that the Emperor of Heaven quoted the odds against bringing the Princess back to the stars at one in ten thousand billion trillion. Of course there is a slight chance that somebody might want to give the Celestial Bookmaker a heart attack."

Master Li slid the crown toward me. I blinked through my tears and picked it up. This was the only life that Lotus Cloud could remember, and she backed away fearfully.

"No," she whispered. "I love you, and you love me, and we can find a desert island and live happily ever after!"

"That's the point," I sniffled. "Ever after is such a very long time."

"I am afraid," Lotus Cloud said desperately. "I don't want to be changed into something strange."

"Oh yes, you do," I said sadly. "Lotus Cloud, you yawned in the presence of diamonds. Emeralds bored you to tears. I gave you a casket of gold, which you handed to the first person who asked for it. You have never asked for a new dress, and you wouldn't know what to do with a servant, but everything changed when I brought pearls and jade. You could never quite remember, but you could never quite forget, and your eyes grew wide with hope and wonder, and your face was transfigured by longing, and a soul-shaking desire wracked your whole body, and with trembling hands you reached not toward pearls and jade, but toward yourself."

My heart was breaking as I maneuvered her into a corner. "Pearls and jade, and the name of the Princess of Birds," I said gently, "was Jade Pearl."

Then I reached out and placed the little golden crown upon the head of the woman I loved.

China!

I suppose that there is only a slight chance that a person will be called upon to rescue a goddess, but the odds will increase dramatically if the person is as illustrious as are my readers, so I will offer two pieces of advice.

Beware of her divine light, and take cover.

No sooner had the crown touched Lotus Cloud's head that I was nearly blinded, and I sank to my knees and gazed at dancing black spots and bright orange pinwheels. Even then I could see in my heart that she had moved away from me, and when my eyes adjusted to the unearthly glow I saw that my beloved Lotus Cloud had picked up the Great Root of Power from the table and had walked outside to the garden. She was surrounded by a shimmering nimbus, and the crown upon her head flickered like fire. The Princess of Birds paid no attention to me and I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"Dear boy, she has a great many things to think about," Master Li said kindly. "Sit down with me at the table and have a drink. Have six or seven."

In the garden the dogs crouched over the tiny pile of dust that had been the heart of their master. They were still as statues. Lotus Cloud lifted her face to the night sky and uttered a low cry that was neither a song nor a whistle, but something in between, and the dogs jerked their heads up and appeared to be listening to a distant echo. Then Lotus Cloud dropped to her knees and bowed her head and clasped her hands together. She prayed for many minutes, and then she humbly banged her head against the ground. Lotus Cloud got to her feet and bowed her head over the Great Root, and for another minute she silently communed with her godmother. Then the Princess of Birds turned and lifted the Queen of Ginseng toward the huge looming shape of the Castle of the Labyrinth.

Master Li grabbed the wine jar. He told me to follow his example, and then he crawled beneath the sturdy table and arranged some heavy pillows for further

protection. "Ever since I was a wee lad, I have been addicted to spectacular endings," he said nostalgically. "Pass your cup."

"Master Li, I don't think that I can handle any more wine," I said shakily, as I stared with terrified eyes at the vast fortress upon the cliff.

"Nonsense! Try saying 'forty-four dead stone lions.'"

"Forty-four dead stone lions."

"Sober as a Confucian," Master Li declared.

I could not dispute it. We were speaking the Peking dialect called Mandarin, in which "forty-four dead stone lions" comes out as *ssu shih ssu ssu shih shih,* if it comes out at all, so I passed my cup.

I was not the only one who gazed in terror at the Castle of the Labyrinth. It was slowly twisting upon its foundations, as though it were being squeezed by a giant hand, and screams and shrieks rang through the streets of the greatest pleasure city in the world, and merchants and merrymakers and priests and prostitutes fell upon their knees and began babbling prayers and promises to repent.

That monstrous monument to temporal power was dissolving. Invincible walls were bending like soft wax, and great stone slabs were spraying down like scattered grains of sand, and enormous steel gates were ripping apart like flimsy parchment. The iron towers melted into mud, and the drawbridges toppled into the moats, and the face of the solid cliff cracked and splintered, and the water from the moats shot over the edge of the cliff and glittered in the moonlight like silver as it plunged in a foaming cascade to the sea. Tunnels and torture chambers collapsed and buried forever the terrible secrets of the Duke of Ch'in, and in the depths of the labyrinth the tiger screamed for the last time.

A great cloud of dust and debris billowed up and blotted out the moon, and stones and steel rained down upon the duke's city. Small pieces of wreckage crashed through the roof and pounded like drumsticks upon the table and covered us. Then a great gust of wind blew down from Heaven and the dust cloud vanished as though it had never been, and I stared in wonder at the Castle of the Labyrinth as you will see it today: a great twisted mass of wreckage scattered across the face of a cliff overlooking the Yellow Sea.

Li Kao's eyes were shining and he happily punched my shoulder. "One should not be so miserly when it comes to a spectacular ending, and unless I am greatly mistaken we are in for a whopper," he said. "Listen."

The sound was faint at first. Then it grew stronger and stronger, deepening in pitch as the chorus swelled, and resolved itself into a great song of joy as a million birds, a billion, a trillion, every bird in China, including those that had to break out of cages, came flashing across the face of the moon toward their princess. The mobs in the streets jumped to their feet and took to their heels, howling in terror while

the trees and shrubs bowed beneath a great wind of wings, and billions of blossoms whirled through the air and turned bawling bonzes into bouquets and fleeing felons into flower arrangements.

The great Phoenix, mightiest of all, led the way, and his flaming crown of feathers streaked across the sky like a meteor. Behind him flew the Eagle and the Albatross, the kings of the birds of land and sea. Then came the Owl, prince of the birds of night, and the Lark, prince of the birds of the day, and the Swan, prince of the birds of rivers, and the Crane, prince of the birds of marshes, and the Parrot, prince of the birds of jungles, and the Petrel, prince of the birds of storms, and the Raven, prince of the birds of prophecy—I shall not give the entire list. Henpecked Ho might have drawn it up, since it covers twenty pages. Behind the officers flew the legions, and the world was fragrant with the sharp scent of the green twigs and branches that they carried in their claws.

The crown upon the head of Lotus Cloud was shining even brighter than the crown of the Phoenix. She uttered another low cry, and the mighty Falcon, prince of the birds of war, slid silently down from the sky and landed in the garden. It was as big as a horse, and its talons glittered like swords, and its wise old yellow eyes glowed like smoky torches. Lotus Cloud ran up and wrapped her arms around the Falcon's neck and rested her cheek against its head. She stood like that for some time, and then she turned, unconsciously imperial, and looked straight at two gentlemen who were still crouched beneath a table. We found ourselves crawling out, and walking obediently into the garden. The Princess of Birds reached out and placed the Great Root of Power in my hands.

"My godmother wishes to go with you," she said softly. "She has suffered much, and she prays that in the village of Ku-fu she may be able to perform the task for which she was born. I have spoken to the Falcon, who alone of all living creatures may be able to get you there in time."

She turned to Li Kao.

"I have a message that I do not understand," she said simply. "The August Personage of Jade says that he will reserve a place for you in the constellation Scorpio, where you will rule as the red star Antares, whose sign is that of the fox, on the condition that you do not try to sell him any shares in a mustard mine."

"Conditions, conditions," Master Li grumbled, but I could see that he was immensely pleased.

Lotus Cloud gestured, and the Falcon bent down and Li Kao and I obediently climbed upon its back. Lotus Cloud leaned forward; her lips softly brushed my cheek. "I will never forget you," she whispered. "Not through all eternity."

The princess stepped back. For the last time I saw her incredible grin, and she waved, and the great wings pumped once, twice, and then the prince of the birds of

war shot up into the air. The Falcon wheeled around, and the wings flashed so swiftly that they were nearly transparent in the moonlight, and Master Li and Number Ten Ox set sail across the night sky of China.

I turned and looked back, blinking through tears. A billion birds were beginning to build a bridge with their twigs and branches, and their princess was placing her foot upon the first step. Never again would I see her. Never again would I hold her in my arms. The Falcon turned its head, and its voice was surprisingly soft and gentle.

"Number Ten Ox, why do you weep?" the Falcon asked. "The Princess of Birds has vowed to remember you throughout eternity, and by now you should know that men cannot come any closer to immortality without going insane."

The beautiful Bridge of Birds was climbing slowly toward the stars, and a great song was spreading across China. Faster and faster we sped through the sky, and on the ground below the peasants were running from the cottages and lifting little children in their arms to gaze at glory.

"You see?" said the peasants. "That is why you must never give up, no matter how bad things may seem. Anything is possible in China!"

We shot over a ridge to a small valley where men stood frozen in awe and wonder, and I began to feel a certain respect for Pawnbroker Fang and Ma the Grub, who were taking the opportunity to pick the pockets of their own lynch mob. The Falcon's burning eyes were lighting up the night like lighthouse beacons as we flashed past, and then we swooped over another ridge and down into another valley toward an old well and a bricked-up hole in a wall.

The Falcon was right. Why should I weep? Bright Star had shed enough bitter tears for both of us, but now her tears came from joy as she gazed at the Bridge of Birds, sparkling in the distance. The dancing girl and her captain were giving a great scholar the respectful attention he deserved, and Henpecked Ho gestured grandly at the glorious sky.

"So the peasant girl knelt before the Emperor of Heaven, and he placed the little gold crown upon her head. 'Arise, Princess of Birds!' he commanded, and when Jade Pearl stood up she was astonished to see that she shone with a divine light…."

The Falcon flashed past, and mountains and valleys disappeared as though China were being folded up like a map beneath us, and we shot down the side of a low mountain where three more ghosts were seated upon a rock, gazing up at the Bridge of Birds.

"You know, I feel in my heart that I had something to do with this, although it scarcely seems possible," Miser Shen said wonderingly. "I cannot imagine how anything so beautiful could be associated with someone so ugly as myself."

His wife kissed his cheek, and the lovely little girl in his arms looked up in surprise. "But, Daddy, you are very beautiful," said Ah Chen.

They vanished behind us. Another mountain and another valley vanished in a blur, and then the Falcon slowed and feathered its wings above a cemetery, where a tired and lonely old man was trudging between gravestones with a cadaver on his back. He tilted the head of the corpse toward the Bridge of Birds.

"Now look here, if the birds can pull off a trick like that, surely you can manage something so simple as resurrection," Doctor Death said reasonably. "Perhaps it would help if you understood how important it is. My wife was not pretty, but she was the most wonderful wife in the world. Her name was Chiang-chao, and we were very poor, but she could make the most delicious meals from a handful of rice and the herbs that she picked in the woods. She sang beautiful songs to cheer me when I was depressed and she sewed dresses for wealthy ladies to help pay for my studies. We were very happy together, and I know that we will be happy together again."

The Falcon dropped like a rock, and the great talons shot out, and there was a dull thud. We lifted back up into the air while the old man toppled to the ground, and his ghost lifted from his body, and another ghost came running with open arms, and Doctor Death and the most wonderful wife in the world embraced beneath the Bridge of Birds.

The stars above us were blending into a continuous blur and the landscape below was unrolling like a painted panorama: the hills and valleys that we had trudged across on our quest, and the Desert of Salt, and Stone Bell Mountain. We shot up the side of another mountain toward a stone pillar and a hammer and a gong and the black mouth of a cave. The wisest man in the world was standing there, gazing at the Bridge of Birds, and for a moment I thought that it might not be such a bad thing to lose one's heart. There was real pleasure in his eyes. Then I saw that his hands were caressing a small pile of jewels, and I remembered that a man with no heart likes things cold, and there is nothing colder than treasure.

"Cold," crooned the Old Man of the Mountain. "Cold…cold…cold…."

Then the wisest man in the world turned his back upon the beautiful Bridge of Birds, and shuffled down into the darkness of his cave.

Another valley disappeared beneath us, and another river, and more hills, and we swooped up the side of another peak, and Master Li and I cried out as one: "But surely they have paid for their folly!"

We stared down at the bodies of the three handmaidens, who still floated upon the cold water of the Lake of Death. The Falcon turned its head.

"In life they were faithless, but in death they were faithful beyond belief," said the prince of the birds of war. "Their courage has been brought to the attention of the judges of Hell, and even now the Yama Kings are making their decision."

We watched the bodies peacefully dissolve into dust, and we felt an indescribable

wave of joy as the soul of Snowgoose and Little Ping and Autumn Moon shot past us to rejoin their mistress in Heaven.

The mighty heart pounded beneath us, and the wings beat with all the Falcon's strength, and we left the Bridge of Birds far behind, and China vanished. My eyes swam with tears from the wind, and I could see nothing, and I held on for dear life. For an hour I had no idea where we were, but then the racing wind began to bring a hundred familiar odors to my nostrils. The pace slackened, and I pried my eyelids open, and the Falcon slid down from the sky and dipped its wings in salute above the watchtower on Dragon's Pillow. As the monastery grew closer we could see the watching bonzes point in wonder from the roof, and then the bells began to ring. Lower we drifted, and then the Falcon landed lightly in the courtyard.

Li Kao and I climbed off and bowed deeply, and the prince of the birds of war looked at us with its yellow smoky eyes.

"I shall not say good-bye. The Raven has told me that we are destined to meet again, at the great confrontation with the White Serpent in the Mysterious Mountain Cavern of Winds. The Raven is never wrong," said the Falcon, and its wings beat once, twice, and then it shot into the air and sailed away to rejoin its bridge and its princess.

Li Kao and I raced into the infirmary, where the abbot ran to meet us. He was wasted with weariness, and one glance told us that the endurance of the children was almost at an end.

"We have the Great Root!" I yelled. "Master Li found the Queen of Ginseng, and she has agreed to help us!"

Master Li and the abbot began preparing the vials, and I ran from bed to bed. I held the root toward the children's faces and recited their names and gave brief ancestries. I suppose that it was a foolish thing to do, but I remembered that the story of Jade Pearl had begun when the Queen of Ginseng had taken pity upon a child and had asked if she was lost, and the children of my village were lost indeed. Then I ran up to Master Li and reverently placed the root in the first vial.

I cannot possibly describe the aroma when Li Kao finally removed the vial from the pan of boiling water and removed the stopper, but old Mother Ho, who caught some of the steam full in the face, tossed her cane away and hasn't used it since. The abbot and Master Li began making the rounds: three drops upon each tongue.

The children's faces flushed, and the covers lifted with deep breathing, and they sat up and opened their eyes to the private world of the Hopping Hide and Seek Game.

The second treatment of three drops, and the happy smiling faces turned as one toward Dragon's Pillow. *"Jade plate, six, eight, fire that burns hot, night that is not, fire that burns cold, first silver, then gold!"* chanted the children of Ku-fu.

The third and final treatment, and there was just enough essence to go around. The children suddenly stopped chanting, and they sat motionless, with wide unseeing eyes. Nobody dared to breathe. The monastery was completely silent until Big Hong could stand it no more. He ran to his son and waved his hand in front of the boy's bright eyes. Nothing happened.

Big Hong fell on his knees, and his head sank to the little boy's lap, and he began to weep.

Master Li is convinced that the true story of the Bridge of Birds is far too crude to please priests and palace eunuchs, and that suitably polite and pious legends will be invented to account for the extraordinary event that stunned the empire on the seventh day of the seventh moon in the year of the Dragon 3,338 (A.D. 640), and that there will probably be a lovers' festival that celebrates a meek little goddess who weaves seamless robes and a meek little god who milks cows, with a few magpies tossed in for comic effect. Perhaps, but in the village of Ku-fu in the valley of Cho we will continue to celebrate the moment when the Queen of Ginseng probed and tested, and then tentatively reached out and took *ku* poison into her heart. Little Hong blinked. His eyes lowered.

"What's the matter, Daddy?" he asked.

Her majesty was gaining confidence, unleashing all of her power, and child after child blinked and shook his head, as though clearing cobwebs, and wanted to know why his parents were weeping. They were very weak.

"Outside!" Master Li yelled. "Carry the children out to the courtyard!"

A long row of beds moved out to the courtyard, and the children stared in wonder at a strange glow upon the horizon, like the rising of a second moon, and then the Bridge of Birds lifted above Dragon's Pillow. Surely the Queen of Ginseng smiled to see her beloved goddaughter provide the final step to the cure. The world was wrapped in the fragrance of green twigs and branches, and a divine light climbed higher and higher toward the stars, to the great song of billions of birds. A trillion wings splintered moonbeams into rainbows, and a roar of thanksgiving came from the Great River, and the Star Shepherd hurled his crook away and bounded across waves and rocks, and the untended stars began to spill over the banks. The August Personage of Jade ordered all Heaven to erupt with bells and gongs and trumpets, and the children of Ku-fu jumped from their sickbeds and began to dance with their parents, and the abbot and his bonzes swung lustily through the air as they hauled on the bell ropes, and Master Li did the Dragon Dance with Number Ten Ox, and showers of stars, torrents of stars, great glorious explosions of stars streaked across the sky of China while the Bridge of Birds reached the boundary of paradise, and the Star Shepherd opened his arms to receive my darling Lotus Cloud, the Princess of Birds.

I shall clasp my hands together and bow to the corners of the world.

May your villages remain ignorant of tax collectors, and may your sons be many and ugly and strong and willing workers, and may your daughters be few and beautiful and excellent providers of love gifts from eminent families that live very far away, and may your lives be blessed by the beauty that has touched mine.

Farewell.

The
STORY
of the
STONE

This is one for the Sacred and Solemn Order of Sinologists

Prologue

Jen Wu is a day Master Li sets aside for my literary endeavors, and I was pleased that it was cold and rainy and fit for little else than splashing ink around.

"Ox," he said, "the writing of your memoirs is doing wonders for your calligraphy, but I must question the content. Why do you choose the rare cases in which matters run melodramatically amok?"

I heroically refrained from saying, "They always do."

"When you allow sensationalism to do the work, you're eliminating the need for thought. Besides," he added somewhat petulantly, "you give the impression that I'm violent and unscrupulous, which is only true when there's a need for it. Why not explain a case that was calm and rather leisurely and lovely, in which the issues were philosophical rather than frenzied?"

I scratched my nose with my mouse-whiskered writing brush as I tried to think of such a thing. All I wound up with was ink in my nostrils.

"Shi tou chi," he said.

I stared at him incredulously. "You want me to try to explain that awful mess?" I said in a high strangled voice. "Venerable Sir, you know very well it almost broke my heart, and I—"

"Shi tou chi," he repeated.

"But how can I tell The Story of the Stone?" I wailed. "In the first place I don't understand where it begins and in the second place I'm not sure it has an ending and in the third place even if I understood the ending it wouldn't do me any good because I don't understand the beginning in the first place."

He gazed at me in silence. Then he said, "My boy, stay away from sentences like that. They tend to produce pimples and permanent facial tics."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Begin at the beginning as you understood it, proceed through the middle, continue to the end, and then stop," said Master Li, and he sauntered out to get drunk, leaving me to my current misery.

What can I say about the affair of the stone? All I know for certain is the date when we first became involved: the twelfth day of the seventh moon in the Year of the Serpent 3,339 (A.D. 650). I remember it because I had a premonition that something dramatic was about to happen, and had been checking the calendar for auspicious days, even though I wasn't so much foreseeing but wishing because I was worried about Master Li. He'd been in a foul mood for a month. For days he did nothing but lie on his pallet and drink himself into oblivion, and when he was sober he pinned up sketches of government officials and riddled the wall of the shack with throwing knives. He never spoke to me about it, but he was old, old almost beyond belief, and I think he was afraid he'd drop dead before something interesting turned up.

I didn't like that at all, but I couldn't afford a decent fortune-teller so I had to rely on *Ta-shih* to tell me whether my premonition was favorable or disastrous, and that meant I could only get six possible answers: "grand peace and luck," "a little patience," "prompt joy," "disappointment and quarrels," "scanty luck," and "loss and death." I didn't dare tempt the anger of the gods by trying more than once a day. I took the first reading on the eighth day of the seventh moon, and my heart sunk when I saw "loss and death." On the ninth I tried again, and again I got "loss and death." My heart bounced up and down upon my sandals when "loss and death" appeared on the tenth day, and on the eleventh, before dawn, I slipped out to pray at the temple of Kuan-yin. Not even the goddess of mercy could help. "Loss and death" came up again, and I read it in the shadow of the goddess's statue as the sun lifted above the city walls, and just then I heard wails of woe drifting from Master Li's alley, and then the dread peal of the Cloud Gong.

I ran back, blinded by tears, and knocked Ming Number Six head over heels, nearly crushing the delicate tapers of sacrificial Buddha's Fingers incense that he had just bought at great expense. He didn't mind. I have never seen anyone happier, and it was only then that I realized that the wails and the Cloud Gong were coming from his house, not Master Li's shack, because Great-grandfather Ming (a loathsome tyrant if ever there was one) had finally condescended to breathe his last. Master Li was still with me, and he even felt well enough to invite a few people over that night.

It had been a spur-of-the-moment thing. The gentlemen were collected from a wineshop, and the ladies came from one of the bawdy *Yuan Pen* troupes that I far preferred to *Tsa Chu* opera, and things went very well except for the Mings' cat. They had tied the beast to Great-grandfather's coffin, hoping to chase away evil spirits that might come for the corpse's *po* (sentient) soul while his *hun* (personality) was down in Hell being judged. I thought it was a terrible idea—a dog, yes, but everybody knows that if a cat jumps over a coffin the corpse will sit up and climb out and cause all sorts of trouble—and the cat also thought it was a terrible idea and began howling its head off. Then one of the guests, a pasty-faced fellow I didn't know, started a dice

game called Throwing Heaven and Nine, and the ladies got tipsy and decided to try to drown out the cat by bellowing bawdy songs from the classic lowbrow farce "The Merry Dance of Mistress Lu," and at that point a storm began moving toward Peking. A wild wind howled in counterpoint with the cat, and a hole about a foot across suddenly appeared in the roof. I fished some fallen thatching from a pot of rice and turned the cooking over to the ladies, and then I went out to the alley and climbed up on the roof to make repairs.

I checked my thatching and twine and mallet and nails, and began sliding across the ridgepole toward the hole. The ladies were catching their breaths before launching into another chorus, but the wind and the cat and the gamblers' doggerel were still going strong.

"Red Mallet Six, easy to fix!" yelled the pasty-faced gambler, meaning he had to beat a throw of one and five.

"Oooooooooooooo," moaned the wind.

"Yeeeeeeeeeeeeeeow!" howled the cat.

"Halfway to Heaven with the One-leg Seven, money-money-money!" yelled the gambler, who had just tossed one and six.

I slid farther along the ridgepole and cautiously tried my weight on a bamboo rafter. It held, and I took out a length of twine and began measuring the hole. Directly below me the ladies got their second wind, and I vaguely recalled that more than one sheltered mandarin was reputed to have been sent to his grave by accidental contact with the Yuan Pen songs of the great unwashed.

"Make your pile while you're young, dear, for beauty must flee,
And middens greet maidens whose image you'll be,
Wrinkled belly and breasts, features mottled and gray,
Lurching lonely through nights while your nose lights the waaaaaaaaaaaa-aaaaaaay!"

Another two or three jars of wine, I thought, and they should really loosen up. I didn't want to miss it.

"Ooooooooooooooobhh," moaned the wind.

"Yeeeeeeeeeeeeeeow!" howled the cat.

"Hear what I said?" the lucky gambler yelled. *"It's the Tiger Head! Money-money-money!"*

Faintly through the din I could hear the watchman crying the double hour of the rat. A new day had begun, and for some reason I automatically grabbed some nails, totaled them, added the numbers of the moon, day, and hour, and started one last Ta-shih reading. I rapidly counted across the upper six joints of the three middle

fingers of my left hand, and stared in disbelief as my counting finger came to a stop on the deadly sixth joint.

"Loss and death?" I whispered.

What could it mean? Surely the prophecy had been fulfilled by Great-grandfather Ming, unless he had arisen…. I hastily slid down and peered through Ming's window to see if that damned cat had jumped over the coffin. The lid was still securely in place, so why did I keep getting the death reading? Something was very, very wrong, and it took a moment to register what it was.

Only the cat and the wind were serenading the night. The shack was silent. Not a peep. I hastily slid back up and peered through the hole, and it was apparent that the phenomenal luck of the pasty-faced gambler who had just beaten double fives with a five and a six had run out. The lash of a donkey whip was wrapped around his right arm, jerking the sleeve up to reveal a leather tube strapped to his forearm. The dice he had palmed and switched for loaded ones fell from the tube and rolled over the floor, and I stupidly noted that he would have won anyway: "Heaven," double sixes, gazed up at me.

The idiot decided to try something even more dangerous than loaded dice. The handle of the donkey whip was in Master Li's left hand, and surely the cheater could see that Master Li's eyes looked like narrow chips of ice, but he reached into his robe with his left hand and awkwardly pulled out a knife. He never had a chance, of course. I hit the roof between two rafters and crashed through like a water buffalo stepping upon a half inch of river ice, and my aim was good—I landed upon the idiot's left shoulder—but I was way too late. When I climbed to my feet I was dripping with red ooze.

"Sorry, Ox. The son of a sow moved on me," Master Li said, glaring disgustedly at the corpse.

He meant that the fellow should have allowed himself to be murdered cleanly, and shouldn't have turned so Master Li's throwing knife would sever his largest jugular vein. Murder was the only term for it. Master Li surely saw from the way the fellow held a knife that he was a raw amateur, and he surely knew that I was going to land on the dolt before he took two steps. The old man looked at me rather contritely, and spread his hands wide and shrugged, and then he accompanied me outside for more thatching. It's amazing how much blood the human body contains, and we were going to need at least four armloads to mop up the lake on the floor.

At least we wouldn't be bothered by guests. They had vanished like figments of dreams, and within half an hour they would have witnesses willing to swear that they had spent the night sacrificing to Chu-Chuan Shen, Patron of Pig Butchers, in West Bridge Temple on the other side of Peking.

Master Li knelt beside the body. "No idea who he was," he muttered. "Saw him in the wineshop and he looked vaguely familiar, so I invited him along."

There was no identification. The money belt yielded an extraordinary amount of gold, and Master Li examined the fellow's discolored fingernails and said he had worked with a variety of metallic acids, although he bore no other resemblance to an alchemist. In a concealed pocket was a squeeze tube made from a pig entrail that released tiny puffs of a grayish substance, and Master Li whistled.

"That's a small fortune, Ox," he said. "Powdered Devil's Umbrella and absolutely pure, so far as I can judge. It may not be the best, but it's far and away the most expensive as well as addictive of all *Ling-chih,* and mushrooms like that haven't grown naturally around Peking for a hundred years."

He found nothing else of interest. Ming's cat and the wind greeted me as I stepped out with the pallid bloodless body draped over my shoulder. The cold air smelled of rain. Small black clouds were skidding across the wind-whipped sky, and stars blinked on and off like a billion fireflies, and the moon looked like the great billowing yellow sail of a ship that was racing across a blue-black ocean toward immense cloud cliffs in the west, where lightning flickered.

No one saw me slip into the abandoned smugglers' tunnel that led from the alley and under the city dump to the canal. When I stepped back out the sky was almost completely covered by clouds, and I could barely make out the jetty and the dark water beneath. There were heavy rocks beside the jetty. I tied the other end of a tarred rope around the corpse's legs, and it slid silently beneath the surface and drifted down to join the others.*

The incident was closed. By unspoken agreement Master Li and I erased the affair of the dice cheater, and never intended to mention him again. The roof would have to wait until morning. I wearily crawled into my pallet while Master Li huddled over one more wine jar, listening to the rain patter down, sifting like a shower of silver through the holes. A small pool formed at his feet, and the last thing I saw before I closed my eyes was the ancient sage gazing moodily at his image reflected in rainwater that glistened like a mirror in the candlelight.

I awoke with the awareness that something strange had happened. During the night a weight seemed to have been lifted from me, and while I had an even more powerful sense that something important was about to happen, this time all the omens were good. It was as though Master Li's moment of rage and murder had been a necessary purgative, although I couldn't imagine why. He was wincing and groaning under the weight of the morning light, as usual, and I eased his hangover with a compress of hot sliced ginger root. Apparently he hadn't felt the same purgative effect yet, because he was sore as a boil.

* The meaning is unclear, although the implication is alarming. It should be remembered that volumes two through five of the complete *Memoirs of Number Ten Ox* were seized and burned by the Imperial Censors, and while copies are rumored to exist, none have been found.

The morning was drowned in mist and drizzle. Along about the hour of the goat Master Li jumped to his feet and grabbed his coat and rain hat and set out toward the Wineshop of One-Eyed Wong, which was usually a bad sign because he knows very well that the famous bouquet of Wong's wine comes from crushed cockroaches. I was more sure than ever that something of great importance was heading straight toward the old man, and I happily accompanied him to his private table.

Master Li sat there looking like ninety pounds of Fire Drug ready to explode, and that is absolutely all I know for certain about the weird affair of *Shi tou chi.* I didn't understand anything that followed. All I can do is set down events as I witnessed them, and freely admit that I missed the subtleties that could have told me what was really going on, and what was important and what was not.

Begin at the beginning, Master Li told me. Proceed through the middle, continue to the end, and then stop. That is what I shall do, and then, perhaps, a kind reader will write and explain it to me.

One-Eyed Wong and his beloved wife, Fat Fu, have worked very hard to earn the reputation of running the worst wineshop in all China. The notoriety gives them a clientele that is the envy of the empire, and the usual mix was present: Bonzes and *Tao-shih* swapped filthy stories with burglars and cutthroats, and eminent artists and poets flirted with pretty girls and boys while high government officials played cards with the pimps. All I could see of great scholars was their lacquered gauze caps, because they were on their knees rolling dice with grave robbers. Against one wall is a row of curtained booths for aristocrats, and occasionally a manicured hand would part beaded curtains to give a better view of the lowlife. The antics of the clientele could be quite dramatic, and One-Eyed Wong constantly patrolled the premises with a sand-filled sock swinging in his hand while Fat Fu sent him messages by whistling.

She knew everybody who was important or dangerous. When Master Li entered, she whistled a few bars of a popular song he had inspired: *Fire Chills and Moonlight Burns, Before Li Kao to Virtue Turns.*

As I say, I was waiting for Master Li to explode, and at the same time I was waiting for my premonition to prove itself, and at that moment a pair of curtains parted at an aristocrat's booth and I said to myself, this is it! The girl who stepped out was one of the most beautiful creatures I had ever seen. Surely she was a princess, and she was coming straight to our table. She wore a honey-colored coat of some exotic material, and a waistcoat trimmed with silver squirrel fur. Her long slit tunic was fashioned from the costliest silk, Ice White, which loses its luster after ten minutes' exposure to direct sunlight. Her blue cap was trimmed with perfect pearls and her blue slippers were embroidered with gold. Her feet made no sound at all as she drifted toward us like a lovely cloud.

Then she came close enough for me to see that her beautiful eyes were totally mad. I jumped to my defensive position at Master Li's left side, leaving his knife hand free, but she paid no attention to us. She flowed past in a subtle mist of perfume.

Master Li took note of the tiny flickers of fire deep inside her wide eyes, and the hugely distended pupils.

"Thunderballed to the gills," he observed.

He was referring to hallucinatory mushrooms so dangerous that sale of them has been banned. Fat Fu reached the same conclusion and began whistling "Red Knives," and One-Eyed Wong moved swiftly. The princess was approaching a table where a bloated bureaucrat who boasted all nine buttons of rank on his hat was laying down the law to admiring underlings, and she smiled so beautifully that it took my breath away. A delicate hand slipped inside her tunic. Wong's sand-filled sock reached the back of her head just as the point of her dagger reached the bureaucrat's throat. She descended to the floor as gracefully as a falling leaf, and one of the scholars glanced up from his dice game. "Got her again, Wong," he said.

"One of these days I'm going to miss," One-Eyed Wong said gloomily.

The bureaucrat gazed down at the lovely body and saw who she was and turned green. "Buddha protect me!" he howled, and he charged out the door so hastily that he left his purse on the table, which the underlings grabbed and divided. Wong picked up the princess and took her to the side door, and the last I saw of her she had been collected by a pair of liveried servants and was being carried away in a silken sedan chair. "So much for premonitions," I said to myself.

Master Li was turning purple. "What a world we live in," he said, breathing heavily through his nose. "Ox, that exquisite girl is Lady Hou, who happens to be one of the three finest poets in the empire. In any civilized age she would be honored and decorated and praised to the skies, but ours is the age of the Neo-Confucians."

He smashed the table so hard that his wine jar bounced up in the air, and I caught it before the contents could spill on his robe and burn holes in it.

"Fraud, Ox!" he said furiously. "We live in a land so debased that its most valued art forms are fraud and forgery. The Neo-Confucians cannot accept the fact that a mere woman could be so gifted, and they of course, control the Imperial Censors, who control publication. They graciously consented to publish the lady's poems, and to her amazement she saw the author's credit: 'Attributed to Yang Wan-li.' That is really quite clever. The triplication being that somebody was faking a masculine classical style, and by officially classifying genuine work as fraudulent, they have, in effect, deprived Lady Hou of her identity. She's been destroying her mind with Thunderballs and slitting Neo-Confucian throats ever since, but there are simply too many of them. They'll win in the end. Eventually she'll be convinced that she really doesn't exist, and is actually a teapot or something in that general price range, and then they'll lock her up and the head Neo-Confucian will suavely appropriate her poetry as his own."

He downed his wine at a gulp, and signaled Fat Fu for some more.

"My boy," he said gloomily, "we live in the last days of a once great civilization.

Dry rot has set in, so we paint it with lies and gild it with fool's gold, and one of these days the whole works will blow away in a high wind and where an empire once flourished there'll be nothing but a bunch of bats flying in and out of a bunghole."

He was depressed but I was cheered. I knew with a certainty I couldn't explain that my premonition had been correct after all, and I had simply focused on the wrong person. I suppose it had to do with the terror in the voice I heard—I couldn't see who it was, but somebody was working his way through the crowd, and he was chanting the same incomprehensible words over and over again. Even Master Li looked up from his wine jar and took notice.

"Interesting," he said, with a faint sign of animation. "One doesn't often hear ancient Sanskrit. The Great Prayer of the Heart Sutra, to be precise: *Gyate, gyate, barag yate, harosogyate, bochi, sowaka!* which means 'Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone altogether beyond, what an awakening, hail!' Nobody can explain why it should be, but the prayer has an extraordinarily soothing effect when one repeats it over and over."

Then we saw him, and I was disappointed. I had expected a wild-eyed barbarian, but he was only a bonze. He was small and pale and appeared to be frightened half to death, and he was looking desperately around the room. His eyes fastened upon Master Li like a pair of limpets, and he scuttled up and fell to his knees and began kowtowing energetically.

"Bl-bl-blpp-blppt," he said, or something like that.

"If you stopped trying to bang a hole in the floor with your chin, you might be more comprehensible," Master Li said, not unkindly. "Why not stand up and try it again?"

The monk jumped up and bowed as jerkily as a kou-tou beetle. "Have I the honor of addressing the great and mighty Master Li, foremost among the scholars and truth seekers of China?" he squealed.

Master Li brushed away the compliments with a modest wave of a hand. "My surname is Li and my personal name is Kao, and there is a slight flaw in my character," he said. "This is my esteemed former client and current assistant, Number Ten Ox. You got a problem?"

The monk struggled for some semblance of self-control. "Venerable Sir, I am the humble abbot of the insignificant monastery in the Valley of Sorrows. You have heard of our valley?"

"Who hasn't?" said Master Li.

I hadn't.

"We have lived in peace for centuries, but now one of my monks has been murdered in a terrible and impossible manner," the abbot said with a shudder. "Our library has been broken into, and something has happened to trees and plants that must be seen to be believed."

He had a fit of trembling, and it took him some time to get more words out.

"O Master Li, the Laughing Prince has arisen from the grave," he whispered.

"Well, he always said he'd return, although he seems to have taken his time about it," Master Li said calmly. "How long has the aristocratic son of a sow been in his tomb?"

"Seven hundred and fifty years," the abbot whispered.

Master Li poured himself another cup of wine. "Punctuality is not a priority of princes," he observed. "What makes you think this one has returned to his old playpen?"

"He has been seen. I myself have seen him dancing and laughing in the moonlight with his murderous companions, and when we found the body of poor Brother Squint-Eyes, the expression on his face bore witness to the presence of the Laughing Prince. We found this clutched in his hand, and a search of the library revealed that the manuscript had been stolen."

The abbot timidly offered a fragment of ancient parchment. Master Li gazed at it casually, and then he froze. Not a muscle twitched in his face, but my heart skipped a beat. I knew what it meant when his body was as still as a boulder and his eyes were almost hidden by wrinkles that could have formed a relief map of all China.

"Anything else?" Master Li asked calmly.

The little monk was close to fainting. He was being squeezed by a memory that made his eyes bulge from his head, and his voice was strangled.

"There was a sound," he whispered. "I cannot describe that sound. It turned half the monks to jelly, yet the other half couldn't hear it at all. Those who heard were forced to follow the sound. We had no will of our own. It led us to a scene of destruction that cannot be described in words. It was a sound that seemed to come from Heaven yet had the effect of the worst fires of Hell, and I knew at once that I must come to the greatest resolver of riddles in all the empire."

Master Li turned the fragment over and examined the back of it. "What do you know about the stolen manuscript?" he asked.

The abbot blushed. "I am no scholar. I couldn't read a word of it," he said humbly. "Brother Squint-Eyes, the murdered monk, was our librarian, and he said it was ancient but not valuable. A curiosity that was probably intended to be a footnote to a history."

"How large was it?"

The abbot formed the shape of a scroll with his hands, about a foot high and a fifth of an inch thick.

"What has happened to the body of Brother Squint-Eyes?"

"There is some ice left in our cold room, so I had the body placed upon it," the abbot said. "Venerable Sir, ours is a poor order, but you will have heard of Prince

Liu Pao. I have written him, and he is on his way, and I assure you he will pay whatever—"

Master Li held up a hand. "That may not be necessary," he said. "Suppose I were to offer my services, including all expenses, in return for this fragment of the manuscript?"

"Done!" the abbot cried.

The thought of having Master Li take over did wonders, and the little fellow was instantly twenty years younger. It was settled in a matter of minutes. The abbot had to return to his monastery at once, and Master Li promised to set forth toward the Valley of Sorrows the following day.

The abbot got a bad nosebleed from banging his chin against the floor as he crawled backward from the table, but his face was joyful when he hopped up and ran out to bring the good news to his monks. Master Li watched him go like a fond grandfather.

"Well, Ox, what do you make of this?" he said.

He meant the fragment, and he knew very well I couldn't make anything of it. I can read only the simplest script, and this was scholar's shorthand, and ancient shorthand at that. I answered by shrugging my shoulders.

"It's a forgery," Master Li said happily. His eyes were almost reverent as he gazed at it. "That's the understatement of the millennium. It's a forgery so great it should have a temple built around it and be worshipped with prayers and gongs and incense, and the monk who discovered it has been murdered, which is precisely as it should be, artistically speaking. Blessings on that ice!" Master Li exclaimed. "If this is any guide, the left lung of Brother Squint-Eyes is sure to be packed with yak manure, and his right lung will contain volcanic ash, and the sheared pigtails of novice nuns will be wrapped around his lower intestine, and engraved upon his liver will be the Seven Sacrileges of Tsao Tsao. My boy, we're going to perform the most delightful autopsy in history."

I wasn't sure that any autopsy could be delightful, but I didn't care. The old fire had returned to Master Li's eyes, and I felt like a warhorse who was being called back to battle. In fact, I very nearly whinnied and pawed the floor.

2

The rain had almost stopped and the sky was clearing rapidly. It was going to be a beautiful afternoon with enough clouds left over for a glorious sunset, and I reveled in fresh air after inhaling the reek of raw alcohol in Wong's. The rain had left the streets slippery, so I carried the old man on my back as we came back up the Alley of Flies, as I always do when the going is difficult. His tiny feet fit comfortably into my tunic pockets, and he weighs no more than a schoolboy.

The streets were nearly empty. That suited me very well because we were in the part of the city called Heaven's Bridge, where every alley is usually filled with scar-faced gentlemen who converse in the silent language of the Secret Societies: fingers wiggling rapidly inside the sleeves of their robes. Heaven's Bridge is also the place for public executions, and it is said that at the third watch one can see rows of ghosts perched like vultures on top of the Wailing Wall behind the chopping blocks. (Decapitation has not improved their dispositions. Kindly strangers who hear the sobs of a child or the pleas of a woman and step into the shadows will never be seen again.) Heaven's Bridge makes me nervous, and I was pleased that the only person we encountered was a bonze who was dutifully banging his wooden fish even though it wasn't subscription day. "The double hour of the goat!" he bellowed. "The Governor's Banquet has been canceled, but there will still be a recital of the stone bells in the Temple of Confucius! West Bridge is closed to traffic, and drivers will be fined! A new storm is approaching from the east, but the western horizon is clear!"

I looked around. "He's crazy," I said. "The east is clear, and the clouds are in the west."

Master Li nudged my ribs and pointed. A patrol of the City Guard was approaching from the east. He pointed up, and I spied some gentlemen who were perched on top of Meng's Money Exchange. The burglars waved to the bonze and slipped out of sight, over the western ridgepole.

"Heaven's Bridge," I sighed.

Master Li was gazing at the bonze as we passed him. "Alibi Ah Sung, from Chao-ch'ing," he said thoughtfully. "That's the Purple Flower, and what are they doing…."

His voice trailed off. Then he began to chuckle.

"Ox, what do you smell in the air?" he asked.

"Wet earth, pine needles, pork fat, donkey manure, and perfume from Mother Ho's House of Joy," I said.

"Wrong. You smell destiny," Master Li said happily. "Destiny that appears to be approaching with the delicate tread of an overweight elephant. Do you recall what I was talking about in Wong's before we were interrupted?"

"Fraud and forgery, Venerable Sir, and something about our decadent civilization blowing away with the wind."

"And last night I was impelled to assassinate a fellow and examine the body, which led to the fact that he had a peculiar pattern of metallic acids on his fingers and a tube of Devil's Umbrella in his pocket. Then somebody slipped a few Thunderballs to Lady Hou, and the darling girl decided to slit a mandarin's throat, and then a monk popped up with a forgery to end all forgeries, and now some crooks from Chao-ch'ing are burglarizing Meng's Money Exchange. Add it up and it totals destiny," Master Li said confidently, if somewhat enigmatically. "Let's make a detour."

❁ ❁ ❁

Peking is not beautiful the way big cities like Ch'ang-an or Loyang or Hangchow can be beautiful, but Fire Horse Park is very lovely, particularly after a rain, when the air is filled with the scents of pine and poplars and willows and locust trees. Master Li told me to head for the Eye of Tranquility, which is not my favorite place. It's a small round lake set aside for old sinners who are grabbing for salvation at the last moment, and the conversation is not exactly inspiring. For some reason the codgers confuse sanctity with senility, and the dialogue consists of "goo-goo-goo," accompanied by drooling and coy little glances toward Heaven. I think they're trying to prove how harmless they are. They also follow the example of saintly Chiang Taikung and sit on the banks with fishing poles, carefully keeping the hooks three feet above the water. (Chiang Taikung loved to fish but refused to take life, and he said that if a fish wanted to leap up and commit suicide, it was the fish's business.) Venders do a brisk business with worms. The old rogues buy bucketfuls and cast more coy glances toward Heaven as they ostentatiously set them free. Frankly, the place gives me goose bumps.

Master Li had me circle the lake until he found what he wanted, and then he slid from my back and walked up beside an apprentice saint who strongly resembled a toad. The fellow had two small leather cups over his ears, secured by a headband, and Master Li removed the headband. I took one of the cups and held it to my own ear

and listened to the lovely *linn-linn-linn* sound of Golden Bells, the little insects from Suzhou who sing so sweetly that dowagers keep them in cages beside their pillows to soothe them to sleep.

Golden Bells are also said to induce pure thoughts, and the toad looked like he could use some. I politely picked up and moved a couple of codgers so Master Li and I could sit down flanking the toad.

"Goo-goo-goo?" said the codgers.

"Goo-goo-goo," I replied.

The toad's pale bulging eyes slowly moved toward Master Li. "I didn't do it," he said.

"Ten witnesses," said Master Li.

"Liars. You can't prove a thing."

The toad turned back to his dangling fish hook. His mouth was set stubbornly, and I doubted that even Master Li could get another word out of him.

"Hsiang, I envy you," Master Li said rather sadly. "Such is your seraphic vision of the life hereafter that you can turn your back on this one, and forgo such worldly pleasures as watching your family flourish. Your nephew, for example. What's his name? Cheng? Chou Cheng of Chao-ch'ing, and what a promising lad he is. I hear he's risen right to the top of the ling-chih trade, and has practically cornered the market on Devil's Umbrellas and Thunderballs."

The toad continued to stare straight ahead.

"I also hear he's put up part of the profits to buy a full seat on the Purple Flower council. Such precocity!" Master Li said admiringly. "I predict the lad will go far, not least because he knows what to do with his assets. Last night, for example, I met a delightful fellow who had a full tube of Devil's Umbrella, and it just occurred to me that the odd stains on his fingers might come from the coiner's trade, and that I had seen him slipping in and out of Meng's Money Exchange. A fellow like that might know all sorts of valuable secrets—what's in the basement, for example—and do you know what we saw on our way here? The Purple Flower Gang opening up Meng's Money Exchange, and I rather suspect they don't intend to steal anything. They intend to draw the attention of the magistrates to some rather peculiar paraphernalia."

The fishing pole was beginning to tremble.

"Everybody knows that Meng's Money Exchange is merely a front for the counterfeiting business," Master Li said thoughtfully. "It is said that the ringleader is the Second Deputy Minister of Finance, and can you guess what we saw at One-Eyed Wong's? Some bright young man who had access to every kind of ling-chih presented a few choice Thunderballs to Lady Hou, and then he whispered something into her lovely ears, and—well, you know Lady Hou. Guess who she approached with her little dagger? Right! The Second Deputy Minister of Finance, that's who, and I

rather suspect that his position as king of counterfeiters is temporary. I wouldn't be at all surprised if your precocious nephew and his friends take over, unless somebody decapitates them first."

The toad dropped his pole into the water. "Li Kao, you wouldn't do that, would you?" he said pleadingly. "He's only a boy."

"And a delightful one, so I'm told," Master Li said warmly.

"A trifle wild, perhaps, but that's the way of the young," the toad said. "You have to allow for a little excess in boyish ambition."

"Youth will be served," Master Li said sententiously. "Sometimes after having been stuffed with truffles and basted in bean curd sauce," he added.

"Li Kao, if you're working for the Secret Service, I can give you a few tips," the toad said hopefully.

"No need," Master Li said. "All I want is an expert opinion, and no evasions." He pulled out the manuscript fragment and passed it over. "Do you know anyone capable of doing this?"

The toad looked at the fragment for no more than five seconds before his eyes bulged even farther and his jaw dropped.

"Great Buddha!" he gasped. "Do I know somebody who could do this? Nobody but the gods could do this!"

He held it up to the light, oblivious to anything else, and Master Li took the opportunity to continue my education.

"Ox, there are no more than ten great men in history whose calligraphy was so prized that kings would go to war to get a sample," he said. "Such calligraphy is unmistakable, and no connoisseur could look at that fragment without crying, 'Ssu-ma Ch'ien!' Surely you studied some of his texts in school?"

I had, and surely I was not going to give Master Li a frank opinion. I used to love history class. I can still quote whole passages by heart: "When the emperor entered the Hall of Balming Virtue, a violent wind came from a dark corner, and out of it slithered a giant serpent that coiled around the throne. The emperor fainted, and that night earthquakes struck Loyang, and waves swept the shores, and cranes shrieked in the marshes. On the fifth day of the sixth moon a long trail of black mist floated into the Hall of Concubines, and hot and cold became confused, and a hen turned into a rooster, and a woman turned into a man, and flesh fell from the skies." Now, that is grand stuff, just the thing to give to growing boys, and then we were old enough to read the greatest of all historians. This is what Ssu-ma Ch'ien had to say about the exact same subject: "The Chou Dynasty was nearing collapse." Bah.

"Nothing is harder to forge than calligraphy, and the calligraphy of greatness is nearly impossible," Master Li explained. "The writer's personality is expressed

through every sweep of the brush, and the forger must become the man whose hand he's faking. Somebody has done the impossible by perfectly forging Ssu-ma Ch'ien, and the baffling thing is that he made the forgery pathetically obvious."

"Sir?" I said.

"Would you write down your father's name unless you were directly referring to him?"

"Of course not!" I was appalled at the idea. "It would be grossly disrespectful, and it might even open his spirit to attack by demons."

"Precisely, yet in a fragment supposedly written by Ssu-ma Ch'ien, he refers to a minor government official named Tan no less than three times. Tan was his father's name."

That stopped me. I couldn't for the life of me imagine why a forger would produce a masterpiece that would be unmasked in an instant. Neither could the toad.

"This is both unbelievable and incomprehensible," he muttered. "Have you seen the entire manuscript?"

"No," said Master Li. "I understand it's quite brief, and was perhaps intended to be attached as a footnote to one of the histories."

The toad scratched his chin. "The parchment is genuine," he said thoughtfully. "When one thinks of forgery, one thinks of modern works, but what if the forger was a contemporary? Li Kao, we know that Ssu-ma was castrated by Emperor Wu-ti, but are we sure we know why? The official reason has never seemed very persuasive to me, and this forgery is so superb that Ssu-ma would have a hell of a time proving he *didn't* write it. One can imagine sly courtiers pointing out to the emperor that the Grand Master Astronomer Historian was so impious he would write down his own father's name, and if the text also contained slighting references to the throne—"

At that point his voice was drowned out. One of the reprobates looked at Master Li's venerable wrinkles and decided that somebody might be challenging for the title of Saintliest of Them All, and he took three or four deep breaths and raised his gaping mouth toward the Great River of Stars.

"Hear me, O Heaven, as I pray to the six hundred named gods!" he bellowed. *"I pray to the gods of the ten directions, and the secondary officials of the ten directions, and the stars of the five directions, and the secondary stars of the five directions, and the fairy warriors and sages, and the ten extreme god kings, and the gods of the sun and the moon and the nine principal Stars!"*

The vendors perked up. "Worms for sale!" they cried.

"The gods who guard the Heavenly Gates!" the champion roared. *"The thirty-six thunder gods who guard Heaven itself, and the twenty-eight principal stars of the Zodiac, and the gods for subjugating evil spirits, and the god king of Flying Heaven, and the god of the great long life of Buddha, and the gods of Tien Kan and To Tze, and the great sages*

of the Trigrams, and the gate gods and the kitchen gods, and the godly generals in charge of the month and the week and the day and the hour!"

"Worms!" cried the venders. "Take pity upon poor helpless worms, most unfairly condemned to cruel death upon hooks!"

"The gods of the nine rivers!" the saint shrieked. *"The gods of the five mountains and the four corners! I pray to the gods in charge of wells and springs and ditches and creeks and hills and woods and lakes and rivers and the twelve river sources! I pray to the local patron gods! Chuang huangs and their inferiors! The gods of minor local officials! The gods of trees and lumber! The spiritual officers and soldiers under the command of priests! The spirits in charge of protecting the taboos, commands, scriptures, and right way of religion!"*

"Gentlemen, think of your poor old white-haired grandmothers who may have been reborn as worms!" an enterprising vender shouted.

"Boy!" Master Li yelled, and to my astonishment he bought a bucket of worms.

"I pray to the gods of the four seasons and eight festivals!" screamed His Holiness. *"I pray to—"*

Master Li reached up and pried the gaping jaws even wider apart and dumped the contents of his bucket inside. Silence descended upon the Eye of Tranquility. The toad was holding the forgery no more than an inch from his eyeballs.

"Forgery of a forgery," he muttered. "Someone's made a tracing of this, and recently. The oaf left marks where he pressed down too hard."

He handed the manuscript back to Master Li. "Tracing is an amateur job," he said contemptuously. "A freak forgery that can make scholars doubt their sanity is worth a fortune, but a tracing of it couldn't fool an illiterate baby. If the idiot tried to sell it to the wrong man, he'd soon be contemplating the pretty fish swimming around his solid stone sandals."

I had a sudden queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach, but if Master Li was thinking of a dead dice cheater at the bottom of the canal, he gave no sign of it.

"How very interesting," he said mildly. "Hsiang, the manuscript has apparently been stolen. Any word on the grapevine?"

"Are you serious? Li Kao, if a collector allowed word of something of this quality to get out, he'd have a visit from the emperor's agents inside of a day. There can't be another fraud as good as this in the whole world," the toad said. "And don't bother looking for the forger. The August Personage of Jade has lifted him to Heaven, and he's now handling the divine correspondences."

Master Li scratched his forehead and tugged at his beard.

"One last question. I can think of any number of men who would kill to get their hands on the manuscript, but the murder I've been handed appears to have been rather gaudy. Can you think of a man who would use methods suitable for the worst excesses of Chinese opera?"

"One," the toad said promptly.

"Who?"

"You," said the toad. He turned to me. "Boy, do you realize that entire cemeteries are dedicated to this antique assassin? How many corpses did he leave behind during that weird fling you had with the birds?" *

"Well, maybe twenty or thirty," I said. "But that was only because—"

"Begone!" the toad yelled. "Begone, and let an old man die with dignity."

"Old?" said Master Li. "If my oldest grandson hadn't eaten an untreated blowfish, he'd be about your age."

"The problem with you is that you *refuse* to expire from old age," the toad snarled. Then he quoted Confucius. "'A fellow who grows as old as you without dying is simply becoming a nuisance.'" He turned back to me. "I, on the other hand, shall succumb with serenity, secure in the sanctity of my soul. Boy, just look at the soul shining through my eyes! It's like a goddamned flower!"

It is dangerous to play the quoting game with Master Li. "'When I return from trampling flowers, the hooves of my horse are fragrant,'" he said softly.

The toad turned pale. "Now, look here, Li Kao, there's no need to find offense where none was intended. All I seek is the True Path that will lead me to the Blessed Realm of Purified Semblance." The thought of his new-found purity emboldened him. "Begone!" he cried. "Begone, you animated accumulation of antiquated bones, and take the sulphurous scent of sin with you."

He turned and glared back at me.

"Also," he added, "take this walking derrick."

Master Li stood up and bowed, and I followed his example, and we turned and walked away over the grass, and a gentle bubbling chorus of goo-goo-goos faded behind us.

* See *Bridge of Birds*.

The journey to the Valley of Sorrows was not a long one, and three days later I climbed to a ridge overlooking the valley. It was quite early in the morning. I mopped the dew from a large flat rock, and we sat down and waited for the mist to clear. As it did I realized that the Valley of Sorrows was like a bowl with a chip in it, the chip being the gap to the south that opened to other valleys in the distance. Winding around and down the sides of the bowl was a lovely path of trees and flowers—too lovely, from my point of view. No peasant in his right mind would waste that much arable land on flowers when something useful could be planted. Conspicuous waste is the boast of wealth and power, and it makes me nervous.

"The peasants are paid not to plant it," Master Li said, reading my mind. "It's called Princes' Path, and the reason for it lies in a fairly long story." He swept his hand across the valley. "Rich or poor?" he asked.

I mentally dug my toes into the earth. "Neither," I said, "the soil seems to be good, but there isn't much of it. Too much rock and shale on the hillsides, and the marsh at the west side is salty. The valley probably supports a small population quite well, but there can't be much left over."

"Excellent," Master Li said. "The first feudal lord of the valley discovered how hard it was to make money from the place and set an admirable precedent by drinking himself to death. His successor followed his esteemed example, and every few years the peasants could look forward to the banquet that accompanied a noble funeral. What do you think their reaction was when a certain Prince Chou turned out to have a cast-iron liver, and lasted thirty years?"

Peasants are the same everywhere, and I said confidently, "They have never forgiven him to this day. They tell their children nasty stories about Callous Chou the Pinchfist Prince, and strangers can tell where he was buried by watching the direction when farmers pee in the fields."

"Right you are, although Callous Chou stories are rare today," Master Li said. "Somebody came along to replace him, and he cornered the story market. Ox, one

of your most endearing qualities is the ability to keep your mouth shut when you are dying to ask questions, and it's time to answer one of them. Who was the Laughing Prince? Why are the peasants and the monks and even the abbot terrified at the thought that he may have come back from the dead?"

I settled back to listen, and this is a brief summary of what I learned about a gentleman whose merry spirit still haunts me to this day.

❁ ❁ ❁

Emperor Wu-ti had a younger brother, Prince Liu Sheng, who was something of a problem. He was a brilliant student of Taoist science, but undisciplined, and it was said that his affability was matched only by his laziness. At court his merry jests kept the nobility in stitches, but it was time for him to do something useful. When Prince Chou finally succumbed the emperor sent his feckless sibling to rule as Lord of Dragon Head Valley. (It was not then called the Valley of Sorrows.) The peasants looked forward to such a fun-loving fellow, and in due course the headmen were summoned to the prince's estate.

"My dear friends," said the prince with an enchanting smile. "My dear, dear friends, I beseech you to plant gourds. Lots and lots of gourds." Then he broke into an irresistible little dance step, while he chanted, "Lots and lots and *lots* and *lots*, lots and lots and *lots* and lots…of gourds!"

Well, a prince is entitled to a few peculiarities. The peasants planted lots and lots of gourds, and the question was where Prince Liu Sheng was going to find the pigs to eat them. As it turned out, he didn't want the gourds for the meat. The dried seeds of the calabash have the peculiar property of burning for a very long time and shedding a brilliant white light, and the prince had brought in experts who had discovered a substantial deposit of salt beneath the marsh at the west end of the valley. By placing calabash seeds inside rhinoceros horn lanterns, Prince Liu Sheng was able to establish the world's first twenty-four-hour-a-day salt mine.

The peasants were chained to enormous horizontal wheels. Overseers whipped them around in circles as they powered drills that bored more than a thousand feet into the soft soil. Bamboo casing was installed, and ropes and windlasses replaced the drills, and buckets lifted the brine to a pipeline that ran clear across the valley to a large patch of shale at the east side. An odorless gas seeped up through the cracks, and it was easily ignited. The brine was dumped upon iron plates and heated, and the salt was extracted and carried away to market. Day and night the whips lashed the peasants around in circles, while Prince Liu Sheng rode through the works on a silken litter with a merry quip and friendly wave for one and all.

Eventually the salt gave out, but the prince had also discovered a narrow but rich

vein of iron ore. The male peasants were chained into work gangs that dug endless tunnels, and the female peasants remained chained to the wheels. Now they powered huge bellows at blast furnaces, and in no time at all the Iron Works of Prince Liu Sheng was the talk of the empire. That was when he became known as the Laughing Prince. His sense of humor almost finished him, because he nearly guffawed himself to death as he watched the comical capers of the ladies at the wheel. Their chains were red hot, you see, and for a time "The Dance of the Peasants of Prince Liu" was all the rage at court.

The Laughing Prince called upon his scientific genius, and somehow devised a treatment of acids and other agents that made his iron less brittle than any other. The acid plant was on top of the eastern hills, and the waste trickled down in a steaming path that circled almost the entire bowl of the valley, and sages and scholars gathered to observe the astonishing effect when the waste reached the marsh. The water turned bright yellow. By day it steamed and bubbled, and at night it emitted an eerie violet light, and fish and frogs floated on their backs with horrified dead eyes lifted to the billowing black clouds from the ironworks. By then the trees were all dead, and no birds sang, and the Laughing Prince made some marvelous jokes about the smell. There were some who protested, but protests ceased when the prince opened the books. The profits were enormous.

Then something happened which nobody fully understands to this day. Prince Liu Sheng abruptly lost interest in making money. He returned to his first love, and he had his field of science picked out. He was going to revolutionize medicine.

"I shall strip the veils of ignorance from the healing art, and display the very nerves and tissues!" he proclaimed.

The assembled sages and scholars were appalled when the prince explained some of his proposed experiments, but their protests abruptly ceased when he pointed out that he would need lots and lots of subjects. "Lots and lots and *lots* and lots," he chanted, breaking into his little dance step, "lots and lots and *lots* and lots…of subjects!" The sages and scholars danced right along with him.

Close to his estate was a grotto. He transformed it into his Medical Research Center, and sages who came to observe the experiments either applauded and praised—and then staggered outside to vomit—or protested, and became subjects for the next experiments. Nobody argued about the prince's expertise. Unquestionably he was the world's greatest expert on the effects of stretching, compressing, slicing, dousing in acids, burning, breaking, twisting—seldom if ever has the human body been so carefully studied. People who enjoy such pastimes need never be lonely. The Laughing Prince gathered like-minded fellows around him. He called them his Monks of Mirth, and he dressed them in robes made from clown's motley, and they danced and laughed beneath the moon as they capered through the valley with a brigade of soldiers to gather peasants for more experiments.

The Laughing Prince was hopelessly, homicidally mad. Some say that his imperial brother finally had enough and sent the yellow scarf, which is the imperial command to commit suicide. Others deny it. At any rate, the prince fell ill. He tossed and turned in a delirium of fever, screaming and swearing, and in his lucid moments he gazed out the window at the ruins of the valley and swore to return from the grave to finish the job.

He died. He was placed in his tomb.

❁ ❁ ❁

"Seven hundred and fifty years later, capering monks in motley have been seen in the Valley of Sorrows," Master Li said. "Brother Squint-Eyes has been murdered, and it appears that part of the valley has been destroyed in a way that is worthy of the Laughing Prince."

"Whoof," I said.

"*Whoof*, indeed, although in such cases the poetic promise almost always turns out to be pathetically prosaic," Master Li said, rather sadly. "Let's go see what the body of Brother Squint-Eyes can tell us."

The monastery was very old, and quite large for such a small valley. The abbot had his monks lined up like an honor guard, and he was disappointed when Master Li declined a tour of inspection. Master Li also declined to begin with the scene of the crime, stating that it was unwise to come to a corpse with one's mind crammed with preconceptions, and we were led down a long winding flight of steps to the lowest basement and the cold room.

Lanterns were hung all over. The room was very bright, which meant that the shadows were very dark, and the play of light and shadow over the body on the block of ice highlighted the head. I stopped short and caught my breath. Never in my life had I seen such terror on a human face. The bulging eyes and gaping mouth were permanently fixed in the expression of one whose last view has been of the most horrible pit in Hell.

Master Li said that the expression was interesting, in that three or four drugs could have caused it, but none of them was common to China. He rolled up his sleeves and opened his case, and the blades glinted like icicles in the cold musty chamber. The abbot appeared to be on the verge of fainting, as did his four assistants, who hovered on the staircase. I myself will never get used to it, and I had to force my eyes to watch. The minutes passed like molasses dripping in winter. After ten minutes Master Li straightened up, and the murderous expression on his face was not entirely a trick of shadows.

"Bat shit," he said.

He bent back over the cadaver, and his knives moved angrily. "No yak manure, no volcanic ash, no nuns' pigtails, and no Tsao Tsao," he muttered. "Nothing but another corpse."

He went back to work, and various pieces of Brother Squint-Eyes landed on the ice beside the body.

"Our departed friend was recently in a large city," Master Li said matter-of-factly. "His death occurred not more than four hours after his return."

The abbot stepped nervously backward, as though fearing witchcraft. "Brother Squint-Eyes went to Ch'ang-an," he whispered. "He died within a few hours of his return."

"He had also been playing fast and loose with his vows," Master Li remarked. "I would rather like to know how he could afford thousand-year eggs."

"No monk can afford thousand-year eggs," the abbot said flatly.

"This one did. At least three of them."

"Eggs can last a thousand years?" I asked skeptically.

"Fraud, Ox! Fraud and forgery," Master Li said disgustedly. "Paint slapped over the rot of reality and gilded with lies. They're simply duck eggs that have been treated with lime. The lime works through the shells and slowly cooks the contents, and after eight or ten weeks the treated egg is billed as being a thousand years old and is sold for a ridiculous price to a credulous member of the newly rich. Delicious, actually. Certain barbarian tribes grow a fruit that tastes quite like it. It's called avocado." He deposited some revolting stuff in a bucket on the floor. "Constipation is a godsend to a medical examiner," he said. "Abbot, you might also consider the fact that in addition to the eggs, Brother Squint-Eyes regaled himself in Ch'ang-an—it had to be a large city to get the eggs—with carp and clam soup, lobster in bean curd sauce, pickled ducks' feet smothered with black tree fungus, steamed shoats with garlic, sweetmeats, candied fruits and spiced honey cakes. I estimate the cost of his last meal at three catties of silver."

The abbot reeled. "Check the books!" he screamed to his monks. "Take an inventory of the candle holders and incense burners! See if there have been any reports of highway robbery!"

"While you're at it, somebody find out if Brother Squint-Eyes ordered an unusual amount of ink for the library," Master Li said. "The type called Buddha's Eyelashes. Also parchment of the type called Yellow Emperor."

The monks galloped up the stairs, and the abbot lifted his robe and wiped his forehead with it. Master Li displayed another gory object. "Ox, you should learn a lot more about physical sciences," he said. "This thing is the spleen. It isn't a very good spleen; functional, but not completely reliable, which is unfortunate because the spleen is the seat of good faith."

He detached another unpleasant object and waved it around.

"The same applies to the heart, the seat of propriety, the lungs, the seat of righteousness, and the kidneys, the seat of wisdom. The only first-rate organ Brother Squint-Eyes possessed was his liver, which is the seat of love, and I would suspect that the late librarian led a somewhat tortured existence. It's damned dangerous to walk around overflowing with love when you're deficient in wisdom, righteousness, and propriety."

"That was Brother Squint-Eyes," the abbot sighed. "He was something of a specialist in abject confessions."

I closed my eyes tightly, education or no education. Sawing sounds echoed from the stone walls. When I opened them later Li had removed the top of the corpse's skull and was fishing out the contents.

"You know," he said conversationally, "in the days of my youth I once visited the court of Muncha Khan, who had just destroyed another enemy army and was celebrating with a banquet. It was held on the field of battle, and servants casually dropped priceless rugs over corpses so we could sit on them. Muncha's tree was trundled out—I never did learn the symbolism of it—and a couple of fellows with pumps were concealed inside. The tree was silver, with jeweled leaves, and four silver lions at the base held their jaws over four silver basins, and at a signal the lions' mouths began spurting mare's milk. Four jeweled serpents wound up toward the top of the tree, and two of them began spouting carcasmos, which is fermented milk that can take your head off. The other two spouted bal, fermented honey, and when we were nicely drunk the chefs rolled out the main course. Turned out to be the brains of the slaughtered soldiers. They were delicious. I cornered one of the chefs because one never knows when a good recipe may come in handy, and he told me it was simplicity itself. You just grab somebody and chop off the top of his head and pull out the brains and wash them in salt water. Then rub them with garlic, pan-fry them briefly, stuff them into rolled cabbage leaves, and steam them for two minutes with onions, ginger, and a touch of turnip sauce."

Master Li held the brains up to the light.

"Never do for a banquet," he said. "Tuberculosis, although in an early stage. I doubt if Brother Squint-Eyes noticed anything more than an occasional headache." He tossed the brains down on the ice and turned to the abbot. "No trace of poison," he said. "No sign of violence. No exotic disease from a place he couldn't possibly have visited. In short, no proof of murder. Brother Squint-Eyes died from a heart attack."

The old man gazed thoughtfully down at what was left of the corpse. "It could be murder if he was intentionally frightened to death, but it would be hell to prove. Abbot, when we catch the fellows who stole the manuscript, you might consider suing for damages rather than insisting upon a murder trial. We'd have to be able to demonstrate the precise method, and an out-of-court settlement might make

more sense. How about settling for having your roof fixed? There has never been a monastery that isn't selling subscriptions for a new roof, and never will be."

The abbot seemed cheered at the thought. Master Li washed his gory hands and we began walking back up the stairs while the abbot explained that in ages past the monastery had been used as a fortress against bandit armies, which was why the lower stories were fashioned from huge blocks of solid stone, and why thick iron bars were set in the windows.

"It was just after the third watch," he said. "I was awake, listening to see if Brother Pang had finally got the bell rings right, and I heard a terrible scream. Other monks joined me as I ran toward the library. The doors are always open, but now they were closed and bolted from the inside. I sent monks out to get a log."

The doors had been bashed apart, and the log lay in the corridor. We walked inside to a huge square room. Three of the walls were lined with tables, and the fourth was lined with scroll racks. The books were kept in side rooms. In the center of the floor was a large circular desk for the librarian, and the abbot showed the careful chalk marks where the body had been found behind the desk. The scrolls, he said, were very old but totally without value, being feudal records involving every payment to the various lords of the valley. Several times within living memory the imperial clerks had searched to see if any treasures were mixed with the trivia, but none had been found.

"Until Brother Squint-Eyes found a curiosity," Master Li muttered.

"His body lay there, and no one else was in the room," the abbot said. "One glance told us how intruders had entered, but the entry was impossible."

A side window that ran almost down to the floor opened upon a small garden. The bars in it were iron as thick as my wrist, but four of them—two on each side—had been squeezed together like soft warm candles to form entrances." Master Li raised an eyebrow, and I walked over and spat on my hands. I could feel muscles strain all over my body as I tried to straighten the bars, but I might as well have tried to straighten crooked pine trees. I stepped back, panting.

"So," Master Li said, folding his arms and narrowing his eyes. "You heard a scream. You ran to the library. The doors were bolted from inside. You got a log and broke the door down. You entered and saw nobody. Behind the desk was the body of the librarian, with an expression of extreme terror on his face. The bars of the window had been squeezed together by some incredible force, making an entrance to the room. Then what happened?"

The abbot was trembling again. "Venerable Sir, that's when we heard the sound. Or some of us did, since others couldn't hear it at all. It was the most beautiful sound in the world, but heartbreaking at the same time. It hurt us, and we wept, and then we started running after it. We had to. It was calling us."

He led the way out through the window to the garden, and Master Li grunted at the mass of sandal prints that covered any possible clue. We went out through a gate, and I realized we were on Princes' Path. It was very beautiful, and mixed with trees and flowers I had known all my life were strange ones I couldn't identify. Master Li pointed out one flower as being a golden begonia, and said there couldn't be more than three others in all China. The path was really a vast garden, and I began to get the feel of it when we reached a ridge and I could look across the valley and see the green line winding up the opposite hills. Master Li confirmed my thoughts.

"The heirs of the Laughing Prince were appalled when they saw the destruction," he said. "They vowed to set things right if it took a thousand years, and Princes' Path was planted to conceal the scars from the acid works. In fact, the only reason the peasants of the Valley of Sorrows aren't spoiled rotten is that the Liu family is land-rich but cash-poor, and most of the cash goes toward maintaining Princes' Path and countless charities."

The abbot stopped at the crest of a low hill.

"We ran to this point," he said. "Did I mention that the moon was very bright? We could not be mistaken in what we saw. Down below, down where the sound seemed to be coming from, we saw monks, but their robes were of clown's motley, and they were laughing and dancing beneath the stars. Normally we would have run for our lives, but the sound was summoning us and we had no choice but to obey. We ran on, and we came close enough to clearly see the clown robes although we could not see the faces because of the cowls. Then the monks danced into heavy brush and disappeared. Shortly afterward the wonderful-terrible sound stopped, and when we got through the brush, the dancing monks had vanished. In their place was something else."

We walked down and made our way through the brush, and we stopped in our tracks and stared. "I'll be the Stone Monkey," Master Li said softly.

Death had laid an icy finger across Princes' Path. In an area approximately thirty feet wide and five times as long, not one living thing could be seen. Trees were bare and dead and without even a trace of sap, as I discovered when I broke off a branch. Flowers were withered. Bushes might as well have been sprayed with engraving acid. Not even the grass had survived, and brown clumps broke off beneath our feet. It looked like a cemetery one might see in a nightmare, and the line between life and death was so sharp it could have been cut with a knife. An inch from a dead flower was a blooming one, and lush greenery rubbed against bare brownness, and birds sang less than a foot from a place where not even an insect moved.

Master Li threw back his head and laughed, but without humor. "Incredible," he said. "Abbot, Ox and I will have to take plant and soil samples to Ch'ang-an for analysis, and I doubt that it's worth speculating until we get a report on what caused

the damage. Don't worry. Most of this affair seems clear enough, and quite simple, and I expect to wrap it up in one or two weeks."

His confidence cheered the abbot, who pointed up toward a roofline high on the opposite hill.

"Prince Liu Pao has returned, and is eager to see you," he said. "Could you possibly stop there first? The peasants…."

His voice trailed off.

"Want the prince and the visitor from the big city to search the Laughing Prince's tomb and make sure that the bastard is still in his coffin?" Master Li said.

The abbot nodded.

"We will be honored to visit the living prince and the dead one," Master Li said. "I assume you have a great many things to do, so if you'll point out the way, we'll stroll up there and then on to Ch'ang-an."

The abbot was obviously relieved at not being asked to enter the tomb of the Laughing Prince, and he gave directions and bowed and trotted away, muttering something that sounded like "forty-two kettles of fish." I gathered plant and soil samples, and then we set forth to visit an aristocrat whose nerves, I hoped, were made from good material. Superstition is easily dismissed in daylight, but when the owls hoot, it's a different story. The wind sighs like ghosts whispering, and moonlight and leaves form patterns of mad monks dancing on the grass, and the house makes creaking sounds rather like the footsteps of a long-dead lunatic lord creeping up the stairs, and Prince Liu Pao's bedchamber was sitting practically on top of the maniac's tomb.

4

The estate was as large as one would expect for the ancestral seat of the former lords of the valley, but very little of it was still used. Weeds covered the formal gardens, and everywhere I looked I saw crumbling ruins. I suppose I was expecting a classic setting for a horror story, but that idea was dispelled the moment we walked through the gate to the wing of the mansion that was still kept up. The courtyard was rock and gravel and natural planting, and the spirit screen was simply a beautiful slab of red stone placed upon a sandalwood pedestal. We walked around the screen to the inner court, and instantly we were surrounded by a blaze of cheerful colors. Bright flowers were everywhere, and gaudy parrots and cockatoos greeted us raucously. A long vine-covered veranda led to the house, and a stack of broad-brimmed peasant hats had been provided for visitors who were allergic to bird droppings.

From the logistics of the place I decided that the living quarters had once been the kitchen. No obsequious flunkies came to greet us, but the door was open. We walked inside to a hallway, and instead of being confronted with grand family tablets proclaiming the Hall of Glory and Beatitude, we saw one simple plaque on the wall. Master Li had been obviously pleased, and now he practically purred. He said it was a classic essay by one of the ancients, Chen Chiju, and that it was one of the four Pillars upon which civilization had been constructed. My education had not gone far enough to get to the pillars of civilization, and since it was in modern script, I read it with great interest.

The Home Garden

> Inside the gate there is a footpath, and the footpath must be winding. At the turn of the footpath there is an outdoor screen, and the screen must be small. Behind the screen there is a terrace, and the terrace must be level. On the banks of the terrace there are flowers, and the flowers must be bright-colored. Beyond the terrace there is a wall, and the wall must be low. By

the side of the wall is a pine tree, and the pine must be old. At the foot of the pine there are rocks, and the rocks must be quaint. Over the rocks there is a pavilion, and the pavilion must be simple. Beyond the pavilion are bamboos, and the bamboos must be sparse. At the end of the bamboos there is a house, and the house must be secluded. By the side of the house is a road, and the road must branch off. Where several branches come together is a bridge, and the bridge must be tantalizing to cross. At the end of the bridge there are trees, and the trees must be tall. In the shade of the trees there is grass, and the grass must be green. Above the grass plot is a ditch, and the ditch must be slender. At the top of the ditch is a spring, and the spring must gurgle. Above the spring there is a hill, and the hill must be undulating. Below the hill is a hall, and the hall must be square. At the corner of the hall there is a vegetable garden, and the garden must be big. In the garden is a stork, and the stork must dance. The stork announces that there is a guest, and the guest must not be vulgar. When the guest arrives he is offered wine, and the wine must not be declined. At the drink the guest must get drunk, and the drunken guest must not want to go home.

"I think I'd like to see the other three pillars," I said. "I like this one."

"We'll get to them," Master Li promised. He led the way down the hall to the living quarters, which were simply furnished with comfortable furniture, and our host came bounding from a back room to greet us.

Has anyone but me ever mistaken a prince for a feather duster? That was precisely my impression. He was small and skinny, but his thin neck lifted to a huge head, and the unkempt hair that sprouted from it in all directions could have filled a couple of mattresses. I remembered hearing that he was a renowned artist, and paint stains decorated his nose and chin. Brushes stuck out from his pockets, and his favorite cup for dipping them in hung on a cord around his neck.

"My surname is Liu and my personal name is Pao and I am honored to greet the renowned Master Li!" he cried, bowing jerkily. He moved in a series of uncoordinated jumps and bounces, and his cheerful smile jerked in my direction. "Arms like logs, legs like tree trunks, and no neck. You must be Number Ten Ox. Delighted to meet you!"

I have seldom met anyone I liked so much on first sight. I felt quite at ease with him, and after a few minutes I completely forgot he was a prince and his great-great-and-so-on-uncle had been Emperor of China. We sat outside on a terrace that offered a wonderful view of the valley and listened to chipmunks quarrel with parakeets while we sipped tea.

"They say that my revolting ancestor has been dancing in the moonlight with his mad monks," the prince said. "Stories like that are scarcely new, but this time they tell

me there really has been a murder. I also looked at the destruction on Princes' Path. I saw it, but I don't believe it."

"I wouldn't either if I weren't convinced that there's a reasonable explanation," Master Li said. "As for murder, I can only say that the library was forcibly entered and a manuscript was stolen. Brother Squint-Eyes suffered a heart attack. He may have been frightened to death, but we'd have to prove intent and method. Have you ever seen the stolen manuscript?"

The prince shook his head negatively.

"This came from it," Master Li said, and he handed the prince the fragment of parchment. The prince was like the toad in that it took five seconds for his eyes to pop wide as soup plates.

"Buddha," he whispered. "Whoever did this should be deified, but why would he make the forgery so obvious?"

"We may never know the answer to that," Master Li said pensively. "The rest seems fairly simple. Brother Squint-Eyes came across a fake Ssu-ma Ch'ien in the ancient library scrolls. It probably doesn't matter whether or not he recognized it as a forgery. If real it would be worth a small fortune to historians, and if fake it would be worth the same to collectors of frauds."

Master Li shook his head sadly.

"Brother Squint-Eyes succumbed to temptation, but he was woefully ill equipped for crime. He tried to forge the forgery by tracing, and then he took a sample page of the original to Ch'ang-an and made a deal with a collector. In order to divert suspicion from the librarian, the collector agreed to fake a burglary. The foolish monk received a small down payment with which he purchased an elegant meal, and then he returned to put his own little scheme in action. My guess is that he wanted it both ways. He would salve his conscience by keeping the original for the library, and pass off his tracing to the collector. He tried to swindle the wrong man."

Master Li turned to me. "Ox, those iron bars had to be bent by large levers, which would make quite a bit of noise. All Brother Squint-Eyes had to do was draw the bolt and run out to the hall for help, but he stayed right where he was. That means he was an accomplice."

He turned back to the prince. "I can well imagine the collector producing a knife and saying that since the good monk imagined he was Ssu-ma Ch'ien, the resemblance should be completed by castration. At any rate, Brother Squint-Eyes screamed and quite literally died of fright. The collector had forced him to produce the original. He snatched it from the dead man's hand and ran, and then he and his accomplices went into their act. Anybody who wants to steal something from the Valley of Sorrows is advised to dress as a mad monk in motley. Witnesses will probably keep running until they land in the Yellow Sea."

The prince poured more tea. Master Li added a splash of wine to his.

"Prince, your ancestor tunneled all over the valley for iron, and Buddha knows what else. He also doused the place with acids and mysterious substances of his own invention. Suppose one of the tunnels collapsed. It isn't impossible that underground echoes could have produced a strange compelling sound, and that a pocket of ancient acids—or whatever—could have been released into that particular area of Princes' Path. I don't know of any substance that retains its potency for seven centuries, but that doesn't mean there isn't one, and we'll find out at the academy in Ch'ang-an. We'll also find the person responsible for the burglary," Master Li said confidently. "The problem will be proving murder. The abbot is willing to settle for a new roof. Do you have any objections?"

The prince pointed to his chest. "Me? My family hasn't had a claim to this valley since the ghastly days of feudalism, so beloved by Neo-Confucians. All we do is go bankrupt maintaining Princes' Path, and a few other things. I have no say in it."

Master Li looked at him quizzically. "I wonder if the peasants look at it that way," he said. "Your family served as lords of the valley for almost five centuries, and I rather suspect that when it comes to the welfare of the valley, they won't turn to the emperor. They'll turn to you, and they won't ask for help. They'll demand it. Rather unfair, since you don't collect a penny of rent or a share of the crops, but there it is."

Prince Liu Pao looked at him thoughtfully. Then he turned and examined my callused hands and large coarse body and homely face with peasant printed all over it. "Number Ten Ox?"

I flushed with embarrassment. "Your Highness, Master Li is right," I said. "Nothing will convince them that the welfare of the Valley of Sorrows isn't the responsibility of the Liu family, and as for fairness, it's like Princes' Path. Peasants can't afford it."

The prince laughed and stood up.

"It seems I have no choice but to go through the motions," he said. "I assume I'm supposed to make sure that my abominable ancestor is safely tucked in, with the famous Master Li as witness?"

"That's all for now," Master Li said.

The prince took a key from a cabinet and led the way outside and through a gate and down a winding path toward the face of a cliff. As we came closer I saw an iron door set in the rock, almost covered by tall weeds and thistles. The door was old but the lock was new, and the prince's fingers were trembling as he inserted the key.

"Nightmares of childhood," he said wryly. "You see, the Laughing Prince's successor decided to keep the famous grotto precisely as he found it, and place the

family tablets inside. Every succeeding prince has been forced to pray and sacrifice inside a monument to the abuse of power. Makes it rather difficult for us to pull wings off butterflies, if our instincts run to that kind of thing."

I expected blackness, but there were fissures in the stone that let in a greenish-yellow light. The famous Medical Research Center should, I think, be part of the early education of emperors. It is hard to forget.

A long row of iron racks against one wall held the essential instruments for scientific research, such as thumbscrews and iron whips and testicle crushers and pinchers and various things for slicing and gouging. Ancient operating tables still stood in the center of the floor, and gutters beneath them ran to stone troughs for the blood. Grim-looking machines whose purpose I didn't understand lined another wall, and a third wall was lined with something I did understand: iron cages where peasants were held. They allowed the peasants a good view of what was happening to members of their families. The worst thing was the back wall.

It was naturally smooth stone, almost like a huge board of slate, and it was covered with annotated experiments, drawn with painstaking accuracy. Mysterious mathematical formulas and ancient script alternated as annotations, and Master Li was quite puzzled as he translated the script for my benefit.

"True path of the stone…. False path of the stone…. Stone strongest here…. Total failure of stone…. Stone branches three ways…. No reaction from stone…."

It made no sense at all, nor did the jumble of arrows pointing to various gruesome aspects of the experiments.

"What on earth did he mean by all these references to a stone?" Master Li asked.

"Nobody knows, but his obsession appears to have been overpowering," the prince said.

He took a torch from a bracket and lit it, and led the way toward a shadowed corner. There I saw the family tablets, and I shuddered to think of small boys being led in here to pray, with grim lectures about the curse the family carried. The tablets were lined up in front of an ancient sacristy, which was empty. On the wall above it an inscription had been chiseled, and again Master Li translated for my benefit.

In darkness languishes the precious stone.
When will its excellence enchant the world?
When seeming is taken for being, being becomes seeming.
When nothing is taken for something, something becomes nothing.
The stone dispels seeming and nothing,
And climbs to the Gates of the Great Void.

The prince smiled at my bewilderment. "I agree," he said. "It has the same quality of apparently leading somewhere and then disappearing that distinguishes the very finest Taoist mumbo jumbo."

Master Li scratched his head. "Lao Tzu?" he wondered. "His third step toward Heaven was to hear the sound of stone growing in a cliff, but he didn't climb to the Gates of the Great Void on the screams of his victims." He winked at me. "He rode an ox," he said.

In the shadows of the alcove was a darker shadow that resolved itself into a narrow tunnel as the prince again led the way with the torch. At the end of it was another iron door, but this one had neither a lock nor a handle. On the wall was a large bronze plaque engraved with a map of the Valley of Sorrows, and beside it hung an iron hammer on an iron chain. The prince grimaced.

"Sense of humor," he said sourly.

He raised the hammer and smashed the plaque, and the iron door slid silently open. We stepped inside to a circular room that was astonishingly bare. Nowhere was the sickening display of wealth that usually distinguishes the tomb of a tyrant. There was nothing but two stone coffins, two offering bowls, and a small altar with incense burners. Master Li was as astonished as I was, and the prince shrugged and spread his hands in an I-give-up gesture.

"My ancestor was a mystery from beginning to end," he said. "He amassed an enormous fortune, but didn't spend a catty of silver on his own final resting place. What did he do with it? He certainly didn't pass his wealth on to his personal family, and there is no evidence that it was seized by his imperial brother. For several centuries after his death the family had to spend half its time chasing away people who dug holes all over the valley, and crooks still do a thriving business in fake treasure maps. The sarcophagus on the left is that of his principal wife, Tou Wan, who predeceased him, and my ancestor sleeps on the right."

Master Li nodded to me. I stepped up and tested the stone lid. It weighed at least a ton, but it rested in smooth grooves, and I got in position and heaved. I almost broke my back before I could persuade it to move, but then it began to slide down toward the foot with a screeching sound. A mummy wrapped in tarred linen appeared. Part of the wrappings had crumbled away, but they had prevented the bone itself from crumbling, and a piece of a white skull was exposed. An empty eye socket gazed up at us, and I will confess that I was relieved to see that the Laughing Prince was not in shape to laugh and dance in the moonlight.

Master Li reached into the coffin and came up with a small enameled container like a pillbox. There was nothing inside but a tiny pile of gray dust, and when he cleaned off the top, we saw the picture of a toad seated upon a lily pad.

"I have heard that the Laughing Prince was expected to recover from his final fever, and this may explain why he didn't," Master Li said thoughtfully. "Even in his day it was known that tear-like secretions of certain toads are heart stimulants even more effective than foxglove, and usually Toad Elixir was prescribed only for severe cardiac disorders. An overdose can be fatal, of course, and this could have been placed in his coffin either to signify a natural cause of death, or the fact that the emperor had indeed sent him the yellow scarf and he had chosen to hop into the underworld upon the back of a toad. Not that it matters."

There was nothing else in the coffin. In death as in life the lunatic lord was a mystery. I slid the lid back in place. We walked back into the tunnel, and the prince closed the door. The grotto was as ghastly as ever, but when we stepped outside I knew it was as dead and gone as the Laughing Prince. A lovely sunset was spreading across the sky, and birds were singing their last songs of the day, and down below us we could see the Valley of Sorrows in a haze of green and gold and purple shadows. As pretty as the setting of a fairy tale, and far more alive.

There was no point in starting to Ch'ang-an with plant and soil samples until morning—besides, it was the fifteenth day of the seventh moon, and my ears had not misled me about the abbot. He had indeed muttered "forty-two kettles of fish," and the monastery smelled like Yellow Carp Pier. Smells of rice, pork, cabbage, eggs, and traditional eggplant tarts drifted up the hill from the village. Word that the Laughing Prince was safely in his tomb had spread like wildfire, and the Valley of Sorrows was ready for a festival.

"Mark my words," Brother Shang said gloomily. "Somebody will break a leg."

Master Li listened to the faint sounds of music from the village. "Peasant dancing can get rather wild," he agreed.

"Smell that pepper sauce! Every child in the valley will be sick to his stomach," said Brother Shang.

"For at least a week," said Master Li.

"Monks by the dozens will forget their vows. I'll have to mop up the vomit and brew hangover remedies," said Brother Shang, whose full name was Wu Shang and who lived up to it by always drawing the short straw. (Wu Shang means "Difficult Birth.") This time he had to stand the lonely vigil at the monastery while the other monks enjoyed the festivities.

"Somebody is sure to toss a torch into a barn," Master Li predicted direly.

"They'll be lucky if one cottage remains standing," said Brother Shang, who was beginning to cheer up. "Family feuds will erupt all over the place! Broken skulls will be beyond counting! Mark my words: This date will be marked in black in the annals of the valley."

We left the poor fellow to his self-pity, a very useful emotion, and started down the hill to the village. The Feast of Hungry Ghosts has been my personal favorite ever since I began traveling with Master Li, since I am almost certain to become a hungry ghost myself. (It honors, among others, those who have died in distant and desolate lands, or whose bodies have been mangled beyond recognition.) I was slightly

surprised to see that Master Li was on his best behavior. As the visiting dignitary he was required to pass judgment on the wines of the valley, and I was prepared for the worst when he approached the reeking pots and uttered the formal *"Ning szu che bou t'uen,"* which means "I'm ready to die, I'll try it," but he only took a small sip of each vitriolic product and praised all without restraint, even the brew that spilled on the ground and killed two lizards and three square feet of grass.

The abbot kept the formal prayers and ceremonies mercifully brief, and I was delighted when the hit of the early going turned out to be Brother Shang. He couldn't attend, but he had spent the winter carving and tuning tiny bamboo flutes, and he tied them to the tails of the monastery's pigeons and sent them flying over the village to serenade us with a bawdy song called "Chu Chang's Chamber Pot." The abbot said something about disciplining the impious rogue, but his heart wasn't in it.

The dancing started, which meant the fights would start shortly, and I was very disappointed when Master Li decided to slip away and walk through the hills in the moonlight. His feet led him to the destroyed area of Princes' Path, and he stood there for several minutes, rocking on his heels with his hands clasped behind his back.

"Ox," he finally said, "what was wrong with the analysis of the situation that I gave to Prince Liu Pao?" he said.

"Sir?"

"I was trying to reassure him. I wish I could reassure myself," the ancient sage said gloomily. "It's perfectly clear that crooks dressed in motley stole a manuscript and frightened a monk to death. After that, everything begins to run amok. A weird compelling sound is heard precisely as the crooks make their escape; some mysterious substance kills trees and plants precisely where they place their sandals. If it was a coincidental collapse of a tunnel and the release of old acids, as I suggested to the Prince, it's the kind of coincidence that deserves priests, prayers, and an elaborate theology. If it wasn't a coincidence, why would crooks waste effects like that on the simple theft of a manuscript? They could walk off with the Imperial Treasury if they felt like it, or pilfer the emperor's undergarments while he was wearing them. My boy, this affair makes no sense at all."

I said nothing, of course, but I noted that the old man was enjoying every moment of his confusion. He had feared that all he had to work with was a simple burglary, and now he was praying for a puzzle that could baffle the judges of Hell. He wiped off a flat rock and sat down beneath the stars. Just below us on the hill we saw tiny flickers of light moving through the woods. Little girls have large maternal instincts, and they take the Feast of Hungry Ghosts very seriously, and they were making their rounds with small lanterns made from candles inside rolled lotus and sage leaves. I could feel ghosts all around us, moving toward the warmth of the sweet singing voices: You are not alone, the girls sang, you are not forgotten, we care and understand, our own lives are but a candle flame from yours:

"Hou tsu-teng,
Ho yeh-teng,
Chin-erh tien,
Ming-erh kojeng;
Sagebrush lantern,
Lotus leaf lantern,
Alight today,
Tomorrow thrown away."

I wiped my eyes. The moonlight was shining upon Dragon's Left Horn and the ancient estate of the Lius, and I wondered how the Laughing Prince could have enjoyed torturing and murdering little girls like these. Apparently Master Li was thinking the same thing.

"I have a theory about the late lunatic lord," he said. "Ox, what occupation is most closely linked to insanity?"

"Emperor," I said promptly.

He laughed. "I can't argue with that, but I meant a commonplace occupation."

I scratched my nose. "Making felt?" I guessed.

"Precisely," said Master Li. "Felt is cured by immersion in mercury. People in certain trades—hatters, for example—practically swim in the stuff, and it's almost certain that the Laughing Prince drank it."

"Sir?"

"In his youth he had been a promising scientist," Master Li explained. "Sooner or later he was bound to experiment with the Elixir of Life. The formulas are beyond counting, but they all contain the common ingredient of cinnabar, and cinnabar is simply mercuric sulphide. For years I've been warning about mercury, but nobody listens. The reason is that the effect is cumulative and gradual, and one needs to live as long as I have to see the pattern."

He hopped to his feet and began demonstrating expressions and body movements.

"It attacks the nervous system, and eventually produces tics and twitches and spastic movements, like this," said Master Li, and he did a strange jerky series of steps that was oddly appealing. "I am most definitely thinking of the Laughing Prince's irresistible little dance step," he said. "As the poisoning progresses, it leads to outbursts of hysterical laughter and fits of murderous rage, and the final result is insanity followed by death. Ox, it's perfectly possible that the crimes of the Laughing Prince were caused by experiments intended to achieve immortality by drinking cinnabar—not very dramatic, perhaps, but more people have been massacred because an emperor's sandals didn't fit properly than because he received a sign from Heaven, and whenever I hear a high priest howl for divine retribution, I suspect acid indigestion."

He jigged around the grass some more, and then he stopped and looked closely at me. "Acid indigestion?" he asked.

It wasn't that, but I couldn't explain what was bothering me. Something was wrong with the night. I doubt that city people would have noticed it, but I am pure country, and my nerves tingled at the tiny hesitation in the chirping of crickets. An owl stopped a hunting call halfway through. There was a tentative sound to the rustling of small night creatures. Something strange and unnatural had entered the Valley of Sorrows, and I realized that I was holding my breath.

When it came, it was only a small vibration. Then the vibration grew more pronounced, and I saw Master Li look around sharply. Then the sound came. I can't describe it. Nobody could. It was like nothing on earth, yet like everything, and my whole body shuddered with an agonizing sense of loss, but with yearning and hope as well—as though I had once lost something very precious and the memory was returning, and also a hope of finding it again. Can I say that the sound had notes to it? If so, they were as simple and direct as the first three tones of the scale, with the third tone drawn out:

Kung…shang…chueeeeeeeeeh….

That's the best I can do, and it hit me so hard I wept, and I held my heart as though it would break in half.

"Ox? What's wrong with you?"

"The sound!" I sobbed. "Master Li, surely you hear the sound!"

"What sound?"

Kung…shang…chueeeeeeeeeh….

It was beautiful and agonizing and it was calling to me. I knew I had to reach it or die, and I was not alone. The festival was breaking up and people were running through the woods, but others were like Master Li and couldn't hear it at all, and they were shouting, "Come back!" and "Have you gone crazy?" I jumped to my feet. Three little girls ran past us, weeping, instinctively shielding the tiny flames in their lotus leaf lanterns.

Master Li swore and hopped up on my back and stuck his feet in my pockets. "Stop trembling like a hobbled racehorse and run," he growled.

I ran. The moon was so bright that the shadows might have been etched on the ground with a sharp instrument and carefully painted black, and the Great River of Stars was sparkling overhead. For a moment I wondered if the strange sound might come from the heart of a star—surely it was as hard to catch. It was like trying to find a cricket at night in a huge old barn: in front of me, then behind me, then to this side, and then to that. I finally realized I was running around in circles, and that Master Li was hauling back on my neck like on the reins of a runaway horse.

I came to a stop and stood with my legs spread and my head down, panting.

Master Li held his wine flask out, and I managed to drink some of it. I choked and gasped but felt better, and he patted my shoulder soothingly.

"I can't hear whatever it is, but I know you're going at it the wrong way," he said soothingly. "Ox, at the risk of sounding like a character from the tales of Granny Shu, I will point out that a noise some people hear and others don't isn't speaking to the ears. It's speaking to the heart, and you have a hole in your heart. All young people do. It's there to catch the wonderful things of the world, and later on it gets filled up by broken things. Forget about your ears. Listen with your heart. Aim the hole at the sound and follow in the direction where it hurts the most."

The vibration was coming again, even stronger than before, and I held my breath.

Kung…shang…chueeeeeeeeeh….

I was off and running, but more confidently now. Master Li was right. Run where it aches the most, and forget about the lies of the ears. I was climbing steadily, and now the night was changing as a thick mist began to rise. The distant lights of the village were blotted out, and then the moon and stars, and Master Li began swearing in a gravelly monotone as the damp blinding blanket closed around us. I could barely see a foot ahead, and I was colliding with trees and rocks. All I knew was that I must keep climbing higher and higher.

I have a vague recollection of sliding down into ravines and climbing back up the other sides. Now the mist was so thick that I could see nothing, and Master Li shouted for me to stop. I couldn't. The wonderful agonizing sound had been silent for some time and I had to reach it, before it vanished forever and I kept skidding downward and scrambling upward—I want to explain that clearly, because of the extraordinary thing that happened.

I was exhausted. All I could do was crawl, but I sensed something ahead of me. The mist was beginning to lift. I saw a pair of sandals, and then skinny legs, and then a slight torso, and then a huge head with wild hair. Prince Liu Pao was staring down at us as though we were ghosts.

"Ox? Number Ten Ox? Master Li? How on earth did you…"

His voice trailed off and he looked wide-eyed at the path behind him.

"I heard noises and I came outside, and nobody passed me on the path," the prince whispered.

The mist was lifting rapidly now, and with a sudden shock I realized why the prince couldn't believe his eyes.

I have not described the physical setting of his estate in detail. Dragon's Head, for which the valley had originally been named, was a tiny mountain. Ages ago some cataclysm had split it in half: Dragon's Left Horn and Dragon's Right Horn. The estate was at the top of Dragon's Left Horn, and between it and the sister peak was a sheer gorge about forty feet wide and two hundred feet deep. I had begun the climb

up the side of Dragon's Right Horn, and since I was now at the estate, I had somehow managed to cross that gorge.

The prince continued to stare. I crawled back to the gorge and peered down a sheer vertical cliff to jagged rocks far below, and then I slowly raised my eyes up a matching vertical cliff to the place I had come from. It was impossible.

"Ox," Master Li whispered in a tiny voice, "you have a wonderful career ahead of you as the human fly in a carnival, but for the love of Buddha, don't do it again when I'm riding on your back."

We could hear a few faint shouts from the village far below. The wonderful sound had disappeared, and the prince said he was like Master Li in that he hadn't heard it at all. Just then there was a sound we all heard. The monastery bells began to sound the alarm, and in an instant I was on my feet and running down the path with Master Li on my back while Prince Liu Pao panted along behind us.

Villagers stood at the monastery gates, afraid to enter. We forced our way through, and the abbot met us and gestured dumbly. I ran to the horary. It had been ransacked. Every book and scroll had been pulled from the shelves and torn apart, and every desk had been searched and overturned, and the librarian's desk resembled a pile of kindling. Master Li slid down from my back and scanned the wreckage, and then he turned and trotted rapidly out the door and down one of the corridors.

The cell of the late librarian, Brother Squint-Eyes, was in chaos. The scant furniture had been torn to pieces. Robes had been ripped open at the linings. The pallet was shredded, and pools of congealing blood stained the floor.

Master Li bent over and dipped a finger in the blood and put it to his lips. "It's only ink," he said. "To be precise, it's ink called Buddha's Eyelashes, and that stuff sticking to the pallet is what's left of Yellow Emperor parchment. After finishing the tracing of the Ssu-ma forgery, Brother Squint-Eyes hid the remaining materials inside his pallet."

Master Li turned and trotted rapidly back to the library. Again his eyes moved over the debris, and he walked to a huge pile of papers beside the bent bars in the window where the thieves had entered before. He began tossing scrolls aside, and then he straightened up with an angry face and cold eyes.

"Well, Ox, if I drop over dead in the next few weeks, it won't be from boredom," he said sourly.

"Buddha save us," the prince whispered, while the abbot and the monks made signs to ward off evil spirits.

Poor Brother Shang's vigil had not been as lonely as he would have liked. The monk lay on his back among the pile of scrolls, staring at the ceiling. He was as dead as Brother Squint-Eyes, and his bulging eyes and gaping mouth were permanently fixed in an expression of terror and horror beyond belief.

6

I have but a confused memory of the next few hours. The abbot sent out groups of terrified monks to interview equally terrified peasants, while Master Li hastened to perform an autopsy. There might be some poison that dissipated inside of a few hours, but all Master Li discovered was that Brother Shang had been in excellent shape and had expired from a heart attack. The monks returned with the news that at least eight peasants had seen mysterious monks in robes of motley who laughed and danced beneath the moon, and who disappeared as though the earth had swallowed them.

The other piece of news was that one more section of Princes' Path appeared to be destroyed.

Master Li tossed his knives down beside the corpse of Brother Shang and said we had better get a few hours sleep. It seemed only minutes before he shook me awake again and handed me a cup of strong tea, and then we set out to meet Prince Liu Pao. He was standing forlornly on Princes' Path, and once more we gazed at the impossible. Nothing lived in a swath of approximately fifty by one hundred fifty feet. Death had cut cleanly. Flowers bloomed beside withered ones, and sap dripped from healthy trees not ten feet from trees whose sap had been sucked right out of them. Again I thought of a cemetery in a nightmare, but something in the pattern of it caused me to frown and sketch shapes in the air. Both Li and the prince watched me with widening eyes, and I blushed.

"Do that again," Master Li commanded.

I repeated the patterns.

"Li Kao, am I losing my mind?" the prince asked. "I could swear that Number Ten Ox is sketching scholar's shorthand for antique Great Seal script, which hasn't been in common usage for a thousand years."

"Ox is capable of the damnedest things," Master Li muttered. "Right now he's capable of sketching the ancient characters for 'Love,' 'Strength,' and 'Heaven,' and I know perfectly well he doesn't understand a single Great Seal ideograph. Well, boy, are you going to keep us in suspense?"

I turned bright red. "I had a dream," I said humbly. "Just before you woke me up. Something in this scene reminded me of it, and it had strange patterns."

I had dreamed that I was sitting on the grass near a village very like my own. Somebody had attached a bamboo pole and a black flag to the gears of the grindstone at the waterwheel, as we did in my village because the gears kept slipping. Farmers could glance up from the fields and see if the flag was pumping up and down, and if it wasn't, a boy would be sent to get Big Hong, the blacksmith, to reset the gears. As the black flag rose to the apex, it flared out and hovered in the air for a moment before starting back down.

Children were playing in front of the waterwheel. One little girl was jumping up and down. Her long black hair lifted up into the air and hovered for a moment before settling down to her shoulders.

In front of the children were butterflies fluttering among some reeds. One was black, and it swooped up, paused, hovered, and then fluttered back down.

The black flag, black hair, and black butterfly formed a nearly straight line that pointed toward my feet. I looked down and saw a small round orange-colored piece of clay. My hand reached out and closed around it, and something told me to keep watching the pattern: up, pause, down…up, pause, down….

My fingers tingled. The piece of clay had a heartbeat, and it was the rhythm of the pattern, and an ache filled my heart and tears filled my eyes. Up, pause, down: *kung, shang, chueh.* I was not hearing the wonderful sound but feeling it in the pulse of a piece of clay, and then I was in my old classroom in the monastery and a bunch of boys were looking at me with eyes like owls and I was desperately trying to explain something very important.

"Don't you understand?" I said. "The life force of a round piece of orange-colored clay is like a flag and a butterfly and a little girl's hair. Up, pause, down; up, pause, down. The important thing to remember is the pause. Can't you understand that?"

The boys stared at me solemnly.

"It's the pause!" I yelled. "It isn't like the heartbeat of a person, and you'll never hear the wonderful sound it makes unless you understand the pause!"

The old abbot was shuffling toward me. Then he came closer and he wasn't the abbot at all. He was Master Li, and he grabbed my shoulders and shook me and screamed furiously, *"Number Ten Ox you couldn't teach a banana to turn black!"*

Then I woke up.

"Sir, that's all I can tell you about the dream," I said. "Something in this scene reminded me of it, and the pattern it took. That tall dead tree, then a space, then lower dead trees, then a space, then bushes…."

I shrugged and sketched in the air.

"And you draw ancient scholar's ideographs for love, strength, and Heaven," Master Li said thoughtfully. "Are you quite positive that the round piece of clay was colored orange?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

He scratched his nose and chewed thoughtfully on the tip of his mangy beard. "That may bear looking into when we have the time," he said. "The symbolism is obvious, but it leads to a swamp I'd rather stay away from."

Master Li started looking for traces of mysterious monks in motley, and I started gathering more plant and soil samples, and just then the drums began. Sheepskin drums, hundreds of them, pounding softly but methodically from all over the Valley of Sorrows. The prince looked at Master Li with raised eyebrows, but Master Li jerked his head in my direction. "When it comes to the ways of peasants, ask the expert," he said.

I flushed again. "Your Highness, they're going to blackmail you," I said meekly.

"Eh?"

"Blackmail isn't quite right, but I don't know the proper word," I said. "They're going to start a work song. It's older than time, and it's used by peasants when they want the lord of the valley to do something."

"*What* lord of *what* valley?" the prince said angrily.

Master Li kindly stepped in to help me. "The peasants think your ancestor is behind this, and so far as they're concerned, you're lord of the valley whether you like it or not. The headmen are preparing the chant that details the peasants' duties to the lord, and thus implies the lord's duties to the peasants. Ox, how many verses are there?"

"Over four hundred," I said. "When they get to the end, they'll start over again, and they can keep it up for a year if need be."

I didn't add that in their place I'd do the same thing myself. Confucius thought so highly of the blackmail song that he put part of it in the Book of Odes, and it's really very effective when the drums go boom, boom, boom.

"In the fifth moon we gather wild plums and cherries,
In the sixth moon we boil mallow and beans,
In the seventh moon we dry the dates,
In the eighth moon we take the rice
To make with it the spring wine
So our lord may be granted long life.
In the sixth moon we pick the melons,
In the seventh moon we cut the gourds,
In the eighth moon we take the seeding hemp,
We gather bitter herbs, we cut ailanto for firewood,
That our lord may eat."

The chanting is without emotion except for the last line of every third verse, and after a few months of it the subject begins to cringe when each third verse starts. It's hard for a lord to justify chopping off insolent heads; it's just a work song.

Boom, boom, boom:

"In the eighth moon we make ready the stockyards,
In the ninth moon we bring in the harvest,
Millet for wine, millet for cooking, the early and the late,
Paddy and hemp, beans and wheat.
My lord, the harvesting is over.
We begin work on your houses;
In the morning we gather thatch reeds,
In the evening we twist ropes,
We work quickly on the roofs,
For soon we will sow the lord's many grains."

"How can they do this to me?" the prince said plaintively. "They know very well that my family hasn't collected a copper coin or grain of rice for centuries."

Boom, boom, boom:

"In the days of the first we cut ice with tingling blows;
In the days of the second we bring it to the cold shed:
In the days of the third, very early,
We offer pigs and garlic, that our lord may eat.
In the tenth moon are shrewd frosts.
We clear the stockyards,
With twin pitchers we hold the village feast,
Killing for it a spring lamb.
Up we go to our lord's hall,
Raise the drinking cups of buffalo horn:
Hurrah for our lord! May he live forever and ever!"

"They'll keep that up for a year?" the prince said. "I think I know what they want, but I'd prefer to have it explained to me."

"You and you alone have the right to dispose of your ancestor in the old way," Master Li said gently. "By the old way they mean pre-Confucian."

"Which is punishable by torment in the Eighth Hell!" the prince said angrily.

"Yes, according to our Neo-Confucian overlords, who also impose upon rivals the sacred duty of retiring from public life for three years upon the death of a father, and then they poison the father," Master Li said sardonically.

Prince Liu Pao was made from tough stuff. He turned without another word and began marching up Dragon's Left Horn toward his estate. He turned off the path and took a shortcut to the grotto. The horror of the Medical Research Center seemed even worse with the muffled sounds of drums and chanting in the distance. The prince opened the door to the tomb and marched inside to the sarcophagus of his ancestor.

"Ox, can you get the lid all the way down?"

I spat on my hands. The lid was so heavy I couldn't stop it after it slid down to the mummy's feet, and it crashed to the floor. Prince Liu Pao stood looking down at the remains of his ancestor, and Master Li beckoned for me to open the other sarcophagus.

"While we're at it, I want to look for something," he said.

The lid was easier to move, and the mummy of Tou Wan, the Laughing Prince's wife, was intact. Master Li reached inside and came up with some jewelry, which he examined closely.

"Good stuff, but not the best," he said thoughtfully. "Tou Wan was said to have been a spendthrift of epic proportions, and I doubt that this would have met her standards. One wonders whether their highnesses might not have been buried by a light-fingered steward."

He stood there scratching his forehead.

"Strange," he muttered. "The Laughing Prince apparently worshipped a stone, and possibly his wife also did, yet the stone wasn't included in either coffin. The faithful steward again?"

A sound made us turn. The prince was struggling to lift his ancestor's mummy from the coffin. The tarred wrapping made it heavy and awkward. I stepped forward to help, but Master Li held me back. Prince Liu Pao was sweating heavily, but he kept going: through the tomb, through the grotto, and outside to the path. He turned off the path and carried the mummy to a flat jutting rock overlooking the Valley of Sorrows. Every eye must have been lifted there.

The drums stopped. The prince searched for a heavy rock, and I closed my eyes. I kept them closed while I listened to ancient bones splintering, but I opened them too soon and saw the rock descend on the skull and smash it to pieces. A white cloud of crushed and powdered bones drifted down to the valley, followed by the scraps of linen from the wrappings, and then by the stone used for the sacrifice. I have seldom admired anyone as much as I did Prince Liu Pao. He turned toward us and managed to keep his voice steady.

"According to Tsao Tsao, my next step on the path to damnation is either to violate my sister or fail to return for my mother's funeral, but I can't remember which comes first," he said.

"The mother," said Master Li, "takes precedence, but I wouldn't be so sure about damnation if I were you. Prince, this time the criminals have made a very bad mistake, and the mummy of your ancestor puts the seal on it. You and I have something interesting to talk about."

From below came one last roll of sheepskin drums: "Hurrah for our lord! May he live forever and ever!"

7

Before we had seen the living quarters. Now the prince led the way to his studio, and the breath went out of me as I stepped through the door into forty captured sunsets. I was in the presence of genius.

Paintings and sketches were everywhere, and they were alive. I could swear that real sap was flowing through painted trees, and real dew was dripping from flowers. The most extraordinary thing was the glowing light that seemed to come from inside the paintings, and the prince smiled at the stunned expression on my face.

"It's just a trick, Ox," he said modestly. "It's called *p'o-mo*, and it means the technique of applying dark ink over light. The effect is scarcely noticeable when you first put it on, but when it dries, it gives the effect of glowing with inner light—'like focused eyes,' my teacher used to say."

"Ah! You studied with Three Incomparables?" Master Li asked.

"Li Kao, you know everything," the prince said admiringly. "Yes, I was his student for several years, and he was without doubt the most disagreeable man I've ever met." He graciously included me in the conversation. "His name is Ku K'ai-chih, but he's called Three Incomparables because of his boast that he's incomparable in painting, in genius, and in stupidity. Unquestionably he's the greatest master of p'o-mo in the empire."

"He used to be, but you surpassed him long ago," Master Li muttered. "Prince, this is incredible work, but have you considered the likelihood of disgrace and exile?"

"Oh, I have no intention of showing my paintings," the prince said. "This is practice. I'm trying to learn, and I have a long way to go."

Being back in his beloved studio had done wonders for him. It was as though the smell of paint had wiped away the recent experiences, and his eyes were shining happily.

"Ox, Master Li means that our overlords have decreed that all art must follow supposedly classical techniques, which are set down in a manual called 'Mustard Seed Garden,'" he explained. "Rocks, for example, may only be painted using *kou* strokes

for outline, *po* strokes for the tops and sides, *t'sun* strokes for texture, and *ts'a* strokes for expression. Any other technique can lead to a trial and exile."

Master Li laughed at the expression on my face.

"It gets worse," he said. "Ts'un strokes, for example, are broken down into the exact lines suitable for individual rocks: curling cloud strokes, axe cut, split hemp, loose rope, ghost face, skull-like, woodpile, sesame seed, golden blue, jade powder, spear hole, pebbles, and boneless. An artist who uses ghost face for painting granite instead of the officially approved axe cut faces six years in the Mongolian desert."

The prince waved around the room. "You are looking at approximately one and a half million years worth of exile," he said proudly. He was becoming quite animated, and he eagerly tossed aside paintings from a pile on the floor and came up with a simple sketch of a tree. "Laws are liars," he said. "Look here. Every single law of painting insists that the *shih*, the movement force, of a tree like this, must be concentrated in the principal branch that thrusts so proudly toward Heaven. Except it isn't. I tried it the correct way eight times, and it sat there as lifelessly as a lohan. Finally I said to myself, 'Stop trying to think, you idiot! *Paint!*' So I let my hand take over, and this lovely tree came to life. Do you see why?"

He covered the proud principal branch, and gradually I saw what he meant. The energy of the tree didn't run that way at all. It spread out and up from the trunk, reached a knot in a branch, doubled back down the trunk, and then lifted up the far side and throbbed with life as it reached for the sky from a tiny insignificant branch that was barely more than a twig.

"Laws lie, the eyes see only what they have been conditioned to see, and the mind is a refuse pile of other people's ideas," the prince said. "Only the hand tells the truth. The hand!" he cried passionately. "Trust the hand, and it will never lie to you."

Master Li looked at him approvingly. "Prince, that is precisely what I wanted to talk to you about," he said. "I'm beginning to suspect that this case is one lie piled on top of another lie, but for the first time we have something to go on. You see, the criminals have told us where to look."

The prince showed me where things were, and I busied myself making tea while they moved a table out to the garden. We sat outside and after sipping his tea Master Li said, "We know that thieves broke into the library to steal a manuscript, leading to the death of Brother Squint-Eyes, but why did they enter again last night and cause the death of Brother Shang? There seems to be only one reasonable explanation." Master Li pulled out the fragment of the Ssu-ma. "This had been traced by Brother Squint-Eyes. When the criminals examined it closely, they saw the markings, and it was the copy they came back for. Thus the books ripped open and robes split at the seams and so forth. But why would they want a badly done copy that had no market value? The answer is that they weren't after the manuscript for its value to dealers,

they were after it for its *content*, and possibly—just possibly—they may have come up empty-handed all the way around."

Master Li placed the fragment on the table and tapped it with a fingernail.

"It was a very brief manuscript," he said. "The odds against this fragment containing what they were after aren't as astronomical as one might think. Perhaps no more than twenty or thirty to one, and I've bet on cricket fights with worse odds than that. Prince, did Ssu-ma Ch'ien ever visit your abominable ancestor?"

The prince looked startled. "I really don't know," he said. After a moment's thought he added, "I'd be mildly surprised if he didn't. Before his fall from grace, he served as the emperor's confidant, and who better to send when a younger brother shows signs of losing his mind?"

"And is it possible that the younger brother caused Ssu-ma's fall and sentence of castration?" Master Li wondered. "The abbot tells me that among the many uses for the monastery was that of a prison back in the jovial days of the Laughing Prince, and might that explain why the manuscript was found there?"

"You mean the forgery?" the prince said, scratching his head.

"An acquaintance of mine, an exceptionally saintly soul at the Eye of Tranquility, has offered an interesting hypothesis," Master Li explained. "The forgery might have been intended to frame Ssu-ma with the charge of filial impiety. I was almost convinced of it, but now, thanks to you, I'm even more convinced of something totally different."

Master Li pointed back inside the studio at the prince's glorious paintings. "The hand. Trust only the hand!" he cried. "That very idea has been gnawing at the back of my mind for days. When I looked at the fragment and saw references to Ssu-ma's father, I said 'Fraud!' but when I looked only at the calligraphy, I said 'Ssu-ma!' You did the same thing. The hand's unmistakable, and I am now going to conclude that this isn't the world's greatest forgery for the simple reason that it isn't a forgery at all. Ssu-ma Ch'ien set down his father's name in order to cry out to scholars, 'Look! Look closely! Something is wrong!' Meaning that he had concealed his real message in some kind of code, and you and I are going to entertain ourselves by seeing who can be the first to break it."

Not Number Ten Ox, who couldn't decipher a single character of ancient scholarly shorthand. I got up and inwardly sneered at the fragments of dialogue that drifted to my ears. They were like children playing games, and we had serious matters to think about.

"Never seen so many errors of fact in a few brief paragraphs."

"Deliberate, perhaps."

"Errors as starting points?"

"Interesting how many errors deal with numbers."

"Indeed yes. Here he writes, 'one-hundred and forty six scales of a dragon.'"

Even I knew that a dragon has 36 evil scales and 117 good ones, which used to add up to 153 when I was in school. I sniffed contemptuously, and wandered around looking at flowers.

"Break it down. One, four, and six."

"Each error probably has a direct relationship to each mention of T'an, his father's name."

"He was really straining here, wasn't he? Comparing the marks on a stone to the 'two hundred fifty-three points of acupuncture.'"

Didn't he realize we had two murdered monks on our hands, and that strange sound was driving people out of their minds while Princes' Path was being destroyed? I decapitated a few dandelions.

"One…two…three. Got it!" Master Li said happily. "Ox, stop pouting and come over here."

Pouting? Me? I walked back with dignity and peered down over Master Li's shoulder. His finger danced across the fragment.

"Coded sections begin with mentions of Ssu-ma's father's name and run to the next error in fact. The numbers give the spacing between important words, and here is what we have: 'Down stairs…. Cold room…. Tunnel to construction site…. Stone in sacristy….'"

He leaned back happily. I stared.

"That's all?" I said incredulously.

"It's all we need, and all thieves would need, for that matter," Master Li said complacently. "Unless anyone knows of another place where a stone was kept in a sacristy, Ssu-ma Ch'ien was referring to this estate. He either went or was advising someone to go down the stairs to the cold room, and somewhere there would be a tunnel that led to a construction site and the sacristy of the stone. A cold room is as far beneath the earth as one can put it, and what could be the purpose of a construction site deep under the earth?"

Master Li reached into his tunic and took out a piece of cloth. I recognized it with something of a shock as being a piece of the wrapping around the mummy of the Laughing Prince.

"Prince, this has faded, but one can still see that the color was imperial yellow, as it should be for the brother of an emperor," Master Li said. "However, I seem to recall that Tou Wan preceded him in death by a few months. Wouldn't your ancestor still have been in mourning for his wife?"

The prince stared, and turned purple as the implications struck him. They took a good deal longer to strike me.

"Of course. It should be white. You mean I just crushed the skeleton of a total stranger?"

"Tsao Tsao built seventy-two decoy tombs," Master Li said mildly.

"I'll be damned if I'll go through that experience seventy-two times!" the prince yelled.

"I doubt that will be necessary," said Master Li. He looked up at me. "Wake up, Ox. The Laughing Prince amassed an incredible fortune which has never been found, and people have been buying fake treasure maps and digging holes in the Valley of Sorrows ever since. Now we have the words of Ssu-ma Ch'ien. Words that thieves would go to any lengths to get their hands on, because what could the Laughing Prince have been secretly constructing deep in the bowels of the earth? Dear boy, we're probably sitting on top of a tomb that contains enough loot to buy half the empire."

8

"The abandoned wings were paradise for a boy," the prince said nostalgically. "Think of the hiding places. I once counted a hundred and six rooms filled with things that nobody considered to be valuable. Not valuable to a boy? Chests filled with ancient costumes for masquerades, for example, and love letters bound together with challenges to duels, and portraits of beautiful concubines and sinister distant cousins."

We followed him as he confidently stepped around rotting sections of wooden floors and ducked under sagging beams. He stepped into an alcove and began prying boards from a window. Sunlight burst inside and glowed upon a portrait upon the wall.

"Liu Sheng, better known as the Laughing Prince."

The silk was still intact, although faded with age, and the color was very good. The man who gazed from the portrait was quite handsome. I judged him to be in his early thirties. His forehead was high and broad and serene, and his thin nose had a proud hook to it, and his mouth was firm and well formed. His eyes were quite strange in that they appeared to be clear but somehow they didn't focus. It was as though the Laughing Prince was not gazing out at the viewer but at something in front of the viewer—a ghost, perhaps, or some strange vision that only he could see. His hands were small and so gracefully formed that they were almost feminine. I could see no trace of madness, yet something in the assurance of the pose suggested an inner arrogance that was capable of almost anything. His dress was clearly symbolic of something but I didn't know what. Master Li did.

"Great Buddha, if his imperial brother saw him dressed like this, the yellow scarf would have been on its way inside of an hour," Master Li said. "The son of a sow thought he ranked above the emperor. In fact, he thought he ranked above most of the gods."

He explained the ornaments to me.

"Upper garment: sun, moon, stars, mountain, dragon, and the flowery fowl. Lower garment: temple cup, aquatic grass, flames, rice, hatchet, and symbol of distinction. Only the emperor of China is allowed to wear all twelve ornaments,

and the Laughing Prince added a thirteenth: the peacock eye, which symbolizes the Second Lord of Heaven. One assumes he was preparing to place his throne beside the August Personage of Jade."

Now the strange unfocused eyes took on a different aspect, and I decided I was looking at a man who had found the world not to his liking and stepped outside it—like Pea-Head Chou in my valley, who joined the roosters every morning and commanded the sun to rise.

When the prince led us away I found that I was tiptoeing, and the painted eyes appeared to be following me. The prince made his way to a brassbound door and unlocked it with an ancient key that was as big as his forearm. "As I said, this place was paradise for a boy," he remarked.

Paradise indeed. Inside was the old armory, and some of the axes were so huge they could only have had a ceremonial function. A thousand weapons hung in racks along the walls, and we found some that were better than anything modern. I chose a small axe and a short sword, and the prince selected a spear and a dagger, and Master Li stuck a row of knives into his belt. The next door took us outside into an inner courtyard, and in a tool shed I found a modern steel pick and bar. In the center of the courtyard was a stone building that housed an abandoned well, and a flight of steps that led down to deep basements.

"The old cold room is at the bottom," the prince said. "I doubt that anyone has been down there since I played at being a hero locked in a terrible dungeon."

Master Li searched for any signs of recent entrance, and his eyes gleamed when he saw layers of untouched dust. I had brought some torches, and we lit them. The prince started forward, but I jumped ahead of him. "A thousand pardons, Your Highness, but this is what I'm here for," I said politely. I started down the stairs, clutching my axe. The prince, I decided, had been a very brave little boy, and I couldn't suppress a small shudder as I cut through thick cobwebs that hung like blankets, and dozens of spiders scuttled over my hands and arms.

Then I was assaulted by a hundred demons—no, bats—no, *white* bats—and I let out a yelp and dove to the stairs and covered my head with my hands. When I dared to peek I saw that Master Li was standing calmly behind me, regarding me with a mixture of exasperation and amusement.

"Number Ten Ox, there is not one word of truth to peasant legends about white bats," he said wryly. "They aren't even albino. They suffer from a parasitical skin disease, like the so-called white elephants of India, and they do *not* live a thousand years, and their black blood is *not* an Elixir of Life, and if you touch them, your hair will *not* fall out."

The prince smiled at me reassuringly. "As a boy I caught a few and kept them as pets," he said. "Unsanitary, but no worse than that."

He ran a hand through his wild mop of hair, and I sheepishly uncovered mine. I got to my feet and reclaimed my axe and torch and started down again, feeling very foolish. There were four landings. The last flight of stairs ended in the cold room, which was enormous, and Master Li and the prince examined the solid stone floor and walls for some sign of a secret tunnel. I began to cheer up as I watched them. Finally Master Li stepped back and clapped his hands to his hips and glared at me.

"Why are you standing there like a statue?" he growled. "You should know something about digging tunnels. Find the damn thing."

It was childish, but I had to do something to counter the humiliation with the bats. I made a great show of examining the floor. "Aha!" I said. I examined the walls. "Aha!" I said. I stood thoughtfully, posing for a portrait of The Young Genius. "Ssu-ma Ch'ien wrote 'cold room,' but not 'in the cold room,'" I said. I made my way back to the stairs and examined them carefully. "Aha!" I said, and I started climbing to the last landing.

Li had a smile on his face as he followed, and I couldn't keep it up.

"I saw it on the way down," I explained. "I was thinking about the labor involved in carrying huge chunks of ice up five flights of steep stairs, so I looked and found what I was looking for."

I swung my torch to both side walls to show old bronze rings set in them. "Pulleys, with center ropes hauling some kind of sleds," I said. "They're evenly spaced and neatly in line except for here." I lifted the torch to the right-hand wall and showed an arc in the line of rings that ran almost up to the ceiling. "This made it awkward to get equal leverage on both sides. The only possible reason for it is that the wall isn't solid."

"Bravo," Master Li said, and I felt much better.

He held my torch and I spat on my hands and swung the pick. It didn't take very long. Soon I had a crack I could work with, and I pried out a stone slab with the steel bar, and the torches almost went out as the flames joined the air rushing into the dark space behind. In a few minutes I had a hole big enough to pass through, and we entered a tunnel carved through stone, sloping downward.

"Be very careful," Master Li cautioned. "If this does indeed lead to a tomb, it may have been set with traps for grave robbers."

We moved slowly, testing the floor in front of us for pits and nervously examining the ceiling for things that could fall on us. The tunnel sloped even more sharply downward, with many turns. We descended for such a length of time that I was willing to bet we had reached the level of the valley, or even below it, when the tunnel finally leveled out, and then after a hundred feet or so it began to slope upward. We climbed steadily, in total silence except for the sounds we made ourselves. There were no signs of traps. Finally our torchlight reflected back to us from the surface of a brick

wall that completely blocked the tunnel. Master Li examined it and found nothing dangerous. My pick and steel bar went to work again. It was a double-thick wall, but no match for steel, and with a crash and a cloud of red brick dust, a large section of it soon collapsed. We coughed and wiped our eyes and held up our torches, and the dust slowly cleared, and we stood rooted to the spot, staring in horror at what lay upon the floor behind the wall.

No wonder the tunnel had remained a secret. The workmen had never left it. We were staring at skeletons, hundreds and hundreds of them, piled almost to the ceiling. The prince was beyond speech as he gazed at the memento his ancestor had left behind. Master Li's voice was cold and angry.

"So much for the peasants. The soldiers who herded them here and bricked them up were probably rewarded with a banquet at which nobody survived the second course, and then the poisoners received their own rewards, and so on. It's estimated that Emperor Shun killed eighty thousand men to keep the secret of his tomb, and even then it was discovered and looted inside of a century. Prince, this should put all doubts to rest. Your esteemed ancestor is indeed sleeping somewhere inside here."

He stepped past me and began tossing skeletons aside, and I forced myself to move. Piles of white bones rose like mounds of snow beside a road as we slowly cleared a path down the tunnel. After an hour we finally reached the end, and it was a blank brick wall. Three swings of the pick were enough to knock bricks loose, but then I felt a shock that numbed my hands and arms. The pick had struck solid iron. I moved to different positions, knocking bricks away, and discovered that a seamless iron wall ran from one side of the tunnel to the other, and from the top to the bottom.

"There's probably another brick retaining wall behind this one, and molten iron was poured into the gap," Master Li said thoughtfully. "Ox, do you think?"

I shrugged. "Iron is tough but it will break, and my bar is steel," I said. "If I can pound four holes in it, I should be able to crack an opening big enough to crawl through."

After that my memory of the tunnel is one of noise. The steel bar produced hard harsh sounds that echoed back and forth between the narrow walls and banged against my head and ears and made me sick. I had to stop every now and then and sit with my head down between my legs until my stomach stopped heaving. I had a terrible headache, but I got into the slow steady rhythm of a woodcutter or ditchdigger, and cracks like cobwebs appeared beneath the point of the bar. Then small chunks of iron broke loose, and finally the bar plunged through. As Master Li suspected there was another brick wall behind, but that caused no problem. The other holes went more quickly now that I had the feel of it, and in about three hours I was able to crack the iron between two of the holes. Another hour was enough to finish the job. We crawled through the small opening and lifted our torches and looked up at a ceiling

gilded with real gold. The floor was marble, and the walls were richly ornamented with silver and bronze. We were in a long hallway lined with side rooms, and we clutched our weapons nervously and stepped into the first one.

No wonder criminals would do anything to find the place. Chests were piled so high with gold and jewels that the lids couldn't close, and bars of gold and silver were stacked like firewood around the walls. Prince Liu Pao was so furious his torch was shaking like a lantern swinging in a high wind.

"Four years before my ancestor died there was a famine in this part of the empire," he said in a high tight voice. "Two hundred thousand people died, but the Laughing Prince said he was unable to help because all his money was tied up in mining equipment and debts."

The prince stalked on to the next room, which held huge jars that had probably contained rare oils and perfumes and spices. Other rooms contained weapons that were so covered with costly jewels they were quite useless for warfare, and we stopped and gaped at a huge room that contained the skeletons of forty horses. Apparently the Laughing Prince had intended to ride in style in his next life, and it wasn't only horses he rode. The prince almost approached Master Li's level of swearing as we entered the Hall of Concubines and found forty small skeletons neatly arranged on forty beds.

"No sign of panic or disarray. Poisoned," Master Li said grimly. "Timed, no doubt, to breathe their last along with their master."

After that we more or less expected to find what we did: skeletons of cooks, courtiers, dancers, actors, acrobats, eunuchs, clerks, accountants—the lunatic lord had taken his entire court with him, or so I assumed. Master Li had reservations.

"One element is noticeably missing. Where are his Monks of Mirth?" he wondered.

We had no answer to that. We entered banquet rooms and game rooms and elegant state bedrooms, and we found closets crammed with the remains of costly clothes and pantries stuffed with petrified piles of rich foods. It wasn't so much a tomb as a vast underground palace, and at the center was a huge throne room, which even had a chopping block as part of the entertainment. Behind the throne was a small door, and we entered a round room with a lapis lazuli floor, and walls and ceiling of solid gold. Two sarcophagi lay side by side. The one on the right bore the dragon symbols of an emperor, and the one on the left bore the phoenix symbols of an imperial consort.

Master Li strode between the coffins to the back wall. There in a niche was a sacristy. The two side panels of the niche were covered with the same mysterious charts and formulas we had seen in the grotto, and the center panel carried the same inscription.

In darkness languishes the precious stone.
When will its excellence enchant the world?
When seeming is taken for being, being becomes seeming.
When nothing is taken for something, something becomes nothing.
The stone dispels seeming and nothing,
And climbs to the Gates of the Great Void.

The sacristy was empty. Master Li swore angrily and whirled around and gestured for me to open the coffins. I stepped up to the one on the left. The lid was hard to move, but at last it began to slide down the grooves, and the further it slid, the wider our eyes grew. I stepped back, panting, and we stood in silence and gazed at the burial dress of Tou Wan, the bride of the Laughing Prince.

She wore a suit that could have fed a million people for a year. It was priceless jade cut into rectangular pieces that were tightly linked together by fine gold wire. There must have been two thousand jade pieces encasing the mummy, but Master Li wasn't interested in jade. He was interested in a stone, and he let loose another volley of oaths when no stone was revealed in the coffin.

An inscription had been chiseled on the front of Tou Wan's sarcophagus, and Prince Liu Pao translated the old script for me. Apparently it had been written by her grieving husband.

The sound of her silk skirt has stopped.
On the marble pavement dust grows.
Her empty room is cold and still.
Fallen leaves are piled against the doors.
How can I bring my aching heart to rest?

It seemed to me that there was real feeling in that, and the prince shook his head wonderingly. "My ancestor was quite unknowable," he said. "He wrote this, and then he went out with his Monks of Mirth to capture and torture a few more children."

Master Li nodded at the other sarcophagus, and I bent to the lid. As it slowly slid down, our eyes nearly bulged right out of our heads, and when it slid all the way down I stepped back and sat down heavily on the floor. The silence was broken only by the hiss of our torches.

The coffin was empty. Prince Liu Pao sat down in a heap beside me, and I supposed that both of us were seeing a mummy dressed in jade crawling from a coffin and creeping out to join his merry monks in motley. Master Li glared down at us.

"Oh, bat shit," he snarled. "Stop trying to catch flies with your gaping mouths and start using your heads."

He sat down on the rim of the coffin and glared around the golden room. He was furious.

"Ox, what happened to your torch when you punched through the iron and brick?" he asked.

"Wha…. Why, nothing happened," I said.

"Precisely. The flame didn't jump toward the hole because there already was fresh air in the tomb," he said. "That means there's another entrance somewhere, and it's been used recently. We're too late. The thieves have already been here, and that means we have to change our minds about their being thieves."

That was too slippery for me, but the prince looked up with sudden interest.

"They didn't take the gold and jewels, and not even Tou Wan's burial suit," he said wonderingly.

"So what did they take?" Master Li asked.

We remained silent, so he answered his own question.

"They took a stone," said Master Li. "All the inscriptions indicate that the Laughing Prince worshipped a stone. When he died he would certainly have arranged for it to be buried with him, so it was taken from the sacristy and—perhaps—placed in his hands, and then the jade suit was fashioned around him. Jade is among the hardest of materials. The stone might be damaged if somebody tried to crack the jade, so whoever it was who beat us to it simply carried the whole damn mummy away. What kind of people would pass up gold and jewels to get their hands on a sacred stone?"

"A religious order of some sort?" the prince guessed.

Master Li shrugged. "That's all I can think of at the moment," he said. "Remember that the Laughing Prince created a quasi-religious order he called the Monks of Mirth, and notice that the Monks of Mirth, alone among his court, did not die along with the prince—at least we haven't seen their skeletons. Suppose he arranged for the order to be perpetuated through the centuries?"

I finally found my tongue. "Why?" I asked.

Master Li threw his hands wide apart in exasperation. "How would I know?" he said. "We can assume that he worshipped a stone, although we don't know why. The use of laughter and dancing in place of prayer is not unknown to ancient pre-shamanistic religions, and I can't help but wonder about the constant repetition of the number five in his peculiar formulas. Five is a sacred number to many weird cults, ancient and modern alike. The primitive Yu-ch'ao, for example, who are said to live in five-sided tree houses and sacrifice to five-headed demons in five-celled temples."

Master Li pulled out his wine flask and offered us some, but we declined. He swilled a pint or two and wiped his lips with his beard.

"Prince, for the moment I'm stymied," he said frankly. "The idea that we may not be dealing with normal criminals throws everything out of balance. All I know

for certain is that we have to get to the bottom of the strange compelling sound and the destruction of Princes' Path, and that means Ox and I will have to go to Ch'ang-an with soil and plant samples for analysis, and then get our hands on the greatest sound-master in the empire. In the meantime, you have a problem."

He waved his wine flask back toward the treasure chambers.

"Technically this stuff is yours. Do you want it?"

The prince shuddered. "Nightmares would finish me in a month if I took a single coin," he said.

"Nonetheless, if word of the discovery gets out, you'll be visited by every criminal, warlord, and greedy state minister in the empire," Master Li pointed out.

"Suppose I make a gift of it to the throne?" the prince asked hopefully.

"People tend to impute their own flaws to others," Master Li said. "The avaricious will never believe that you didn't keep the choicest gems for yourself, and the missing jade suit of your ancestor will be considered absolute proof. Are you particularly fond of torture?"

The prince turned as white as one of the skeletons. "But what can I do with this tomb?" he whispered.

Master Li turned to me. "Ox, can you manage it?" he asked.

I drew myself up proudly. "Venerable Sir, you are talking to a former apprentice of Big Hong the blacksmith," I said.

He turned back to the prince. "What tomb?" he said.

"What tomb?" I said.

The prince began to regain some color. "What tomb?" he said.

It really wasn't very difficult. The stones and bricks were easily replaced, and there were countless pieces of old iron lying around the estate. I was very proud of my makeshift furnace and bellows, and when I had finished, I doubted that anyone would notice the patch in the iron wall unless he was looking for one.

The difficult part was putting the skeletons in the tunnel back into place, and that was because I kept hearing a mad mummy in a suit of jade creeping up behind me. When I added artistic layers of dust and cobwebs there wasn't a greedy bureaucrat in the empire who would believe that Prince Liu Pao or anyone else had entered the tomb of the Laughing Prince. Then we left for Ch'ang-an.

9

I had never been to the capital before, but I thought I knew about big cities from my experiences in Peking. That illusion vanished the moment we passed through the Gate of Luminous Virtue. I gaped like any yokel at a raucous beehive where two million people buzzed inside walls that enclosed thirty square miles. There were twenty-five north-south avenues, and every one of them was four hundred eighty feet wide and lined with elm, fruit, and pagoda trees. The avenues rose to a high hill called Dragon Head Plain, and converged to a single road of bluish stone that wound up like a dragon's tail to the vast basilicas of the elite who ruled the empire.

I was awed and silent as we took the Street of the Vermilion Sparrow toward Dragon Head Plain. We passed through the Gate of the Red Bird just as a thousand drums pounded the three hundred beats that heralded the opening of the markets, and I felt dizzy in the atmosphere of a thousand years of greatness as we approached the legendary Brush Forest Academy, where Chinese genius is nurtured. Master Li had been one of the geniuses, and his reaction was slightly less than reverent.

"Fraud, my boy! Fraud and forgery," he said, waving disgustedly at sacrosanct landmarks. "Paint slapped over dry rot and gilded with lies. Some of the lies are rather pretty, however, and my favorite concerns the little peasant lad who's digging a ditch behind a village schoolhouse."

Master Li pulled out his flask and drank deeply, which caused outraged comments from distinguished-looking pedestrians. He ignored them.

"The urchin's keen ears catch fragments of lessons drifting from the window," Master Li said between burps. "One day the schoolmaster absentmindedly falls into the ditch and discovers to his astonishment that the boy has covered the walls with masterful drawings, flawless mathematics, and learned quotations from the ancients.

"'Boy, are you not the scrofulous, illiterate, and lice-ridden urchin called Hong Wong?' the schoolmaster gasps.

"'The insignificant name of this worthless one should not blemish the esteemed lips of Your Magnificence!' the lad wails.

"'And is not your father the ulcerous, flatulent, maggot-infested fellow called Hong the Hopeless, who takes pride in the fact that he has failed the examination for village idiot sixteen years in a row?'

"The lad falls to his knees and begins banging his head against the ground. 'Seventeen!' he sobs. Well, the schoolmaster grabs the boy by the ear and hauls him into the classroom, of course, and gives him every test he can think of, and word spreads far and wide that the latest Chinese genius has been discovered in a ditch in an insignificant village eight miles from nowhere. You know the rest. Triumph after triumph, the highest awards and degrees, elevation to important office, advisor to emperors and savior of peasants, and eventual deification to become Celestial Patron of scrofulous, illiterate, lice-ridden lads digging ditches behind schoolhouses."

Master Li spat with lamentable accuracy upon a statue of K'uei-hsing, God of Examinations.

"Now let's take a look at reality," he said. "Little Hong Wong is indeed taken in hand by the educational establishment and force-fed languages, calligraphy, poetry, painting, dancing, music, chess, etiquette, courtly ritual, philosophy, religion, history, and the classics, following which he's ready to start learning something—mathematics, for example. Agriculture, engineering, economics, medicine, government, and the art of war. He passes his examinations with honors and receives his first official appointment, and then what happens?"

He actually seemed to want an answer, so I shrugged and said, "A superior who inherited the job from an uncle rams a barge pole up his ass."

"Good boy." Master Li said approvingly. "Hong Wong has just entered the world of the Neo-Confucians, to whom all innovation is anathema. His brilliant plan for a sanitation system will be rejected out of hand because it has no direct parallel in ancient times. His astronomical observations will be used as evidence in his trial for heresy, because they cannot be confirmed in the oldest texts. His paintings do not slavishly imitate the ancients, and his poetry is not plagiarism, and his essays do not deal with the three hundred thirty-three approved subjects, so all of them will be burned. Hong Wong will be very lucky if he is merely stripped of rank and possessions and kicked out to starve, and if he is truly a genius, he will not be so lucky. Lin Tseh-shu was banished to a corner of Turkistan so distant the sun hasn't reached it yet, or so they say. Su Tung-po was exiled to Hainan, whose principal exports are malaria, jungle rot, and leprosy. Chu Suilang was last seen sinking into a swamp in Vietnam, and when Han Yu stepped off the prison boat in Swatow he was very nearly devoured by crocodiles."

Wen Ch'ang, God of Literature, received the next stream of saliva.

"Ox, at an early age a Chinese genius gazes at the path that lies ahead and reaches

for a wine jar," Master Li said. "Is it any wonder that our greatest men have lurched rather than walked across the landscape as they hiccupped their way into history?"

"Sir, that's the best autobiography I ever heard!" I said enthusiastically.

Master Li's reputation was still considerable, although tainted with a questionable aroma, and our soil and plant samples were given priority at the Academy of Divination and Alchemic Research. Then he set out again, climbing to Imperial City and the great palaces of the bureaucrats. Again I was overawed as I gazed to the top of the hill and Palace City, where the imperial family lived, and then the Gate of the Cinnabar Phoenix, which led to the Great Luminous Palace of Emperor Tang T'ai-tung. Master Li wasn't going that high, however. He turned toward a building that made my blood turn cold: the Gate of the Beautiful Vista, which is the headquarters of the Secret Service and which was surrounded by straw mannequins with the flayed hides of corrupt officials wrapped around them. (The emperor had been busy cleaning house since he took over, and Master Li thoroughly approved of Tang.) Fortunately Master Li was heading toward a smaller palace next door, and I looked forward to meeting a legendary lady.

The Captain of Prostitutes is the most powerful woman in China, except when an Empress sits upon the throne. Her guild is the heart and soul of espionage, and almost entirely responsible for probing the mysterious minds of barbarians. Couriers constantly gallop from her palace with coded messages for the Bower of Brilliant Companions in Hangchow, or the Sun-Bright Residence in Loyang, or the Pavilion of Increasing Perfection in Peking, and many a powerful official has shared his bed and secrets with a young lady and awakened to find the lady gone, and in her place an official pouch containing the yellow scarf.

I expected a long wait for an audience, but Master Li presented his business card, and in a matter of minutes we were ushered into the presence of the great lady herself. She was tall and middle-aged and very beautiful, and her voice was an exquisite musical instrument.

"Most exalted and venerable of sages," she said, bowing to the floor.

"Most lovely of earthbound goddesses," Master Li purred, matching her bow.

That sort of thing lasted several minutes, and then we were served tea, and I sat like a turd in a truffle shop while they played the game of social shuttlecock. I have never been able to understand why perfectly sensible people waste time being wittily obscure instead of just saying what they want and going on about their business. The Captain of Prostitutes began the game by strewing a few flower petals over the golden surface of the tea.

"Dear friend, these flowers will die from loneliness, since I appear to be out of butterflies," she said ruefully.

Master Li caught the shuttlecock in midair.

"Alas! No flower can be complete unless accompanied by butterflies. Just as hills must have springs, and rocks must have moss," he said.

"What is a stream without cress in it? What are tall trees without creepers? What are men without the mind of Li Kao?" she said musically.

Master Li bowed at the compliment. "Women," he said, delicately brushing her wrist with a fingertip, "cannot be complete without the expression of a flower, the voice of a bird, the posture of the willow, the bones of jade, the skin of snow, the charm of an autumn lake, the heart of poetry, and the soul of my lovely hostess."

"Invincible charmer," she said with a sigh. Her eyes lowered to the old wrinkled finger upon her delicate wrist. "Passion, dear friend, displays but the bottom end of the universe," she chided.

"Then it is the job of the poet to give it a new dress!" cried Master Li. "Shall I sing of mountains clothed in clouds, or pines dressed in wind, or willows adorned in rain, or terraces attired in moonbeams?"

The captain served more tea and flower petals. "One must be careful in one's attire," she said. "Sometimes it is too easily removed, and at other times it cannot be removed at all. Green hills are reflected in water which borrows its color from the hills. Good wine produces poetry which borrows its beauty from the wine."

"And a beautiful woman," Master Li cooed, "is like a poem in that she is best seen when one is slightly drunk. If a mere man may appropriate a lovely lady's train of thought, pale clouds become multicolored when they reflect the sun, and placid currents become falls when they pass over a cliff. Things acquire the characteristics of associates, and that is why friendship is so valued, and why one's friends must be carefully chosen."

She caressed his wrinkled hand. "Then I shall choose as my friend an ancient unyielding rock," she said.

"And if the rock is but a dream?"

"Then I shall be a shadow in the dream." she said softly.

Master Li swallowed his tea and leaned back and did some mental addition. "Ten points each?"

The Captain Of Prostitutes fined herself a slap on a cheek. "No, I misquoted," she said. "Chang Chou wrote that passion 'holds up' the bottom end of the universe, and I said 'displays.' Eight points at most."

"That means I only owe you sixty-six," Master Li said.

"Sixty-seven," she said firmly. "Well, Kao, what can I do for you?"

"Direct me to a sound-master," he said. "I hear that you play host to the best when he's in town."

She nodded. "Moon Boy," she said matter-of-factly, "Ever hear of him?"

"No, but I'm told he's a phenomenon the likes of which are seen once in a thousand years," Master Li said.

"Frankly, I doubt that there has ever been a sound-master to match Moon Boy," she said. "How badly do you need him?"

"Very badly. I've run up against something that has me baffled."

She leaned back and regarded him with narrowed eyes. "Moon Boy isn't here at the moment," she said. "Nobody in his right mind would accept an invitation to perform for the King of Chao, but Moon Boy went off with a song on his lips."

Master Li whistled. The captain was all business now. "The king isn't the problem. You can handle that twelve-chinned wonder if anyone can, but handling Moon Boy is another matter."

"I've heard he's a bit difficult to control," Master Li murmured.

"Multiply what you've heard by a thousand," she said. "However, I can loan you the one person in the world who can lead him around like a little lamb."

She rang a bell and whispered to the servant who appeared, and he trotted away.

"What would you want in return?" Master Li asked.

"Your influence and writing brush," she said, and she stood up and began pacing the floor like a man, smacking a fist into the palm of the other hand.

"Li Kao, impatience is not pleasing to Heaven, but it's been nearly two thousand years since our guild received celestial signs indicating that our Patron deity had been replaced, and we're getting impatient. We lost the protection of Golden Lotus, the greatest whore the world has ever known, and not one of the substitute deities we've been saddled with could lift a customer's purse if he was dead drunk and stuck headfirst in a barrel of molasses," the captain said angrily. "Now nothing is going right! The court keeps us tied up with Secret Service work that pays practically nothing, and there have been eight outbreaks of pox in the last five months, and now the palace eunuchs are trying to divert the emperor's attention from their activities by starting another morality campaign. Golden Lotus wouldn't have stood for it!" the captain said passionately. "She'd have marched from star to star across the Great River and demanded an audience with the August Personage of Jade! We need a patron with her kind of guts, not an obsequious blob of suet."

She whirled around and swept a delicate porcelain teacup from the table and watched it smash on the floor.

"Li Kao, I'll loan you the girl who can control Moon Boy for as long as you need her, and all I ask in return is that you petition the imperial court to make a formal request to Heaven for a new Patron of Prostitutes."

"You overestimate my influence at court," Master Li said wryly.

"You underestimate my ability at blackmail," she replied. "The emperor can't ignore a petition from Master Li, and I'll see to it that an army of priests and bureaucrats falls in behind you. Besides, our candidate will be one of the emperor's predecessors, and he wouldn't want to disturb the dear lady's ghost."

Master Li sat up straight. "You don't mean Empress Wu?" he said incredulously.

"Who would be better qualified?" the captain asked. "She bounced from bed to bed all the way to the throne, and why should she fry in Hell when she can do something useful in Heaven?"

"Dear lady, you'd be asking the Emperor of Heaven to accept as a junior minister a tyrant who poisoned her sister, her niece, and one of her sons!" Master Li exclaimed. "She forced another son to hang himself, had three grandsons and a granddaughter whipped to death, executed two stepsons and had all sixteen of their male progeny decapitated, strangled thirty-six senior ministers, and wiped out three thousand entire families. In addition, she turned out to be one of the cleverest and ablest rulers China ever had, and she acquired the throne so smoothly, her rivals never knew what hit them. The August Personage of Jade will accept letters of office from Empress Wu the moment he accepts mine to be Patron of Teetotalers."

The Captain looked at him in silence for a moment, and then extended her hands in a charming gesture of offering a gift.

"The guild has authorized me to take whatever steps are necessary, and I hereby pass that authorization to you," she said. "Li Kao, you have been known to occasionally catch the ear of Heaven. If the opportunity arises, you may handle the situation as you think best, keeping in mind that our patron must be tough, smart, quick, remorseless and blessed with the moral principles of a rutting angleworm. It's a damn shame you yourself happen to be the wrong sex."

Master Li stood up and bowed. "Never have I received a greater compliment," he said sincerely.

I looked at the gleams in their eyes and groaned inwardly. They were about to begin another game of shuttlecock, but just then the servant reappeared with a young lady in tow. She was small and lithe and pretty, but not pretty enough to make me feel like a pig at a peacock convention, and the captain looked at her fondly.

"This is Grief of Dawn, who will never make a good whore," she said. "Her heart is too tender, but fortunately, it's the only tender spot she has. She's tough and capable and far too experienced for her years, and you won't need to worry about traveling with her."

She turned to the girl. "This is the notorious Master Li and his assistant, Number Ten Ox. They need Moon Boy. Prying him loose from the King of Chao will be his responsibility, and yours will be keeping Moon Boy in line until he does what must be done."

Grief of Dawn bowed. She undid her hair clasp and handed it to Master Li. "Moon Boy and I are as one," she said simply. "With me he will stay, but with anyone else he will fly away upon the first breeze."

Master Li examined the clasp and nodded appreciatively. Grief of Dawn politely extended it to me, and I saw the interlocking yin-yang motif of phoenix and dragon.

She turned it over to show the interlocking names of Grief of Dawn and Moon Boy, and her hand happened to brush mine. I don't know if my reaction was visible in Hangchow, but the captain's eyebrows nearly lifted off her head.

"Is he always this susceptible?" she asked.

"Well, I've never before seen his ears emit puffs of smoke," Master Li said judiciously.

"Get a bucket of water," the captain said to the servant.

"No need," I said in a high strangled voice. "Just choking on a flower petal from the tea."

Grief of Dawn's eyes were startled and wary, but there was a hint of a smile in them. She discreetly moved to the other side of the room. The flower petal excuse fooled nobody, and here I think I should insert a tirade I have heard many times from Master Li. It's the only way to begin to explain my reaction to Grief of Dawn.

The great dream of bureaucrats and most aristocrats is to return to the best of all possible worlds: the rigid feudalism so prettily praised by Confucius. The key is the total subjugation of peasants, and some of the methods are very ingenious. One of the best has been the establishment of a dowry system that requires a bride to be accompanied into her new home with a substantial gift of money or land.

In practical terms it means that peasants who are cursed with an overload of daughters must choose between starvation or infanticide. The girls can't quite pay their own way in the fields. The parents can't afford to keep them and can't marry them off—the only thing left is to drown them at birth, which allows aristocrats to screech, "What inhuman callousness! Who can argue that mere pigs should be allowed to own their pigpens?" Peasant girls who are kept alive soon learn that they are starving their own parents and that marriage is out of the question, and if they are at all pretty, they often run away and become prostitutes in order to send a little money home. This allows bureaucrats to bellow, "Look at the immoral sluts! Who can argue that such swine should have any legal rights at all?" It's a marvelous system, without a flaw, and those who say that some of the sluts could teach the bureaucrats a few things about morality will be given a fish hook, a knife, a candle, and unlimited time in which to mend their manners in a swamp in Siam.

When my hand brushed Grief of Dawn's, I felt calluses. It would take years for the hard lines to soften completely, and from my point of view they were prettier than pearls. That doesn't explain it completely, of course, but one thing was certain. I was in love.

Master Li was grinning at me. "Ah, if only I could be ninety again," he said nostalgically. "Ox, try to keep your paws off the young lady while we're traveling. Grief of Dawn, hit him over the head with a log every now and then. He will be grateful for the attention."

"We have a pact?" said the Captain of Prostitutes.

"We have a pact," said Master Li. "I promise nothing, but I shall do my best for Empress Wu, and, should that fail, do everything possible to get you a competent patron. Can you blackmail somebody at the postal service? We're in something of a hurry."

"It shall be done," said the Captain of Prostitutes.

❁ ❁ ❁

The sun was just lifting over Serpentine Park when Master Li and I arrived at the postal service stables. Grief of Dawn was waiting for us. She had chosen clothes that indicated experience in serious traveling: boy's tough trousers, high leather boots, a tunic made to withstand thorns as well as raindrops, and an oiled rain hat. The rest of her clothes and possessions were neatly stored in a pack on her back. Master Li approved, and his approval rating jumped ten points when she walked to her horse and slid the bow from the saddle holster and grimaced at the pull. She went through six or seven different bows before finding one that suited her, and when she swung up to the saddle, I knew she was a far better rider than I was. I'm only comfortable upon a water buffalo. Meanwhile, I was strutting around like a peacock.

Only somebody with the influence of the Captain of Prostitutes could have arranged it. I had an official cap and tunic emblazoned with imperial dragons, and a message pouch sealed with the emblem of state. Master Li showed me how to fix the butt of the flagpole into the cup beside the stirrup. The gates swung open and I managed a respectable blast on my silver trumpet and we galloped out in a cloud of dust, scattering pedestrians quite satisfactorily. I even made the turn without falling off.

Master Li let me set the pace—to get it out of my system, I suppose—and I exhilarated in the kind of speed that is only possible for those who ride beneath the flag of the gyrfalcon. The horse stations were positioned every few miles, and I would raise the trumpet and blow "alert," and then "three horses," and we would ride up to grooms holding fresh horses and swing from one mount to the other without touching the ground, and then be off again as though the fate of the empire depended upon it. That lasted one day. After that we traveled a good deal slower because my rear end was almost as sore as the insides of my thighs. Master Li could still ride with the best of them, and Grief of Dawn might have been born on a horse, and I was grateful to them for not laughing when I hobbled around our camp at night.

When the route led downstream beside a major river, we would ride our horses onto a postal service barge and let the current do the work. Those were the best times. I had a chance to talk to Grief of Dawn. She was pure peasant, just as I thought, and we learned that she had no memory of her life until she was about eighteen. She

had been found by an old lady she called Tai-tai ("great-great"), unconscious and covered with blood, and the old lady had taken her in and treated her as a daughter. It had been early in the morning, so Tai-tai named the girl Grief of Dawn. Master Li examined a deep round indentation in her skull and said that somebody had certainly tried to kill her, and it was a wonder all she had lost was her memory.

He had no objection to my telling her about the case we were on, so long as I made no mention of the tomb, and she was fascinated to hear about Lady Hou, the Thunderballed princess in One-Eyed Wong's, because she knew and loved some of her poems. The bargemen always had musical instruments. At night we would play and Grief of Dawn would sing peasant songs so old that not even Master Li knew them, and one night she adapted one of Lady Hou's poems to our circumstances and sang it for us. I will include it here as a matter of interest for those who may not have encountered the deceptively simple art of Lady Hou.

"Tonight no wind blows on the river.
The water is still and dark,
No waves or ripples.
All around the barge
Moonlight floats in air,
Acres of smooth lustrous jade.

"Master Li breaks the silence.
High on wine he lifts his flute,
Playing into the mist.
Strange music rises to the stars;
Apes in the mountains
Screaming at the moon,
A stream rushing through a gorge.
Ox accompanies on his sheepskin drum.
Head held like a mountain peak,
Fingers beating like raindrops.

"A fish breaks the surface of the water
And leaps ten feet into the air." *

When we got to land again we galloped through villages where children with huge dreaming eyes gathered to watch us pass (who hasn't imagined himself as a

* Officially attributed to Yang Wan-li.

legendary hero of the postal service?), and through narrow mountain passes where bandits with hyena faces snarled at the flag of the gyrfalcon and drew back in fear. That may give the impression that imperial control was total, but such was not the case.

"My children, there are corners of the empire where the emperor is little more than a figurehead, and we're approaching one of them," Master Li said. "In the Kingdom of Chao there is only one ruler, and his name is Shih Hu."

Master Li threw out his hands in an admiring gesture so wide he nearly fell from his horse.

"What a man! He's been on the throne for twenty-eight years without making a major mistake, which approaches the supernatural. He stands six feet seven and weighs more than four hundred pounds, and enemies who assume his bulk is blubber soon decorate pikes on his walls with their severed heads. He's loved by his people, feared by his rivals, adored by his women, and Grief of Dawn will have something to think about when she sees his bodyguards."

He winked at her. "They're beautiful young women who wear uniforms of sable and carry golden bows," he explained. "I'd rather go up against a pack of panthers than the Golden Girls. They worship their king, and perhaps he deserves it. Chao is the best-governed state in the civilized world, but you must never forget that the king himself is not civilized. Shih Hu was born a barbarian, and his soul remains barbarian. His violence can be sudden and extreme, and his palace is hard to get into and even harder to get out of."

He rode on in silence for a few minutes.

"So far as I know, the king has only one weakness," Master Li said thoughtfully. "He avidly collects people with unusual talents, and I rather think he might open his gates to a living legend. Somebody like the world's greatest master of the Wen-Wu lute."

Grief of Dawn and I looked at each other. The Wen-Wu is the hardest instrument in the world to play properly, and we shrugged our shoulders.

"Venerable Sir, can you play the thing?" I inquired.

He looked at us in surprise. "What does playing it have to do with being the world's greatest master?" he said.

10

The great banquet hall of King Shih Hu was hushed and expectant. Minutes passed. Then the doors flew open and flunkies in sumptuous attire marched inside and blew mighty blasts on trumpets. They were followed by a parade of priests chanting hymns in praise of a master whose genius had surely been bestowed by the hand of Heaven itself. Then an army of acolytes pranced prettily through the doors, strewing rose petals hither and yon. Then came two senior apprentices: a fabulously wealthy young man who had abandoned all worldly goods to sit at the feet of the master, and a princess of the royal blood who had abandoned a throne. The princess carried a small ivory stool, and the young man carried a simple unadorned lute upon a silken pillow.

Priests and acolytes continued their hymns. Minutes passed slowly. Just when the suspense had become unbearable, there was a soft shuffle of sandals, and several distinguished guests swooned when the world's greatest master of the Wen-Wu lute tottered through the doors.

He was at least a thousand years old and semi-divine. A thick beard whiter than snow fell down and brushed his ankles, and his enormous white eyebrows lifted like the fierce tufts of a horned owl. His coarse peasant robe was woven from the cheapest cloth, and his sandals had been patched at least fifty times. Green leaves still sprouted from his freshly cut oak staff. Disdain for worldly matters was written all over him, and he was matted with mud from a hillside where he had slept beneath the stars.

The great man slowly shuffled across the floor to the ivory stool, and the princess reverently lowered him to a sitting position. The young man knelt and placed the lute upon the master's lap. For what appeared to be an eternity the saint gazed down, silently communing with the instrument, and then his head slowly lifted. Piercing black eyes burned holes through the audience. A wrinkled finger lifted, and the wrinkled voice that emerged from the beard was like the drone of a pedagogical bee, yet vibrant with authority.

"The Wen-Wu lute," the great man said, "was invented by Fu-hsi, who saw a meteor land in a tung tree. Soon afterward a phoenix landed beside the meteor, and when the meteor fizzled out with a melodic hiss and the phoenix flew away with a contrapuntal cry, Fu-hsi realized that he had been granted a sign from Heaven. He felled the tree, which was precisely thirty-three feet long, and cut it into three eleven-foot pieces. These pieces he soaked in running water for seventy-three days, one fifth of a year. He tapped the top piece, but the pitch was too high. He tapped the bottom piece, but the pitch was too low. He tapped the middle piece, and the pitch was just right."

One of the banqueters sneezed, and the master raised a white eyebrow. Flunkies, priests, acolytes, and apprentices descended upon the wretch and pitched him out the door. After two minutes of glowering silence, the master condescended to continue.

"Fu-hsi commissioned Liu Tzu-ch'i, the greatest artisan in China, to fashion the middle piece into a musical instrument. It was precisely thirty-six inches long, corresponding to the three hundred sixty degrees of a circle, four inches wide at the rear end, corresponding to the four seasons, eight inches wide at the front end, corresponding to the eight festivals, and its uniform height of two inches corresponded to yin and yang, the generative forces of the universe. Twelve stops were intended to correspond to the twelve moons of the year, but Fu-hsi later added a thirteenth stop to account for leap year."

One of the banqueters coughed, and the master raised the other eyebrow. Flunkies, priests, acolytes, and apprentices descended upon the wretch and pitched him out a window. It was three minutes before the ancient demigod condescended to continue.

"The five original strings," he wheezed, searing the cowering assembly with flaming eyes, "corresponded to the five elements: metal, wood, water, earth, and fire; the five temperaments: quietude, nervousness, strength, hardness, and wisdom; and the five musical tones: kung, shang, chueh, cheng, and yu. When King Wen of Chou was imprisoned at Chiangli, his son, Prince Pai-yi-k'ao, was so grieved that he added a sixth string to express his sorrow. This is called the Wen string, and it produces a low melancholy sound. When King Wu launched a military campaign against King Cheo, he was so pleased at going to war that he added a seventh string to express his joy. This is called the Wu string, and it produces a high heroic sound. Thus the lute of seven strings is called the Wen-Wu lute, and in the hands of a performer of talent it can tame the most ferocious beast. In the hands of a performer of genius it can start or stop a war. In the hands of a performer such as myself it can raise the dead."

The great man paused. Flunkies, priests, acolytes, and apprentices peered around for sneezers or coughers. Nobody breathed. The great man continued.

"The proper tone possesses eight qualities: clarity, wonder, remoteness, sadness, eloquence, manliness, softness, and extensibility, but the tone will suffer under

any of six conditions: bitter cold, extreme heat, strong wind, heavy storm, noisy thunder, or swirling snow, and the Wen-Wu lute must never be played under any of seven circumstances: mourning the dead, simultaneous playing with orchestra, preoccupation with worldly matters, uncleanliness of body, untidiness of costume, failure to burn incense in advance, and lack of an appreciative audience."

The audience held its collective breath as the demigod slowly raised the lute from his lap. He plucked a string: *plink!* He plucked a second string: *plonk!* He returned the lute to his lap.

"I," he announced, "am currently mourning my wife, secondary wives, concubines, children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and pet parakeet, all of whom perished during a typhoon. The snoring of those louts in the corner constitutes playing with orchestra. The leering moron in the blue robe is more interested in dancing girls than in art. Half of you haven't washed in a month, and the other half have spilled soup on your robes. I fail to perceive the slightest trace of incense, and to call this collection of oafs an appreciative audience would be to provoke the gods into howls of hysterical laughter."

The world's greatest master of the Wen-Wu lute slowly rose to his feet. The forefinger of his left hand lifted. *"However." A* divine nimbus appeared to envelop the awesome figure. Six more green leaves appeared to sprout from the staff as his fingers closed around it. "My period of mourning ends in two days, and if the other factors are rectified, I may possibly grant you a performance. In the meantime you may direct me to my suite. See that I am not disturbed, for I wish to contemplate the phenomenon of human fallibility."

The great man shuffled slowly from the room, accompanied by a series of dull thuds as guests fainted and toppled to the floor.

❁ ❁ ❁

"Fraud, my children! Fraud and forgery. Dry rot covered with paint and gilded with lies," Master Li declaimed. He tossed the Wen-Wu lute to a hook on the wall: *plunk.* "A fool will study for twenty or thirty years and learn how to do something, but a wise man will study for twenty or thirty minutes and become an expert. In this world it isn't ability that counts, but authority."

"Sir, you're doing wonders for my education," I said.

"And mine," Grief of Dawn said admiringly.

"What do we do now?" I asked.

"Wait to be arrested," Master Li said matter-of-factly. "I didn't fool the king for a moment, of course, but I hope I entertained him. What did you think of the Golden Girls?"

Of the king I had seen only a vast shape looming in the shadows, but his bodyguards had been very visible.

"They're beautiful," Grief of Dawn said. "Beautiful and dangerous. Did you see the captain? She worships the king and can't wait to kill to prove it."

Master Li nodded. "Be very careful when we're summoned to his majesty's presence. Was Moon Boy there?"

"No, sir," said Grief of Dawn.

The suite was enormous, with a number of private bedchambers connected to bathing rooms that made my eyes bulge almost as wide as Grief of Dawn's. There were jade-tiled tubs that one could sit in while warm water poured from the mouths of nine-headed bronze dragons. There was soap made from perfumed Fenglai peas, and thick velvet towels, and the water exited through the mouths of nine-headed bronze tortoises. In the central suite were racks containing beautiful paintings in rich brocade cases with jade-tipped scroll unrollers, and an entire wall was covered with books. The ink stone on the desk had the most perfect purple eyespots I had ever seen, and Master Li said it was a genuine Tuan from Ling-lang Gorge. His nose led him to a cabinet that contained wines from every corner of the empire, and he selected a jar and moved to the windows.

He was studying the layout of the castle. A deep moat ran between two high parallel stone walls, and anyone crossing the drawbridge was stopped at three checkpoints. Getting out was not going to be easy, and I was not cheered by King Shih Hu's idea of decoration. The walls were lined with pikes holding severed heads, and a row of bare pikes had nameplates beneath them—bandit chiefs, I learned, who would sooner or later join the decorative scheme.

"They're here," Grief of Dawn whispered.

I hadn't heard a door open, but I turned to see six of the Golden Girls and the captain. The captain had the eyes of an eagle, fierce and pitiless, and she gestured commandingly. Master Li held up a hand.

"Would you mind if I remove this atrocious thing first? I'm either going to strangle in it or trip over it."

He removed his fake white beard, and then his huge eyebrows. The Golden Girls escorted us outside and down a maze of marble corridors We approached a pair of very pretty lacquered doors that stood fourteen feet high, and they swung open to reveal the most beautiful room I had ever seen.

It was big enough for five village dances and a riot. Various sections were curtained off by shimmering screens of falling water that flowed into pools where brightly colored fish swam. Skylights let sunbeams play over magnificent rocks that had been left as nature had placed them, and the air was rich with the scent of growing flowers. In the center of the room was a boulder of bluish-green stone that needed only a cushion to become a throne, and upon it sat Shih-Hu, King of Chao.

The closer we came, the huger he grew. His eyes were small bright dots in the vast expanse of his face, and I was relieved to see a suggestion of a twinkle in them. We knelt and performed the three obeisances and nine kowtows, and he signaled for us to rise. His voice was soft, with thunder rumbling beneath it.

"We prefer you without the beard," he said to Master Li. "It was rather overdone, although we cannot fault you for allowing artistry to overpower reality. It was a superb performance."

Master Li bowed.

"Who are you and what do you want?"

"Your Majesty, my surname is Li and my personal name is Kao, and there is a slight flaw in my character," Master Li said politely. "This is my esteemed former client and current assistant, Number Ten Ox, and the lovely young lady is Grief of Dawn. With your permission, she would like to show Your Majesty her hair clasp."

Grief of Dawn removed the clasp and handed it to the Captain of Bodyguards, who examined it for sharp points and poison before passing it to the king. He examined the interlocking phoenix and dragon and turned it over and read the names. He whispered to one of the Golden Girls, who bowed and left the room.

"Grief of Dawn wishes to see Moon Boy again, and I saw no reason why I should not help her enter the palace," Master Li said smoothly. "As for my own interest, I am seeking a manuscript. I wish only to read it, not take it, and I have heard that Your Majesty is the greatest collector of rare things. I took the liberty of a harmless deceit to gain entrance, and I have a small fragment of the manuscript in question."

He handed the fragment of the Ssu-ma to the captain, who checked it over and handed it to the king. I began to warm to the huge monarch when I saw the obvious incomprehension on his face. He could no more read ancient scholar's shorthand than I could. He shrugged and handed it back to the captain, who passed it to Master Li.

"It means nothing to us," he said. "Your information is slightly inaccurate. We do indeed collect the rare, but our interest is not in things but in people. Here is the jewel of our collection."

The Golden Girl stepped from behind one of the screens of falling water accompanied by a young man, and Grief of Dawn forgot protocol completely and let out a squeal of joy and ran toward him. The young man whooped happily and met her halfway, and the two of them blended together in an embrace so tight that I had the impression of a single body with two heads. I assume that my complexion was bright green, and the grinding of my teeth was probably audible in Soochow.

Nobody had any right to look like Moon Boy, who was the handsomest man in the whole world. In addition, he would have put a peacock to shame. He wore a purple cap embroidered with gold and trimmed with jewels. Circling his forehead was a silver band with the same phoenix-dragon motif as Grief of Dawn's clasp,

and the same names were probably interlocked on the back. Around his neck was a golden chain twisted in the form of coupling snakes, and his dark red tunic was embroidered with bright flowers and butterflies. The tunic was secured by a belt woven into a design of flower stems and ears of corn, and over the tunic he wore a blue satin cloak fringed with gold. His gold-embroidered shoes were also of blue satin, and the maddening thing was that none of the finery was overdone. Moon Boy was all of a *piece*, and the only thing missing was applause. The damned creature was destined to ride through the world in a shower of rose petals while Number Ten Ox pitched manure in a barnyard.

They finally broke apart. The king gestured. Moon Boy led Grief of Dawn up to the throne, and with great gentleness the King of Chao reached down and picked up first Moon Boy and then Grief of Dawn and placed them upon his vast lap.

"What charming children you are," he said. He kissed Moon Boy's cheek. "This is the most special of all my special people, and clearly he shares his soul with Grief of Dawn. Why should that be?" He gently tilted Grief of Dawn's chin and looked deep into her eyes. "Are you special too, my child?" For a long time he studied her, and then he said, almost whispering, "Yes. In you is something very like the strange inner core of Moon Boy, although he is not properly named. He is more like the sun and it is you who are more like the moon. One cannot look directly at the sun without being blinded, so wise men study the sun by looking at the moon."

The king suddenly smiled, and it was breathtaking. His smile was as open and spontaneous as that of a child, but there was a strange hint of yearning and melancholy to it, and he delicately lifted her free hair and replaced the clasp.

"Would you like to wear a uniform of sable and carry a golden bow?" he asked softly. Then he chuckled. "That is not a fair question, of course, and you are not forced to reply. None of our girls has ever been forced. Grief of Dawn, we want you, but we shall court you as we have courted all the others, and the decision will be yours alone to make."

He effortlessly picked up both of them and placed them back upon the floor. His eyes moved to Master Li.

"Even this humble orphan has heard of the astonishing Li Kao, whose achievements are said to be without limit," the king said graciously. "There is much we would like to discuss with you, and we look forward to the enlightenment of your wisdom. One day you may even confide in us the real purpose of your visit, but there is no hurry. You have brought us Grief of Dawn, for which we are deeply grateful. She shall be our honored guest, and may your own visit be a long one."

A flick of a royal finger dismissed us. We bowed backward from the throne room. The chamberlain directed us back to our suite, where a splendid repast was waiting.

"Master Li, did he mean what I thought he meant?" I asked.

"That Grief of Dawn and I have just joined his collection of special people? I hope so," Master Li said cheerfully. "Well, my love, are you ready for gold and sable?"

Grief of Dawn blushed and lowered her eyes. "What an extraordinary man," she whispered.

I didn't realize just how extraordinary the king was until late that night. I awoke just after the third watch. Musical instruments were playing somewhere. I slipped into my tunic and stumbled out to the central room, yawning and rubbing my eyes, and I discovered that Grief of Dawn had heard it also and was standing at the window overlooking a garden.

It was the Golden Girls. Instead of bows they carried lutes and pipas, and they played very well. Then a great dark shape moved from the shadows, and the King of Chao stepped out into the bright moonlight. He was absolute monarch. He could take whatever he wanted, but that wasn't his way. Even at a distance I could sense that he was enjoying himself immensely, and he bowed deeply toward Grief of Dawn's bedchamber and then turned to face the moon. The king placed the big toe of his right foot upon the big toe of his left foot and began to sing a love charm from the barbaric country of his birth.

I can't explain it, but it was one of the most impressive things I have ever seen and heard in my life.

"I loose my arrow and the moon clouds over,
I loose it and the sun is extinguished,
I loose it and the stars burn dim,
But it is not the moon, sun, and stars I shoot at.
It is the heart of Grief of Dawn."

His majesty flapped his arms, imitating some sort of bird, and began to dance with grace that was accentuated by his huge bulk. There was nothing funny about it. He was like a vast force of nature, totally incapable of making a fool of himself.

"Cluck-cluck! Grief of Dawn, come and walk with me,
Come and sit with me,
Come and sleep and share my pillow.
Cluck-cluck! Grief of Dawn,
When thunder rumbles remember me,
When wind whistles remember me,
When the Red Bird sings remember me,
When you see the moon remember me,
When you see the sun remember me,
When you see the stars remember me.

Cluck-cluck! Grief of Dawn
Come hither to me,
Let your heart come hither to mine."

Three times the song charm was repeated, and then his majesty bowed again toward Grief of Dawn's bedchamber. The Golden Girls also bowed. Then the king and his girls were gone, blending into the shadows, and I suppose that my face was rather expressive. How many young women are courted by a huge, powerful, infinitely courteous and gentle, yet infinitely barbaric monarch? Sable and gold awaited Grief of Dawn, not to mention an impossibly handsome young man named Moon Boy.

"Oh, Ox. Poor Ox," Grief of Dawn said softly.

Her hand slipped into mine. "Come and walk with me, come and sit with me, come and sleep and share my pillow," she whispered.

"Cluck-cluck!" I said.

❁ ❁ ❁

There are mornings one would prefer to forget.

This one began beautifully, with sunlight shading through the window and dappling Grief of Dawn's lovely shoulder. I nuzzled her cheek and listened to the lethargic buzz of lazy flies, and a drowsy drone of bees, and the curtains gently rustling in a whispering breeze, and a happy voice that bellowed, "Come back here, you little bugger!"

I sat bolt upright.

"Oh, damn," Grief of Dawn sighed plaintively.

A naked boy, perhaps thirteen or fourteen, ran past the window on the veranda.

"Hey, bugger, don't you want the plugger snugger?" the happy voice yelled.

"Ten million curses," Grief of Dawn groaned, smothering a yawn.

A naked young man galloped past the window after the boy, stopped, trotted back, and stuck his head inside the room.

"Good morning, my love!" Moon Boy said cheerfully.

"Why must you waste that thing on boys?" she said.

He glanced down complacently at his crotch. "Waste? What do you mean waste? You know very well that some of the little darlings can't sit down for a month." Moon Boy climbed through the window and sauntered up to the bed. "My, you've certainly picked a splendid specimen this time. Congratulations!"

I hastily jerked the covers up to my shoulders.

"You're Number Ten Ox, aren't you? Where did you get that divine nose? Looks like a cow stepped on it," Moon Boy said.

"Er…. A slight disagreement with Big Hong the blacksmith," I mumbled.

"I trust he received a decent funeral," Moon Boy said, and then he sat down on the side of the bed and began caressing Grief of Dawn's right thigh. "Speaking of funerals, I once saw Master Li during one of his black periods," he said. "He wouldn't remember me. I was in the back row at court waiting to give my first imperial performance, and this wicked old man kowtowed to the emperor, got to his feet, whipped a knife from his sleeve, and cut the throat of the Minister of Trade. Blood all over the place."

"Moon Boy, is that true?" Grief of Dawn said skeptically.

"Every word. When the emperor learned the motive for the mayhem, he couldn't decide whether to boil Master Li in oil or make him a duke, but it was academic because the old man had already escaped to Turkistan. Shortly thereafter the High Priest of Samarkand was found with his nose caressing the sole of his left foot, which says something about the condition of his spine, and when the bailiffs paid a call on Master Li, they found he'd suddenly been called to the sickbed of a great-granddaughter in Serendip."

I was used to Master Li stories, only a tiny fraction of which are even marginally true, but I was not used to hearing one from a revoltingly beautiful young man who climbed stark naked through the bedroom window and began stroking my girl's bare leg. Now he was stroking her left breast, and taking her into his arms.

"I've missed you," he said softly.

"How I love you," she whispered.

The king was wrong about Moon Boy's name. He was perfectly named, I decided, because the moon is inhabited by a large white rabbit, and everybody knows that rabbits are notorious perverts.

"Why not give up boys for a week and try me?" Grief of Dawn whispered.

In addition, I decided, he moved like a cat, and Master Li once said that certain Egyptians say that a cat lives in the moon, and everybody knows that the soul of a cat is formed from the composite souls of nine debauched nuns who failed in their vows.

"Come away with me," Grief of Dawn whispered.

"Darling, I'd like nothing better, but his majesty is a wee bit possessive," he said.

"Master Li will take care of that. He has a job for you, and that boy you were chasing resembles a Swatow sea slug."

"Tell the wicked old man I accept. I shall pack a few essential clothes and jewels—you must *see* the emerald the king gave me—and kiss the lads farewell."

The lad on the balcony had realized he was no longer being chased, and was coughing self-consciously outside the window. Moon Boy was up with a smooth feline motion.

"Work, work, work," he complained. "Why must one's responsibilities always interfere with one's pleasures? Still, duty is duty."

With a catlike bound he was at the window, and with another he was out of it. *"Come back here, you little bugger!"* he yelled, and he was gone.

Grief of Dawn smiled and settled back in my arms. "Well, now you've met Moon Boy," she said. "Slightly larger than life, isn't he?"

"Will he come to visit after we're married?" I asked apprehensively.

She looked at me gravely. "Ox, I can never get married," she said. "Moon Boy and I think that we were part of the same soul and somehow it was split on the Great Wheel of Incarnations, and a piece of it is still missing. Apart we're nothing, and even when were together we aren't complete. We wander the world, Ox, searching for the missing piece, and I can never settle down until I find it."

I wanted to argue about that, but Grief of Dawn had a better idea. We were getting back to where we started before the interruption, and things warmed up nicely, and it appeared that the morning would be saved after all.

"Good morning, my children!" Master Li said happily as he trotted into the room. "Why is it that the most delightful of physical positions to the participants is an aesthetic abomination to onlookers?"

We managed to get separated, and Master Li took Moon Boy's position on the side of the bed.

"Your absurdly good-looking young man just galloped lewdly past my window," he said to Grief of Dawn. "I've never been much for hopping into bed with boys, but if I could be ninety again, I'd be delighted to make an exception with him. Buddha, what a creature! Has he agreed?"

"Yes, sir," she said.

"Good. I want to get out of here as fast as possible. Ox, Grief of Dawn, I want you to find the highest point in the castle you can reach, with the best view of the courtyards and walls."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"This evening Moon Boy is scheduled to perform, and after that the Golden Girls will put on a show. Nobody will pay attention to young lovers walking by the lakes in the gardens. How long would it take you to get a sackful of toads and two sackfuls of lantern flies?"

"Not long," I said. "An hour or two."

"Splendid," said Master Li. "Plan to slip out and collect them just after Moon Boy's performance, and with any luck we'll be out of here before midnight. In the meantime, enjoy yourselves."

Grief of Dawn and I lay back. Dogs were barking and cats were yowling and roosters were crowing and grooms were swearing and cooks were screaming. We got up and dressed and went out to find the highest vantage point.

11

About an hour later we were able to report to Master Li that there were two accessible turrets with good views of the castle and walls, and he explained to us that bandit gangs crossed through Chao at this time of the year to reach their mountain hideouts before the rainy season made the roads impassable, and Shih Hu's favorite sport was massacring bandit gangs.

"He leads his troops personally, and he's renowned for being out of his castle and on the attack within minutes," Master Li explained. "The drawbridges are slow and cumbersome. I want to know whether or not he uses them, and my bet is that he has some other exit."

We had nothing to do until evening except mingle with the distinguished guests. Master Li huddled with Grief of Dawn and sent her out wearing her dusty travel clothes, with a wicked dagger in her belt and her bow over her shoulder and her hair bound by a leather cord apparently jerked from a broken bridle. Her hair clasp was polished like an emperor's adornment and pinned to the front of her sweat-stained tunic, and if ever there was a wild warrior princess, it was Grief of Dawn. She was besieged by admirers. I got close enough to hear her explain—apparently Master Li's suggestion—that she was searching for her brother, who had been transformed by an evil shaman and was wandering through the woods in the form of a tiger, with his matching clasp around his neck. After that I couldn't get within forty feet of her, so I wandered off.

King Shih Hu's special people were all over, and Master Li got into a furious argument with the world's greatest astronomer about the direction of currents in the Great River of Stars during the rainy season: "neo-Chang Hengian epicycles" and "Phalguni asterisms" and "reverse *ch'i* concentrations"—I couldn't understand a word of it. I fled to the company of the most beautiful woman in the world and had a very interesting conversation.

She had blond hair and green eyes and said she was a Greek from Bactria. She also said she was sick and tired of being kidnapped by one king after another ever

since she had been ten years old, and she would insist upon being buried standing up because she never wanted to see another bed throughout eternity. I liked her very much, although there was a certain tightness at the corners of her eyes and mouth that argued against a close relationship.

I wandered off again and talked with an old man who had a very interesting story to tell, because he had once urinated over the statue of a local Place God when he was drunk, and apparently the God of Walls and Ditches had been passing by, because the next thing he knew, he was encased in bronze and standing on a pedestal as a *T'u-ti* himself, and there was a terrible drought and the peasants demanded that he bring rain to the fields, and when no rain came, they brought out the ceremonial cudgels and beat him black and blue. He still had some very impressive welts to display. I was pressing him for more details when I heard the drawbridge lower, and then a courier came galloping across it and jumped from his horse and dashed into the palace to report to the king.

Master Li was nodding at me. Grief of Dawn was buried in admirers and couldn't get away, so I made hasty apologies to the former T'u-ti and ran for the stairs. I arrived at my lookout spot just as the king and his Golden Girls came from a side door into a courtyard and entered the stables. I knew that Master Li had been right when I heard the drawbridge raise and slam shut, and several minutes later I blinked at the sight of Shih Hu outside the walls. He was riding on a revolving couch on a great war chariot. He had racks of bows and mountains of arrows within easy reach, and Master Li had told me that he was one of the great archers of the world and would whirl around and around on his couch firing arrows so fast they looked like a waterfall. The Golden Girls rode on horses, and they were followed by foot soldiers jogging in disciplined ranks.

I went back down to report that the king had some kind of exit through the stables. Master Li was delighted.

The afternoon festivities continued with the chamberlain playing host. There were actors and acrobats and Sogdian spin-dance girls who wore crimson pantaloons and performed on top of huge rolling balls. Great mounds of food were brought out. It was half-civilized and half-barbarian. A perfectly traditional dish of ducks' feet and ham steamed with Peking dates and black tree fungus was followed by an exotic Mongolian stew: venison, rabbit, chicken, fish, figs, apples, peaches, curds, butter, spices, and herbs, all boiled together with mounds of sugar candy. I thought it was quite good, but I noticed that both Master Li and Grief of Dawn spat out the sugar candy.

The king and his bodyguards and soldiers returned just as the sun was setting. They were in high spirits, and the soldiers were carrying a new collection of severed heads mounted upon pikes. When the king and the Golden Girls had bathed and changed, it was time for the high point of the festivities: Moon Boy.

I will admit I was skeptical. A person who looked like Moon Boy could announce, "The song of the lark," and then go "quack-quack-quack" and get a standing ovation.

We entered a great stone hall. The chamberlain made a great show of rapping walls and floors to show that there was no trickery involved, and then some servants placed a simple wooden table at one corner of the room. More servants brought in two paper fans, a small jar of water, and four cups, which they placed upon the table. Then Moon Boy appeared. He was carrying a simple sounding board like the ones used by girls in my village, and his eyes searched the audience until he found Grief of Dawn. He gave her a wink, and I assumed he was going to perform something especially for her. The servants unfolded a large screen, blocking out the table, and the lanterns were extinguished until the room was almost dark. There was a buzz of conversation while Moon Boy warmed up, and then there were three sharp raps from behind the screen and the room was hushed.

All I know about sound-masters is that the greatest produce sounds that don't actually exist. Somehow they manage to suggest a sound to the ears of the audience, and the minds of the listeners fill in the rest. Master Li, who had heard the great ones for nearly a century, later said that Moon Boy would become a legend that would live ten thousand years, and I had no inclination to argue with him.

I remember hearing a small soft wind blow and looking around to see who had opened a window, and then flushing because I realized it was Moon Boy behind the screen, waving the paper fans. After that I listened with growing wonder and awe as Moon Boy performed a peasant song for Grief of Dawn. I cannot possibly describe something that must be heard, but I made quick notes later on, and I might as well include them here.

❁ ❁ ❁

Soft breeze carrying night sounds, village sounds…. Dog barks loudly, sound seems to be coming in through a window…. Man grunts right at my ear, rolls over in bed…. Barking fades away, two pairs of sandals passing by window, a laugh and a hiccup…. In distance a wine seller calls goodnight and closes his doors…. Wind is shifting, blowing from a river…. Water sounds, barge poles splashing…. Faint laughter, a man begins a bawdy song, words carried away on shifting breeze…. Dog begins barking again, right in ears, deafening…. Man swears, gets out of bed, stumbles toward window…. Sharp yelp and sound of wood scraping across floor as he bangs his knee against a table…. Dog even louder…. Man fumbling for something, grunts as he throws, barks change into yelps and howls, echoing from cottage walls as dog races away, sound fades…. Man yelps as hits table again, crawls back into bed.

Woman sighs and rolls over, whispers to man…. Man laughs softly, woman giggles. Find myself blushing as soft lovemaking sounds come from bed…. Lovemaking louder, rhythmic…. Baby wakes up and begins to cry, man curses, woman groans…. Woman gets up and begins nursing baby, man gets up and relieves self in chamber pot…. Boy wakes up and says something sleepily, man curses and tells boy to get up and relieve self if needs to…. Mixture of sounds: man and boy relieving selves, woman singing softly to baby, baby sucking and cooing, crickets, hoot of owl, breeze through leaves…. Boy back to bed, baby back to sleep, man and woman back to bed, woman whispers, man begins to snore.

Fire! Voice shouts outside window, other voices join in, everybody out of bed, baby crying…. Man yelps as hits table, shouts out window…. Voices say something about a barn…. Feet milling around outside, sounds of doors opening and closing, clank of buckets, creak of windlass, man yelps as hits table again…. Sandals on, runs outside…. Clanks and splashes from bucket brigade, flames hissing and roaring…. Incredible confusion of sounds: people shouting, horses neighing, donkeys braying, cattle and oxen lowing, chickens squawking…. Gates open and thunder of hooves as animals gallop out…. Old man shouting, "My hay! My grain!"…. Woman screams about sparks on her roof.

Something very strange. All sounds of the village seem to be lifting slowly into the air…. Twisting, turning…. As though August Personage of Jade has reached down to China and picked up the village and is turning it this way and that in his hand…. A slow, quiet, vast puff of breath as though blowing the fire out…. Animal sounds die down, bucket and water and fire sounds die down, shouting and screaming die down…. Village settling back down to earth, one sound after another fading away…. Boy's sounds fade away, woman's sounds fade away, man's sounds fade away…. Baby cooing happily…. Baby gradually fades away…. Silence.

Three sharp raps. The lanterns are lit, the screen is pulled away. There is nothing but a table and a sounding board and two fans and a jar of water and four cups, and Moon Boy, who clasps his hands together and bows.

❁ ❁ ❁

Grief of Dawn and I slipped away easily while the audience besieged Moon Boy. I had the sacks and sticks and lanterns ready, and while we caught toads and lanternflies she told me that it was a good thing we were getting Moon Boy out of there because the soft life was causing him to lose his voice, particularly in the high registers, and unless he could find some pretty boys who would give him a good run across the hills he was going to be nothing but the best, as opposed to being supernatural.

"Well, he still seems to have a certain ability," I said weakly.

She laughed and kicked me in the shins, and we made our way back with our bulging sacks. Master Li was waiting for us at the stables, which was a pity because we couldn't stay and watch the Golden Girls. It was their turn to perform. The great lawn was as bright as day with thousands of lanterns, and they were entertaining the guests with a hair-raising game of polo, which I had never seen before. (It had been the rage at court ever since it had been imported from India, but I was not exactly an ornament of the court.) The Captain of Bodyguards was particularly spectacular, because she thought nothing of crashing her horse into another one at forty miles an hour, and as Grief of Dawn watched them I could see that she was yearning for a sable uniform and a polo mallet. I dragged her away.

We had time to decorate toad faces with a little white paint while we waited for Moon Boy. At last he managed to pry himself away from the adoring mob, and he slipped through the shrubbery carrying a large backpack of clothes and jewels.

The toad, as everybody knows, is one of the five poisonous animals, and is the Beast of Moon and Night, and it spits Vermilion Dust that causes malaria, and is the confidant of the tortoise, the most devious and inscrutable of all living things. When toads have feasted upon Chinese lanternflies their bellies swell to grotesque proportions, and since the lanternflies are swallowed whole they continue to produce greenish flashes of light at twenty-six pulses per minute. The effect is quite startling. The effect is particularly startling when the green pulsing bellies are highlighting white-painted demon-toad faces. If one adds ghastly ghost screeches from Moon Boy, the result can be an experience that will remain with you for life.

One hundred of the hideous things hopped through the doors of the stables, and the screams of the soldiers and grooms were drowned out by the howls from the audience at the polo match. We stepped aside to avoid being trampled to death, and inside of a minute the stables contained nothing but toads and horses. We raced inside.

The exit was easy to find, because it was directly across from the king's war chariot. It was a wide tunnel, sloping downward, and we grabbed torches. Master Li hopped up on my back and we ran down the dark passage. The king would scarcely allow an open path for his enemies, of course, so the problem was going to be getting through the doors. The tunnel leveled as it started to run beneath the moat. Ahead of us was a huge iron door, and Master Li told me to stop. His eyes moved slowly over the walls.

Rows of iron shields hung there. The centers of the shields bore strange emblems, and they protruded from the smooth surfaces. The emblems seemed to concern every subject from agriculture to the zodiac, and Master Li thoughtfully chewed on his beard.

"I suspect sequence locks," he said. "The king rides down this passage on his couch on the chariot and punches shields that form the code to open the door. It's

almost certainly set up so that the wrong code will cause an unfortunate result, which means that the king can remember it even if he's drunk or half-asleep. Probably a personal horoscope, or his lucky stars. Does anyone happen to know when he was born?"

Nobody did, but Grief of Dawn said, "When he picked me up and put me on his lap I noticed the amulet around his neck. It had the planetary symbol of Mercury."

"Good girl!" Master Li rubbed his hands happily. "If the amulet means enough to him that he wears it permanently, the code may simply be characteristics of his guiding planet. Let's see if they're all here.'"

He had me walk up and down the line while he hummed through his nose and studied weird symbols. Then he had me go back to the beginning.

"We must hope he's used the Chinese system. If he's used a barbarian one we can expect a twenty-ton spike-studded iron plate to fall on our heads," Master Li said matter-of-factly. "The organ associated with Mercury is the spleen."

I closed my eyes. Master Li reached out and punched the spleen symbol. Nothing happened, so I timidly made my way down the line of shields while Master Li punched symbols.

"The taste associated with Mercury is salt….

"The color is black….

"The element is water….

"The parent element is metal….

"The child element is wood….

"The friend element is fire….

"The enemy is earth….

"The earthly analogue is a stream….

"The celestial analogue is a bear…."

As he punched the ninth symbol, the iron door slid open. We stepped through the opening to the other side, and Master Li reached out to another shield.

"And the musical note of Mercury is sixth on the scale," he said complacently, and the iron door slid shut behind us.

"Education is a wonderful thing," Moon Boy said admiringly. "I should have paid more attention in school."

"Master Li knows everything," I said proudly.

Even Master Li was baffled when we reached the next row of shields. The tunnel was sloping up to an exit outside the walls, and another iron door confronted us. I could see no pattern at all to the symbols, and Master Li was clearly puzzled.

"Strange," he muttered. "All but three of the emblems are symbolic of nature, and those three form no pattern at all: a sandal, a fan made of feathers, and an incense burner."

We could be of no use to him. He had me walk back and forth along the shields. "This passage is his war route," the old man muttered. "Logically he would use symbols that would concentrate his mind on battle, but what is militant about symbols for rain and sunlight and a variety of animals?" He muttered to himself for a while. "Visualize him," he muttered. "Shih Hu, King of Chao, riding in his war chariot upon a revolving couch with his Golden Girls behind him."

He suddenly let out a whoop. "Ox, back to the beginning," he said happily. I trotted back to the first shield. "I should have seen it at once," said Master Li. "Shih Hu is remarkable in that his bulk requires him to fight while seated upon a couch, and has there ever been a mighty warrior before him who did the same thing? Yes, one. Shih Hu's idol is the great Chuko Liang, the legendary Sleeping Dragon of the wars of the Three Kingdoms, who charged the enemy while reposing upon a couch in a carriage. And how did he array his men? In the Eight Trigrams Battle Formation, which he signaled by languidly waving his white feather fan."

Master Li punched the fan symbol. No gaping pit opened beneath our feet, so I started up the line of shields.

"The first trigram is Heaven….

"The second trigram is earth….

"The third trigram is wind….

"The fourth trigram is cloud….

"The fifth trigram is dragon….

"The sixth trigram is tiger….

"The seventh trigram is bird…."

As he punched the seventh shield the door slid open. We stepped through and Master Li reached for another shield.

"And the eighth trigram is snake," he said, and the door slid shut behind us.

Moonlight had greeted us, and after a few more feet we were out on a hillside beneath the stars. Master Li gazed back at the huge walls of the castle.

"The grooms and guards will creep back to the stables and find nothing but indignant toads," he said thoughtfully. "If they do anything it will be to round up and spank the bottoms of any small boys who happen to be handy, and they certainly will not interrupt a banquet to tell their king that they deserted their post because they were attacked by awful amphibians. In the morning Shih Hu should have a royal hangover. I doubt that any of us will be missed until afternoon at the earliest, and then they'll search the place and the grounds. Night will intervene, and not until the following morning should they realize we're gone. We should have nearly two days' head start, and we'll need every minute of it."

I started out at a fast pace. We couldn't use the horse stations of the postal service until we reached Loshan, and the rugged country was familiar to the king

but not to us. I remembered the display of severed heads on pikes and lengthened my stride.

It was slow going, because no amount of effort can speed you through mountainous terrain when you don't know the shortcuts. The distant landmarks Master Li checked seemed to grow no closer, and on the morning of the third day we noticed some monks who were watching us from a hillside. The monks turned and vanished. A few hours later we reached a place where we could see the distant rooftop of the monastery. I thought I saw something lift from the roof and streak through the sky back toward Chao, but I couldn't be sure. Grief of Dawn's eyes were almost as sharp as Moon Boy's ears, and she had no doubt about it.

"Pigeons," she said softly. "Probably the king has sent messages to all the monasteries under his protection, and I think he's getting a reply."

I seemed to hear galloping hooves and the rumble of chariot wheels, and I picked up the pace even more, but it was still a long way to Loshan. The following morning we stood on the crest of a hill and looked down at a river that was very peculiar. Half of the water was blue, and the other half was yellow.

"The Min," said Master Li. "Yellow clay washes into it from the banks, and farther down it will be totally yellow. That's when it joins the Yangtze, just above Five Misery Rapids. Past the rapids is Loshan and the horse stations of the postal service."

His face was grim and remained grim as he told me to get to the nearest village. There we bought a boat and a great deal of wine, and I noticed that the peasant who sold us the boat was acting rather peculiar when we climbed in and pushed off. He was smiling and bowing at first, but then the smile faded as we went out farther and farther toward the strong current in the center of the stream. Then he began to shout and wave his arms, and he tried to run after us as we reached the current and started rapidly downstream. The last I saw of him, he was on his knees making shamanistic gestures to release him from guilt.

"The perils of Five Misery Rapids are greatly overrated," Master Li said calmly. "At least when you compare them to the perils of an angry Shih Hu and his Golden Girls. We shall, however, take a few precautions, and this is the first."

With that he tossed the oars overboard. I yelped in dismay, and he tossed the pole overboard.

"Temptation," Master Li said. "If we had poles or oars, we'd be tempted to use them, which would be suicidal. The second precaution is to get stinking drunk, and that, my children, is an order."

Master Li opened wine jars. Moon Boy hoisted his enthusiastically, and Grief of Dawn and I did so dutifully. The water helped. Blue and yellow were blending in dizzying patterns, and in no time my head was spinning. Master Li and Moon Boy were quite mellow when we heard the sound, and Grief of Dawn and I were reeling.

The sound was the roar of the Yangtze. Our little boat shot out into the great river and hit a current like a brick wall and spun around and began to race downstream. It was bouncing up and down like a bucking pony, and I was drunk enough to giggle at first. Then I saw what was coming at us and I stopped giggling and gaped in horror.

The water strikes Yenyu Rocks with enough force to send spray like a woman's hair flying sixty feet into the air. I discovered that my empty hands were frantically rowing imaginary oars, and Grief of Dawn was shoving with a nonexistent pole. I watched a log float out to the safe water we were trying to reach. Then the current caught the log full force and drove it into jagged rocks just beneath the surface, and two splintered pieces shot out and flew through the air and smashed ten feet up a sheer cliff at the bank. Our little boat, meanwhile, dashed straight toward Yenyu, hit the backwash, skidded around the sharp stone corners, and plowed through the woman's-hair spray without suffering a scratch.

Grief of Dawn and I grabbed for fresh wine jars.

The speed was incredible as we raced straight at and then past Fairy Girl Peak, where the rocks are shaped like a nude nymph, and the Frog, where a forty-foot plume of water shoots from a stone bullfrog mouth. We passed through the Shing and Chutang gorges without incident. Master Li and Moon Boy had their arms around each other's shoulders and were roaring a bawdy song, and I was foolish enough to think the worst of it was over. Then I saw what was coming and nearly fainted. Wu Gorge was looming through the spray.

Day turned into night. We had shot into a gorge so narrow that only at noon could one see the sun in a tiny ribbon of sky at the top of towering cliffs. The narrower the Yangtze became, the faster it ran. The noise was beyond belief. A stinging mist mercifully blocked out the rocks that reached like fangs to tear us to pieces. If our bodies had been rigid with sobriety there wouldn't have been an unbroken bone, but we were as limp as sacks of meal. I would have preferred being unconscious, because Five Misery Rapids was leaping toward us at a hundred miles an hour.

Master Li happily waved his wine flask. *"One!"* he bellowed, and suddenly we were airborne. The little boat turned completely around twice as we sailed over the falls, and we hit the surface again with a splash that sent spray fifty feet up the sides of the cliffs. I somehow got my stomach back in place just as Master Li bellowed, *"Two!"* We ascended toward Heaven again, practically grazing one of the walls as we shot through the air. It was a long way down to the level below the second falls, and Grief of Dawn and I clung to each other in terror. No sooner had we landed and scraped ourselves up from the deck than we felt our stomachs say farewell again. *"Three!"* Master Li yelled, and we sailed out into space. I don't even remember landing. *"Four!"* Master Li yelled, and I opened my eyes to discover we were headed somewhere in the direction of Venus. The boat spun around as we descended, and we landed backward,

which allowed me to notice that we had missed a rock like a fifty-foot saw by two inches. The boat spun around. Now I could see that we were hurtling toward the narrowest part of the gorge, and I stared at a spume of water that was wrapped in rainbows as it shot a hundred feet out into nothingness. We joined the spume. *"Five!"* Master Li bellowed. I realized that we were flying from Wu Gorge, sailing into a million acres of bright blue sky, and then the spray settled around us and we soared down blindly. Down and down and down, while I prayed we were still right side up. We hit with a shock that nearly drove me through the bottom of the boat.

I think I was stunned, because it took some time for me to get my scrambled senses functioning, and then I wondered what was wrong. The noise had gone. The boat was peacefully floating upon placid water. I had the distinct sensation that I was about to be devoured by an enormous mouth, and I sat up and stared at the serene smile of the Great Stone Buddha of Loshan: three hundred sixty feet high, carved in the side of Yellow Buffalo Mountain at the safe end of Wu Gorge. Five Misery Rapids was behind us, and so was the King of Chao, and the only problems were Master Li and Moon Boy.

They wanted to go back and do it again, but Grief of Dawn and I sat on them until they regained their senses.

12

The next few days were rather interesting, although exhausting. I made a few notes, and perhaps I should include a couple of them.

❁ ❁ ❁

Wake up, rub eyes, examine bug crawling into left nostril. Grief of Dawn sleeping, Master Li snoring, Moon Boy gone. Get up to gather firewood. Dogs barking, screams of rage in distance. Make tea, get more water for rice. Screams of rage closer, plus beautiful voice singing obscene song:

"There's a boy across the riiiiiiiver
With a bottom like a peeeeeeeeach!"

Rest of it unprintable. Hear six hawk moths diving at my tea, look around for hawk moths, see Moon Boy doing something with his throat. Screams of rage very close, lynch mob gallops over hill. Leader has pitchfork, drags weeping boy. Moon Boy accepts tea. Leader screams accusations, Moon Boy sips tea. Leader charges with pitchfork. Moon Boy smiles—air turns sulphurous. Smiles wider—hills shimmer with heat waves. Moon Boy tickles leader beneath chin, purrs like cat: "Come here, sugar." Escorts leader behind large rock, boy stops weeping and starts laughing. Offer tea to lynch mob. Lewd sounds from behind rock, boy can't stop laughing. Offer rice to lynch mob. Leader emerges, adjusting clothing. Refuses tea and rice and drags boy away by ear. Moon Boy saunters from behind rock, whistling. Master Li awakes, regards Moon Boy and departing lynch mob, mutters, "If only I could be ninety again," goes back to sleep.

❁ ❁ ❁

Our route back toward Ch'ang-an took us past the village of Moon Boy's birth, at which point I began to suspect that Moon Boy's moral turpitude resembled his art: almost supernatural.

Road past small temple, priest emerges. Stares at Moon Boy, lifts robe, races toward village: "Lock up the boys! Lock up the men! Lock up the goats and donkeys!" Moon Boy smiles proudly. Enter village, woman emerges from cottage: "My son!" Faints. Father emerges waving horsewhip: "Shame! Scandal! Infamy! Ignominy! Odium! Obliquity!" Father apparently fairly well educated. Priest runs up and sprinkles Moon Boy with holy water, begins beating with rod. Moon Boy tickles beneath chin. "Kitchy-koo." Priest faints. Mother revives: "Witness, O Heaven, that I was blameless!" Topples back to ground, Moon Boy smiles proudly. Neighbors gather, Moon Boy blows kisses. Father follows from village waving horsewhip: "Agony! Abasement! Depravity! Degradation!" Moon Boy blows kisses. Horses, goats, bulls, donkeys: whinnies, bleats, bellows, brays. Moon Boy blows kisses, Master Li mutters, "Rather an active childhood." Buy boat, push off into stream. Strange low hoarse sound, Moon Boy doing something with throat. Swans swim up. Great white glowing clouds of swans, canopy of wings over Moon Boy, feathers shining in sunlight. Beautiful. Unreal.

❁ ❁ ❁

If I am ever invited to take a ride on one of those tubes of Fire Drug that streaks up into the sky, goes *bang!* and hurls sparkling comets across the sky, I will bow politely and say, "A thousand pardons, but this humble one has already made the trip."

One of Moon Boy's most remarkable attributes was that he was completely without jealousy. When Grief of Dawn felt like climbing into my bedroll, which she did now and then, all Moon Boy did was lift his handsome head to the night sky and sing to the rabbit in the moon, asking for a soft silver blanket of moonbeams for Grief of Dawn and Number Ten Ox. Master Li would cry in mock agony, "Ah, if only I could be ninety again!" (actually, I think he was happy to be free from the tyranny of sex and desire), and it was clear that, for reasons of his own, he was becoming fascinated by the maid without a memory.

Grief of Dawn was a walking collection of contradictions. She was a simple peasant who spoke the *pai bua* of the people, like me, but at times she would unconsciously toss in *wen li* phrases that would have done credit to a courtier. She painted her forehead yellow but refused to pluck and paint her eyebrows: half-patrician, half-peasant. She was shameless enough to walk around with her hair uncovered, yet she was furious when she saw a man in mourning for his mother who carried a staff of oak rather than the appropriate mulberry. She was a prostitute who indignantly refused a

fan Moon Boy bought because it was folding, and the symbolism was indecent, and ladies should always carry fixed fans.

Master Li's eyes lit up. "I haven't heard the fan taboo since I was a lad of six or seven!" he exclaimed.

"Little Miss Spotless Sandals," I teased.

"Everybody should dust his sandals now and then," she said demurely, and then she stepped behind me and dusted hers with two swift kicks to my rear end. *"Turtle Egg!"* she yelled.

Master Li collapsed with laughter. When he recovered he explained that people once believed turtles could conceive through thought alone, which made parentage impossible to establish, so "turtle egg" became a euphemism for bastard. Master Li swore that the insult had last been delivered during the Usurpation of Wang Mang, and he was willing to bet that at some point in her wanderings Grief of Dawn had found work in one of the moldy priories where antiquated old maids preserve ancient sayings and customs they learned from their great-great-grandmothers. Another time Grief of Dawn got mad at Moon Boy and called him "Forgetter of the Eight!" and even Master Li had to pause before connecting it to the corrupt courtiers whom Mencius swore had turned their backs on filial piety, politeness, decorum, integrity, fidelity, fraternal duty, loyalty, and sense of shame: the Eight Rules of Civilization.

Grief of Dawn was perfectly aware of Master Li's growing interest. She began to regard him with a speculative expression that had a hint of mirth in it, and I wondered if Moon Boy could read her mind, because he picked up the exact same expression. One scorching afternoon we reached a stream and in an instant Moon Boy had stripped and was gliding through the cool water like one of his swans. Grief of Dawn had plenty of secluded places to use if she liked, so Master Li and I undressed and dove in after Moon Boy. There was another splash. Grief of Dawn swam like a seal, and wasn't exactly shy about displaying her supple athlete's body. She stood in a shallow spot, apparently to give Master Li a good view of her lovely firm breasts.

"Venerable Sir, how many wives have you had?" she asked innocently.

"Buddha, I started to lose count somewhere back toward the beginning of the Sui Dynasty."

"And how many wives do you have now?"

"Not one," the old man said complacently. "They kept growing old and dying on me, so when I reached the point where I could no longer enjoy the Play of Clouds and Rain, I decided to settle for selfishness and comfortable clutter, and I haven't had a wife since."

"But is that wise?" Grief of Dawn batted her eyes as though the bright sunlight bothered her. (She had beautiful eyelashes.) "Wives are useful for many things, and

there are potions and incantations that can do wonders with the Play of Clouds and Rain…"

I stopped listening and tried to make my clumsy mind come to grips with Grief of Dawn's point of view. The more I thought of it, the more sensible it became. Prostitutes are called "flowers of smoke," and brothels are "smoke and blossom camps" because worldly pleasures are transitory, and nothing is more transitory than beauty. A whore's hopes can be measured in the distance between two wrinkles, and what could Grief of Dawn look forward to? If she married me, it would mean a farm and children and heartbreak when she was compelled to run off after Moon Boy and resume her restless wanderings. But if she married an ancient sage? Master Li would merely laugh if she ran off, and take the opportunity to smash up the shack with some old-fashioned drinking brawls, and laugh some more when she returned, and when he died she would become a respectable widow with a roof over her head.

"…then you wash the dragon bones and grind them into a fine powder, and put the powder into tiny silk bags and put the bags into the body cavities of dead cleaned swallows and leave them overnight…"

Master Li was smiling faintly as he listened to the innocent folk remedy. He began whistling very softly. I felt my face turn red, and Moon Boy had a hard time suppressing laughter, and Grief of Dawn flushed and began stumbling over words. The tune was "Hot Ashes," and for some peculiar reason the phrase "scraping hot ashes" refers to incest between in-laws—a young wife and her son-in-law, for example—and could it be said that I was something of a substitute son to Master Li? The arrangement that Grief of Dawn had in mind could become rather complicated, and Master Li held up a hand and cut her short.

"Forget about resurrecting erections," he said dryly. "At my age the last thing a man wants is one more petrified part. As for the rest of it, I'll think it over, and if I were you, I'd work on a young fellow who wears his peasant propriety like a suit of armor."

Grief of Dawn dove beneath the water and popped up in front of me like a dolphin. Her waving hand encompassed Master Li and Moon Boy and the water and the sunlight and the grass and the flowers and everything else we were sharing. "Oh, Ox, what fun we could have, and how happy we could be," she said pleadingly.

There was real yearning in her voice, and deep inside me it struck a sympathetic chord. My parents had died when I was nine. That had probably been the age of Moon Boy when he was first disowned, and Master Li hadn't experienced family life for years, and Grief of Dawn couldn't even remember if she had a family, and somehow I found myself thinking of the little shack in the alley in the coming winter, warm in the wind and snow, and I could smell the good food and fresh-scrubbed cleanliness that a young wife would bring, and I could hear the easy jokes and laughter, and

I could see Moon Boy suddenly appearing like an exotic tropical bird—besides, if Master Li wasn't worried about who slept where, why should I be?

Grief of Dawn started a water fight. We said no more about her hope. It was Master Li's decision, and he would let her know in due course.

❁ ❁ ❁

We didn't want to be sidetracked by several years in jail. Grief of Dawn made Moon Boy promise to be on his best behavior when we arrived in Ch'ang-an, and Masier Li was in high spirits when he entered the Academy of Divination and Alchemic Research to get the report on the soil and plant samples. When he came out he was spitting nails.

"According to the finest minds in China, there is no trace of acid or poison or any other harmful substance," he snarled. "The only thing wrong with Princes' Path is that parts of it are stone-cold dead, and some oaf has scribbled on the bottom: 'Extinction through natural decay.'"

Master Li swore without repeating himself all the way down the hill to Serpentine Park, where he said he wanted to try something.

"I'm reduced to grasping at straws," he said sourly. "One straw concerns the last meal of the late librarian, Brother Squint-Eyes. I've been assuming that he paid for it with the down payment for Ssu-ma Ch'ien's manuscript, and that his tracing copy was stolen during the crooks' second visit to the monastery, but there could be another explanation. Let's go to the exhibits."

Bored schoolmasters were guiding classes around. Master Li found one with weak watery eyes and a nose covered with crimson veins, money changed hands, and the delighted schoolmaster dove into the nearest wineshop. Master Li took over the class, and after huddling with the brats he started off toward the Boar Pavilion. The boys, I saw with surprise, were marching behind the old man with the precision of the Imperial Guard. It really was quite impressive—an ancient gentleman of the old school and his beautifully behaved charges—and a crowd began to follow Confucius and sons.

"The hope of the empire!" exclaimed an emotional matron.

Master Li lined the boys up and gave the downbeat, and they honored the exhibits of past glories with the most perfect rendition of "Evening Lake Scenes" I have ever heard. The applause was deafening. Vendors were mobbed, and the lads disappeared behind mounds of gooey sweets. Master Li lined them up again and marched off to the Gallery of Beatitude, and there the lads delivered a flawless "Shadows on the Eastern Window." Then they actually performed obeisances and kowtows.

"The hope of the empire!" the matron bawled, and a fierce old fellow with a floppy mustache told one and all that he had planned to return his medals to the

General Staff in protest against the decline of standards, but now he wasn't so sure about the decline.

The Temple of Immaculate Illumination was next, and the boys' performance of "The Twin Pagodas of Orchid Stream" was so superb that every vendor in sight was cleaned out, and candy and crystallized fruit and honey cakes by the ton vanished into the boy's gaping maws.

"The hope of the empire!" cried Moon Boy and Grief of Dawn, beating the matron to it, and the fierce old gentleman with the medals vowed to move Heaven and earth to get his great-grandsons enrolled with Master Li.

The most sacred of all exhibits is the Confucian Stones (a row of stones engraved with all two hundred thousand characters of the master's writings). A low railing surrounds them, and the rule is, look but don't touch. Master Li lined up the little angels for a tribute worthy of the Ultimate, and the rendition of "The Tower of Floating Blue-Green" brought tears to every eye, including mine.

"The hope of the empire!" I bellowed, along with Moon Boy, Grief of Dawn, the matron, and the gentleman with the medals.

The vendors were cleaned out within minutes. The boys, I noticed, were beginning to turn green. They turned as one and groped for support, which happened to be a low rail, and leaned over it and began heaving their cherubic little guts out. All over the sacred Confucian Stones.

"One million miseries!" howled Master Li.

A gentleman of the old school is prepared for any emergency, however, and Master Li swiftly joined forces with the fierce old fellow with the medals to recruit a bucket brigade to dump cleansing water over the stones. Thoroughness is also a mark of the old school, and Master Li would not rest until he extracted some large sheets of paper from his tunic and pressed them down firmly over every indentation of the sacred text. Fortunately he also happened to be carrying a huge blue sponge, and he rubbed it over the surface so vigorously that the outside of the paper turned blue. When he lifted the sheets, the stones were nearly dry, and as good as new.

The audience, meanwhile, explained to the furious guards that it was all their fault for stuffing the little angels with goo, and the matron and the bemedaled gentleman took up a collection to pay the fine. There wasn't a dry eye as Master Li marched the lads away, and behind us I heard a chorus bawling, "The hope of the empire!"

Master Li led the boys into a secluded glade. "All right, brats, let it out," he said.

The boys collapsed on the grass, rolling around and pummeling each other and howling with laughter. "Please, sir, may we see?" one of them asked when he had regained his breath.

Master Li took out the pieces of paper. The ink from the sponge had settled in nicely, and the imprints were perfect. Genuine rubbings of the Confucian Stones are

hard to come by. The boys begged to stay with Master Li and continue their lives of crime, but he advised them to remain in school and study hard so they could mastermind the mobs when they descended into depravity. Then he returned them to the schoolmaster and took the schoolmaster's place in the wineshop.

He ordered the stuff he had been named for, *kao-liang*, which is a terrible wine but a wonderful paint remover, and began using it to remove the peaks from every 且 that was accompanied by 末 in the rubbings and replace them with flat lines: 旦. Then he left the wineshop and we started up the Street of the Vermilion Sparrow to Dragon Head Plain.

"Brother Squint-Eye's forgery of the Ssu-ma was a crude tracing of a coded manuscript that contained the name of the historian's own father, and to a collector the monk's copy would have looked like the most obvious and inept fraud in history," he explained. "If the foolish monk brought it to Ch'ang-an and tried to sell it, it's a wonder he wasn't decapitated on the spot. There is, however, one place that might have bought the thing, and perhaps some pitying person told him where to go."

The Pavilion of the Blessings of Heaven is the greatest library in the world, and in addition to its collection of original manuscripts, it maintains a collection of forgeries. Both can be instructive to scholars, and some woefully inept forgeries are kept for pure entertainment value. Master Li made his way to the office of Liu Hsiang, the head librarian.

"Greetings, Hsiang," he said cheerfully.

"Lock up the manuscripts! Lock up the silver and incense burners! Lock up your wives and check your rings and purses!" the librarian screamed. "Hello, Kao. What brings you back to civilization?" he continued in a normal tone of voice.

"Shopping trip. My study lacks something, and I've decided I need a fake to hang on the wall."

"You know very well that our collection is not for sale," the librarian said primly.

"Who said anything about selling? I'm talking about trading," Master Li said, and he took out the rubbings and tossed them on the desk. "Think of the labor that went into that thing," he said with a chuckle.

"Who bothers to fake rubbings?" the librarian said skeptically. He glanced at them and then looked more closely, and after a few moments he began making small strangled sounds. I realized he was laughing. The librarian staggered to his feet and embraced Master Li, and the two old men clung together whooping and gasping with mirth. Moon Boy and Grief of Dawn and I pounded them on the back until they calmed down.

"Hilarious, isn't it?" Master Li said, wiping his eyes. "Think of the months it took the idiot to do this."

"Months? Say he did ten characters a day…. That's seven years!" the librarian chortled.

Master Li waved us over to the desk. "My children, do you see the joke?" he asked.

We scratched our heads. "They look like genuine rubbings of the Confucian Stones to me," I said.

"Look at this character here—and here and here. Do you know what it means?"

"Yes, sir," Moon Boy said.

The librarian broke in. "Ah, but in the days of Confucius it wasn't written like that!" he exclaimed happily. "See the flat lines on top? In the old days it wasn't a flat line but a peak, like a rooftop"—he swiftly sketched 旦—"so the idiotic forger was saying that Confucius—"

Moon Boy's face lit up. "Confucius couldn't—"

Grief of Dawn's face lit up. "Confucius couldn't even—"

"Confucius couldn't even write 'ancestor'!" I howled.

The three of us clung together, whooping and hollering, and the librarian and Master Li very kindly pounded our backs until we regained control.

"Kao, this is truly a treasure of incompetence, and if you have something reasonable in mind, we might make a deal," the librarian said.

Master Li scratched the tip of his nose. "Well, I'm rather in the mood for mangled history. Anything new?"

"Not on this level. It isn't every day that—wait! How about a truly pathetic Ssu-ma Ch'ien?"

"Sounds promising," Master Li said casually.

The librarian rang a bell for his assistant. "Not long ago an idiotic monk showed up with the most inept Ssu-ma I've seen in years and a tracing at that."

"Do tell," said Master Li.

It was as simple as that. A few minutes later we walked out of the Blessings of Heaven Pavilion, and Master Li had Brother Squint Eyes' traced copy in his hands.

13

We found a pleasant little park and bought grasshopper pies and plum juice with vinegar from one of the vendors, and sat down on the grass beneath a pagoda tree. Master Li had already scanned Brother Squint-Eyes' forgery. He had also taken a detour through one of the scroll depositories, and he reached into his tunic and extracted an ancient scroll that was sealed with the stamp "Restricted Shelves: Authorized Staff Only." He placed the scroll, the forged manuscript, and the report on the sod and plant samples beside him on the grass, and concentrated on his grasshopper pie. Then he included all of us in a wave of his finger.

"Tell me the story of the emperor and the tangerines," he commanded.

We stared at him.

"Sir?" I said weakly.

"You heard me."

We looked at each other, and finally Moon Boy shrugged. "Long ago there was an emperor named Li Ling-chi," he said. "He was good. He was very good. In fact, he was so good that birds flew around his head singing songs of praise, and butterflies danced before him."

"He was so good that fish and frogs jumped from ponds to receive his blessing," said Grief of Dawn. "He was so good that on feast days a few of the gods always flew down from Heaven to have tea with him. Tea and tangerines, because his only weakness was a fondness for tangerines. His people were delighted that he wasn't fond of the things that usually entertain emperors, such as wars and massacres."

"Li Ling-chi got better and better," I said. "He became so good that he couldn't bear the sight of evil, so he had his craftsmen make him a headdress with a veil of two hundred eighty-eight jewels, and he couldn't bear to hear evil, so they added jeweled earflaps. That way he only saw pretty shining things and he only heard tinkle-tinkle-tinkle, except on feast days, when he took off his headdress to have tea with the gods."

"Tea and tangerines, except one day there were no tangerines," Moon Boy said. "The emperor was outraged. 'How can I have tea without tangerines?' he cried. 'O

Son of Heaven,' said the chamberlain, 'it is winter, and in winter tangerines do not grow in your gardens.' The emperor was not to be fooled. 'I had tangerines last winter!' he yelled. 'O Son of Heaven,' said the chamberlain, 'last winter the roads were clear, but this winter there have been heavy snowstorms. Produce from the south, where tangerines still grow, cannot reach the capital.' The emperor turned purple. 'You mean to tell me that my subjects in the south are gorging themselves on tangerines when their emperor can't have any? We'll see about that!' he shouted."

"Emperor Li Ling-chi jumped up on top of his throne," said Grief of Dawn. "He had become so good that when he waved his hands to the south, all the green growing things tore loose from the earth and flew north to be blessed, and in no time tangerines were growing in the capital in the middle of winter. The gods who were coming to tea cried in horror, 'Stop! Stop!' But the emperor still had his headdress on, and all he heard was tinkle-tinkle-tinkle. They sent comets and apparitions and omens, but all he saw was pretty shining jewels. Meanwhile there was no food in the south, and the peasants began to starve, and bodies piled up in ditches just as if there had been wars and massacres."

"The August Personage of Jade gazed down from his throne," I said. "His roar of rage shook all the tangerines from the emperor's trees, and he flew down from Heaven and made Li Ling-chi eat every piece of the fallen fruit, and the emperor swelled up like the Transcendent Pig. Then the August Personage of Jade waved his hand and all the green growing things flew back south where they belonged, and he picked up the emperor and hurled him into the sky. But the emperor was lopsided because of all those tangerines, so he curved, and that's why we still see him to this day."

"Every seventy-five years," said Moon Boy, "peasants can gaze up at the sky and see a bright comet curving back toward earth. The orange color is all those tangerines inside the emperor, and the sparkling tail is his jeweled veil and earflaps, and if you listen very, very closely, you will hear the sound of an emperor with a tummyache."

"Waa! Waa! Waa!" we chanted in unison. "Ling-chi cries, candle dies, little children close their eyes—so!"

We sat there feeling like fools. Master Li polished off a few more grasshoppers and took a swig of wine from his flask.

"That bit of folklore has fascinated scholars for centuries," he said. "Part of it is based upon a real emperor, Huang Ti, who actually did attempt to block out reality with a jeweled veil and caps, but does the rest of it refer to an ancient invasion of the south by the north? A long-forgotten plague? There are some scholars who insist that it's a racial memory of a very rare phenomenon: a sudden shift in the *ch'i*, the life force, in various climatic areas. As for the suddenness, in theory there is no reason why the appearance of an overpowering concentration of ch'i couldn't draw less powerful life forces to it, destroying anything in its path, whether the intention

behind it was as good as Li Ling-chi thought he was or as bad as the Laughing Prince knew he was."

He tossed the last of his grasshoppers to some fish in a pond and picked up the stolen scroll.

"Believe it or not, there's a point to this, but be patient," he said. "Am I correct in assuming that every one of you gave up on *Dream of the Red Chamber* after the first two paragraphs?"

Grief of Dawn and Moon Boy and I turned red. The problem with '"the crown jewel of Chinese literature" is that it has two thousand pages and an equal number of characters, and the hero is an effeminate ass who should have either been spanked or decapitated, both ends being equally objectionable.

"No matter," Master Li said. "The book has been revised countless times, by Kao Ngoh and lesser talents, and the later versions bear little resemblance to the original. This happens to be the original, and it contains a rather peculiar story. Listen carefully."

He opened the scroll and searched for the place and began to read one of the strangest and most unsatisfactorily incomplete fairy tales I have ever heard.

> "'Of the 36,501 stones selected by the goddess Nu Kua for the Wall of Heaven, there was one she was forced to reject because of a serious flaw. The flaw was an evil one. Contact with the goddess had enabled the stone to acquire a soul, but its soul was evil. The stone had also learned to move around at will, and it wandered through Heaven causing much malicious harm, and at last the emperor was forced to intervene.
>
> "'The ways of the August Personage of Jade are subtle indeed. In Heaven there was also a flower named Purple Pearl, and Purple Pearl was even more flawed and evil than the stone. The emperor planted the flower in a barren spot beside the River of Spirits, and there it was discovered by the wandering stone. Evil attracts evil, and the stone began to bring moisture to nourish the flower. Purple Pearl bloomed and became beautiful, and her evil was exercised by the dew and raindrops of Heaven, and she fell in love with the stone. She vowed that if ever she were reborn upon earth she would shun the Sphere of Banished Sufferings and seek the Source of Drenching Grief, and tears would build up inside her, and if the opportunity arose, she would repay her debt to the stone by shedding every tear in her body.
>
> "'The strange vow of a flower is of the utmost importance. The stone has been returned to earth, where it passed into the hands of Lao Tzu, who cried, 'Evil!' and hurled it away. It passed to Chuang Tzu, who also cried, 'Evil!' and hurled it away. The stone now lurks in darkness, waiting for

the hand that will not hurl it away, and he who possesses the stone will be himself possessed. The stone is the Stone of Evil, and its malignancy will spread unchecked unless drowned in the tears of Purple Pearl.

"'Let no man interfere with the destiny of the flower, for the outcome is awaited by both the goddess Nu Kua and the August Personage of Jade.'"

Master Li tossed the scroll on the grass. I choked on a grasshopper. "That's all?" I said incredulously.

"Not according to Ssu-ma Ch'ien," said Master Li. He picked up Brother Squint-Eyes' copy and began rapidly decoding the complete hidden text.

"'*Red Chamber* story correct about stone, tablet from Cave of Yu…. Confirmation of reactions of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu…. Have traced stone to Prince Liu Sheng…. Consumed by evil, has become Laughing Prince…. Secret hiding place…. Downstairs…. Cold room…. Tunnel to construction site…. Stone in sacristy…. Plain appearance…. Flat smooth area rising to round concave bowl shape…. Found axe…. Blow broke flat area from bowl area…. Second blow broke off small chip…. Soldiers seized, could not destroy…. Imprisoned…. Terrible sentence…. Scholars, seek Stone of Evil! …. Destroy it! …. Evil that consumes men can consume world.'"

Master Li placed the copy beside the scroll.

"Ssu-ma Ch'ien was a very brave man," he said. "The question is whether or not *he* was correct about the mysterious stone, and he suggests that Tsao Hsueh Chin, the author of *Red Chamber*, may have taken the stone story from a tablet from the Cave of Yu. Do you know what that means?"

We shook our heads negatively.

"The legendary Emperor Yu is said to have received certain tablets from Heaven, which he concealed in a cave," Master Li explained. "They're called 'Annals of Heaven and Earth' because they supposedly deal with matters affecting men and gods alike. Now and then somebody produces an old clay tablet said to have come from the Cave of Yu. Usually the message involves something lucrative for the discoverer, but one or two of the tablets have contained prophecies that proved to be astonishingly correct."

He picked up the soil and plant report and waved it in my direction. The expression on his face made me very uneasy.

"Number Ten Ox, according to this, there isn't one damn thing wrong with Princes' Path, just as there wasn't one damn thing wrong with the green growing things in the south until Emperor Li Ling-chi waved his hand," Master Li growled. "If one allows for tale-telling embellishment, there's nothing impossible about the tangerine story. A tremendous concentration of ch'i would draw lesser life forces to it like iron filings to a magnet." The old man's eyes bored toward my brain. "Just after a section of Princes' Path was destroyed, you had a dream. In it you sensed an

extraordinary ch'i, a pulsing life force, coming from a small round piece of clay that was colored orange. Was your sleeping mind guiding you to the story of the emperor and the tangerines?"

My mind was as blank and opaque as a pool of mud. I automatically swallowed my plum juice with vinegar.

"A stone touched by Heaven?" Master Li wondered out loud. "A stone worshipped by the Laughing Prince? All we know for sure is that something destroyed sections of Princes' Path, and a strange sound seems to be associated with it."

Moon Boy gulped. His eyes were wide and wondering. "I think I can tell you what the sound is," he said in a small hushed voice.

❁ ❁ ❁

Confucian temples have no priests or formal worship, but they have a regular congregation of makers of bells. That's because of the *pien-chung*, a row of sixteen stone bells hanging in a wooden rack. The bells have no clappers and are struck by wooden beams swinging on ropes, and to most people the sound is dull and uninteresting, but bell makers view them differently. On the wooden frame is the inscription "When the bell speaks, the stone answers," because a perfectly tuned metal bell will produce a matching echo from a similar stone bell, and it's the most accurate tuning device known.

A Confucian temple wasn't far away. Moon Boy ran his hands lovingly over the stone bells. He was in his professional element, and he was all business.

"The ancients separated musical instruments into categories corresponding to the trigrams of Fu Hsi," he said, and for a mad moment I thought I was going to hear another lecture on the Wen-Wu lute. "Each instrument is defined by four qualities: the material it's made from, the cardinal point of its greatest strength, the season it suggests, and the related sound phenomenon."

He began fashioning a framework from pieces of bamboo.

"The mouth organ is classified as gourd, northeast, winter/spring, and the sound of thunder. The zither is silk, south, summer, and the sound of fire. All instruments were easily classified until they came to the sonorous stone, and then the ancients became entangled in an argument that lasted nearly six centuries. They easily provided stone, northwest, and autumn/winter. The problem was the related sound phenomenon, and their final decision is still hotly debated. It won't be easy, but I'll try to show you why they chose as they did."

He lifted two of the stone bells to the bamboo frame and arranged them so the mouths were almost touching. He took two of the striking beams and swung them over so the ends were almost touching the sides of the bells.

"Ox has tried to describe the strange sound in Princes' Path to me," he said. "Now Master Li has spoken of a stone that might have been touched by Heaven, and which might be possessed of an overpowering ch'i. All I know is that stone produces two different sounds, and most people have only heard the sound from the surface. The other sound comes from the soul."

He began to tap the beams against the bells, very lightly and rapidly. A dull stone sound filled the temple. His hands moved faster and faster. A vibration made my stomach feel queasy. Moon Boy's hands were blurs and the vibration became a humming sound that made the temple shake. His head bent down and his mouth almost touched the narrow crack between the two bells. Moon Boy's throat began to vibrate like a lark's. I realized that he was somehow pitching his voice into the two bell mouths simultaneously, but all I heard was the hum. Sweat was pouring down Moon Boy's face. His throat vibrated faster and faster. "When the bell speaks, the stone answers," and the stones were beginning to answer. It was a nearly inaudible echo beneath the vibrating hum, gradually growing louder. Then the echo broke through, and my heart nearly broke loose from its moorings.

Kung…shang…chueeeeeeeeeh….

Master Li had not been able to hear the sound on Princes' Path, but now he looked as though somebody had smacked him with a barge pole. Grief of Dawn was weeping. "That's it!" I cried. "The sound I heard was a thousand times as pure and strong, but that's it!"

Kung…shang…chueeeeeeeeeh….

Moon boy stepped back, drenched in perspiration.

"The ancients," he said, panting, "decided that the related phenomenon of the soul-sound of stone was nothing less than the Voice of Heaven."

"Well, well, well," said Master Li.

All the way back to the Valley of Sorrows Master Li kept it up. "Well, well, well…. Well, well, well…. Well, well, well…."

I hadn't seen him so happy in months.

❁ ❁ ❁

Prince Liu Pao was delighted to see us. At first I was delighted to see him too, but then Master Li introduced Grief of Dawn. The prince jumped a foot into the air and his complexion switched back and forth from pink to white and the conversation went something like this.

"Would you care for tea?"

"No, thank you, Your Highness," said Grief of Dawn.

"Wine, perhaps?"

"No, thank you, Your highness," said Grief of Dawn.

"Cakes? Fruit?"

"No, thank you, Your Highness," said Grief of Dawn.

"How about a few swans?" the prince said hopefully. "Cash? Lambs? Silk?"

Since those were the classic wedding gifts, I decided I was in trouble. The prince's reaction to Moon Boy was almost as strong, and within minutes the three of them were so close that I began to think deep thoughts about Grief of Dawn's belief that part of the soul she shared with Moon Boy had been lost on the Great Wheel of Transmigrations. Had the wandering soul settled inside Prince Liu Pao? I asked Master Li about it, but he only grunted noncommittally.

He had something else to think about. Now all his attention was focused upon the mysterious stone of the Laughing Prince, and he settled down in the library at the monastery and began poring over ancient records in search of any mention of an unusual stone. He asked the prince to do the same with family papers, and I was sent out to see what I could find in peasant tales and legends.

It was something to keep my mind off the prince and Grief of Dawn. The stone stories of the old women in the village were the same ones I had heard all my life, so I tried a different kind of folk tale. Blacksmiths are surrounded by boys as flowers are surrounded by bees, so I decided to lend the village smith a hand. After I had lifted the anvil a few times and bent a few iron bars in my hands I had all the boys I needed, and within two days I was able to race into the library at the monastery.

"A stone! A magical stone!" I shouted. Master Li looked up from the scrolls and blinked at me. "It's a boys' story, and very ancient," I said excitedly. "So far I've only heard a vague description, but I know it deals with a hero who sneaks into a secret cavern and finds a magical stone. Know what he's trying to do with it?" I said rhetorically. "Kill the Laughing Prince, that's what."

Master Li leaned back and put the tips of his fingers together. "Well, well, well," he said.

14

Adult visitors were rarely allowed to attend meetings of the Sacred and Solemn Order of Wolf, but Prince Liu Pao was not the normal kind of visitor. The moon was very bright. I listened for a treble owl hoot and replied with two cat yowls, and a boy slipped from the shadows and led us through a maze of thick brush to the side of a low cliff. The prince and Master Li and Moon Boy and Grief of Dawn and I got down on our knees and crawled through an opening, and when we stood up we were inside a small cave. Thirteen boys, eleven to fourteen years old, greeted us formally. The occasion was the induction of the thirteenth, Little Skinhead, into the elite boys' gang of the Valley of Sorrows, and we would be allowed to stay until they got to matters like codes and passwords.

A single torch burned at the back of the cave. Lying on the floor beneath it was the skeleton of a boy who had been about the same age as the members of the gang. It was a very ancient skeleton, and the boy's death had been dramatic. The rib cage was crushed, and inside it lay the iron head of an old spear. We followed the gang's example and bowed to the bones.

The leader was called Deer Ears. "We bow to Wolf, as have our fathers and grandfathers before us," Deer Ears formally announced. "We gather in his honor, and our distinguished guests will be allowed to add one detail to his story."

The boys sat in a semicircle facing the skeleton. We sat just behind them, and Deer Ears picked up an ancient ring from the skeleton's separated finger bones. He handed it politely to the prince, who examined it and passed it around. The ring was black iron, and engraved on the front was the head of a wolf. Master Li studied the inside of the ring with interest. There were faint lines and markings that made no sense to me. We handed the ring back to Deer Ears, and he reverently replaced it.

There was a brief ceremony for the purification of the boy to be inducted, Little Skinhead, but sacred matters would be saved for later after we had gone. When Deer Ears began the story of Wolf I was disappointed. It was like a thousand such stories, and I could almost predict what would happen next.

A woodcutter finds a baby in a basket at his doorstep. Around the baby's neck is a cord holding a ring and a small clay tablet. Neither the woodcutter nor his wife can read, so they take the tablet to a priest, who reads to them: "When the finger fits the ring, take the boy to Temple Spring." They have no children themselves, so they decide to raise the child as their own, and since the ring has the head of a wolf on it they name him Wolf.

When the boy is twelve years old the ring fits his finger, so the woodcutter takes him to the Temple of the Spring of the Master, which is renowned for handling all sorts of strange matters. A priest searches the records and says that according to instructions left twelve years before, Wolf is now old enough to be told that he has a cousin living in Ling-chou Valley, a very clever fellow known as Ah the Artificer. Wolf is to go to his cousin, but no other information has been left to guide him. The priest also hands Wolf a simple wooden bow, which seems to be his only inheritance except for the ring, and with many tears Wolf parts with his foster parents and sets off to seek his destiny.

Ah the Artificer is a classic villain. The greedy mean fellow accepts the boy as slave labor and works him half to death, but Wolf at least discovers that his mother died in childbirth, and his father was named Li Tan and was perhaps the greatest artificer of them all. Wolf's father then fell under the spell of a concubine of the lord of the neighboring valley, the Valley of Sorrows. The concubine was a witch. She was a barbarian called Crown of Fire, because of her bright red hair, and she had a daughter called Fire Girl, who was Wolf's age. The witch and Wolf's father had attempted to assassinate the lord, the Laughing Prince, and had been put to death, but their infant children had vanished and thus were spared.

"One day," said Deer Ears, "a mysterious stranger appeared at Ah the Artificer's door. They talked in low voices for many hours, and then Wolf was called in. When he saw the stranger's face, Wolf felt a shudder of fear, because—"

"Wolf wasn't afraid of anything!" Little Skinhead said indignantly. He had the right spirit for a recruit.

"Wolf felt a shudder of fear because the stranger's face was as white as death," Deer Ears hissed. "Sick, slimy, fish-belly white, and the stranger's heart was so cold that his eyes had turned blue, and a red beard crawled over his face like a hairy spider, and he was—"

"He was drunk," Little Skinhead said matter-of-factly. "My father took me to Soochow, where there are lots of barbarians, and barbarians are always drunk."

"He hadn't hit the wine jars yet, and don't interrupt!" Deer Ears yelled. "He told Wolf he was a trader with a caravan on its way to Samarkand with a cargo of…."

Deer Ears paused and looked thoughtfully at the guests. We could add one unimportant detail to the story, and nobody had yet bothered with the cargo. He bowed to the prince, who deferred to Master Li.

"Slavonian squirrels," Master Li said, intoning the words like a priestly chant. "Undressed vairs and vair bellies and backs. Martins and finches, goatskins and ram skins, dates, filberts, walnuts, salted sturgeon tails, round pepper, ginger, saffron, cloves, nutmegs, spike, cardamoms, scammony, manna, lac, zedoary, incense, quicksilver, copper, amber, pounding pearls, borax, gum arabic, sweetmeats, gold wire, wines, dragon's blood rubies, loaded dice, and beautiful dancing girls."

Only Master Li would have tossed in loaded dice and beautiful dancing girls, and the boys sat in reverent silence while they absorbed it. For the next ten or twelve centuries Master Li's cargo would be part of the tale of Wolf.

Deer Ears' voice changed to a nasty wheedling whine. "'What a fine boy,' the stranger said. 'What a clever and manly boy. I have just the task for such a boy, and he who performed it would receive six shiny copper coins.' Wolf looked at him silently. The stranger's face contorted with terrible pain. 'All right, seven!' he shrieked. 'You see, I have a niece—a wild and ungrateful girl!—who has stolen a gem and swallowed it to conceal the theft, and she has slipped into a small cave at the end of the valley. The entrance is too small for a man, but a clever boy could squeeze inside and bring my niece back."

Wolf wants no part of it, but Ah the Artificer insists, so he takes his ring and his bow and a torch and squeezes through a small opening into a dark cave.

Then the story got very interesting indeed, at least so far as I was concerned, and since it proved to be of use to Master Li, I will set down as of the important parts as I can remember.

❁ ❁ ❁

Wolf Boy and Fire Girl

Wolf lit the torch and looked around. There was nobody in the cave, but there was a dark corner and when he walked over he stared in astonishment at a smooth flight of stone steps leading down. Wolf's eyes gleamed, and he thought of buried treasure, and he strung his bow and made sure he could quickly reach his knife and started down the stairs. The steps led on and on, winding sharply downward, and Wolf began to hear the sound of running water. Finally something sparkled in his torchlight, and he realized it was an underground river in the center of an immense cavern. The water was jet black, the color of the stone bed it ran through. To his right was a glow, and he moved cautiously toward it and came to the first of a long line of torches set in brackets on the stone walls.

The light was good enough for Wolf to extinguish his own torch. A small crimson boat was tied to a post. There was another post beside it, and it was stained with drops

of water. The stain was still damp, and Wolf untied the little boat and climbed in and pushed off into the current.

Enormous statues carved in stone lined the banks. Wolf gazed in wonder at images with the bodies of humans but the heads of animals or birds. What could they mean? The cavern was silent except for the hiss of torches and the lapping of water. Nothing stirred. The boat drifted on and on. Everything was black or white or gray, but then Wolf saw a flash of crimson. He steered the boat over to a shelf of rock overhanging the side of the river, and beneath it was a crimson boat just like his. He tied his boat beside it and swam to the bank and climbed out, and he saw a trail of sandal prints, still damp, leading up over a mound of tumbled rocks. Wolf began to climb, following the prints, and he reached a small level area.

Something landed on his back and knocked him to the ground. A knife flashed in front of his face, and a small arm tried to jerk his head back. Wolf kicked and rolled over, pinning the knife beneath him, and managed to get to the top position. He was looking at a girl about his own age, and she was half-Chinese and half-barbarian, and her hair was the color of fire. She hissed like a cat and fought furiously, but Wolf was stronger and he managed to pin both arms, and then the boy and the girl stopped fighting.

Men were approaching, down at the riverbank. They heard coarse laughter and the clash of weapons, and something in the voices made Wolf and the girl break apart and crawl to the edge of the rocks and peer down. The soldiers had cruel brutish faces and they wore the uniform of the Laughing Prince, and Wolf realized that the cavern must run all the way to the Valley of Sorrows. The soldiers marched away and disappeared in shadows, and Wolf and the girl sat up.

Something was very strange. They should be in darkness, but they were silhouetted against light, and they realized that each of them had something on their backs that glowed. It was Wolf's bow and one of the arrows in the girl's quiver, and they held them out and stared in wonder. Writing had appeared on the bow and the arrow—writing in fire. Wolf glanced at the girl and blushed.

"I don't know how to read," he whispered.

"I can read, a little." The girl took Wolf's bow and scratched her head and wrinkled her nose and read, slowly and hesitantly:

"In darkness languishes the precious stone—
When will its excellence enchant the world?"

She took her arrow and scratched her head some more and wrinkled her nose some more and read:

"The precious stone, hidden away,
Longs to fulfill its destiny."

They stared at each other. Finally Wolf said, "I am called Wolf, and my father was Li Tan the artificer. I never knew him, and he left me this bow and a ring."

"I am called Fire Girl, and my mother was Crown of Fire the witch," the girl said. "I never knew her, and she left me this arrow."

"They say that my father and your mother tried to kill the Laughing Prince," Wolf said. "Is that barbarian trader really your uncle? He said you stole something, but I don't believe him."

"Stole something?" The girl turned and spat furiously. "He is called Brushbeard the Barbarian, and he was taking me to sell as a concubine to the Laughing Prince, just as he once sold my mother, and when I get a chance, I'm going to kill him."

As they talked, the glowing letters on the bow and arrow faded away, but now a third glowing light had appeared. It came from the ring on Wolf's finger, and he slipped it off. No writing had appeared, but the strange lines and marks on the inside were shining brightly. Wolf examined the markings closely, and saw that not all of the lines were glowing. The shining lines were running between parallel rows of dark ones, twisting and turning through openings.

"Could it be a map through a maze?" Fire Girl whispered.

Wolf turned the ring to display more scratchy lines on the front.

"Look, these lines start at the wolf head and run to the edge, and then around and inside the ring, like going into a hole or a tunnel, and the shining lines twist through all these little openings to a circular mark, and stop there."

The girl grabbed his arm. "There's a statue farther on that has a wolf head just like this one!" she said excitedly.

Without another word they slid back down to the riverbank and ran until they came to the huge stone wolf statue. They looked for some mark or sign but found nothing. The eyes of the wolf head were fixed on a shadowed section of the stone wall, and when they followed the direction of the eyes they found a tiny side tunnel that was almost invisible. Wolf and Fire Girl managed to squeeze through the opening.

The ring was shining even brighter, and the eyes of the wolf were like small lanterns. There were many side passages, but Wolf followed the pattern of the lines inside the ring, and to be on the safe side they used their knives to scratch marks at the entrances when they turned into different passages. They twisted and turned through a maze, and ahead of them was a light, and finally they stepped into a small round cave. The light came from a natural chimney that ran up through stone to a patch of blue sky and a shaft of sunbeams.

The cave had a table and two benches. On the floor was a stack of torches, and across from them were two sleeping pallets. Between the pallets was a natural stone shelf. On the shelf were three bronze caskets, and the same legend was carved in the stone above the two end ones. The caskets had sliding lids carved in fish shapes, and Fire Girl studied the legends above the end ones and read:

"Pull not the scales
Till all else fails."

The casket in the center had two lids that folded together, with the yin symbol on the left and the yang symbol on the right, and above it on the wall were the four ideographs *tung ling pao-yu.*

"Stone of penetrating spiritual power," Fire Girl read.

Wolf opened the center casket. Inside was a piece of stone. It was small and slim and as sharp as a razor, and it was shaped like the head of an arrow. Fire Girl picked it up. On each side were two written lines, and after much scratching and nose wrinkling, she read the four lines together:

"When evil is taken for wisdom, wisdom becomes evil.
When cruelty is taken for virtue, virtue becomes cruelty.
The stone defeats cruelty and evil
And flies to the heart of Liu Sheng."

"Fire Girl, Liu Sheng is the name of the Laughing Prince," Wolf said.

When Fire Girl held up the tip of the arrow her mother had left her he realized it had no head. There was a groove for one. She slowly took the stone and slid it into the groove, and it stuck there as though it had been bound with rawhide. She lifted the arrow and placed the center of the shaft on her finger. It was perfectly balanced.

"What do you think we should do?" she asked quietly.

Wolf looked around. The chimney that ran up to the surface was against a wall, and he walked over and found foot- and handholds. He jumped and grabbed, and began to climb. It was a long way up, but the holds were good, and finally he stuck his head from the hole and saw that he had come up at the bottom of a deep gorge. Across from the hole he saw a good landmark—strange red and emerald-colored rocks in the side of the cliff—and he began climbing back down.

"You can climb that," he said, panting. "If we have to, we can get out quick. Fire Girl, I think that my father and your mother wanted us to try to kill the Laughing Prince if they failed, but I don't know anything about him. Why should he be killed?"

She shook her head. "I don't know, but I think we had better find out," she said.

They held hands and began retracing their steps through the maze to see what they could see.

(Here I will summarize, since the details were not important to Master Li. They discover the terrible destruction of the Valley of Sorrows, and the awful torture chamber in the grotto. They also discover that the instruments of torture are made by Ah the Artificer, and that the girls who please the Laughing Prince before being sent to the grotto are sold to him by Brushbeard the Barbarian. They are chased by soldiers, and find out from a cricket how to steal food. The wolf head statue can talk a few words and warns them of a geyser of poisonous steam. It also tries to warn them about bats, but "bats" can mean forty other things unless pronounced with the proper inflection, and since the statue can't move its lips, they don't understand the warning. Each is captured and saved by the other and they discover the throne room that the Laughing Prince has built in the cavern. They make traps by placing sharpened stakes in pits and covering the tops with mats that look like rock, and digging beneath boulders high on the slopes of rock piles. They agree that the Laughing Prince must be killed, and the only chance is when he holds court in the cavern. They crawl up a tunnel that overlooks the throne room, and discover that both Ah the Artificer and Brushbeard the Barbarian are among the dignitaries. The Laughing Prince appears and sits on his throne.)

"Can you reach him?" Wolf whispered.

Fire Girl shook her head and handed the bow and arrow to Wolf. The Laughing Prince wore a monk's robe, like the Monks of Mirth who flanked the throne, except that his robe was not motley. His face was in the shadows of the cowl, but evil glittering eyes pierced through the shadows like pinpoints of cold fire. He reached back and fed what might have been human liver to the seven black bats that perched upon the back of the throne, and he laughed with the sound of icicles breaking.

Wolf notched the arrow and slowly drew it back. His muscles strained to hold the feathers steady beside his right ear. Carefully he lifted the bow to the best elevation for a long shot. The sharp stone tip glittered in torchlight, and the seven bats flapped up into the air, the high shrieking squeals echoed through the cavern.

"Master, O Master, an arrow is near!
Shining bright on the tip is the stone that you fear!"

The glittering eyes of the Laughing Prince swept over the cavern. Icicles seemed to rush into the tunnel. Wolf tried to release the arrow, but his fingers were frozen. His arm was frozen. He felt ice enter his body and crawl toward his heart.

Fire Girl grabbed the bow and arrow and pulled back with all her might. The icicle eyes shifted and she was frozen. Seven black bats were streaking toward them.

"Master, O Master, a boy and a girl!
With a wolf on a ring and fire in each curl!"

"My thieving niece! Four gold pieces to the man who brings her to me! All right, five!" screamed Brushbeard the Barbarian, leading a platoon of soldiers across the cavern.

"Bring me my ungrateful little cousin, dead or alive!" howled Ah the Artificer, leading another platoon of soldiers.

The Laughing Prince shifted his eyes to his Monks of Mirth, and Wolf and Fire Girl fell back as though icy chains had snapped. Now there was no hope of a clear shot, and they turned and ran back down the tunnel. They reached the central cavern just ahead of the soldiers. Arrows whistled past their ears as they dove into the river, and spears probed the water as they swam beneath the black surface to the other side. They climbed out and raced toward a side tunnel, but Brushbeard the Barbarian and his men were right behind them, shouting in triumph.

Wolf and Fire Girl began counting silently: ten yaks and one, ten yaks and two, ten yaks and three…. They leaped as far as they could. Ten yaks and one, ten yaks and two, ten yaks and three…. They leaped again, and behind them came terrible screams, and seven black bats flew shrieking through the cavern.

"Master, O Master, your brave soldiers die!
In deep bidden pits where sharpened stakes lie!"

Where was Fire Girl? Wolf stopped and turned back and saw her standing calmly in the center of the tunnel. The sacred arrow was back in her quiver. A plain one was fixed in the bow, and the feathers held steadily beside her ear. A gross figure was moving forward, clinging to the wall and sobbing with terror.

"Dear Uncle, a gift from my mother," Fire Girl said softly.

The arrow whined like a wasp and Brushbeard the Barbarian clutched his throat and tried to pull the shaft out. Blood spurted, and he collapsed to the floor, writhing and gurgling. Fire Girl turned and ran back to Wolf, and they raced on. The tunnel exit was high on the cavern wall, at the top of rock mounds, and soldiers below at the riverbank looked up and pointed and yelled in triumph. Wolf and Fire Girl dodged arrows as they raced along a narrow path, pulling wooden braces from beneath the traps they had set. Seven black bats shrieked toward the ceiling.

"Master, O Master, to a trap have we rushed!
Beneath falling boulders your soldiers are crushed!"

Where was Wolf? Fire Girl stopped and looked around and saw him sliding down the rock slope with his knife between his teeth. Ah the Artificer shrieked in fear and swung his sword. Wolf ducked beneath it. Ah the Artificer screamed and fell, trying to pull the hilt of the knife from his stomach. Blood gushed from his mouth, and he jerked over the floor. Wolf turned and scrambled back up the rocks to Fire Girl, and they raced on. There were no more side passages until they reached their secret tunnel. They were in the open, and seven black bats were flapping above their heads.

"Master, O Master, the quarry runs here!
No escape to the front, and none to the rear!"

A cold wind whistled through the cavern. Wolf and Fire Girl turned and gazed in horror at the spectre of evil incarnate. A great black bat was flying toward them. The wings spanned at least forty feet, and the fangs glittered like huge spears, and a royal crown was on its head, and the eyes were the eyes of the Laughing Prince.

They had almost reached the wolf statue, and there was one last trap. It had been intended for soldiers who might pursue on a barge, and Wolf dove for a rope and pulled. A great boulder broke free and rolled like thunder down the slope and shot out into the air, and the splash as it hit the river sent up a blinding curtain of spray. Hidden by water, they dashed to the wall and slipped into the tiny entrance, and then followed the maze back to their cave. Behind them they could faintly hear the shrieks of seven black bats.

"Master, O Master, the quarry has fled!
We shall search every crack till their bodies lie dead!"

Fire Girl sat on the floor, exhausted. Her eyes were closed. When she finally opened them, she saw Wolf standing at the chimney looking up at the shaft of sunlight. Sounds of soldiers were coming down the chimney as the army of the Laughing Prince searched outside the cavern as well as in.

"I'm going to take a look," he said. His eyes were large and grave as he looked at her. "Wait for me, Fire Girl."

He scrambled up the chimney and paused at the top. Then he was gone. Fire Girl closed her eyes again. Then they opened wide.

"There's the boy!" a soldier shouted from above.

"Red hair! There's the girl too! They're both outside!" yelled another soldier.

Fire Girl jumped to her feet. Red hair? A girl up with Wolf? Her eyes fell on the stone shelf between the sleeping pallets, and widened even farther when she saw that the casket on the left was open. She walked over and looked solemnly at the legend above it: "Pull not the scales till all else fails." The casket was empty, except for a tiny strand of something red. On the bottom of the casket was writing, and Fire Girl scratched her head and wrinkled her nose.

"A boy who dies, dies not in vain;
The Great Wheel turns, he comes again."

Wolf had taken something red to pretend he had red hair, and he was leading the soldiers away from Fire Girl. They would catch him, of course, but she might escape.

Fire Girl walked to the last casket on the right. The fish scale lid slid down. She reached inside and lifted a small vial of pale liquid. On the bottom of the casket was writing.

"A girl who grieves and drinks of this,
Will be awakened with a kiss."

Fire Girl walked over and lay down on her pallet. She brushed her hair with her fingers and straightened her tunic. She carefully placed the bow and the arrow with the stone top on the floor beside her, and opened the vial. The liquid smelled fresh and clean, like forest herbs after a rain.

"Yes, Wolf, I will wait," she said softly, and she lifted the vial and drank. Her eyes closed, and she slept.

The Great Wheel turns, a boy will grow,
His cave is kept for him to know.
Again the ring of Wolf will glow,
And the secret passage show.
A touch of lips will open eyes,
A girl of fire will thus arise.
Then the sacred arrow flies,
And the Heart of Evil dies.

"The poetry is atrocious, but there's real merit in parts of the tale," Master Li said as we walked back down the hill in the moonlight.

"Yes indeed!" the prince said enthusiastically. "I always knew my ancestor had icicle eyes and the soul of a forty-foot bat."

"I think it's a glorious story," said Grief of Dawn.

"I even liked the poetry," Moon Boy confessed.

"It's sheer genius!" I cried. "Any one of those boys could be the reborn wolf, so they have to spend endless hours looking for omens. Even if they aren't Wolf, they'll be officers in his army, so they have to prove themselves through ordeals—spending the night alone in the Forest of Sobbing Ghosts, for example, or packing Fire Drug into a hole beneath Terrible Tempered Wu's bad luck jar, so when Wu explodes it during the spring festival he'll return to earth somewhere in Tibet. And bats! They'll have to figure out how to handle those bats, and that means secret dark places. Lots and lots of cobwebs and spiders. They'll practice setting nasty traps, and learn spells to ward off the evil eye—I used to think my old gang was special, but the Seven Bloody Bandits of the Dragon Bones Cave shouldn't be allowed to bow to the Sacred and Solemn Order of Wolf."

Master Li was regarding me with rather cool eyes.

"Perhaps the extraordinary references to a stone are worthy of minor mention," he said wryly.

The example of Wolf and Fire Girl gave me backbone. "Damn it, it's *genius.* Centuries ago the boys who found the cave realized that if they chose as their hero a skeleton with a spearhead inside the crushed rib cage, it would be a hero who had somehow failed. So they pieced together bits and pieces from old heroic stories and—"

"Produced a tale that I admire, except for the poetry," said Master Li. "The poetry is abominable. The most admirable thing about the tale is its folk-epic nature, meaning that the words take on a quasi-religious significance. Did anyone notice Deer Ears' delivery?"

I hadn't, but Grief of Dawn had.

"His head was thrown back and his eyes were closed," she said. "Once he said 'which' and hastily changed it to 'that.' He was like my dear old Tai-tai, preserving the exact wording of an ancient story just as her parents and grandparents had preserved it."

Master Li gazed at her fondly. "Let me know if you can use some extra adoration between visits from these three gentlemen," he said. "That's the point about the references to the stone. Deer Ears came very close to the inscription above the sacristies, and two of the lines were exact: 'In darkness languishes the precious stone. When will its excellence enchant the world?'"

Prince Liu Pao threw his hands wide apart.

"Yes, but what *is* the stone?" he asked plaintively. "According to the boys' story, it's a magical thing that slays evil. But my ancestor kept and worshipped it, which scarcely makes sense unless he was in love with the idea of suicide. According to

Ssu-ma and the author of *Red Chamber*, it's the embodiment of all evil. According to Ox's dream, it's an overpowering life force. Is it good? Is it evil? Is it anything more than a legend? I hate to say this, but much as I enjoyed the story of Wolf, it leads us nowhere."

"Prince, I must respectfully disagree," said Master Li. Somehow he gave me the impression of a conjurer who intended to reach into a two-inch pillbox and pull out a twenty-foot pole. "Remember those mysterious fellows in robes of motley who are somehow able to pop up out of nowhere and disappear the same way? Well, I strongly suspect that the cavern in the story is actually the tomb of the Laughing Prince, which means that the tomb is far larger then we had imagined. With daylight, we'll put the theory to the test."

15

The sun had just lifted over Dragon's Right Horn when Master Li led the way down the hill to the bottom of the gorge between the two peaks. I was carrying an armload of tools, and the others had torches.

"Thousands of peasants labored on the Laughing Prince's tomb," Master Li said. "Could he have murdered every one of them? Some details of the tomb were certain to be preserved in the folk memory of the Valley of Sorrows, and one form of preservation may be the fanciful tale of Wolf, who comes to a cave with Fire Girl and climbs up a natural stone chimney. He sticks his head from the hole and discovers he's at the bottom of a deep gorge. Deer Ears, head back, eyes closed, chants the exact words preserved through the centuries: 'Across from the hole he saw a good landmark—strange red and emerald-colored rocks in the side of the cliff.'"

The old man walked over to one of the sheer cliffs.

"I came down here to try to figure out how Ox had been able to climb down one side and back up the other," he said. "I didn't find a climbing path, but I did find this."

He bent some thick thistles, and we gazed at strange red and emerald rocks, almost like gemstones, set in the middle of plain granite. "Prince, is there anything like this formation in some other part of the valley?" he asked.

Without a word the prince began looking for the hole of a natural stone chimney, and the rest of us fanned out and followed his example. An hour paused before Moon Boy shouted. He was about twenty feet up the side of a cliff, at the only place where the slope allowed easy climbing, and he was pointing down at a thick clump of furze. We ran up to him. I chopped through the furze, and a black hole appeared. I had brought a long bamboo pole, and I thrust it down but couldn't reach bottom. I tossed the pole back to the other tools, and the prince helped me secure a rope ladder. Master Li handed me a torch, and I began climbing down with my knife between my teeth, feeling very much like a pirate.

The ladder was just long enough. I stepped into a small round cave with a narrow passage leading from it. My torchlight revealed an ancient wooden table and two

benches. A natural stone shelf was set in the wall. I closed my eyes tightly and prayed, and then I began swinging the torch slowly around the room.

I will confess that I had prayed to find a thirteen-year-old girl with hair of fire, who had been sleeping for seven and a half centuries. I was very disappointed when she wasn't there. "Come on down!" I yelled.

Master Li and the prince and Grief of Dawn and Moon Boy joined me. They lit their torches, and now it was bright enough to see that nobody had disturbed the dust on the floor for years. We cautiously made our way down the passage and found ourselves in a much larger cave. This one had been used for target practice, and I was willing to bet that the archer had been a boy or a girl. Arrows were stuck all over, including the ceiling where ancient scaffolding held supporting beams. There was an old desk. To the left of the desk was a long wood table, and to the right was a row of brassbound chests. The chests were empty. Directly in front of the desk was a large metal plate set in the stone floor, and Master Li scratched his nose thoughtfully as he looked at it.

"This looks like a paymaster's office," he said. "Engineers and overseers would stand in front of the desk to receive their wages, and the Laughing Prince was renowned for his playful pranks."

He walked behind the desk and searched for something, and then he pulled some kind of lever. I jumped backward. There was a screeching metallic sound, and then the plate split into two halves that dropped down on hinges. Where an overseer might have been standing was nothing but a black hole, and I cautiously knelt at the side and thrust my torch down. The light couldn't reach far enough to touch bottom. I found a splintered piece of old scaffolding and lit it from the torch and dropped into the pit. It almost went out, but then it flared up again and we caught our breaths.

It had landed on sharp jutting rocks far below, right between two broken bodies. It took me a moment to realize that they weren't ancient skeletons like the ones piled in the tunnel. Hair still clung to them, and patches of dried flesh, and their clothes were almost intact.

"No more than twenty or thirty years ago," Master Li muttered.

"Thirty-three," the prince whispered. His face was white and strained. "I used to play with them. Ah Cheng and Wu Yi, gardeners at the estate. They let me ride the water buffalo and shovel manure and do all sorts of interesting things I wasn't supposed to, and one day they vanished and we never found them."

Master Li tested a bench at the table and sat down in a puff of dust.

He gazed moodily into the pit. "A stolen manuscript," he said softly, perhaps to himself. "Two dead monks, a weird sound, trees and plants destroyed—did the murder of two gardeners thirty-three years ago also play a part? Did they find the entrance in the gorge and come down here? If so, what did they see or hear that led

to their deaths? If the unpleasant people dressed up in motley were involved back then, it strengthens the theory that some kind of religious cult may be behind this, worshipping the stone of the Laughing Prince and possibly continuing a line that goes back to his original Monks of Mirth."

Master Li jumped up. "This is just a preliminary look around," he said. "The next time we come down here we'd better be heavily armed. Fortunately, the dust will tell us if anyone has used a passage. Let's do a bit of exploring."

There were side passages leading from three walls of the cave. All of them had been heavily braced against rockslides. Scaffolding and posts and cross-beams were everywhere, so old that the wood might snap from a loud sneeze, and we moved very carefully. The first passage ended in a rockslide that had blocked it completely, and so did the second. The third passage was so dangerous that nobody in his right mind would enter it. It was a miracle that the ceiling hadn't collapsed years ago. In the fourth we reached another dead end of fallen rocks, and so it went in all the passages. Whatever they led to couldn't be reached from the cave, and if we were going to explore a cavern that might be part of the Laughing Prince's tomb, we were going to have to find another entrance.

It was a terrible disappointment. Master Li swore without a pause after the sixth passage, and he was still swearing as we climbed gloomily back up the ladder and blinked in the sunlight. We walked back down to the center of the gorge, and suddenly Moon Boy stopped and held up a warning hand. His ears were incredibly keen.

"Horses," he said. "Lots of them, and the sound of wheels. Also jangling weapons. They're coming right at us, and if it's your monks in motley, they mean business."

We had no place to go and no time to do it in. Galloping horses and a huge chariot dashed into the narrow gorge, and mysterious monks in motley would have been far preferable to the grim-faced people we stared at. King Shih Hu of Chao reined up his horses and regarded us from his great war chariot, and his Golden Girls licked their lovely lips.

"We regret that we will be denied the enlightenment of your wisdom Li Kao," the king said softly. "A man who can so easily spirit special people from our castle is worth listening to, but our chariot will hold only Moon Boy and Grief of Dawn."

I thought, he's going to kill us. To his way of thinking we're common thieves who have stolen valuable things from his treasury, and he's going to kill us. I decided I had better fall on my knees and do some abject kowtowing, and I had better do it fast.

"Surely Your Majesty does not claim ownership of people?" Master Li said, in the tone of a gentleman opening an interesting line of conversation. "Moon Boy and Grief of Dawn are not even your subjects, and perhaps they would prefer to make their own decision."

I was on my knees banging my chin against the bamboo pole, the far end of which was gradually sliding toward a rake I had brought with the other tools. Only two more feet, I thought, and I tried another six kowtows.

"Neo-Confucians, of course, would argue that since Grief of Dawn and Moon Boy come from peasant stock, they should have no legal rights whatsoever," Master Li said judiciously. "Your Majesty is far too intelligent to be neo anything, and far too just to arbitrarily decide destinies without first hearing the wishes of the people involved."

"It is, Li Kao, the ability of a ruler to be arbitrary that determines his hold upon his throne," said Shih Hu.

A faint and oddly sad smile was on his lips. His eyes moved to the Golden Girls, who were fixing arrows to their bowstrings. I banged my chin one more time. The pole moved forward, and the handle of the rake slid into the hollow end. The rake was directly in front of the lead chariot horses. I grabbed the pole, lunged forward, and whipped it up. The rake plunged into the tender belly of a horse, and it reared and whinnied and pawed the air. I got the next horse. The plunging horses were in the Golden Girls' line of fire, and I felt Master Li's hand grab my belt, and I dove forward and crawled between the hooves until I was beneath the chariot. Master Li fell back out of the way. I tried to take the weight on my shoulders and legs as I heaved upward. My spine made nasty cracking noises, but I was trying to lift the chariot from one side, and the great bulk of the king helped to unbalance it. With a crash it toppled over, and the horses fell in a tangle of kicking legs, and I crawled between them while the Golden Girls maneuvered for a clear shot. It was a matter of getting a royal hostage before the girls got me, and Shih Hu was waiting for me. He even managed to keep his natural dignity as he sat on the ground like a great Buddha, and his dagger was in his hand, and he was smiling.

I heard the sharp click of the coil of rattan inside Master Li's sleeve as it shot the throwing knife from the sheath up to his hand, and a whine was almost simultaneous with the click as the blade shot past my ear. The king swore as the blade sank into his hand, and his dagger fell to the ground. I was on him in an instant, with an arm around his throat and his dagger pressed to the back of his neck.

The Golden Girls growled like panthers. They maneuvered their horses with perfect discipline, edging around and behind me. The king was paying no more attention to me than to a mildly annoying mosquito. He casually pulled Master Li's knife from the palm of his hand and tossed it away, and then, with one sweep of a massive arm, he sent me flying ten feet backward. He didn't look at me at all. The arrows drew back, pointed at my heart.

"Stop," the king said. Authority rumbled beneath the quiet tone, and the arrows lowered. He lumbered to his feet and walked over and knelt beside Moon Boy,

who was holding Grief of Dawn in his arms. The shaft of an arrow protruded from her chest.

The golden shaft was aimed right at her heart, and with a shock that paralyzed emotion, I realized that Grief of Dawn was dead.

"Who could have done this?" the king whispered. "None of my girls shoots wildly." His huge head lifted. The Golden Girls bowed before his gaze, all but the captain. Her eagle eyes were defiant, but it was like trying to stare down the sun. Her eyes fell and her lips quivered. A tear slid down her cheek.

"Meng Chang, were you in so much pain?" the king said gently. "You should have come to us, my child. Jealousy is a terrible emotion. It transforms pinpricks into great gaping wounds, but there was no need for jealousy. That we loved Grief of Dawn did not mean we loved you less."

Master Li had knelt beside Grief of Dawn. His head jerked up in astonishment. "I don't believe it, but she's still breathing," he said.

My heart jumped like a speckled trout.

"If she survives this, she'll last until Mount Yun-t'ai falls on her," Master Li muttered.

His hand moved to the arrow shaft as though to pull it out. "No," the king said sharply. For the first time he was looking at me, and for the first time I realized that one of the girls' arrows had hit the fleshy part of my left thigh. The point was sticking out in the air. It was wide and flaring, and to pull an arrowhead like that back through the body is to kill the wounded person.

I snapped the head from my arrow and drew out the shaft and tossed it away, and then I ran up to Grief of Dawn and snapped off the feathered end of the arrow in her chest. I held my breath as Master Li slowly pushed the shaft down. My hand was beneath Grief of Dawn's back, and finally I felt the point bulge against the flesh. The head broke through, and I pulled the arrow completely out.

Grief of Dawn still breathed. Master Li neatly bandaged the wound. I thought Grief of Dawn was making muffled sobbing sounds, but then I realized they were coming from Meng Chang, the Captain of Bodyguards. Grief of Dawn tried to open her eyes, but couldn't.

"Tai-tai, are you ill?" she whispered. "Shall I sing to you, Tai-tai? Sometimes the pain gets better if I sing."

What happened next left all of us stunned and shaken. We had heard Grief of Dawn sing many times, but never as she sang then. She was singing to soothe the pain of the old lady who had taken her in and given her a home and a name, and what came from her lips and her heart was a miracle.

I can't describe it, other than to say it was like Moon Boy's sound magic mixed into the glorious glowing paintings of Prince Liu Pao. There were no words.

I heard pure notes climbing into the sky, brushing clouds aside, shooting past the moon, joining and singing with the brilliant glows of the stars in the Great River, and then lifting to Heaven itself to dance among the gods. The last note hovered, subtly changing pitch and color, and then began to descend to earth. The pure voice drifted among the wonders to be found in the raindrops and rippling streams of spring, and the soft drowsy sounds of summer, and the crisp clean noises of fall. Wind howled and snow fell, but Grief of Dawn was singing of a steaming kettle and boiling pot in a safe snug cottage where an old woman lay warm in her bed. The notes drifted down lower and softer, dissolving into whispering lullaby sounds, and then the last note sank into silence.

"I'm sorry, Tai-tai," Grief of Dawn whispered. "I can sing no more. It hurts to sing like that. It's beautiful but it's wrong, like stealing."

Her head fell back. Her heart was still beating, but she was unconscious.

We looked at each other in silence. Then the King of Chao got to his feet and walked back to his chariot. His huge hands separated the pawing horses and brought them to their feet, and he calmed them with pats and soft words. The Golden Girls parted to let him pass to the captain.

Meng Chang was dead. She lay on her face with her hands beneath her and the point of her sword thrusting out through her back. The king pulled the sword out and stopped the blood with his cloak. He picked her up and climbed into his carriage and sat on his couch with the girl's body on his lap. The Golden Girls opened a small chest and took out a white cloth of mourning and draped it over the king's head, and one of them took the reins. King Shih Hu and his Golden Girls rode away without a backward glance, and I never saw them again.

❁ ❁ ❁

Grief of Dawn was tougher than the Kehsi steel of Hsingchou. Master Li was able to avert infection by making poultices from nasty-looking tree mold, and she clung ferociously to life, but fever made her hallucinate, and I decided that perhaps she was mixing the story of Wolf into something from her own life. In her private closed world she was running with somebody, and it was a desperate race.

"Faster…must run faster," she panted. "Where is the turn? … Past the goat statue…. There's the raven and the river…. Faster…. Faster…. *This way! Hurry!* … Soldiers… Hide until they pass… Now run! *Run!*"

She didn't always hallucinate about running for her life, and I remember the startled expression on Master Li's face when she moved restlessly in her bed and said, "Please, Mistress, must I go to Chien's?" She wrinkled her nose in disgust. "It smells so bad, and the bargemen make rude jokes about ladies, and that old man with one leg always tries to pinch me."

"Eh?" said Master Li. He walked over and began wiping the perspiration from her forehead. "Darling, what does your mistress want you to get at Chien's?" he asked gently.

She wrinkled her nose again. "Rhinoceros hides."

"And where is Chien's?" he asked.

"Halfway between the canal and Little Ch'ing-hu Lake," said Grief of Dawn.

Master Li whistled and paced around the room, and then he returned to her bedside.

"Darling, does your mistress ever send you to Kang Number Eight's?" he asked coaxingly.

Grief of Dawn smiled. "I like Kang Number Eight's," she said.

"Where is it?"

"On the Street of the Worn Cash-Coin," she said.

"What do you buy there?"

"Hats."

"Hats. Yes, of course. And where do you buy your mistress's painted fans?" Master Li asked.

"The Coal Bridge."

"I suppose she also sends you to buy the famous boiled pork at…. What's the name of that place?"

"Wei-the-Big-Knife," she said.

"Of course. Do you remember where it is?"

"Right beside the Cat Bridge," she replied.

Master Li took another six laps around the room. When he returned to the bed, he had his hands behind him and the fingers were tightly crossed.

"Darling, when your mistress plays cards, what kind does she use?" he asked.

"Peach-blend," Grief of Dawn said drowsily.

"And where do her dice come from?"

"Chuanchu Alley."

"And what do you buy from Yao-chih?"

"Cosmetics."

"And where do you get rare herbs?"

"Fenglai."

"What does your mistress get from Chingshan?"

"Writing brushes."

"Of course," said Master Li. "And what's-his-name personally blends her ink?"

"Yes. Li Tinghuei."

"And that lovely courtesan makes pink paper for her?"

"Shieh Tao. Yes, she is lovely," Grief of Dawn said.

The fever was returning. Grief of Dawn tossed and turned while Moon Boy and the prince tried to soothe her.

"Faster…faster…. Where is the passage? *Hurry!* … More soldiers…. Faster… faster…. *Hurry, darling!* … There's the ibis statue…."

Master Li walked over to the desk and sat down and pulled out his wine flask and swallowed about a quart.

"Pink paper from the hands of Shieh Tao," he snarled when he came up for air. "Painted fans from the Coal Bridge and hats from Kang Number Eight's on the Street of the Worn Cash-Coin. Li Tmghuei personally blends the ink. Moon Boy! Can Grief of Dawn read?"

"About as well as I do, which is not very well," he said frankly. "Number Ten Ox reads ten times better than either of us."

Master Li swallowed another quart. "I don't even know what I'm about anymore," he muttered. "She'd have to be able to read Flying White shorthand."

He jumped to his feet and turned to the prince. "Your Highness, that damned fever will kill her unless we get rid of it, and the only medicine I know of that will do the trick requires the seeds of the Bombay thorn apple. Moon Boy and Ox and I are going out to find one, and in the process we will probably get killed."

Moon Boy looked at me, and then at Master Li.

"What shall we pack?" he asked.

16

There is no point in dwelling on my emotions regarding Grief of Dawn, but when I lay awake at night I passed the hours by planning for the day when she would be well and Master Li would take her for his wife. The Mings had quite a large shed at the rear of their house. Would they need it now that Great-grandfather was dead? We could buy it, and I knew how to lever it up and move it over to the shack, and I could fix it up as quarters for me and any guest—it was a great comfort to work out every last detail of such things, and eventually I would drift off and dream about it.

We made one stop before reaching Master Li's destination. It was at Unicorn Hall, which is a rather sad commentary upon earthly glory. The proud dignitaries of the Han Dynasty had posed for portraits that were intended to be worshipped throughout eternity, but Unicorn Hall is now in ruins. Weeds grow everywhere. Nobody has bothered to repair the roof for a century, and rain pours in. People have taken the doors and the wooden floor, and the only reason any portraits remain is that nobody can find a use for them.

Emperor Wu-ti's portrait was still intact, and even a flattering artist couldn't disguise the fact that he looked more like a bull than a man. The Laughing Prince's portrait was like the one at the estate, with the same strangely unfocused eyes. Master Li wasn't interested in the prince, however. He had come to take a close look at the prince's wife, Tou Wan.

"A friend of mine—dead for at least sixty years—once told me something interesting about Tou Wan," Master Li said. "He said that she may have been the only aristocrat to wear a hairpin that had a point fashioned from simple stone, in the style of poor peasants, and yet in all other matters she had been a spendthrift of classic proportions."

The young lady who gazed from the portrait was very beautiful, although I couldn't tell how much was real and how much was flattery. Her hair was secured by a single long pin, and the tip of it was just visible. Master Li studied it with his nose no more than an inch from the surface.

"That's what he meant," he muttered. "It's stone, all right, and the artist wouldn't have dared to toss in a sarcastic touch."

He turned and started back down the path. "Remember the words of Ssu-ma Ch'ien? The second blow of the axe broke a small sliver from the stone of the Laughing Prince, and it appears that a small sliver of stone decorated the hairpin of the Laughing Prince's wife. I'll have to remember to ask her about it."

We stared at him, but he said no more about it.

Where Grief of Dawn was concerned, Moon Boy was all business. He didn't once slip away in search of pretty boys, and we made good time. In a few days we stopped at the crest of a hill and gazed down at the roof of a small temple, and Master Li said it was our destination.

"The Temple of Liu Ling," he said. "Ever hear of him?"

We said we hadn't.

"We were quite a group, I suppose, but Ling was miles ahead of any of us," Master Li said, smiling at ancient memories. "I can see him now in his cart pulled by two deer, followed by a couple of servants. One carried enough wine to kill Liu Ling, and the other carried a spade to bury him on the spot—so much for Confucian ceremony. When I came to call he'd greet me stark naked, and I can still hear him scream, 'The universe is my dwelling place and my house is my only clothes! Why are you entering into my pants?'"

Master Li pointed to the temple. "Ling decided that men listen only to lies, so he founded the Temple of Illusion and arranged for the order to continue after his death. Moon Boy, can illusion of and by itself kill a man?"

Moon Boy shrugged. "My teacher, Lin Tsening, once deafened a bandit by persuading him that he was hearing two monstrous dragons in the next room. There were no dragons. The actual sound was scarcely loud enough to frighten sparrows, but the bandit was still deaf."

"Granny Ho once got mad at her son-in-law," I said. "She put him into some sort of trance, and told him he had fallen downstairs and hurt his left leg. When he woke up he laughed at her, and a day later his left leg turned black and blue and began to swell, and he was so lame he couldn't work for a week."

"Excellent," said Master Li. "My young friends, I need to recall something. Years and years ago on a walking trip I saw a Bombay thorn apple but I've long forgotten where it was. In addition, I need to take a totally fresh look at things I have seen or guessed at, but not fully understood. In short, I need to take a trip into the inner recesses of my mind, and I want to take you with me. Nothing is more dangerous than a voyage inward. If your mind and senses tell you that a spear has plunged into your heart, does it matter whether the spear is real or imaginary?"

I thought about it. "It seems to me that either way, you'd be dead," I said, and Moon Boy nodded agreement.

"Keep that in mind," Master Li said grimly. "The Temple of Illusion is Liu Ling's masterpiece, and a great many people who have ridden up to it in carriages have departed in coffins."

With those cheering words he started down the hill. The temple was small and bare, and a small courtyard led to a plain room where a priest sat behind a desk reading a scroll. He didn't bother to look up when we entered. Master Li slid quite a lot of money across the desk. "One," he said. He added another pile. "Two." He added a third pile. "Three," he said. Still the priest didn't look up, but he rang a bell, and another priest entered and led us to a small room that contained only a row of pallets on the floor and a single plaque on the wall.

I was rather surprised. I had expected mysterious music and thick incense and all the other trappings of mumbo jumbo, but apparently the illusions of Liu Ling didn't need any embellishment. The plaque was in simple script I could read, and I studied it with interest.

Butterfly Dreams

> Chuang Tzu said, "Once I dreamed myself to be a butterfly, floating like petals in the air, happy to be doing as I pleased, no longer aware of myself. But soon enough I woke, and then, frantically clutching myself, Chuang Tzu I was. I wonder: Was Chuang Tzu dreaming himself to be the butterfly, or was the butterfly dreaming itself to be Chuang Tzu? Of course, if you take Chuang Tzu and the butterfly together, there is a difference between them, but is not the difference only the illusion of material form?"

The silent priest reappeared with three cups of wine and three small bowls, and he gestured that we should eat and drink. Master Li ate the stuff in his bowl with the air of a connoisseur. "I don't know what they put in the wine, but this is Devil's Ears, the most powerful of hallucinatory mushrooms," he said nonchalantly. Then he turned and pointed to the plaque.

"Chuang Tzu once made a meal of Devil's Ears. Then he had a vision that explained all the perplexing problems of mankind, and he wrote it down. When he came to himself he eagerly grabbed the paper and this is what he read: 'Sheep's Groom couples with bamboo that has not sprouted for a long while and produces Green Peace plants. Green Peace plants produce leopards, and leopards produce horses, and horses produce men. Men in time return to Sheep's Groom.' Wraps it all up rather neatly, don't you think?"

I choked on my mushroom. Moon Boy managed to eat his, so I followed suit, and then I clapped one hand to the top of my head and the other to my toes and waited for my hands to either spread apart or slam together. Nothing happened, and I began to breathe more easily. The silent priest came back in and gestured for us to follow, and walked through a door into a garden. I gazed with disbelieving eyes at the shadows.

The angle of the sun told me that it was at least the double hour of the horse. It had been early morning when we entered. Somehow nearly four hours had vanished. What had happened to them? Master Li didn't seem to be perturbed. He was trotting toward a small round pool of water in the center of the garden, and there was a happy smile on his face. As I came closer I saw something white at the bottom, and then I realized that a human skull was grinning up at us.

"Ling, dear old friend! My, you're certainly looking splendid today," Master Li said.

Moon Boy and I very nearly toppled over. There wasn't a breath of wind, yet a tall patch of reeds at the back of the pool suddenly sprang into motion: bending, arching, jabbing, thrusting—it was calligraphy; the reeds were writing in the air.

"Li Kao, you were born to be hung!"

"You mean 'hanged,'" Master Li said sweetly.

"I mean the gallows!"

The reeds began moving so fast I had trouble keeping up, but I gathered that the late Liu Ling was saying that the flaw in Master Li's character couldn't be explained by loathsome percentage alone, and in a previous incarnation Master Li must have been a hyena or a scorpion or even the East Idiot Ruler of South Tsi. The reeds became quite agitated as they reviewed that gentleman's career.

"—and cut off their hands and feet!"

"No, I couldn't have been the East Idiot Ruler of South Tsi," Master Li said thoughtfully. "I would have cut off their noses as well."

"…burned right down to the ground!"

"If you must do something, do a thorough job," Master Li said.

"…every last man, woman, and child!"

"Wasteful. Some of the girls must have been pretty. Ling, old friend I hate to be overly critical, but was it wise to surround yourself with nothing but water?" said Master Li.

He puffed out his flask and splashed wine into the pool, and Moon Boy and I clung together for support. The dark stain of wine had gathered itself into a spinning whirlpool, and the spout was reaching down through the water to the grinning mouth of the skull. The reeds were still. Then one moved.

"Burp."

"This stuff is since your time," Master Li said. "It's called Haining Mountain Dew. What do you think of it?"

The reeds went into action again. *"Haining? Those clodhoppers make this excellent wine? I suppose even dung beetles have their talents. Speaking of dung beetles, has Belly Draft finished drinking himself to death?"*

"He's still working at it," said Master Li. "I tell his landlords that his liver is constructed from some kind of crystallized carbon but they keep throwing him out because of the danger of spontaneous combustion."

He poured more wine into the pool and had some himself. The reeds went waving again.

"Who's the raving beauty and the carnival wrestler?"

"This is my esteemed former client and current assistant, Number Ten Ox," Master Li said. "This is Moon Boy, the world's foremost authority on sounds and bottoms like peaches."

We stepped forward and bowed to the skull. The reeds moved.

"Moon Boy makes me wish I still had a bottom, but why bring young heroes to an old quack lying at the bottom of a pool?"

Master Li took another sip of wine. "For one thing, I want Moon Boy to look into a mirror," he said casually.

Was it my imagination or were the reeds moving warily?

"What kind of mirror did you have in mind?"

"The only one that matters," Master Li said.

"Take care, Li Kao!"

"Others have made the trip," Master Li said. "I even hear that the emperor came to you for a passport, and he's still in one piece."

The reeds were quite agitated. *"Tang needed both divine intervention and an enormous bribe to get out! Can you count on that kind of help? I can open the door, but once inside, you'd be on your own, and have the boys consented to such a journey?"*

Master Li glanced at us. I bowed to the skull. "Illustrious Sir, where Master Li goes, I go," I said.

"Most Noble Sage, the life of a girl named Grief of Dawn is involved, and I will go where I must," Moon Boy said.

The reeds were still, and when they moved, it was reluctantly.

"So be it. Li Kao, give my love to Queen Feiyen if you see her—gods, her breath was like an orchid!—and thank Li Po for leaving me his loaded dice."

The water in the pool began to revolve. It swirled faster and faster, moving in concentric circles toward the center, and my eyes were drawn to the skull. A strange light was shining in the empty eye sockets, beckoning to me, and it seemed that the skull was growing larger and larger. White bones appeared to fill the sky, and the light pulled me forward, and I found myself walking through a huge eye socket. Master Li and Moon Boy walked through the other one, and we were standing on a rocky

ledge high on a mountain. Cold wind whistled around my ears, and in the distance an eagle screamed.

"Marvelous effects," said Master Li.

In front of us, set in the rock, was a bronze door. Master Li pushed it open and we walked through to a landing and placed our feet upon the first step of a long winding staircase that would take us down to Hell.

17

Barbarian readers, no matter how illustrious, will have but a rudimentary concept of Hell. This not their fault but the fault of ignorant priests and sages who cling to two incredible fallacies: that Hell is reserved for the damned, and that the world is flat.

The world is a cube measuring 233,575 paces across. The center of the cube is occupied by the Kingdom of Hell, and it is the judging place for *all* mortals, saint and sinner alike. That is why people on the wrong sides of the cube don't fall off: We are all drawn toward our ultimate destination so no matter where one stands, Hell is always "down" and Heaven is always "up," and that's all there is to it.

The kingdom is enormous. There are one hundred thirty-five lesser Hells and ten principal ones: one for judgment by the God of Walls and Ditches, one for the Great Wheel of Transmigrations, and eight for the punishment of sinners. The lesser Hells contain people waiting to be judged, other people awaiting transportation to the Land of Extreme Felicity in the West, where they will sit at the feet of Buddha, extremely blessed people who await transportation to K'un-lun Mountain, where they will sit at the feet of the August Personage of Jade, and so many others that I will not try to list them.

It is strictly illegal for the living to enter Hell, with rare exceptions involving official delegations from the Emperor of China. Outside of Emperor T'ang, I knew of only two others who had illegally entered Hell and managed to return. One was Chou the Rogue, who was a crook so audacious that he once blackmailed the sun, and the other was Crazy Ch'i, who has become a demigod and has many temples dedicated to him. I would back Master Li against either of them, which is why I wasn't totally paralyzed with fear as we descended to the Land of Shadows. Master Li, however, had a few doubts.

"Our first task will be to evaluate the new regime," he said worriedly. "It is said that the former First Lord of Hell, Yen-wang-yeh, has been judged to have been too lenient and has been demoted, but no signs have been received to indicate who's currently in charge. If Legalists have won out, we could be in real trouble."

We were floating downward rather than walking—a blessing, since it is a terrible task to climb down 116,787½ steps—and a small circle of pale cold light was appearing before us. We came to rest in front of a doorway and cautiously peered out across a flat gray plain toward the walls of the principal city of Feng-tu. There was no sun, only a pearly glow in the gray sky. Even the trees and flowers were gray, and sounds seemed to be muted.

The demons weren't gray. Some had bright blue faces and fiery red eyes and long yellow tusks, and others had green fangs and crimson noses and black ears. They were every bit as horrible as the demons one sees in dreams, and they were herding the dead into long lines that slowly shuffled toward the city gates. The social hierarchy was absolute. Aristocrats formed one line, tradesmen another, scholars another—bureaucrats and soldiers and farmers all had their assigned line and priority of entrance, with the nobility taking precedence and actors bringing up the rear. The ceremony was formal and painstaking. Demons bowed to trolls, who bowed to ogres, who bowed to devils, and Master Li drew his head back and spat disgustedly.

"Bat shit," he growled. "The Neo-Confucians have taken over." He thought about it and cheered up. "Actually, this makes our task much easier," he said. "Moon Boy, put on your best jewels and costliest clothes. Ox, you want the garb and facial expression of an ideal peasant, and I'll take a few liberties with current reality."

We opened our packs. I put on a pair of sandals that were falling apart and a hat that resembled a rat's nest, and ripped an old tunic in the back to resemble lash strokes. When I had plastered an expression of meek animal resignation across my homely face, I was a peasant to warm the heart of the most demanding mandarin. Moon Boy dazzled the eyes. It would take four pages to do his clothes justice, and his jewels would have bankrupted some kingdom.

Master Li was awesome. Never before had I seen him in full academic regalia, and it was magnificent. He had finished his examinations as *chuang yuan*, the number one scholar in all China, and he proudly wore the emblem of the rose. In addition, he had a breast emblem of imperial axes and dragons: *chien-kuan,* the dreaded censor who is empowered to promote or decapitate on the spot. (Years ago he had been entitled to wear it.) His lacquered cap bore all nine buttons of rank, and he handed me his state umbrella. I put it together and raised it above the heads of the scholar and the handsome peacock.

"Arrogance, lads!" said Master Li. "Never forget that the flames of Hell exist for the privilege of brewing tea for noble Neo-Confucians like us."

We took deep breaths and marched out into the cold gray landscape of Hell. Demon nostrils twitched in disgust at the aroma of living flesh, and fiery eyes turned toward us.

"Make a note of that fat fellow with the purple eyes and lumps of flesh hanging from his fangs! Ten lashes for slovenliness," said Master Li, and Moon Boy scribbled in a ledger. "Look at these lines! Mired in molasses and not even straight! Isn't that the corpse of the fellow who called himself Duke of Chou? Since when does a pimp take a place in the aristocrats' line? A good housecleaning is what this place needs, along with a few hundred decapitations."

The fierce old fellow appeared to be the type of person one passes on to superiors, and fangs and talons hovered but did not strike. We marched rapidly toward the gates. Moon Boy had the natural assurance of beautiful people. He graciously inclined his head right and left as though acknowledging applause, and a faint frown indicated that the least the ogres could do was line his path with incense and flower petals. Meanwhile, I was discovering why so many of my humble class take pride in their servility and lash marks.

I held a state umbrella on high, which meant that I too was marching beneath the yellowish-black gauze cover, red raw silk linings, three tiers and silver spires that signified an official of the highest rank. I belonged. What is a great official without a peasant to lash? A sense of power passed from the handle to my hand, and I discovered that the most natural expression in the world was a lofty sneer. Slavery is a marvelous refuge from uncertainty.

The fiends who guarded the gates held up their claws: halt! "Look at those filthy nails! Twenty lashes!" Master Li screamed furiously, and he marched right between them. I clutched the umbrella for dear life, and the next thing I knew we were through the gates and inside the city. Master Li marched past the vast basilica of the God of Walls and Ditches toward the palace of the First Yama King, and as we approached the doors, I knew we were in trouble. None could pass without the permission of a very senior devil who had a black face, crimson eyes, steel fangs, iron wings, and a head covered with writhing vipers instead of hair. Puffs of smoke came from its ears and nostrils. I wondered if the knocking sound came from my knees or Moon Boy's, and decided we were playing a duet.

Master Li tapped his imperial censor's emblem and regarded the terrible creature with the scientific detachment of a butcher examining a chunk of meat. "Lord Li of Kao, emissary of the Son of Heaven, to see the Recorder of Past Existences. Immediately!" Master Li snapped.

The demon glared. Flames spurted from its mouth.

"Do I detect insolence?" Master Li said coldly. He plucked an emerald broach from Moon Boy's tunic and tossed it into the river of molten iron that ran beside the walls of the palace. "It would be regrettable should I be forced to report that an insolent doorkeeper stole a valuable broach and attempted to conceal the crime by swallowing it." His cold eyes moved to the creature's belly. "Although it might be entertaining to watch your superiors recover the evidence," he added.

Without another word he turned and marched straight toward the great steel doors. I hastened to catch up, and I was so blinded by sweat and terror that I didn't realize the doors had opened until my sandals began to slap across a marble floor.

Even Master Li had a thin line of perspiration on his forehead. Moon Boy alone seemed unperturbed. He continued to acknowledge imaginary applause, although he appeared to be slightly annoyed at the lack of welcoming trumpets, and I stiffened my spine and raised the state umbrella a bit higher. We walked down a long hallway to a large room where an army of clerks shuffled papers.

Hell is staffed by ordinary spirits as well as demons. (Demons aren't evil, incidentally. To be reborn as a servant of Hell is one of the incarnations of the Great Wheel, and blood lust is simply part of the process, like becoming a tiger.) The head clerk must surely have been a banker in his last incarnation. He had thin straight hair, thin straight eyebrows, thin straight eyes, thin straight nostrils, thin straight lips, thin straight shoulders, thin straight hands placed precisely parallel upon the desk, thin straight knees pressed primly together, and thin straight feet planted firmly on the floor. Moon Boy regarded him thoughtfully.

"Mine," he said.

"You have him," said Master Li. "We need to get into the Recorder's office."

It was like one of those dances in opera that tell more than words are capable of. My cheeks burned as Moon Boy undulated gracefully toward the desk—I had never seen him do that before—and the clerk's eyes glazed. Moon Boy smiled. The clerk's eyes bulged, and beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. Moon Boy cooed soft words. The thin knees jerked beneath the desk. Moon Boy cooed some more. The thin hands twisted together and the thin feet pawed the floor. The poor fellow managed to say something, and Moon Boy's hand behind his back pointed a finger at one of the side doors. Master Li and I moved unobtrusively over to it. Moon Boy gestured and accidentally brushed the clerk's hand, and the clerk shot to his feet and wobbled shakily to the door and deferentially knocked and opened it.

We were through the door before the clerk knew what was happening, and Moon Boy rewarded him with a pat on the cheek before slamming the door in his face.

I expected another army of clerks, but the Recorder of Past Existences was seated alone at a huge desk almost buried beneath ledgers. The face that lifted to us reminded me of paintings of Heng-chiang, the Sniffing General. His eyebrows were vertical and his eyes bulged like a frog's and his nose was wrinkled as though he permanently sniffed something unpleasant. Master Li bowed as to a social equal, and Moon Boy's bow perfectly matched courtesy and condescension.

"Eh?" said the Recorder.

"Lord Li of Kao, emissary of the Son of Heaven, and the Son of Heaven is furious," said Master Li.

"Eh?" said the Recorder.

"Such an unseemly intrusion would be intolerable were not serious matters involved, and what could be more serious than failure to adequately apply the Broth of Oblivion?" Master Li said gravely.

"Eh?" said the Recorder.

Master Li whirled around and glared at me. "Look at this witless and lice-ridden representative of the lower classes!" he said angrily. "By rights his knowledge should be limited to fields, fealty, and flatulence, yet he claims to recall every detail of a previous existence in which he was the great-great-grandfather of *this* jewel of the current court!"

Moon Boy took his cue and bowed gracefully.

"Not only that, this drooling crotch-scratching clod insists he was tutor to the princes of the Sui Dynasty!" Master Li yelled. "He tells tales of Emperor Yang's debauches that would curl your hair, if you had any, and every time he opens his silly mouth, he substantiates his claim to have been Lord Tsing!"

(That gave me my cue. Tsing was the name of the dear old assistant abbot in the monastery near my village, who taught the village boys when they finished working in the fields. He was a sweet kindly fellow who suffered from terminal pedantry, and I used to amuse Master Li by imitating him.)

"Step forward, oaf!" I drooled and scratched my crotch and stepped forward. Master Li looked around and pointed to an ornate bronze bowl. "What decorative motif is that?" he snarled.

I tried to make my eyes film over, and my jaws creaked like unoiled hinges as they relentlessly spread apart.

"T'sao-t'ieh, or 'glutton mask,' is a distinctive motif of the Shang and early Chou dynasties," I droned in a dull monotone. "It is an animal face seen from the front, sometimes recognizable and sometimes stylized to resemble a fabulous monster. It is flattened on a side surface or bent around a comer; in either case a flange is likely to split it into symmetrical halves, each having a protruding eyeball. From each side of the face, sometimes in proper proportion and sometimes not, extends a body in perfect symmetry with its opposite, as if the carcass had been cut through along the backbone and the two halves had been folded out like wing attachments to the head. The bodies have serpentine dragonlike qualities, coiling in spirals or geometric twists and turns, and are themselves covered with spiral or geometric designs, sometimes including smaller t'sao-t'ieh. The same glutton mask usually appears many times on a vessel. It is a striking, powerful, and unique design, and what it represents…(pause, slowly count to ten)…is not known."

Moon Boy's eyes had glazed, and he was teetering on his feet. The Recorder of Past Existences was slumping at his desk. He jerked his head up when his chin

bounced against his ink stone. I picked my nose. Moon Boy woke up and fell at my feet and began kissing my sandals. *"Great-great-grandfather!"* he howled.

My rheumy eyes creaked toward a vase of gray flowers. My relentless jaws creaked open.

"The following plants and flowers," I droned, "each create a mood. The plum flower goes with poetry, the orchid with seclusion, the chrysanthemum with rustic flavor, the lotus with simplicity of heart, the cherry apple with glamour, the peony with success, the banana and bamboo with gentlemanly charm, the begonia with seductive beauty, the pine tree with retirement, the plane tree with absence of worry, the willow with sentimentality, the—"

"For the love of Buddha, stop!" the Recorder howled.

"Awe-inspiring, isn't it?" Master Li said. "How can one doubt that this worm was tutor to princes when he can put an entire regiment to sleep in two minutes flat? Failure to remove all memory of previous existences is an extremely grave matter!"

"I can't understand it," the Recorder whispered. "Hundreds of such cases have been reported in the past, but we have been very careful during the past few centuries."

"It could be fraud," Master Li pointed out. "The Son of Heaven has proposed an infallible test, which is the reason for this visit. We shall simply make this revolting creature stand before *Nieh-ching-t'ai*, and the truth shall be revealed."

"It is strictly illegal for the living to stand before the Mirror of Past Existences!" the Recorder snapped.

"The gods look the other way when the cause is just and wise," Master Li said smoothly. "Besides, this preening peacock claims to be the great-great-grandson, and fraud is so often a matter of conspiracy."

Moon Boy did a good job of turning pale and trembling, and the Recorder's eyes gleamed. Bureaucrats and courtiers do not love one another, and a few minutes later we were walking down a maze of corridors. A great black door swung open to reveal a dark tunnel at the end of which was a glow of greenish light. As we came closer I realized it was a natural mirror formed by an immense crystal set in the stone wall.

A sense of sacred awe surrounded the Mirror of Past Existences. I found that I was on my knees, kowtowing, and the others were kowtowing in front of me. We got back to our feet. The marks of two sandals were drawn on the floor in front of the mirror, and Master Li shoved me forward. I placed my feet on the marks and slowly raised my eyes. The green light from the mirror was pulsing like a heartbeat. I could see my own reflection clearly, but there was no reflection of the others. A strange sense of peace had entered my heart. I was not frightened when a soft voice spoke in my ear.

"Why does a living person stand before me?"

I had no idea what to reply, so I said the first thing that came to my mind.

"Master Li seeks truth."

The green light pulsed silently. Then the voice spoke again. "So be it. Look straight at me, Number Ten Ox."

Two columns appeared at the sides of the mirror. One was headed "Virtues," and the other was headed "Sins." Then my image dissolved and reformed, and I realized that I was looking at my first existence upon the earth.

I was a blob of something I couldn't identify, something like a tiny jellyfish. The blob combined with other blobs to form larger jellyfish. Then I became something with tendrils, and then something that crawled, and finally I was delighted to recognize one of my existences: a flatworm. The virtues and sins columns remained empty.

I was reborn as a fish. Then I became some sort of plant, and then some fungus, and then an insect. I was reborn as a hawk moth, a cockroach, a cow, and a tortoiseshell cat. I was quite proud of myself as I moved up the scale of existences.

I frowned. I appeared to be backsliding. I became a piece of kelp, a patch of pond scum, six kinds of rock, four trees, and a number of plants. Then I began moving up the scale again: a snapdragon, a black grouse, a gecko, and a bowlegged mongrel with one eye, chewed ears, and a body bearing the scars of a thousand back-alley battles. The virtues and sins columns remained as empty as the minds of the General Staff. I eagerly awaited my first human existence.

Here it was. I was reforming as a human being. I gaped at the familiar ugly face of Number Ten Ox, and when I felt my body, I watched the reflected hands move in the mirror. The virtues and sins columns disappeared.

"I'll be damned," said Master Li.

"We don't say that down here, but I know what you mean," the Recorder said. "Extraordinary! This boy is as innocent as an apricot."

"Not quite," Master Li said grimly. "We now know that he was never a tutor to princes, and one wonders about the nature of his accomplice. Peacock, step forward!"

Moon Boy took my place in front of the mirror. That was what Master Li had wanted from the start, and I admired the neat way he had arranged it.

"Virtue" and "Sin" columns appeared. Moon Boy's image began to dissolve, and he too became some kind of blob. Again I saw the procession of other blobs and things with tendrils, but then things turned dramatically different. In rapid order Moon Boy became poison ivy, a patch of deadly nightshade, and a clump of red berries I wouldn't have approached with a barge pole. He was moving up the scale at great speed, and he dissolved into a tarantula, a cobra, and a horrible thing with twenty writhing tentacles. The thing dissolved into the image of a sweet little old lady with twinkling eyes.

The little old lady was bustling about her kitchen adding green and purple powders to a pot. Purple smoke lifted from it, and black liquid boiled over the side,

and the sweet little old lady cackled with delight as a kitten lapped at the stuff, turned blue, and dropped over dead. The sins column began to show activity, and apparently the Great Wheel of Incarnations decided to go back and try again.

The little old lady dissolved into something I couldn't identify, but Master Li muttered that it looked like a case of leprosy. The leprosy dissolved into a misshapen worm, a vulture, a poisonous toad, a sow bug, a patch of spleenwort, and then a happy laughing little boy who was torturing a gecko. The sins column went to work, and Moon Boy's next incarnation was the stuff of legend: Mad Monk Mu of Midnight Marsh.

The ghoulish monk dissolved into a patch of quicksand as the Great Wheel of Incarnations tried again. The quicksand dissolved into feverish swamp vapor, a series of spiders, a vampire bat, a hyena, and finally into Moon Boy—but Moon Boy dressed as a girl and playing with a cat. I was relieved to see that he wasn't torturing it. Then I slowly realized that Moon Boy was training the cat to scratch the eyes from the rival's baby, and the mirror appeared to shudder as though gathering forces for one final effort.

Light formed around Moon Boy's beautiful face. The nimbus grew brighter and brighter, shimmering like tongues of fire. Moon Boy was changing and yet not changing, rearranging in a way that was both familiar and strong. His face lifted. His arms rose as though reaching for the sun. Brilliant colors moved around and through him. The sins column had overflowed and was stretching down the wall, and the virtues column remained empty.

Suddenly the columns disappeared. The image disappeared.

Words formed in the mirror. *"Judgment is beyond the jurisdiction of lower courts, and is reserved for the Supreme Deity."* Then the words vanished and Moon Boy was staring back at his own image.

"Heaven preserve us," the Recorder whispered.

"Incredible," Master Li said. "We must thank the gods that this fellow is not under our jurisdiction! The Son of Heaven will assign temporal punishment to him and his oafish accomplice, but I had best glance at the Register of Souls to ensure that an earthly sentence will not conflict with a divine one."

I doubt that the Recorder of Past Existences would normally have allowed such a thing, but he was a shaken man. He meekly allowed Master Li to spend a minute in the room where the register was kept, and then he hastily escorted us back through the maze, opened a door, shoved us outside to a courtyard, and slammed the door behind us.

Master Li doubled over with laughter. "What a pair you are!" he chortled. "It's an honor to travel with such distinguished young gentlemen, so let's travel to see a friend of mine, and then on to see Tou Wan, the wife of the Laughing Prince."

I had to admire Moon Boy. He had just discovered that his previous existences broke the world record for wickedness, but he preened himself as though nothing had happened and kept his voice steady.

"At the risk of sounding stupid, why don't we go see the bureaucratic assassin himself?" he asked reasonably.

Master Li started off in silence. Finally he cleared his throat and said, "That would be a bit difficult. You see, according to the Register of Souls, the Laughing Prince managed to elude the bailiffs, and he has never arrived in Hell."

18

Looking back at it, I think it was fortunate that Moon Boy and I were preoccupied with images of a mad mummy creeping up from a tomb to the room where Grief of Dawn lay helpless in bed. It distracted us from the details of Hell, and some of them were very unpleasant. We were approaching the river How Nai-ho, which is the boundary between the First and Second Hells. It is spanned by three bridges: One is gold and is used by visiting gods and their emissaries, one is silver and is used by the virtuous, and the third is a ramshackle bamboo bridge with no handrails that is used by sinners. The sinners scream in terror as they try to cross the river. Inevitably they fall off, and horrible bronze dogs and snakes splash through the water with jaws gaping wide. The water bubbles with blood, but it's merely a foretaste of what is to come, because the mangled bodies wash up on the far bank and are miraculously healed, and laughing demons lead the sinners to places where torment begins in earnest.

Master Li marched toward the gold bridge while Moon Boy bellowed, "Make way for Lord Li of Kao, emissary of the Son of Heaven!" and we proceeded past glaring demons and over the golden span as though we owned it. The Second Hell punishes dishonest male and female intermediaries and ignorant or unscrupulous doctors. The torment is not one of the terrible ones, but the smell is revolting, and Moon Boy and Master Li clapped handkerchiefs to their noses. I was used to barnyards, so I wasn't bothered very much. We made our way down long lines of pits, and finally Master Li stopped at one where a fat fellow with a mournful flabby face was buried in soft manure up to his chin. Even through the reek he could smell living flesh, and his eyes slowly lifted.

"Now, look here, Li Kao, if it's about that land I sold you!"

"Nothing like that," said Master Li.

"I had no idea there was alkali in the soil! May Heaven judge if I…er…may Heaven judge…er…oh, shit."

"Well, you should be an expert on the subject," Master Li said cheerfully. "Actually, the Yama Kings were quite lenient, considering the fact that you sold some of the same land to your own father."

The fat fellow began to weep, and tears made pale furrows in the brown goo that covered most of his face. "You wouldn't bring that to their attention, would you?" he sobbed. "You can't imagine what the Neo-Confucians are doing to this place! They'd send me to the Eighth Hell, and that's horror beyond belief."

"You should see what the same fellows are doing to China," Master Li said gloomily. "The other night I dreamed you had returned as court physician, and I hadn't been so happy in years."

It was difficult to draw oneself up with dignity under the circumstances, but the fat fellow tried.

"Not all of my patients died,'" he said huffily. "Some even managed to walk again, and one or two didn't even need crutches!"

"The ones you treated for colds?"

"Colds or pimples. It is not the physician's fault if a patient is lunatic enough to come in with a case of hangnails," the fellow said reasonably.

"You were a doctor in a million," Master Li said warmly. "Who else would have prescribed arsenic oxide for hiccups?"

"It worked!"

"No patient is in a position to dispute it," Master Li said somewhat ambiguously. "Medical expertise is not what I've come to see you about, however. Do you remember the walking trip we took in Tungan? It must have been eighty or ninety years ago, and I've reached the point where my brain resembles the stuff you're buried in. All I can remember is a girl in a scarlet sampan."

The transformation was amazing. Flab appeared to melt from the fat fellow's face, and I realized that he had once been a lighthearted and rather handsome young man.

"You remember her too?" he said softly. "Li Kao, not a day has passed in which I haven't thought of that girl. Wasn't that a time? She sang 'Autumn Nights' and tossed rice cakes into the water and laughed as we dove for them like ducks. By all the gods, I hope she made it to Heaven."

"Wasn't there a festival?" Master Li asked.

"A wild village one. Masks and drums and monkey-dances, and that big farmer picked you up after you'd blackened his eye and crowned you King of Fleas. We stayed drunk for a week, and they gave us gifts of food and flowers when we left."

He gazed sadly down at his manure pit. "What a wonderful thing it was to be young," he whispered.

Master Li told us to keep our eyes peeled for demons while he leaned down and tilted his wine flask at the fellow's lips. It had been a long time between, and he gulped a quart.

"Buddha, that's wonderful stuff! Haining Mountain Dew?"

"The best," Master Li said. "You were an avid botanist in those days, and I seem to remember that after we left the girl in the sampan we set out cross-country. We passed a temple or a convent, and when we climbed into the hills, you discovered—"

"The Bombay thorn apple!" the fellow cried. "How could I forget it? The find of a lifetime, and I always planned to go back, but somehow the world closed in on me and I never did."

"Could you find it now?" Master Li asked.

The fellow looked up with sudden intelligence in his eyes. "So that's it. You need a Bombay thorn apple, do you? Dangerous stuff, Li Kao. You always did get involved in the damnedest things, and how you manage to keep alive is one of the great mysteries of the empire." Master Li leaned down with the flask again.

"What a pair we are," the fellow said when he stopped coughing. "I'm damned and you're demented. I may be a sinner, but at least I know it isn't nice to deprive children or lunatics of their toys, and if I wanted the only Bombay thorn apple I've ever seen in China I'd go about two miles past the White Cloud Convent to the point where the hills are closest to the road. I'd turn east and start climbing. Shale followed by granite followed by some kind of black rock, and past the black rock I'd come to a clearing in front of a cliff. Tunnel through the brush, and right against the cliff another tiny clearing, and in the center is a Bombay thorn apple—unless somebody's cut it down for firewood and massacred his family and neighbors in the process."

His eyes moved to Moon Boy and me. "Something to do with Beauty and the Beast, eh? Take care, Li Kao. This is the soft area of hell. Later on you'll need a better passport than a state umbrella."

After Li bowed and turned to go. "You know, the Yama Kings are stern but just," he said. "Good intentions can at least partially mitigate bad results, and the Great Wheel waits patiently. Who knows? After a couple insect and animal incarnations, you might find yourself poling down the Yangtze in a crimson sampan." The fellow looked up with desperate hope in his eyes. "You couldn't possibly have sneaked a look at the Register of Souls." he whispered.

Master Li winked. We started off down the path, and the last I saw of the fellow he was weeping with joy at the thought of being reborn as a sampan singsong girl, and the last I heard of him he was practicing "Autumn Nights."

The torments of the Third and Fourth Hells are also relatively light, and are designed for such sinners as bad bureaucrats, backbiters, forgers, coiners, misers, dishonest tradesmen, and blasphemers. Serious torment begins in the Fifth Hell, where murderers, unbelievers, and the lustful are punished. I will make no attempt to describe the cauldrons of boiling oil, the pits of molten lead, the beams of hollow iron, the Hill of Knives, and the Sawmill. Master Li told me that such things are

used by most cultures with the exception of the Tibetan, and that the Yama Kings had no intention of instituting the unspeakable atrocities of the Tibetan World of Darkness.

According to the Register of Souls, Tou Wan had been damned not for murder and torture but for wanton carnality, and the Fifth Hell provides such sinners with beds in which to cool down. We marched down rows of beds formed from sheets of ice to which sinners were held by frozen iron chains, and naked bodies shuddered unceasingly and the air was loud with the sound of cracking joints. We came to the wife of the Laughing Prince in the fiftieth row.

I was not prepared for her youth and beauty. Like the others, she shuddered and jerked in her chains, but she made not a whimper and her eyes were open instead of being fastened shut by eyelids thick with frozen tears. Master Li bowed deeply.

"Princess, I hope you will forgive the intrusion," he said. "We had hoped to interview your noble husband, but he appears to be unavailable."

Her lips parted with the sound of cracking ice. "Unavailable?"

"Somehow he managed to dodge the bailiffs. Do you have any idea how he managed it?"

She managed an ironic laugh, and I decided she was the toughest person I had ever met. "They should have searched for his soul inside the stone," she said.

"The stone!" Master Li exclaimed. "Wherever we go, we keep running into references to that stone. Would you be kind enough to enlighten me on the subject?"

Tou Wan's voice was as cold as the ice she lay on. "Guess, if you like. If you guess right, I may answer one or two questions."

"I shall guess that the stone was broken into three pieces, and the largest piece was placed in a sacristy, and the second largest was used by your husband as an amulet, and the last sliver became the tip of your hairpin," said Master Li.

"You guess well, old man," the princess said. "Ssu-ma Ch'ien broke it, the meddling fool, and he wasn't even half right about it. He called it the Stone of Evil, and his mistake cost him his balls. What would you call the stone, old man?"

Master Li looked thoughtfully at her. "I would not call it evil and I would not call it good," he said slowly. "I would call it a concentrated life force that in the hands of a saint could heal all wounds, but in the hands of your husband could wound all heals, if you will forgive the sophistry."

"Better and better, old man," Tou Wan said. Her eyes closed. Ice began to form over her lips. I thought she had ended the interview, but then her body shuddered and jerked, and the ice over her mouth cracked.

"It was not his, it was never his, it was mine…. A lover gave it to me…. Lovers always gave things to me…. I was ten when I let a boy think he had seduced me; he gave me his mother's rings…. A pretty boy, so easy to train, like a dog…. Lie down!

Sit up! … His father came for the rings and I trained him too…. Roll over! Beg! … I led him around on a leash that only women could see; how they hated me, the sluts…. He made me his number seven wife, and I persuaded him and his pretty son to go to a war where they were sure to be killed…. Hsu was the lawyer and Kung-sun was the magistrate…. Lie down! Sit up! Roll over! Beg! … I threw the other wives out into the street, and then Yi Shou the merchant with his jewels and carriages, Governor Kuo with his houses and land, wriggling like good little dogs begging to be petted…. I could not train Prince Liu Sheng, but he gave me a crown…. It was his steward who gave me the stone…. The stone…. Holding it against my skin, feeling the pulse…. My husband stole it from me and it drove him mad, madder than I believed possible…. The Little Tour, the Big Tour, one thousand seconds, the Embryonic Pearl, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill! … Ssu-ma broke the stone, and all I had was the sliver for my hairpin…. That maid, always looking at it, always wanting it, trying to steal it…. I stabbed her, but she ran away with my stone…. My maid and that concubine with the ring of Upuaut my husband gave her…. The soldiers killed them, but they could not find the stone…. It was mine, all of it was mine…. My husband refused to give me a second piece…. He laughed and showed me a tender poem for my coffin, and then he made me drink poison…. Mad monks in motley dancing and laughing around my bed…. Cold…. Colder…. Mist, sounds of water, bailiffs pulling me into a gray world, Yama Kings, freezing, freezing, freezing…."

Tou Wan's eyes opened. She looked at me. "Peasant boy, you would have made a good little dog." Her eyes were deep and wondering as they moved to Moon Boy. "You I would have worshipped." Her eyes moved to Master Li.

"You I could neither have worshipped nor broken and trained," said the princess. "Old man, I fear you. Go away."

Master Li bowed, and Moon Boy and I followed his example. Tou Wan's eyes closed and her mouth shut with a sound like the click of a lock. I raised the state umbrella and we marched on down the path.

"What an extraordinary young woman," Master Li said admiringly. "The phrase 'tougher than Tou Wan' must enter the language, and we should try to do something about her bed of ice."

19

We walked across a long gray plain that led to the great gray walls of the Sixth Hell. Gray grass bent beneath a cold gray breeze, and the gray sky seemed to press down upon us.

"Master Li, I don't understand about the stone," I said. "Isn't it evil? Ssu-ma thought so, and he wrote that the author of *Dream of the Red Chamber* had been quoting from the Annals of Heaven and Earth."

Master Li walked on in silence for some time. Then he said, "Ox, we can't be sure that the legendary annals were actually involved, but we do know that both Ssu-ma and Tsao Hsueh Chin accepted as proof the reactions of two great men who possessed the stone. Both Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu cried, 'Evil!' and hurled it away, but did they really mean that the stone was evil? Could they have meant something else? There's at least one other possibility, and it has to do with the shape of the stone."

The shape? I tried to recall the words of Ssu-ma. "Flat smooth area rising to round concave bowl shape." What did that have to do with evil?

"But Tou Wan said that it drove her husband mad," Moon Boy pointed out. "Doesn't that imply the stone was evil?"

"No," Master Li said flatly. "Her words make it perfectly clear. The inner power of the stone tempted the Laughing Prince to use it in the ridiculously dangerous discipline called Taoist Ideal Breathing. The goal is personal immortality, which is always an invitation to disaster. You lie on your back with your tongue pressed against the roof of your mouth to catch brain dew, which is what Taoists call saliva. Normally you press the middle finger of each hand against the opposite palm, but I suspect that the Laughing Prince pressed his fingers against the ch'i pulse of the stone. You suck in air and hold it for thirty seconds, and then purify it by releasing drops of brain dew and send it through your chest and heart. That's called the Little Tour. Every lunar month you increase the time you hold your breath by five seconds, and when you can do so for one hundred fifty seconds, you're ready for the Big Tour."

"Holding your breath for two and a half minutes can be dangerous," Moon Boy pointed out.

"You get dizzy and disoriented," I said. "If you keep it up, you might damage your brain."

"You might indeed," said Master Li. "That's only the beginning. The Big Tour is to send purified air through your chest, heart, abdomen, liver, kidneys, and sexual organs, and every lunar month you continue to hold your breath five seconds longer. When you reach one thousand seconds you will supposedly produce inside your body something called the Embryonic Pearl, which is a divine Elixir of Life."

"Of life? You'd be dead!" I exclaimed.

"Not necessarily. The body is capable of amazing things," said Master Li. "The problem is the brain. It must have a steady supply of fresh air, and the Laughing Prince went mad."

I saw the Laughing Prince clutching the stone, holding his breath longer and longer, holding it until the physicians shook their heads and ordered the Cloud Gong to sound the death knell; I saw a mad prince wrapped in darkness, clutching the stone and holding his breath as the centuries passed; I saw his eyes open, and the lid of his coffin lifting up, and a lunatic encased in jade stalking from his tomb; I saw a shadow in the moonlight, and Grief of Dawn on her sickbed—

"Ox, this is your department," Master Li said.

I snapped back to reality. I had thought that the gray plain was smooth and unbroken, but I was wrong.

"Did either of you happen to glance back after we first stepped out into Hell?" Master Li asked.

Neither of us had.

"The door closed behind us and vanished. Nothing but the blank wall of a cliff," he said. "That means we have only one exit from the underworld, the Great Wheel, which means we must reach the Tenth Hell."

Ahead of us was Yin-Yang Gorge, which is spanned by a swinging rope no more than two inches wide. We stood at the edge and peered down, but there seemed to be no bottom.

"What do you think?" Master Li asked.

I looked around. Demons have lowly servants called raksha. Some of them carried huge water buckets on the ends of long wooden yokes, and I said, "Sir, I think the two aristocrats should beat the insolent peasant and punish him by slapping a yoke on his stupid shoulders."

The demons appeared to approve as Master Li and Moon Boy whacked me, and they made no objection when the fierce old dignitary commandeered a raksha and took his yoke. I dumped the water from the oversize buckets and told Master Li and

Moon Boy to climb in. Master Li added rocks to his bucket until the weight was balanced, and I fixed the yoke on my shoulders and approached the rope bridge.

Anyone who has seen rope-walkers at festivals knows they balance themselves with long poles, and peasants spend a great deal of time carrying heavy things balanced on the ends of a yoke. I knew it wouldn't be difficult so long as I didn't panic. Besides, I had an umbrella far better than any rope-walker's.

I placed my left sandal upon the rope and started slowly across, using the state umbrella for added balance. The rope was swinging, but that was no problem so long as I didn't fight it. I quickly gained confidence. There was nothing to it, and I got to the center of the gorge with no difficulty. Then from the black depths came a sound so horrible that I knew whatever lurked down there was far worse than anything we had yet seen.

"Buddha! Moon Boy, what was that?" Master Li called from his bucket.

The sound came again, louder and even more horrible, and the hair on the back of my neck lifted so stiffly that it stretched the skin of my face back, and my teeth involuntarily bared in a wide mirthless grin.

"The evil minister!" Moon Boy yelled in terror. *"It's the lips of Ch'in Kuei, moving over a sinner who fell."*

I very nearly toppled off the rope. Ch'in Kuei is the prime minister who assassinated the great Yueh Fei, and has been punished by being given the body that reflects his soul. He's made of nothing but huge slimy lips. They have jagged little teeth set in them, and the minister eats and eats, sucking the flesh from sinners, starting with the eyeballs, and the sickening sound was like a great wind that sucked the rope back and forth, swinging wildly over the gorge.

Sweat was blinding me. I wiped it away and tried to concentrate on the rope beneath my feet, but I kept imagining that fat drooling lips were lifting over my toes. In a moment I was going to fall. The only thing I could do was lean forward and start to run. The state umbrella was a life-saver, catching air and pulling up, but the problem was keeping my shoulders straight so the buckets didn't swing, and I had to use short rapid steps because the rope kept moving. Sooner or later I was going to miss.

I knew from the moment that my right sandal started down that I would miss the moving rope, and if I leaned to the left to catch up to it, I would be completely unbalanced. A smacking slobbering sound from below helped me to push off with my left foot and leap ahead. My hands reached out as far as they could, and as I fell, my fingers just reached the edge of the cliff at the far side of Yin-Yang Gorge. I dangled there, kicking wildly for a foothold, and my right foot hit a jutting rock. In half a minute I had made it over the edge, and Master Li and Moon Boy tumbled from the buckets to the gray grass. We crawled forward while the sickening sounds of Ch'in Kuei feeding on flesh gradually faded away.

"Ox, I wondered when things were going to get exciting," Moon Boy said, and then he leaned over and threw up.

Now we were in the Sixth Hell, where sacrilege is punished, and the torments we stared at didn't make it easier to control our stomachs. Finally we made it to our feet, and I picked up the state umbrella, which had fallen in front of me. We took deep breaths and started out again, marching arrogantly in our armor of Neo-Confucian superiority. Master Li avoided confrontations as we reached boundaries. The Seventh Hell punishes those who violate graves or sell or eat human flesh, and the Eighth Hell is for those lacking in filial piety, and I have no intention of describing the terrible things we saw. (I will, however, strongly advise against winding up in the Eighth Hell so long as Neo-Confucians are in charge.) Master Li could no longer avoid confrontations at the border of the Ninth Hell. The only way to get to the Tenth and the Great Wheel was to go right through the palace of the Ninth Yama King, and Master Li was thinking deeply as we approached the walls where long lines of sinners shuffled toward their doom, weeping gray tears.

"Goo-goo-goo."

"Ox, did you hear that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Goo-goo-goo."

"Great Buddha! It's the entire congregation from the Eye of Tranquility," Master Li exclaimed.

Indeed it was, and he walked up the line peering at faces.

"Hello, Hsiang!"

"Hello, Li Kao. What are you doing here?" the toad asked mournfully.

"I was about to ask the same of you," said Master Li.

The toad shook his fist in the general direction of Peking. "Those cursed vendors!" he yelled. "Kao, it occurred to the greedy bastards that gentlemen in search of salvation should mortify the flesh, so along with worms they began selling cheese."

I shuddered. Like most Chinese I find cheese disgusting, and I could well imagine that eating the stuff would be mortification of the first order.

"Cheese killed all of you?" Master Li asked skeptically.

"Well, no," the toad said. "Competing vendors began selling raw sea slugs."

Master Li shrugged. "I prefer them minced and steamed with eels, but they shouldn't have done much more than make you throw up when they squirmed in your stomach."

"Well, you see, Li Kao, they came from the bay where the boys deposit the night soil," the toad said sadly.

"You didn't eat them!" Master Li exclaimed in horror.

"We lived through that, but then the vendors began stuffing the sea slugs with the cheese."

Master Li turned pale, and Moon Boy and I turned green.

"I remember it precisely," the toad groaned. "It was the double hour of the cock on the third day of the eighth moon when a homicidal vendor came up with the idea of peddling all his wares at the same time, so he began stuffing the worms into the cheese inside the sea slugs."

"Jade Emperor, preserve us," Master Li said. "I assume that the next thing you knew, you were shuffling toward the basilica of the God of Walls and Ditches."

"The god was furious," the toad sniffled. "Nothing in the Register of Life and Death covered the combination of worms, cheese, and sea slugs, and since we had prematurely departed from the red dust of earth, we were sentenced to the Ninth Hell."

"Goo-goo-goo," the codgers chanted, hoping that Heaven could still see them release worms from jars.

"Look at the bright side," Master Li said soothingly. "In three years you'll be allowed to return in ghost form, and you can haunt the vendors as much as you like."

The toad turned purple. "You don't know those vendors!" he shouted. "They'll stuff our ghosts inside the worms inside the cheese inside the sea slugs and call it the Four Fetid Flavors of Suffering Serenity and make a goddamn fortune!"

Master Li's eyes moved to the gate ahead. The demons were the most ferocious we had seen, and the devils were obviously high officials, and we weren't going to get very far with a badge of office and a state umbrella. A side gate led to a garden of gray flowers, and Master Li bent down and slipped his lock picks from the false heel of his left sandal.

"Hsiang, are you going to give up this easily? No, by all the gods!" Master Li exclaimed. "You've been treated most unfairly, and surely Heaven will hear your plea if you all put your hearts into it. Where's His Holiness? There you are! Come on, men. One last grand effort!"

"Goo-goo-goo," the codgers chanted timidly, but the saintliest of them all was made from stronger stuff:

"I pray to the Heavenly Master of the First Origin!" he bellowed. *"I pray to the Heavenly Master of the Dawn of Jade of the Golden Door! I pray to the Queen Mother Wang! I pray to Chang-o and the Hare! I pray to Mother Lightning and the Master of Rain and My Lord Thunder and the Earl of Wind and the Little Boy of the Clouds."*

"Goo-goo-goo-goo-goo!" cried the codgers, gaining a little backbone.

Master Li bent to the lock of the side gate, hidden by the crowd. His Holiness obligingly drowned out the scrape of the pick.

"I pray to the Great Emperor of the Eastern Peak! I pray to the Princess of Streaked Clouds! I pray to Kuan-yin and Kuan-ti and the Eight Immortals! I pray to Lady Horsehead and King-of-Oxen and the Transcendent Pig and Prince Millet and Hun-po Chao, patron deity of the armpits!"

"Goo-goo-goo-goo-goo!"

The lock snapped open and we slipped through the gate and closed it behind us. The noise faded as the line shuffled on toward the palace. We saw that there was a series of small gardens, each secured by a locked gate, and we would have to get through seven of them to reach the side of the palace. Master Li swore under his breath as he tackled the next lock. None of the picks was the right size, and he had to work with infinite care and patience. At last it opened and we raced through the next garden. The lock on the second gate was easier, but the third one was almost impossible. Master Li broke two picks and was trying to get leverage with a third when we heard footsteps crunching over gray gravel. It sounded like the approach of an elephant, and Moon Boy slipped back through the shrubbery to take a look.

"Got it," Master Li whispered.

The gate swung open. We left it ajar for Moon Boy and ran through the next garden to the fourth gate. The crunching footsteps had stopped. Then I heard a noise that made the hair lift on my head.

A demon was angrily sniffing the scent of living flesh. The sound indicated something huge and horrible, and we heard a growl like muffled thunder. Master Li worked furiously on the lock, but it was another difficult one and when the footsteps started toward us I knew we'd never make it through in time. I picked up a large gray rock as a weapon and slipped back through the bushes, and when I parted some branches and peered out I had to stifle a howl of horror.

This demon was enough to terrify the great Ehr-lang. It stood at least ten feet tall. Its muscles looked like rolls of steel piled together, and its talons could rip tigers apart, and its fangs might have come from one of those creatures found frozen in Mongolian glaciers, and its nostrils were sniffing furiously, and its red eyes were blazing with blood lust. I was paralyzed. As I stood there like a statue, I suddenly realized I wasn't alone. Moon Boy stood across from me, mostly hidden by gray leaves, and he took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. In ten more steps the monster would reach a clearing where it could see the gate and Master Li, but Moon Boy was sauntering out to the path. The demon stared. Fangs glittered; talons lifted to strike.

Moon Boy smiled—the gray sky blurred and produced a patch of blue. Moon Boy smiled wider—two gray flowers strained to produce pink blossoms. Moon Boy reached high up and tickled the terrible creature beneath its chin.

"Come here, sugar," Moon Boy purred, and he led the demon back into the bushes.

20

Master Li had to spend a great deal of time on the fourth and fifth locks. He was working on the sixth when we heard a sound behind us and a handsome young man came limping up the path. He was pale and weak and shaky, but he managed an elegant wave of a hand.

"Hell," he said, "is grossly maligned. I must come here often." I honored him with the three obeisances and nine kowtows. "Buddha, the thing on that divine creature reminded me of the imperial flagpole at the funeral of General Ching!" Moon Boy said happily. "Better hurry. Any moment now the darling boy will catch his second wind and come looking for an encore."

"Moon Boy, designing your medal will be one of the great challenges of the millennium," said Master Li. "We'll have to acquire the services of Deng the Debauched, and even Deng will be hard put to do you justice without landing all of us in jail."

The lock snapped open and we hurried through the garden to the Seventh and last gate. Fortunately, it had an easy lock. We slipped through just as heavy crunching footsteps approached, and we reached the palace wall as a huge hoarse voice cooed, "Yoo-hoo?" I found a likely window and a moment later we were inside.

Down a corridor ahead of us was a huge room where endless rows of clerks scribbled in enormous ledgers, and above the doorway was the inscription "Tribunal of the Ninth Realm of Darkness." We straightened our clothing and brushed off gray leaves and dirt. I raised the state umbrella proudly, and Master Li marched beneath it into the anteroom. Bureaucrats were dashing in and out of a doorway, and I actually got a glimpse of a Yama King: a dark crowned shape seated upon a throne, surrounded by clerks and courtiers. In all great bureaucracies the clerks are too busy and important to look up, so Master Li simply marched past rows of doors until he came to one with the title "Treasurer of the Ninth Realm of Darkness." He shoved the door open and we walked inside. We marched past more busy clerks to a great desk where a spirit who resembled a shark was clicking like mad on two abacuses at once, and the nine buttons on his gauze cap indicated that we had

reached the treasurer himself. Cold shark eyes lifted to Master Li's emblems and state umbrella.

"No inspection has been scheduled," he snapped.

"Of course not," Master Li said with equal coldness. "One who raids an illegal cricket-fighting parlor does not announce his plans in advance."

The treasurer shot to his feet. "You dare to compare this office to a cricket-fighting parlor?" he said furiously.

Master Li shrugged. "In such establishments peculiar things happen to the odds, and it has come to the attention of the Son of Heaven that peculiar things have happened to the odds in this office."

"Explain yourself, sir!"

"The emperor," Master Li said, "has been informed that the fee which purchased his own release from Hell has been unaccountably increased, which makes it virtually impossible for those unfairly imprisoned to be saved."

"A lie! A vicious and unfounded slander!" the treasurer yelled. "Emperor T'ang purchased his passage for thirteen casks of silver and gold, and thirteen casks remains the price!"

"I sincerely hope so. We are here to ensure that the system works smoothly and equitably, and there is but one way of doing so," said Master Li. "The Son of Heaven, you will recall, had no funds with him but was able to borrow on the credit account of the saintly Hsiang Liang."

The treasurer sat down. A smile was on his face and malice was in his eyes.

"The emperor indeed did so, but only on the authority of Minister Ts'ui," he said softly. "It so happens that I currently occupy the ministerial position, and do you have my authority to borrow on the account of Hsiang Liang?"

Master Li wrinkled his nose. "Who said anything about using the same account? Since there are three of us we shall require three times the amount, and I doubt that even Hsiang Liang's good deeds have deposited that much."

"Less than twenty mortals in all history have amassed thirty-nine casks of silver and gold in their credit accounts," the treasurer said with malicious laugh. "I sincerely hope for your sake that you are in a position to borrow from T'su T'sin, the priest of the Temple of Lepers."

"Nothing so grand," said Master Li, bowing reverently at the name. One hand was behind his back and the fingers were tightly crossed. "We request you to check the credit balance of—"

Moon Boy and I stared at each other. Who could possibly have that much virtue on deposit?

"—a common singsong girl and prostitute named Grief of Dawn," Master Li said calmly.

We smothered yelps of astonishment. The treasurer grabbed ledgers and ran his finger down rows of names and numbers, and when the finger stopped I thought he had suffered a stroke. "You have proof of permission to borrow on this account?" he said in a choked whisper.

Master Li took the interlocking phoenix/dragon headband from Moon Boy and handed it across the desk. The treasurer's finger moved to the fine print, and his voice took on a weak whine. "Well, why didn't you *say* it was a joint account? Of course you can borrow the money. As much as you like! Sign here, here, and here."

Moon Boy signed there, there, and there, and in about as much time as it takes to tell it, I was hauling a cart upon which were piled thirty-nine casks of silver and gold. Master Li and Moon Boy sat on a couple of the casks, and the state umbrella rose grandly above them. The treasurer led the way to a side door and clapped a perfumed handkerchief to his nose.

"Get out quickly," he hissed.

The door opened, I pulled the cart through, and the treasurer hastily slammed the door shut behind us. We were in the Ninth Hell, and I hope I may be allowed to pause for a brief tirade.

The Ninth Hell is the delight of theologians and the despair of everyone else. Technically it houses *wang-ssu-ch'eng*, those who died in accidents, but it is also the destination for suicides, those who died without proper prayers and ceremonies, and all who died before the official date set down in the Register of Life and Death—like the toad and his goo-goo friends. In the Ninth Hell there are no torments, which is the worst torment of all. Without punishment there can be no repentance and purification and rebirth, and the poor lost souls of the Ninth Hell must serve the sentence of imprisonment for all eternity.

Mind you, no crime is involved. Many of the damned are innocent children. After three years the damned are allowed to occasionally return to earth in ghost form (which is the reason for the Feast of Hungry Ghosts), and it is theoretically possible for a ghost to be saved by finding someone to take his place. That is why it is so dangerous to linger where a child has drowned or a man has hanged himself. The spirit will try to seize you and drag you down to the Ninth Hell, and only by doing so can it earn a place on the Great Wheel of Transmigrations. In practical terms the chances of reaching the Wheel are almost nonexistent.

All one hundred thirty-five lesser Hells and all but one of the major ones are dedicated to justice. The Ninth Hell alone is unjust. None but a theologian could love it. How can I forget a little girl I saw weeping beside the road, damned for eternity because she slipped and fell into a stream? It is my sincere belief that priests could deal a death blow to atheism by destroying the Ninth Hell, and the proper petitions should be submitted to Heaven at once.

The moment we stepped outside we were assaulted by the stench of unwashed bodies. Venality is rampant in the Ninth Hell, where the lowest of demons sell food and drink at ruinous prices, and an army of lost souls besieged us, screaming for coins. We would surely have been crushed had not Master Li and Moon Boy been able to scoop handfuls of gold and silver from the casks and hurl them into the mob. The poor souls fought for coins like animals, and the weak and the young had no chance at all.

Each chest was nicely calculated to get us so far across the long gray plain. Master Li and Moon Boy hurled coins until their arms were falling from the sockets, and as the cart grew lighter, I was able to pull it faster. Ahead was the great gray wall of the Tenth Hell, rising at the top of a hill. I puffed and panted as I hauled the cart up the steep slope. The howling wretches began to dwindle behind us. One determined band kept up, but Moon Boy had one last cask, and he tilted it and a shower of silver fell down the hill. At last we were rid of the mob and could start worrying about reaching the Great Wheel.

A demon army patrols the walls of the Tenth Hell. Master Li wasted little time. By ripping the canopy from the state umbrella he was able to fashion an acceptable ceremonial wreath, and the handle passed for a wand, and Moon Boy's jewels produced a pearl that could pass for the sacred one. Moon Boy and I were naturally suited to be the Disciples of Wealth and Poverty, and Master Li's venerable wrinkles formed a passport of their own. He started toward the walls waving blessings right and left, and the cry went up: *"Ti-tsang Wang-p'u-sa! The God of Mercy arrives for his annual inspection!"*

The wall was not difficult. There were many foot- and handholds, and Master Li hopped up on my back and Moon Boy grabbed my belt. I was halfway up the side before the soldiers began to wonder why the God of Mercy simply didn't fly over the thing, and the alarm wasn't sounded until I was almost at the top. Arrows flew harmlessly over our heads and started down the other side, but I almost fell nonetheless. I simply wasn't prepared for my first view of the Great Wheel of Transmigrations.

The immensity of it cannot be described. Some phenomenon made the lower spokes move slowly even while higher ones were lifting with blinding speed. The wheel lifted up and up and up, and it wasn't even halfway visible. It vanished in gray clouds, and I realized that it had to reach the surface of the earth and then keep lifting until it could deposit newborn yaks upon the highest mountains of Tibet.

Endless lines of the dead were converging upon a humble cottage where Lady Meng brewed and served the Broth of Oblivion. When the dead were herded back into lines their minds were as empty as the eyes of politicians, and demons tossed the trappings of their next existences over their heads: animal skins, bird feathers, and so on. It took a little while for the soldiers inside the wall to be alerted to our presence, and by that time we were shuffling in a line with sheepskins over our heads. Master

Li's nimble fingers had snatched them so quickly the attendant didn't know they were gone, and the soldiers passed us by.

We were getting very close to the Great Wheel. The dead were climbing inside to swinging platforms. "Ox, if we get inside we'll never be able to get out," Master Li whispered. I nodded and he prepared to hop on my back, and Moon Boy prepared to grab my belt.

"Now," I whispered.

Master Li hopped and Moon Boy grabbed and I jumped and caught a spoke. I managed to get my feet on the outer edge of the rim just as the soldiers spotted us. Demons screamed with rage, and arrows and spears flew, but we were rising with great speed. An arrow missed Moon Boy's nose by half an inch and a spear grazed my arm, and then we were too high for missiles to reach, and a moment later we were shooting up into the clouds. We rose with incredible speed that made tears blur my eyes, and Master Li began to swear quite foully.

We had left the demons below, but we would be lost if we couldn't see where to get off, and the clouds obscured everything. Long minutes massed as we whirled into infinity, and still the clouds billowed around us. Then I began to see pinpricks of light like tiny stars, and Master Li scanned the sky.

"There! The perfectly round one. See it?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Don't miss."

"No, sir," I said.

The small round spot of light appeared to be zooming toward us at unbelievable speed. I crouched, trying to judge the trajectory. "Ready," I said. My heart stopped when a thick cloud blinded me, but then we shot through it. "Set," I said. The light was crossing my imaginary target point and I jumped with all the strength I had. We shot across the sky like a projectile from a catapult, and the light grew brighter and brighter, and then plunged straight into the center of it and hit a wall of water.

The breath was knocked out of me and I almost choked to death as I floated upward, and then my head broke through the surface and I gasped and gulped fresh air. I hauled Master Li and Moon Boy to a bank and dragged them up. We were lying on green grass and a yellow sun was shining, and bright birds were chirping, and a white skull was grinning up at us from the bottom of a pool.

❁ ❁ ❁

Master Li crawled over and tilted his wine flask over the pool and Moon Boy and I watched the wine whirl in a spout that disappeared into the grinning jaws.

"Ling, old friend, you are a truly great artist," Master Li said.

The reeds moved. *"Burp."* They moved again. *"No, but I am not a bad quack."*

Moon Boy was probing sensitive areas that might or might not have come into contact with an oversized demon. I stared at a long bleeding scratch where a spear might or might not have grazed my arm. Master Li grinned at us.

"Moon Boy, have you forgotten your teacher and the bandit he deafened? Ox, have you forgotten Granny Ho and her son-in-law? If Moon Boy hadn't handled that demon we would have been killed, and if Ox had missed the target just now we would also have been killed. We have been treated to the artistry of the great Liu Ling, which makes questions of literal truth immaterial, if not absurd. Was Chuang Tzu imagining himself to be the butterfly, or was the butterfly imagining itself to be Chuang Tzu?"

He turned back to the pool and poured more wine in, and the old man and the skull drank in comfortable silence like old friends.

"Ling," Master Li finally said, "your priests did a marvelous job of probing our minds while we lay in mushroom stupors, and they were not blinded as I am by subjective experience. Is it permissible to ask for an opinion?"

The reeds remained still.

"Let's put it this way. If you were to entertain somebody with the story of Li Kao and Number Ten Ox and Grief of Dawn and Moon Boy and Prince Liu Pao and so on, what would you call it?"

The reeds remained quiet, but then, slowly, they moved. *"Shi tou chi!"*

"The Story of the Stone?" Master Li nodded. "Yes, I vaguely perceive what you mean. It's a question of priorities, of course, and I haven't quite sorted them out. But I'm almost there, I think."

He got to his feet. Moon Boy and I followed his example, and we bowed to the skull.

"Ling," Master Li said, "I still say you're a very great artist."

The reeds moved for the last time. *"Kao, I still say you were born to be bung."*

A priest was holding a gate open for us. We walked out to a green hillside, and the last I saw of the Temple of Illusion was a window in a small tower with shutters half-closed. A winking eye.

21

A few miles past the White Cloud Convent we turned off the path and climbed shale and granite and black rock and crossed a clearing. We burrowed through brush to another cleaning at the side of a cliff, and Master Li gazed happily at a strange and rather unimpressive plant.

"The mind is a miser," he said. "Nothing is ever thrown away, and it's amazing what you can find if you dig deep enough." He began stripping thorny little seedlike things. "Don't play with thorn apples unless you know what you're doing," he cautioned. "They're of the nightshade family, like mandrake and henbane and belladonna, and their principal product is poison. From the Bombay thorn apple comes the legendary potion of India, dhatura, which can stupefy, paralyze, or kill, depending upon the dosage, but which can also produce a medicine with remarkable effect upon internal bleeding and fever. With any luck we'll have Grief of Dawn on her feet in no time."

Our trip back to the Valley of Sorrows was fast and uneventful, although Moon Boy and I grew ever more apprehensive as we approached, and we were weak with relief when the feather-duster head of Prince Liu Pao thrust from a studio window and called cheerfully to us.

"Hurray! Grief of Dawn is as good as cured!" the prince yelled optimistically. "She's been unchanged! No weird sounds while you were gone, no more murdered monks, and no mad mummies crawling up from tombs!"

Moon Boy and I ran inside. Grief of Dawn looked very lovely and very vulnerable as she tossed in fever. She seemed to sense our presence and tried to sit up, and fell back, and Master Li stepped up and took her pulse. Since he used the right wrist I assumed he was checking on the condition of her lungs, stomach, large intestine, spleen, and parta ulta. He grunted with satisfaction.

"She can take the potion in full strength," he said confidently, and at once he set to work with the thorn apple; boiling, distilling, blending with herbs and mysterious ingredients, and finally testing it on a cat who seemed to enjoy it.

I don't know whether or not the stuff could be called miraculous but I do know that Master Li added a final ingredient that no other physician could have managed. Moon Boy and I propped up Grief of Dawn, and Master Li managed to get a good dose of the potion down her throat. Within a minute she was stirring restlessly, and then her eyes opened. At first she saw nothing. Her eyes cleared and focused and her head moved forward and her lips brushed Moon Boy's cheek. "Darling," she whispered. I leaned forward. "Dear Ox," she said, and she kissed me too, and even managed to blush when Prince Liu Pao grinned and presented his cheek for a kiss.

"What happened?" she whispered. "It was dark and damp and I was running and running and running, and something terrible was behind me."

"Well, it's gone now," Master Li said comfortingly. "You have nothing to worry about except how in hell Ox is going to add enough space to our shack."

The sick girl sat up straight.

"I've already figured it out, and there'll even be space for Moon Boy when he pops up," I said happily.

"How about the prince?" said Master Li. "Let's include all of the family. Your Highness, do you object to sleeping three to a bed when you wander into our alley in Peking?"

"Not at all!" the prince said cheerfully.

Grief of Dawn was looking at Master Li with wide glistening eyes. The old sage shook his head ruefully.

"A man my age starting one more family. Sheer idiocy! At least," he added, "I'll have the most fascinating young wife in all Peking, and that is the understatement of the century."

I didn't fully understand what he meant until Grief of Dawn had completely recovered. Both she and the prince had us recount our adventures in Hell over and over, and Grief of Dawn gazed in wonder at the scar where the arrow had entered her chest and said she wished she could remember what it was like to be stone-cold dead. Master Li paced the floor, obviously yearning for action. His excitement was catching, and I think it helped speed Grief of Dawn's recovery, and then she was as fit as she had ever been and Master Li got us up with the sun. He said it was time to try something, and we had best be heavily armed. I chose an axe and stuck a short sword in my belt. Moon Boy and the prince both selected spears and daggers. Master Li lined his belt with throwing knives. Grief of Dawn was far and away the best archer among us, and she selected a bow from the pile and added a quiver of arrows and a knife in her belt. Master Li climbed up on my back.

"Start down the hill, and go across the valley to the hill beside the monastery," he said. "Along the way I'll entertain you with some fascinating notes I've taken."

Master Li pulled out a sheaf of notes and told Grief of Dawn to walk beside me. It had rained during the night, and the morning was very beautiful. Raindrops like tiny

pearls glowed on each leaf, and damp grass sparkled like diamonds in the sunlight.

"My pet, according to the inner recesses of my mind, you have a credit account in Hell that could buy one or two of the lesser kingdoms. The reason lies in a lullaby to old Tai-tai that you sang when you were delirious, and that was only the beginning of an incredible performance. You're packed with more marvels than the Puzzle Book of Lu Pan!" he said enthusiastically. "Let's start with one of the most astounding conversations I've ever experienced."

He flipped through his notes and began to read aloud.

GRIEF OF DAWN: Mistress, must I go to Chien's? It smells so bad, and the bargemen make rude jokes about ladies, and that old man with one leg always tries to pinch me.
MASTER LI: Darling, what does your mistress want you to buy at Chien's?
GRIEF OF DAWN: Rhinoceros hides.
MASTER LI: And where is Chien's?
GRIEF OF DAWN: Halfway between the canal and Little Ch'ing-hu Lake.
MASTER LI: Darling, does your mistress ever send you to Kang Number Eight's?
GRIEF OF DAWN: I like Kang Number Eight's.
MASTER LI: Where is it?
GRIEF OF DAWN: On the Street of Worn Cash-Coin.
MASTER LI: What do you buy there?
GRIEF OF DAWN: Hats.
MASTER LI: Hats. Yes, of course. And where do you buy your mistress's painted fans?
GRIEF OF DAWN: The Coal Bridge.
MASTER LI: I suppose she also sends you to buy the famous boiled pork at…. What's the name of that place?
GRIEF OF DAWN: Wei-the-Big-Knife.
MASTER LI: Of course. Do you remember where it is?
GRIEF OF DAWN: Right beside the Cat Bridge.

Master Li lowered his notes, and regarded Grief of Dawn with the fondness of a connoisseur examining a rare orchid. "My pet," he said, "you were describing a shopping trip that the personal maid of an aristocratic lady might have taken in Hangchow."

"Hangchow?" the prince said with a startled expression on his face.

"Indeed yes, but you're right. No such establishments exist today, and the only reason I know about them is because they were often mentioned in the casual

journals of classical writers," said Master Li. "Both one-legged Ch'ien and his famous rhinoceros hides disappeared during a fire that destroyed the entire neighborhood during the late Han Dynasty. The Coal Bridge and Kang Number Eight's were razed to make way for a new canal more than three centuries ago. Wei-the-Big-Knife's was destroyed during the turmoil of the Three Kingdoms, and so it goes with every single reference."

Grief of Dawn's eyes were like soup bowls. "I don't remember saying any of that, and the names mean nothing to me," she protested.

Master Li shrugged. "You were delirious. At first I thought you were citing the same journals I'd read, but they're written in ancient scholarly shorthand that none but academics can decipher. I started asking loaded questions to pin down the exact date of this marvelous shopping trip, and I found it in two references."

He went back to his notes.

MASTER LI: And what's-his-name personally blends her ink?
GRIEF OF DAWN: Yes. Li Tinghuei.
MASTER LI: And that lovely courtesan makes pink paper for her?
GRIEF OF DAWN: Shieh Tao. Yes, she is lovely.

"Li Tinghuei and Shieh Tao are mentioned again and again in classical journals," said Master Li. "Since Tinghuei was senior by more than forty years, there could have been only a brief period when it was possible to patronize both of them. I checked the dates, and the amazing shopping trip took place between 765 and 771 years ago."

Moon Boy and I were gaping at Grief of Dawn, who was gaping at Master Li. Prince Liu Pao looked like he was mentally counting on his fingers, and Master Li read his mind.

"Precisely! That was when the Laughing Prince and Tou Wan kept a palace in Hangchow, and Tou Wan's maid would have accompanied her between Hangchow and the Valley of Sorrows."

Occasionally a moderately intelligent thought misses a turn and accidentally enters my mind, and I said, "Sir, in Hell you confirmed from the Recorder of Past Existences that the Broth of Oblivion isn't always properly administered, and Grief of Dawn had come to the Valley of Sorrows, but perhaps she was *returning* to the valley, because when she was wounded and hallucinating—"

"Good boy!" said Master Li. "I had begun to suspect that Grief of Dawn had been Tou Wan's maid in a previous incarnation. Fever allowed deep-buried memories to rise to the surface, stimulated by the familiar surroundings. I wasn't just guessing wildly, of course. An absolutely delightful pattern was beginning to emerge, and we'll get to it in a few minutes."

We began to climb again. Master Li led the way along a twisting path, and then we got down on our knees and crawled through the opening of a cave where the angle of the sun sent a flow of warm light over a small pile of bones. We sat in a semicircle around the skeleton of Wolf, and Master Li patted Grief of Dawn's knee reassuringly.

"A thought kept returning to my mind," he said. "Was it merely the familiar landscape of the Valley of Sorrows that released memories of a long-forgotten existence, or was something more dramatic involved? The night before you were wounded, you sat here and heard the story of Wolf and Fire Girl. Folk epics of the heroic quest are almost always based upon historical fact and then embellished beyond recognition. Was there fact behind the flight of Wolf and Fire Girl? They were running beside an underground river that was lined with statues bearing heads of animals and birds. During your fever you relived parts of a terrible experience. Here's some of it."

He picked up his notes and found the place.

GRIEF OF DAWN: Faster… Must run faster…. Where is the turn? … Past the goat statue…. There's the raven and the river…. Faster … Faster This way! Hurry! … Soldiers…. Hide until they pass…. Now run! Run!

"Interesting," Master Li said thoughtfully. "Here's how my subconscious mind reacted in Hell."

TOU WAN: All I had was the sliver for my hairpin…. That maid always looking at it, always wanting it, trying to steal it. I stabbed her, but she ran away with the stone…. My maid and that concubine with the ring of Upuaut my husband gave her…. The soldiers killed them, but they could not find the stone.

Master Li shrugged. "I have no idea why I tossed in the bit about the maid having been stabbed, but other parts are clear enough. Anyone ever hear of Asyut?"

The sudden change of subject startled us. We shook our heads negatively.

"It's a city in Egypt, or used to be," he explained. "The patron deity was called Upuaut, and when the barbarian Greeks conquered the place, they retained the deity but renamed the city Lycopolis. Prince, can you provide a literal translation?"

The prince was obviously pleased to be able to contribute something. "City of the Wolf," he said promptly.

"Exactly. The head of Upuaut is that of a wolf, and the artisans of the city are renowned for amulets and bracelets and rings with wolf heads." Master Li carefully lifted the ring

from the skeleton's finger bones. He displayed the faint inner markings. "Hieroglyphs. It means 'He Who Rules the West,' which is one of Upuaut's many titles."

Master Li gently replaced the ring. "Did you know that it is virtually impossible to distinguish between male and female skeletons? All one had to go on is size. A fairly large boy and a small young lady would look precisely the same. You see, one of Upuaut's duties was guarding women through pregnancy, and that is why his rings were strictly for females. Nobody would give such a ring to a man or a boy, but he would give it to a concubine." He turned to his notes.

> GRIEF OF DAWN: Faster…faster…. Where is the passage? … *Hurry!* … More soldiers…. Faster…faster…. *Hurry, darling!* … There's the ibis statue….

Master Li put his notes away. "I strongly suspect that more than seven and a half centuries ago a maid and a concubine were forced to run for their lives from the construction site of the tomb of the Laughing Prince," he said. "Over the years the boys of the valley transformed them into Wolf and Fire Girl, but many details of the story are still accurate history. Here in this cave the concubine was caught and killed. The maid was no doubt also killed, and if I may borrow an atrocious poetic style: The Great Wheel turns, the lives roll on, the maid returns as Grief of Dawn."

She was stunned and shaken, and Master Li patted her shoulder.

"Dear girl, we need more than this delightful hypothesis to go on," he said quietly. "May I have your permission to try to bring buried memories of a previous incarnation up to the surface?"

"You have my permission," she whispered.

I had seen him do it before, but it always fascinated me. Master Li took his business card from his pocket and attached it to a leather thong. (The card is a seashell, and the half-closed eye painted upon it seems to say: "Part of the truth revealed; some things I see, but some I don't.") Slowly the shell swung before Grief of Dawn's eyes, back and forth, back and forth, while his soft voice told her she was getting sleepy. Her eyes closed. Grief of Dawn slept yet didn't sleep, and when she awoke she wasn't Grief of Dawn. She was Hyacinth Bud, the personal maid of Tou Wan.

"We're your friends, darling," Master Li said soothingly. "We're going to help you. Do you remember running up to this cave?"

"I think so," she whispered.

"Soldiers were chasing you?"

"Yes."

"You and your friend?"

"Yes, Golden Belt. We ran and ran, but the soldiers were getting closer, and then we saw a small hole in the hillside and hid in here." She looked around puzzledly and frowned. "I don't remember a skeleton."

"Can you remember the path you took up here?"

"I think so."

"Darling, it is very important for you to show us how you got up here to the surface. You were underground, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"Will you lead us to the exit you took?"

She moved like a sleepwalker. The altered landscape frightened her, but Master Li told her to concentrate on the unchanged landmarks, like the old monastery and Dragon's Head, and she began to walk straight toward the area of Princes' Path that had been destroyed at the death of Brother Squint-Eyes. Her hands were out in front of her, and she stopped with both of them pressed against a huge boulder.

"The door is closed! It's closed!" she whispered.

She was becoming increasingly agitated. Master Li thought it might be dangerous for her to continue to relive the experience, and he brought her out of her trance.

Again she was Grief of Dawn, and Moon Boy held and soothed her. We could have searched for a lifetime and not found the secret door. The workmanship was nearly supernatural. I finally found the lever, but it wasn't until the door in the boulder swung open that I saw the shape in the intricate patterns of apparently natural cracks.

It opened silently, which meant recently oiled hinges. Inside was a rack of new torches, and a flight of steps leading down toward the bowels of the earth.

Now we knew how nasty people in motley appeared and disappeared and somewhere down there—almost certainly—was the mysterious stone that lay behind all of this. I led the way with my axe and a torch. Master Li followed with a throwing knife ready. Prince Liu Pao had his spear in one hand and his dagger in the other. Moon Boy held a spear and Grief of Dawn's belt.

Grief of Dawn was a born fighter, and the job of an archer in close quarters is to guard the exposed rear. She walked backward, totally secure at the touch of Moon Boy's guiding hand, and she was surefooted as a mountain goat. I placed my foot on the first step and we started down.

22

Recent torch cinders marked the steps, and there were smoke stains on the ceiling. The steps were smooth and regular and steep, and we came to four landings. The air was fresh but rather moist, and Moon Boy said he could hear water. Finally I could too, and as we arrived at the last step our torchlight reached out to an underground river.

The story of Wolf flashed through my mind. The water was jet black because of the rock bed it ran through, and on the other side was something huge and dark. It made no movement or sound. I bent down and swung my torch until I found the right angle, and light bounced across the water to an enormous stone statue. It was of a man, and the features were rather familiar.

"Yen-wang-yeh, the former First Lord of Hell," Master Li said in a normal tone of voice. "There's no need to whisper, you know. Our torchlight will have already announced our presence."

He studied the statue thoughtfully. "The representation of a guardian of the dead suggests that this cavern actually is an extension of the tomb of the Laughing Prince, as we had assumed. Considering the fact that the bastard tunneled under most of the valley, he may have built the largest tomb in history."

The cavern was immense. Our torchlight barely reached the ceiling. The slap of our sandals echoed away in the darkness and came bouncing back in a distorted manner, as though filtering through a maze of side tunnels. Master Li started off upstream, while I clutched my axe and glared ferociously at the shadows. Grief of Dawn's bow swung back and forth behind us, with a notched arrow ready.

Spaced at about two-hundred-foot intervals were more huge stone statues. Master Li identified the strangely named Emma-hoo, the Japanese King of the Dead, and muttered something about the Laughing Prince having enlisted deities from every culture he could think of. Many of the figures Master Li couldn't identify, but he bowed deeply to a strong young hero who was holding a captured lion, and as he walked on he began chanting under his breath. I caught part of it.

"In the house of dust
Lives lord and prophet,
Wizard and priest,
And Gilgamesh whom gods
Have anointed in death
Great was his glory.
Great was his pride.
Dust is his nourishment,
And his food is mud."

"Doesn't sound very heroic to me," I muttered.

"Dear boy, the story of Gilgamesh makes our epics of the heroic quest look like scribblings of half-witted children," Master Li said sternly.

I was in no position to argue with him. The next statues were Egyptian underworld deities, and there were an extraordinary number of them. I nearly jumped out of my sandals when the torchlight picked up a huge threatening mummy holding some kind of hideous creature, but Master Li said it wasn't intended to represent the Laughing Prince, but Osiris and the monster Amemait. He identified a god with the head of a jackal as Anubis and a lady with a feather as Ament, but he seemed to be looking for something else. Finally he stopped and pointed.

"Toth," he said. "Grief of Dawn, in your delirium you said, 'There's the ibis statue,' and here he is. What we're looking for, incidentally, is a statue with the head of a raven."

The only sounds were the lapping of water and the slapping of sandals and the hiss of torches. The shadowed emptiness seemed infinite. I felt the cold chill of eternity pressing down on me and I clutched my axe tighter; statue after statue, secretive, monstrous, eternally guarding the mummy of a laughing madman whose coffin was empty; I would not have been surprised to hear deadly shrieking squeals and see seven black bats lapping overhead.

Master Li grunted with satisfaction. Moon Boy had bounced torchlight across the water to another statue. It was a woman whose head was that of a raven. "I have no idea what she represents, but Grief of Dawn said, 'There's the raven and the river,' and just before that she said, 'There's the goat statue.' We can assume that she had just come in sight of the river, so start looking for a side passage. If we don't find one here, we'll try the other bank."

We were on the right side. Sixty feet farther on we found a side passage with steps leading up, and on the first landing was a statue of a deity with a goat's head and horns. We reached countless landings, and I was willing to bet that we had climbed far above the level of the valley and were inside one of the hills. Finally the steps came

to an end. We had reached a semicircular marble floor like that of an anteroom. Four iron doors were set into the stone wall, and beside each one was a stone statue with a porcelain jar in its hands.

"Back to Egypt," said Master Li. "These represent the four sons of Horus, whose jars hold organs removed during embalming. The one with the human head is Imstey, who protects the liver. Doghead Hapi protects the lungs, jackal-head Duamure protects the stomach, and hawk-head Qebhsnuf protects the intestines." He scratched his nose thoughtfully. "The style isn't Egyptian but Chinese, and I wonder if the Laughing Prince had a different symbolism in mind. Hapi's head resembles that of the Celestial Dog, and perhaps the Laughing Prince felt he deserved a bodyguard equal to that of the Emperor of Heaven."

Not everything was stone and rigid, so Master Li reached out and lifted the jar from the statue's hands. The rest of us jumped backward as the door beside the statue slid open. The prince jammed his spear in the frame to keep the door from accidentally closing. We lifted our torches and stepped inside, and Grief of Dawn and Moon Boy cried out in wonder.

They hadn't seen it before, but we had. We were back inside the formal tomb, and the door was so neatly hidden in the wall that we would never have found it. Now we knew how fresh air could get in and a mummy in a jade suit could be carried out. There was no sign or sound of merry fellows dressed up in motley.

Nothing had been taken since we had been there. When we looked into the room where the skeletons of poisoned concubines lay in their beds I saw tears trickle down the cheeks of Grief of Dawn. Once she had laughed and cried with these girls, and one terrible day she had run away with one of them. What must it have been like to live in the shadow of Tou Wan, and to be at the command of a lunatic torturer and murderer like the Laughing Prince? Looming over all of them had been the strange power of a mysterious stone, and Master Li had the stone in mind as he led the way to the burial chamber and the exposed mummy of Tou Wan.

"Ox, see if you can get the jade plates away from the skull," he said.

It was a slow process, but finally I managed to break the gold wire at the corners of one of the plates, and after that it went more quickly. White bones appeared, and then I let out a howl of terror and jumped four feet backward. I know nothing of embalming, but somehow the hair had survived. I thought it was a living creature as it bulged out between cracks. I got hold of myself and removed the last plates. Master Li reached out and withdrew the hairpin, and a lustrous black lock, shocking against the bare white bone, slid over my hand like a snake. Master Li swore. The tip of the hairpin had been snapped clean off.

"The sliver is gone, the piece of stone from the sacristy is gone, and if the Laughing Prince used the third piece for an amulet—hell, *he's* gone," Master Li

snarled. He scratched his head and frowned. "Odd. Something deep inside my mind had expected this," he muttered. "In Hell I had Tou Wan say that the stone from her pin had been stolen, possibly by her maid. Why did I suspect the sliver was gone?"

We had no answer, of course, and Master Li finally shrugged and started back to the exit. "At any rate, we know for certain that the stone was taken before she was encased in jade, which leads us back to the Monks of Mirth who very probably provided perverted prayers at her deathbed. If the order has continued to this day, hidden down here in a cavern, they've had all three pieces of the stone for more than seven hundred fifty years. What in the name of Buddha have they been doing with it?"

It was another unanswerable question. We went back out to the semicircular anteroom, and Master Li replaced the jar in the hands of the statue and the door slid shut. The next statue was the one with the head of a jackal. Master Li said that jackals meant many things to ancient Egypt but that the symbolism here was probably Chinese and we should keep tight hold on our stomachs. He lifted the second jar and the second door slid open, and when we walked inside his warning wasn't good enough. Both Moon Boy and Grief of Dawn threw up, and the prince and I were close to it.

It was another medical research center, but even worse than the grotto. The dry air had better preserved the graphically illustrated experiments painted on the walls, and it was harder than ever to believe that any man could do such things to human beings. Prince Liu Pao couldn't take his eyes from the iron cages. Skeletons of peasants lay there, patiently awaiting their turn to entertain the Laughing Prince. Master Li's attention was drawn to the charts and formulas that annotated the experiments.

"Ch'i and shih, the life and motion forces that animate the universe," he said matter-of-factly. "He was using an extraordinary stone to chart the energy patterns of life as it slowly drained from the bodies of dying peasants. The man who could master the flow of energy would become a god, of course, and if he had also used Ideal Breathing to create the Embryonic Pearl, he would be immortal. Show me a quest for personal immortality and I'll show you a path through a slaughterhouse, and the incense of personal divinity is the stench of other people's corpses. Ox, when I decay to the point where I start dabbling with potency potions and the Elixir of Life, lead me to the Eye of Tranquility and hand me a fishing pole and a jar of worms."

He led the way back out and closed the door behind us. The third door was guarded by Quebhsnuf the hawk-headed, and the hawk is the hunter. The Monks of Mirth would have to go out to grab more peasants, and Master Li said it would be a good idea to see if there were other exits in case we had to get out fast. The door slid open and we walked into a long tunnel, lined with side passages.

Master Li ignored the side passages and continued down the tunnel until we reached a dead end. Then he started back to check the passages one by one. When

we turned around, Prince Liu Pao took the lead and confidently stepped into the first dark opening. He disappeared.

"Aaaarrrrgghh…."

His scream of terror dropped down and down, echoing ever deeper in the depths of the earth, and then it faded away. The silence was more frightening than the scream.

I forced my feet to move. Apparently the prince hadn't been paying attention to his sandals, because a black pit opened in the floor just inside the entrance. I knelt and thrust my torch down. The drop wasn't vertical. A smooth stone chimney sloped down through solid rock, as slick and even as packed snow. I remembered how the prince had nursed Grief of Dawn, and I saw his warm glorious paintings glowing before my eyes. I sat down and slid my legs over the edge.

"Can you see him?" Master Li asked.

"No, sir, but I will," I said grimly.

I pushed off before anyone could stop me. Moon Boy yelled, and then all I heard was the air whistling past my ears as I picked up speed. The slick stone was faster than the ice on Boat's Head Hill behind my village. The flame of my torch was streaking behind me like the flags on racing boats during the Dragon Boat Festival, and I shot around another curve, sailed up the smooth wall almost to the ceiling, and skidded back to the center groove at ninety miles an hour. Even in my terror I felt the thrill of excitement. I shot around another curve and sailed up the smooth bank and back down to the center again, and the wild exhilaration of the ride was furthered by the fact that I was racing into pitch blackness, and for all I knew, the chimney was going to branch into a pair of six-inch holes with a jagged fanged rock in the center. The speed was incredible. I careened like a comet around three more curves, and then the slope leveled and lifted, and I was shooting upward when the chimney came to an abrupt end. The next thing I knew I was flying out into the air, and water was rushing beneath me, and I just had the wit to hurl my torch ahead before I plunged down and splashed into a river.

I came to the surface spouting water, and paddled to the bank. Pitch is hard to put out, and my torch lay there still burning. I had come back to the central cavern and the black river, and I lifted the torch and jumped back in and paddled to the other bank. I walked up and down peering upward, and finally I saw the black hole I had come flying out of.

"I'm all right!" I yelled. *"I don't see the prince, but I'll find him!"*

I began slowly walking along the bank looking for wet marks where the prince had climbed out—or been carried out. I didn't want to think of him landing on the back of his neck or striking a submerged rock. A sound made me whirl around, raising my axe.

I should have expected it. Master Li was flying through the air. He hit the water like a cormorant, and Grief of Dawn came flying after him and landed like a swan. Moon Boy couldn't do anything that wasn't graceful, and he reminded me of a great dancer at the opera as he turned a somersault, touched his toes, and split the water as cleanly as a knife blade. I helped drag them out, and collected their torches and relit them from mine. "Buddha, what a toy!" Master Li said, pounding the side of his head to force water from his ears. "The man who could duplicate that ride in the public parks would be a mandarin inside of a month."

"Mandarin? Emperor!" Moon Boy said enthusiastically.

"I only hope the prince enjoyed it as much as I did," Grief of Dawn said somberly.

Master Li was looking for something, and he found it. Ancient iron brackets were set in the wall leading up to the hole of the chimney. "Nature rarely produces something that smooth, and I suspect that nature had some help," he said. "The river was used to transport heavy objects to this point. They were hoisted to the hole, and windlasses hauled them on sleds up through the rock to the higher levels of the tomb. There should be a staircase very close."

We soon found it. Master Li wanted only to be sure there were steps if we needed them, and then we began to search for Prince Liu Pao. We walked up and down the bank, and were about to cross to the far bank when Grief of Dawn's sharp eyes found what we had missed. It was a small red tassel.

"The prince's tunic has scarlet tassels at the bottom," she said excitedly.

We widened the search, and sixty or seventy feet upstream we found another tassel.

"They've got him," Master Li said flatly. "If he were free, he would have yelled as Ox did, and he would have looked for a way back up and found that staircase. We have to assume that he's been grabbed by our friends in the funny robes, but has enough movement to leave a trail."

At regular intervals we continued to find the tassels that the prince had surreptitiously torn off. Then they stopped. We doubled back, and finally found a side passage that was almost invisible behind a jutting shelf of rock. Another tassel lay just inside the entrance, but Master Li brought us to a halt. His eyes were bleak as he examined the tunnel. Ancient wooden supports and scaffolding were everywhere, and the floor was littered with rocks that had fallen from the ceiling. It was a death trap, and the prince wouldn't conceivably have entered it unless he was being carried. Master Li lowered his voice.

"Moon Boy, this is your department," he whispered. "Rather nasty gentlemen may be back in there, and I'd like them to hear us enter without us actually entering."

Moon Boy nodded. He sat down at the entrance and took off his sandals and placed his spear so he could scrape it against the wall with his shoulder.

"Sssshh, quiet!" Master Li whispered—except it wasn't Master Li, but Moon Boy pitching his voice into the tunnel. The sandals in his hands moved rapidly and lightly, and four pairs of feet seemed to move into the tunnel.

"I don't see anything," my voice whispered.

"I don't either," Grief of Dawn's voice whispered.

"All clear this way," Moon Boy whispered in his own voice.

The sandals were gradually hitting the floor harder, as though the people wearing them were coming closer. Moon Boy moved his shoulder and produced a metallic scrape from the spear, followed by a muffled curse in the voice of Master Li.

"Is that another tassel?" my voice whispered, louder.

Deep in the darkness of the tunnel was a sharp snapping sound, followed by the screech of splintering wood. We heard a great crash. The floor shook and waves rippled across the river, and dust and wood splinters billowed from the tunnel mouth. Crash followed crash as though the entire ceiling was collapsing, and it was a long time before the noise stopped and the echoes faded away.

"Good," Master Li said quietly. "Officially we're dead, pulverized like corn beneath a grindstone, and they won't be looking for us when we pay them a call. Fortunately, they shouldn't be hard to find."

23

Master Li rode on my back. The staircase was very steep, with innumerable landings, and I was ready to stop and catch my breath when we reached a large cave that had other side passages branching from it. Master Li climbed off and wandered around the cave while Moon Boy and Grief of Dawn and I sat down and rested. Suddenly he made a sharp exclamation, and we got up and ran over to him.

He had accidentally pushed against a part of the wall that moved. A doorway had opened into another room. All of us had been there before, and we walked inside and looked around at the paymaster's office and the pit where the two dead gardeners lay. The arrows were still stuck in every available piece of wood, and Grief of Dawn bent down and looked closely at one. Her eyes were puzzled when she lifted them.

"I know, I saw it before," Master Li said. "Those aren't ancient arrows but relatively modern ones, yet it would have been absolutely impossible for a local boy or girl to have found this place and played here without somebody finding out about it. No youngster could keep such a secret, unless he had been born with the secret. Happy home life with the Monks of Mirth?"

He walked over and looked gloomily down into the darkness of the pit in front of the paymaster's desk.

"I wonder," he said as though talking to himself. "Were you paid to carry a boy or a girl up steep steps as Ox just carried me? Did you stop at this level to rest, and did the boy or girl pause to play around with a bow and arrows? Did you then carry them up the rest of the way, and did he take another wonderful ride down that slide to the river? And then up for more archery and up farther for another slide, and so forth? Did you hear or see more than you should, and then stand in front of the desk to receive your pay?"

The pit was silent. Master Li shrugged and led the way back to the cavern. He got on my back and I began to climb again, and the final steps up from the fourth

landing brought us back into the tunnel where we had begun, right beside the passage with the pit and the marvelous stone slide. I had a sudden clear vision of a gardener setting down a laughing child, who ran to the slide and vanished down into darkness.

Master Li walked rapidly back down the tunnel and out to the little anteroom. One more door remained, and beside it stood the last of the sons of Horus.

"Imstey, who alone bears a human head," Master Li said grimly. "We're looking for humans, very unpleasant ones, and we have to hope they didn't leave the prince tied up in that tunnel when they sprang the trap to crush us."

He lifted the last jar, and the door swung open. This time we didn't need torches, because a long row of them was already burning in brackets spaced along a tunnel wall. The air was fresh and foul at the same time, and Moon Boy grimaced disgustedly and said something about the virtues ot bathing at least every seven years.

The tunnel sloped sharply downward. Again I took the lead with my axe, and Master Li followed with his throwing knives, and Moon Boy held a spear in one hand and Grief of Dawn's belt with the other, and Grief of Dawn walked backward swinging her bow to cover our rear. We tried to be quieter than mice. The tunnel kept going downward, and gradually the air grew moister as though we were again approaching the river, and I saw two small rocks lying on the tunnel floor. I remembered the rockfall that had supposedly killed us, and glanced nervously at the ceiling. I couldn't see any serious cracks, but a few feet farther on there was a sign that this passage had at least shaken when the other one collapsed. Dust covered the floor, and Master Li grunted with satisfaction. Recent sandal prints were marked in the dust.

We moved faster. I had to smother a yelp, and I grabbed Master Li's arm and pointed. A crimson tassel lay on the floor. Moon Boy whispered to Grief of Dawn, and she turned and looked and her eyes lit up.

"He's alive," Master Li whispered. "The prince is a lot tougher than he looks, and when he runs out of tassels, he'll find a way to cut himself and leave a trail of blood."

Moon Boy began to hear sounds we couldn't. He whispered that people were laughing somewhere in the distance, and finally we came close enough for the rest of us to hear it; coarse and merry, with other sounds of celebration.

"A good sign," Master Li whispered. "They're celebrating our demise and if they were in the process of sacrificing the prince to the stone—or whatever they do—the ritual would have a somber religious sound."

Ahead of us was light, and we passed a number of empty side passages. The laughter was right in front of us when we came to a passage that wasn't empty. It was a dressing room, with a row of monkish robes in motley hanging upon pegs, and at the end of it there seemed to be a ledge looking down over the area where the light came from. We slipped inside and dropped to our stomachs and crawled to the ledge and cautiously peered over it.

The cavern below reminded me of the courtyard of a large monastery. It was illuminated by a thousand blazing torches in brackets on the walls. The scene was very strange: Monks in motley laughed uproariously as they danced with stiff awkward movements in concentric circles. They were capering around a throne upon which sat a monk who wore a smiling paper mask with a curling beard. A large urn stood beside the throne, and a monk who appeared to be some kind of dignitary stood about ten feet away. There was no sign of the prince.

Master Li signaled for us to slide back. "It's an ancient ceremony called the Festival of Laughter," he whispered. "The one on the throne is the leader, wearing the mask of Fu-hsing, God of Happiness. The monks will dance up to the throne and embrace the leader and take a paper scroll from the urn, which they will bring to the assistant, and he will open it and read aloud a comical wish for happiness. When everyone has his wish, the assistant will cry, *'Tien-kuan-ssu-fu,'* beginning the festival, and they'll release flocks of bats, since both bat and happiness are pronounced fu. The leader will be carried on the annual tour of inspection, and that should lead us right to the prince, and then they'll get stinking drunk at a banquet."

Master Li crawled back and selected a robe that fit him. He helped us hide our weapons on our backs, beneath robes, and the huge cowls neatly covered our faces.

"Aesthetically the ceremony leaves much to be desired, but it's marvelous for murder," Master Li said grimly. "I'm not going to wait for the tour of inspection. Too risky. That fellow and his happy friends tried to kill us, and it's time to return the favor. If we can get right in the middle of them and they're suddenly without a leader we should have an easy time of it, but don't forget to leave one or two alive to tell us where the prince is."

He bent down to the sandal that didn't contain lock picks and slipped off the rounded end of the false sole. It had a small threaded hole in it. He reached father into the hollow sandal and took out a slim rounded blade not much thicker than a large needle, and screwed the base of it into the hole. The piece of sole fit neatly into the palm of his hand.

"Ox should bring up the rear in case I miss," he said. "I should be right in front of him. Any volunteers to go first?"

"Me," Grief of Dawn and Moon Boy said simultaneously.

Master Li chose Moon Boy to go first and Grief of Dawn to follow, and we slid back to the ledge. The ceremony was going exactly as he had predicted, and the laughing monks were slowly circling in toward the throne. Each formally embraced the leader and took a scroll from the urn and danced up to the assistant, who opened the scroll and read a happiness wish in a loud braying voice. They were crude jests without wit or imagination—to be eternally pickled in a cask of strong wine, for example, or to be reborn as a pillow in a brothel. Each stupid joke was greeted by howls of laughter.

All eyes were on the throne and the assistant. We easily slipped down the side of a sloping cliff and fell in at the end of the procession. The only problem was matching the awkward dance steps of the monks, who seemed to be woefully uncoordinated. The line moved steadily toward the leader.

"Brother Pimple-Puss, who shall be granted his wish to be buggered by the Transcendent Pig!" the assistant bellowed.

Even that was greeted with laughter. The last line was circling in, and my heart was in my mouth as Moon Boy danced toward the throne. I had never known anyone braver, but his complexion was becoming sickly green. He managed the brief formal embrace without incident, however, and took his scroll to the assistant, who read another idiotic happiness wish. Grief of Dawn was next, and she too had turned green, but she also made it safety. Now it was Master Li's turn.

I could swear I saw a greenish tinge on his wrinkled skin as well. He danced up and extended his hands for the embrace, and his right hand slapped suddenly against the leader's heart. A swift flick of the wrist unscrewed the sandal sole. He collected his scroll and danced on to the assistant, and now it was my turn. I soon realized what caused the green complexions. The leader hadn't washed in six months. A step closer I changed it to six years, and then sixty.

Master Li hadn't missed. The head behind the paper mask lolled lifelessly against the back of the throne. The tiny blade had drawn almost no blood, and with the sole gone, it was nearly invisible. I was relieved that I wouldn't have to strangle the bastard. I took my scroll and danced on, and for the first time the assistant changed the ritual. Apparently the last in line served a ceremonial function.

"The last shall be first!" the assistant bellowed. "Our belated brother is granted the wish to carry our leader on the tour of inspection!"

I looked around for a carriage or a litter, and realized that in the ancient ritual one carried the leader on one's back. Master Li and Moon Boy and Grief of Dawn were so closely squeezed between laughing monks that it would be difficult for them to get to their weapons and all Master Li could do was raise both eyebrows heavenward as two last monks approached the throne and picked up the leader.

Luck was with us. The flickering torchlight didn't permit a clear view, and the paper mask stayed in place, and it occurred to me that they might not be surprised if the leader got a head start and was already stinking drunk. Swiftly I found myself with a corpse on my back, his head lolling over my shoulder and his arms hanging down on either side of my neck. The only thing I could do was hold the lifeless legs and hope the tour of inspection would do what Master Li first surmised: lead us to the prince.

"T'ien-kuan-ssu-fu!" the assistant shouted. *"The Agent of Heaven Brings Happiness! Ring the bell! Beat the gongs! Release the bats! Let there be dancing and merrymaking, for the Festival of Laughter has begun!"*

"Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho ho!" the monks laughed, and off we went.

Bells and gongs were banging so loudly they hurt my ears, and cages were opened and thousands of terrified bats flapped frantically through the torchlight.

"Dance! Dance! Dance! Let joy reign supreme in the Festival of Laughter!" the assistant howled.

I managed to glance back and saw that Master Li and Moon Boy and Grief of Dawn were each so tightly hemmed in by capering monks that they could do little but dance along with them. The harsh cacophony of bells and gongs was completely disorienting the bats. They were crashing against the walls and up against the roof, and small furry bodies were dropping down all around us.

"More laughter! More dancing! More bells and more bats!" the assistant screamed.

The corpse I carried was growing rigid with astonishing swiftness. The dangling arms were pressing uncomfortably against the sides of my neck, and I was finding it difficult to breathe. I tried shifting the weight, but nothing is harder to move properly than a corpse. It's like a sack of meal equipped with awkwardly positioned arms and legs.

"Joy!" the assistant howled.

The arms were squeezing tighter and tighter. I had no choice but to drop the corpse's legs and reach up and wrench at the arms, and we staggered forward with his feet bouncing against the ground. It was like trying to pry thick iron bars apart….

A vision of the library at the monastery flashed before my eyes, and iron bars squeezed like soft candles. I wrenched with everything I had. The arms simply squeezed tighter.

"Let joy be unconfined, for our Lord of Happiness greets his honored guest!" the assistant screamed.

The cowl of the corpse's robe fell back. The mask was slipping off. The head slowly lifted. One eye popped open and winked at me, and carrion breath made me gag as the mouth opened. Now I knew why two monks lay dead with horror stamped on their faces.

"How kind of you to carry this humble one on the tour of inspection," said the Laughing Prince.

I could not be mistaken. Half of the face was the face of the portrait in the tomb. The other half was also the Laughing Prince but like an effigy molded in wax and placed beside a fire. The flesh had partially decomposed, and his voice was also half-decomposed, thick and slurred and clotted and foul. The other eye popped open and winked at me. Both eyes were totally mad.

"You shall enjoy yourself in my kingdom," the Laughing Prince snickered.

"Dance! Dance! More joy and merriment!" howled the assistant.

"See how my monks enjoy themselves," said the Laughing Prince. "What delightful additions you and your friends will make to our company." Cowls were falling from the faces of capering monks, and I saw that they were corpses. Patches of flesh still stuck to white bones, and empty eye sockets stared in eternal horror.

"More bats and more bells! Ring more gongs!" the assistant screamed.

The Laughing Prince had sought godhood, and he had found eternity as *chiang shih*, the corpse who crawls from the grave and strangles wayfarers and steals their souls. Never in history had anyone escaped the embrace of a rigid corpse.

"Oh, yes, you and your companions shall enjoy yourselves so much that you will never want to leave," the Laughing Prince hissed in my ear. "Such joy. Such unending laughter. And you will dance for me forever and ever and ever."

"All praise to our Lord of Happiness!" howled the assistant. *"All praise to the Stone!"*

"The Stone!" the corpses cried. "All praise to the Stone!"

I frantically looked back and saw that the assistant was lashing Master Li and Grief of Dawn and Moon Boy with a whip, while corpses crowded in to squeeze their arms tightly against their sides. I looked to the side. I could barely breathe now, and my vision was blurred, but I could make out the destination we seemed to be circling toward. A sacrificial altar stood at one side of the cavern. Beside it was a huge stone basin filled with ceremonial oil, and behind it was a pillar, where sacrificial axes hung on hooks.

"More bats!" howled the assistant. *"More dancing and laughter!"*

Better now than later, I thought, and I knocked over a row of corpses as I made a detour. The bodies of bats crunched beneath my feet as I staggered toward the altar. More bats were shrieking in fear as they collided with the skulls of capering monks, and crawled into empty mouths and eye sockets for shelter. My neck was breaking. Black and red spots danced in front of my eyes. The basin of ceremonial oil suddenly loomed in front of me, and with the last of my strength I lunged forward and carried my body and the corpse's over the edge and into the oil.

I came to the surface, gasping, and grabbed the oily arms and shoved upward. Slowly they began to slide. They stopped at my ears, and I reached down with one hand and scooped up more oil, and finally the deadly arms shot up over my head with a loud popping sound. I lurched to the rim of the basin and toppled over it to the ground, and the Laughing Prince stood up in the oil and extended his arms lovingly.

"Come back, dear boy. We haven't finished our dance," he chuckled.

I crawled to the pillar and hauled myself upright and grabbed one of the sacrificial axes. The rigid corpse was out of the basin and walking toward me, arms extended. Both mad eyes were winking. I let the thing get within range, and then I chopped the legs off at the knees. The Laughing Prince tumbled over backward.

"The Stone and the Lord of Happiness crave more merriment!" the assistant howled.

I chopped the hands from the arms, and the arms from the torso, and raised the axe high and brought it down on the decomposing face. The head split apart, and as it did, the eyes winked in sequence.

"Quite," said the left half of the mouth.

"Useless," said the right half of the mouth.

I dropped the axe and staggered away and fell. I lay there, gasping for breath and unable to move.

"Sing the great Hymn of Joy, for our Lord of Happiness prepares the sacrifice!" screamed the assistant.

I managed to turn my head. The severed hands of the Laughing prince were scuttling toward me like crabs. They crawled up my legs and over my chest, and clamped viciously around my throat.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the capering corpses. "Ho, ho, ho!"

I staggered to my feet, futilely wrenching at the strangling hands, and lurched back toward the basin. I ducked my head into the oil and pried the oily fingers free, one by one. I hurled the hands back into the oil and stumbled to the pillar and wrenched a torch free. I hurled it blindly. It almost missed, but it teetered for a moment on the rim and then fell into the basin. I fell on my face, unable to move.

A pillar of flame shot toward the roof. Two balls of fire crawled over the rim and down to the ground, and all I could do was watch as the flaming hands crawled toward me. They were hissing and popping. Bones were separating. Fingers spurted greasy smoke and fire and detached from the hands and fell off. Black clouds were crawling toward my legs. They stopped and I jerked in pain as hissing stuff spattered my ankles. Then the clouds cleared, and where the hands had been were two piles of smoking charcoal.

The bells stopped. The gongs stopped. The corpses stood frozen in awkward dancing positions. Only the bats still continued to fly through the torchlight.

Something moved, and tears welled in my eyes and trickled down my nose as I saw Master Li crawl toward me. He was alive, and so were Grief of Dawn and Moon Boy, and I was alive too, and we weren't waking up to eternity as merry monks in motley.

24

Moon Boy propped my head up, and Master Li took out his flask and poured wine down my throat until I choked and coughed and sat up and spewed alcohol over my tunic. It helped to clear my head, which Master Li patted in grandfatherly fashion. "When traveling, always bring an ox with you," he said.

Moon Boy planted a kiss on my left cheek, but it wasn't Moon Boy I wanted, and I was still so weak that I felt my eyes fill with tears. Grief of Dawn hadn't bothered to come to me, and I was about to drown in self-pity until I realized that, alone among us, Grief of Dawn had kept her head. She had finally been able to free her bow, and we had no idea what her horrors might be down there, and she was crouched behind the basin of oil sweeping the cavern with a drawn arrow. Nothing stirred except bats. Finally she released the tension of the string and crawled back.

"Ox," she said, giving me a kiss, "the boys will have to add you to the story of Wolf. Never before has anyone broken the grip of a chiang shih."

The rigid corpse lay in pieces, but could it somehow rise again? I shuddered, and so did Moon Boy, and Grief of Dawn's hands slid slowly down her body to her shoulders, and she hugged herself protectively.

"Master Li, I hate and fear that horrible thing, but why am I drawn to it?" she whispered. "It's almost as I am drawn to Moon Boy, or even to the prince."

Moon Boy looked at her with somber eyes and turned to Master Li. "I too feel the attraction," he said. "When I danced behind that creature, it was only partly because I was forced to. I also wanted to."

The old man looked at me. "Ox?"

I shook my head. "No, sir," I said. "All I feel is fear and loathing."

"It's the same with me, and I think we're deficient in sensibility," he said. He walked over and bent down to the severed torso. His knife glittered in the torchlight. "More than seven centuries ago the Laughing Prince died, and during the forty-nine days while the Bailiffs of Hell waited to ensure there had been no mistake in the

Register of Life and Death, the flesh began to decay. The Laughing Prince wore an amulet of stone on a chain around his neck, and the stone sank into his body. Before the bailiffs arrived, the stone had entered his heart and he had arisen from the dead; mad, almost mindless, totally evil—but does that mean the stone was evil? My children, the attraction you feel would make far more sense if the opposite were true."

The flesh was so rotten that he scarcely needed the knife, and he scooped more than cut and came up with a smooth flat piece of stone. He carefully washed it in the oil and dried it on his robe, and I was quite frightened when he walked back with the stone in his bare hands. I suppose I expected his fingernails to grow a foot and coarse black hair to crawl over his flesh, and when he lifted his eyes from the stone I looked for the flow of lunacy. Instead I saw a film of tears, and his voice was soft and gentle.

"Is the stone evil? Here, Ox, judge for yourself."

He handed me the stone. It happened so quickly that I took it without thinking, but then I let out a yelp and would have dropped it if his fingers had not closed around mine.

"Don't be afraid," he said quietly.

The stone was warm. It was living, and I could feel a flow of energy like a heartbeat. A tingle entered my fingers and spread throughout my body. It spread through every nerve like a miraculous tonic, and my weariness vanished, and I had the distinct sensation that at any moment I might begin to bloom like a flower. Master Li gestured for me to pass it around, and I handed it to Grief of Dawn. She began to weep, even while a smile came to her lips, and when Moon Boy received it he turned white as a ghost and pressed it to his chest as though he wanted to join the stone with his body.

Master Li took it back and held it up to the torchlight. "The author of *The Red Chamber* never saw the stone, but I'm willing to bet he did indeed see one of the Annals of Heaven and Earth, and that it simply said the stone was flawed. It was the flower that was evil, but Tsao Hsueh Chin imputed evil to the stone because of the peculiar reaction of two great men who once possessed it. Ssu-ma Ch'ien never touched the stone with his hands, and he too imputed evil because of the reactions of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. If Ssu-ma had not been under such a strain he might have paid closer attention to the shape of the stone, and reached a different conclusions."

Master Li grinned at us and quoted Ssu-ma. "'Smooth flat area rising to round concave bowl shape.' What does that suggest to you?"

It suggested nothing at all to me or Moon Boy, but Grief of Dawn's eyes lit up.

"A place to grind an ink stick and a bowl to dip the brush into. It was natural ink stone," she said.

"Good girl! Natural ink stones are highly prized, and this one was presented first to Lao Tzu and then to Chuang Tzu. I would have given almost anything to have been there when the great men first used it," Master Li said. "Their writing brushes

dipped into the well and moved over the flat area, rising into contact with a stone that carried the touch of Heaven, and they gaped with stunned eyes when the calligraphy that flowed from their brushes was that of the gods. They could keep quiet about the stone and claim such genius as their own, and the temptation must have been terrible, and they yelled, 'Evil!' and hurled the stone away. Anyone who heard them would assume they were referring to the stone, not the temptation that came with it."

He placed the piece of stone into his purse and secured it with a leather thong.

"This is only one piece. There are two to go," he said grimly. "When Laughing Prince rose from the dead he was totally mad and almost totally mindless, and he couldn't possibly have planned rational actions. Somebody else has been doing the thinking, and somewhere down here is the ringleader who has his hands on Prince Liu Pao. Unless…."

His voice trailed off. We knew what he was thinking, and our faces were white and strained as we methodically moved among the Monks of Mirth. We pulled back cowl after cowl. All we found were white skulls, or recent ones with patches of skin and hair still clinging to them. Moon Boy nearly had a heart attack when both empty eye sockets of a skull suddenly winked at him, but then a frightened bat flew from the hollow skull. Something terrible might have happened to the prince, but at least he wasn't one of the monks.

We took torches and bent close to the floor. It took nearly an hour to do it, but Moon Boy suddenly whooped happily. A scarlet tassel lay at the entrance of one of the side passages. Again we clutched our weapons and started off, with me in front and Grief of Dawn covering the rear.

If the prince hadn't managed to leave that trail we would have been hopelessly lost in a matter of minutes. It was a maze inside a labyrinth that was inside another maze, and tunnels branched off in all directions. Everywhere we saw heavy wooden braces holding the ceiling together. We had to move carefully to avoid touching scaffolding, and we found ourselves whispering, as though a loud word could bring the tomb down on our heads. Tomb it was: room after room, some finished and some incomplete, designed for every conceivable function and pleasure. The Laughing Prince had decided to take his whole world with him, and I even expected a polo field until I realized that in his day we had imported the marvelous horses from India (left by the mad Greek invader) but not the game that went with them.

The scarlet tassels continued to show us the way. Moon Boy whispered that he could hear water, and a few minutes later we stepped into a beautiful cave. From what we could see in torchlight, the stone was blue and green and very beautiful, and a marble floor led to a pool fed by a small trickle of water falling from a ledge nearly forty feet above it. Marble steps led up to jutting rock shelves, and I had a weird vision of a parade of skeletons and mummies climbing up to dive.

Moon Boy held up a hand. "Something moving," he whispered. "It's coming this way. Up there," he whispered, pointing to one of the rock shelves above the pool. Then we all froze like statues, because a high screeching voice began to shriek.

"Master, O Master, the game nears your bow!
An old stag, two young bucks, and a lovely young doe!"

The echoes bounced back and forth between the walls and vibrated into endless passageways. Something moved. A small graceful figure wrapped in a robe of motley was standing on the shelf looking down at us. I stopped breathing when I saw the cowl was pulled back just far enough for the top of the head to be seen above dark shadows. The hair was the color of fire. I heard a clear lilting laugh, and then the pure lovely voice of a girl.

"I hope I didn't frighten anybody. Who are you?"

Master Li's eyes were slits so narrow I wondered how he could see anything, and his cool voice was sardonic.

"Tourists," he said. "Who are you?"

The girl shyly plucked at her robe. "My friend calls me Fire Girl," she said. "Have you seen him?"

"Possibly," Master Li said. "Is your friend the happy fellow who cavorts with monks who wear robes like yours?"

"Yes. He's my friend until my real friend comes, but I haven't seen him for the longest time." Her pure voice was puzzled. "He promised to come back, I know he did, but I can't remember when it was."

Master Li heaved a sigh and reached for his wine flask.

"His name, no doubt, is Wolf."

"Yes!" the girl cried delightedly. "Have you seen him? I've been waiting and waiting and I know we have something important to do, but my head isn't very clear and I can't remember what it is."

She had the most beautiful young voice I had ever heard, but there was a strange discordant note behind it. Something was off center, and it came not from the vocal chords but the mind.

Master Li swallowed some wine, and for once he didn't seem to enjoy the taste. "We also have a friend," he said. "He has funny hair that sticks out all over, and ink stains on his nose. He may have gone with your other friend, the one with the monks."

"Yes, I saw him." She gestured vaguely behind her. "Back there. Maybe he's sick, because they were carrying him."

"Then we'd better go to him with some medicine," Master Li said reasonably. "Do the monks call your friend the Lord of Laughter?"

'"Yes, but I don't like it when he laughs," she said gravely. "He smells bad too, but when I woke up I was all alone, and I was alone for the longest time, and I was glad when I found him."

"That was when you learned how to open the doors and get into the burial chamber," Master Li said matter-of-factly. "Was he out of his coffin when you found him?'"

She plucked her robe nervously and was silent for a long time. "Yes," she whispered. "But he wasn't really awake, and it took me the longest time to learn how to wake him up."

"With the stone from the sacristy?"

"Yes, but then he wasn't any fun," the girl said petulantly. "He wasn't any good at games, and he got nasty unless I made the stone sing and calm him down, and when I asked him to find more friends, he came back with those monks, and they weren't any fun either."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Master Li said coaxingly. "You had two other friends, didn't you? Two men who came down from outside? They carried you up the steps so you could slide, and then you shot a few arrows, and then you went back to the slide, and one day you found out how to get into the burial chamber."

She plucked her robe more nervously. "Yes," she whispered.

"And your other friend wasn't out of his coffin then, remember?" Master Li said gently. "You had the men lift the lid, didn't you? And you'd already found out about that iron plate in front of the desk, and the men stood there so you could pay them. It must have been hard to pull the lever."

Tears were trickling through her lovely voice, pearls slowly drifting down through nectar.

"I didn't want to do it, but they would have told everybody about the room of gold and the suit of jade, and I knew I had to keep it secret. I have to keep everything secret. I can't remember why, but I know it's important, and one day Wolf will come back and remind me of the reason."

"Secrets can be very hard to keep," Master Li said sympathetically. "At night you went into the world above and listened at windows and heard things, and one night you came back to the cavern and told your friend who smells so bad that a monk from the monastery had a manuscript by somebody named Ssu-ma Chi'en, and your friend told you that Ssu-ma had found an entrance to the tomb. Isn't that how it happened?"

'"Yes," she wailed.

"And after that you listened at another window and learned that the monk had made a copy, and your friend who smells so bad had to deal with that too."

"Yes," she whispered. "You were there! You and your friend with the hair and ink spots." She threw back her head and laughed like a peal of lovely bells. "Your friend's hair is really very funny. Do you want to see where they carried him?"

Master Li swallowed more wine and put his flask away. "It might be a nice idea," he said dryly. "Lead on, Girl of Fire."

My head was hurting, and words slipped like sly lizards through cracks in my solid granite brain, darting, stopping motionless, creeping cautiously toward meanings: "You told your friend who smells so bad that a monk from the monastery had a manuscript by somebody named Ssu-ma Ch'ien, and your friend told you…." The girl had said yes, and that her smelly friend had also planned the second burglary and murder, but how could the Laughing Prince have planned anything? He hadn't been rational! Suddenly I realized that Master Li had led the girl to confirm that the only two people who could have been responsible for the murders of the monks were the Laughing Prince and the girl herself, and the girl had certainly killed the two gardeners.

But was *she* rational? She kept her distance as we climbed to the rock shelf, moving like a timid fawn as she turned into one of the side tunnels. Her beautiful voice reached back through the darkness, singing.

"The boy who dies, dies not in vain.
The Great Wheel turns, he comes again.
The girl who grieves and drink of this
Will be awakened with a kiss."

Master Li grunted and flicked a finger downward, and I saw why he was following the girl wherever she led. One more scarlet tassel lay on the tunnel floor. She might be crazy, but she was leading us in the right direction.

"A touch of lips will open eyes,
A girl of fire will thus arise,
Then the sacred arrow flies,
And the Heart of Evil dies."

The sweet notes echoed away into the distance, and the girl's voice spoke from the darkness ahead. "I don't remember what that means, but Wolf will tell me when he comes," she said trustingly.

We turned and twisted through tunnels, all braced with rickety old wood. Four more scarlet tassels told us we were going in the right direction, and finally the small dim figure ahead of us turned into one more entrance, and her voice drifted back: "They took him in here."

When we reached the opening and stepped inside to a small cave, the girl was gone, but I saw another passageway in the far wall. The cave had once been a storeroom, and old metal tool racks lined a wall. Ancient posts lifted to crossbeams that held up the shaky ceiling. One of the posts had cracked, and somebody had tied cords of rope around the split.

Something was wrong. My gut told me that, not my mind, and I forced my eyes to move slowly around the cave. Suddenly they jerked back. A rope? A rope that had survived seven centuries and wasn't even frayed? I strode forward so I could see the other side of the thick post. The rope extended to a hole in the wall, and it was lifting and tightening. I swore and swung with my axe, but I was too late. Just before the blade reached it, the rope jerked taut and the flimsy old post snapped right in half.

Other posts groaned in protest. They bent, and the entire ceiling suddenly dropped two feet. The tortured posts screamed, and then they snapped with deafening sharp cracking sounds. Splinters of wood shot around the cave like vicious spears, and rocks tumbled down, and the entire framework supporting the ceiling began to bulge in the center. I dove forward as the bulge bent toward the floor and got beneath the center beam and heaved upward with all my might. I couldn't lift it, of course, but it temporarily stayed where it was.

"Get out!" I yelled.

I glanced back. My mind refused to believe what my eyes were telling me. It couldn't be. *It couldn't be.* Surely a shack in Peking would echo with happy laughter, and an old sage would whistle "Hot Ashes" and open another wine jar when his young wife slipped into the shed in back to visit Number Ten Ox, and Moon Boy and the prince would come every few months, and….

And my heart believed what my eyes said, and turned to ice. Moon Boy was cradling Grief of Dawn in his arms, and this time no medicine on earth would help her. A shaft of splintered wood at least three inches thick had struck her square in the chest like a bolt from a catapult, and she was as dead as Tou Wan. Moon Boy was not going to leave her body to be crushed. He picked her up and carried her back toward the tunnel, and then I saw no more as my eyes blurred with tears. The ceiling sounded as though it was groaning with grief as it pressed down upon me. I couldn't move or the whole works would collapse.

Master Li's hand was on my shoulder. "Is the weight distributed evenly?" he asked.

"No," I panted. "It's tilted forward."

Master Li scuttled to the old iron tool racks. Some were very thick and strong, and he began walking one toward me. He got it beneath the beam, and then he wrestled with another one. When they were placed on both sides of me I bent my knees, lowering the center beam as slowly as possible. It was shuddering like a living thing, and it wouldn't remain in one piece much longer. It touched the tool racks.

Master Li had moved back to the tunnel opening. I let go, dropped to the floor, pushed back, and did a back flip to the opening. I just made it to the tunnel before the beam snapped in half, and Master Li hopped up on my back and I began to run. The crash of the falling ceiling nearly deafened us. The whole tunnel was shaking and dust billowed and rocks and wood splinters flew. I was running blind, but then I saw a glow of light through the darkness and dust. Moon Boy had the body of Grief of Dawn over his shoulder, and he was waving his torch.

Once before I had seen Master Li use his incredible memory to find the way back through a labyrinth, and now he did it again. He took the second opening on the right, then the third on the left, then the first on the left, and kept it up without hesitation even though rocks were falling and stones were screaming like tigers as they scraped together. We ran through one more opening and found we were back at the pool. In a minute we were back at the tunnel we had taken before, and then we came to a halt.

The vibration had shuddered through the entire cavern, and some ceilings were weaker than others. The tunnel that would have taken us back to the Monks of Mirth was completely blocked by a rockslide.

"Master Li, I can hear water that way!" Moon Boy shouted. "It sounds like the river!"

Now Moon Boy took the lead, groping through passage after passage, moving ever closer to the sound. At last Master Li and I could hear it too and we stumbled from a hole to the bank of the black river in the huge central cavern. Moon Boy's torchlight bounced across the water and revealed the features of the first statue we had seen: Yen-wang-yeh, the former First Lord of Hell. We were only a few feet from the stairs that led up to Princes' Path and safety.

Master Li hopped down from my back and trotted back into the tunnel we had come from. He told Moon Boy to raise his torch, and he studied the vast structure of scaffolding with the eyes of an engineer. He walked over to the central supporting post near the left-hand wall. There was a crack in the center of it.

"Ox, can you break this thing?" he asked.

"It's old and fragile," I said. "Sir, it might break, but if a tunnel collapsed here, after the collapse back there, wouldn't that put a tremendous strain on the entire structure? That crazy girl is still in there, and the prince may still be alive."

"Do it," Master Li commanded.

"Venerable Sir—"

I shut my mouth. Master Li was glaring at me, and it was not for Number Ten Ox to contradict the great man. I put my shoulder to the post, but I had underestimated how rotten it was. It snapped at the first pressure, and I very nearly fell and impaled myself on the stump. Master Li hopped up on my back and Moon Boy lifted the

body of Grief of Dawn and we began to run. We could hear nothing but the scream of splintering wood and the thunder of falling rocks, but I saw Moon Boy's lips opening and closing and his finger frantically pointing up.

Just ahead of us a huge crack was spreading across the ceiling of the cavern. With an enormous roar, about a hundred tons of rock crashed down and blocked all possible paths to the staircase. The river heaved, and a tidal wave raced back against the current. Master Li was pounding my shoulder and pointing, and I realized our only hope was to get back to the staircase that led up to the formal tomb. Moon Boy was very strong, and he would rather have died than leave Grief of Dawn's body down there, and he carried her while I carried Master Li as we ran for our lives. The face of the cavern ceiling was spreading into a succession of smiles. Rocks fell like hailstones and the black river turned white with foam. The walls shuddered and the floor bucked like a wild horse, and chunks of shattered wood and clouds of dust burst from every side passage.

I climbed into an enormous extended hand, and then up and over the torso of the fallen Japanese King of the Dead. We raced on past fallen statues. Gilgamesh still stood in his pride, holding the lion, but Anubis had fallen. Screeching grinding sounds hurt our ears. A huge crack opened in the floor, and Toth and Ament dropped into the pit and disappeared. We just made it past the enormous mummy of Osiris before it toppled over and smashed, and inside my head and heart I was listening to a beloved voice:

"Faster…faster…. There's the raven and the river."

There was the raven. We panted past it and lunged into the side passageway. The stairs were still intact. The walls appeared to be squeezing together as we bounded up the stairs, and it wasn't my imagination. The sound was indescribable. We finally reached the marble landing and the doors, and the statues still stood, and Master Li reached out and lifted the jar from the hawk-headed deity. The framework was beginning to twist and the door screeched in protest, but it opened enough for us to squeeze through. The tunnel was choked with dust and fallen rocks, and I had to feel to find a side passage.

The only passages we knew were the slide and stairs that led back down to the river, which would have been suicide, but if Master Li was right about the hawk symbolism, a number of side passages should lead out to the valley where monks in motley could hunt peasants. Luck was with us. I tripped over a staircase and began to climb, but then I ran smack into the stone wall of a dead end.

Master Li hopped off my back and began probing the wall, and then the side walls, and he pulled something and a crack of light appeared. I saw a patch of blue and a bright sun and white clouds, and we toppled out upon green grass. Dust was billowing behind us and I managed to shut the door, which was perfectly disguised in

the face of a cliff. The thundering sounds faded, but the ground continued to heave beneath our feet. We were on Dragon's Right Horn, looking across the deep gorge to the matching peak and cliff and the estate of Prince Liu Pao.

The entire range of hills was shuddering, and muffled roaring sounds came from the bowels of the earth. The tomb of the Laughing Prince was like a cancer eating at the insides, but then the hills took charge. A billion tiny cracks appeared across the Valley of Sorrows as the earth squeezed down and pressed empty spaces together. Caverns and caves and tunnels were crushed out of existence, and great spouts of dust whistled up from holes and spread across the sky. The earth gave one last shudder and then was still.

Moon Boy straightened Grief of Dawn's body upon the grass and gently combed her hair with his fingers, and I sat down beside her and wept. Master Li lifted his eyes and watched tiny puffs of dust form a pattern on the matching cliff across the gorge, and then a door burst open and a small figure tumbled out. Dust covered everything. When it cleared I saw a robe of motley, and a cowl that revealed a glimpse of bright red hair. The head turned toward us.

"Oh!"

"Somehow I knew you'd make it," Master Li said.

The girl sat up and smacked billows of dust from her robe. "I'm so glad you're safe," she said in her beautiful off-center voice. "I'm afraid for my friend, though, and his monks, even though I don't like the monks very much. Did you find your friend with the funny hair?"

Master Li snorted and reached for his wine flask. His eyes and voice were cold and angry.

"We will just as soon as you pull that wig from your silly head and take your lips away from the stone. Prince, the time for games has ended. You and I are going to have a serious talk."

25

Moon Boy and I stared. I suppose that the pupils of our eyes were swimming around the whites like drunken dolphins when a red wig lifted and a feather duster mop of black hair appeared. The cowl fell back and Prince Liu Pao winked at us. In his hands was a piece of stone, round and concave like a bowl. "Yang," he said in a deep masculine voice. He moved his lips to the other side of the stone. "Yin," he said in the sweet feminine voice of the girl. "Needless to say, the sound from the center is quite extraordinary," he said cheerfully in his own voice. "I didn't dare use it underground because of the vibration, which shows how ill-equipped I was to take on the great Master Li. You didn't hesitate to bring the whole works down, and you very nearly squashed me like a bug."

The prince bowed deeply. Master Li grunted and emptied the contents of his purse upon the grass. The lining was waterproof, and he filled it with wine and sealed it. He still had plenty of spring in his right arm, and the purse sailed across the gorge to the prince. They toasted each other politely, and drank thirstily.

"As a matter of minor curiosity, how old were you when you first discovered the entrance in the gorge?" Master Li asked.

"Twelve," the prince replied. "I was thirteen when I learned how to open the doors and enter the burial chamber, and your reconstruction of the tragic affair with the gardeners was so accurate it chilled my blood." He heaved a melancholy sigh. "I hated to kill them. They were my friends, but as you yourself have pointed out, I was faced with the possibility of having every greedy bureaucrat and bandit in the empire at my doorstep. How could I trust those fellows to keep such a secret?"

"How indeed?" said Master Li.

I can't speak for Moon Boy, but I was convinced I was hallucinating. In fact, I was wondering where and when I had eaten some weird mushrooms.

"The manuscript of Ssu-ma Ch'ien posed a similar problem," the prince said. "I thought the secret would last as long as I would, but Brother Squint-Eyes came to me with a sample page. The idiot thought it was genuine. I knew it was forged, but two

days later it dawned on me that the idiot was right. It had to be in code, and how could I be sure Brother Squint-Eyes wasn't playing stupid? For all I knew, he could even have deciphered it, but not yet put two and two together. I had to send my abominable ancestor to deal with him."

The prince flushed angrily. "I was being forced to take actions that made me ill," he said. "You revealed there might be a copy, and I had to try to get it, and that other idiotic monk had to stick his head into the library and commit suicide."

The two of them sipped wine and moodily watched butterflies dance through sunlight that was beginning to filter through a golden haze. The breeze carried a faint smell of rain, and black clouds were gathering in the distance. Far below us the Valley of Shadows was wrapped in deep purple shadows.

"In the tomb I always used the softest possible sound from the stone to control my ancestor," the prince said. "When I sent him and his merry companions to the monastery he wanted to linger and strangle a few more people. I had to make a loud sound to bring him back, and it was exactly like the emperor and the tangerines. The incredible ch'i of the stone overpowered weaker ones in its path, and when I pulled my ancestor back, I also pulled the life force from parts of Princes' Path. I was absolutely appalled! In fact, I felt like a character in a fairy tale who waves a magic wand to cure his wife's one blemish, and does so, except she's now a flawless yak. What had been so simple was becoming terrifyingly complex, and the immediate result was that the abbot was so frightened he rushed off to Peking to seek the legendary Li Kao. Even then I was idiotic enough to think you would weary of reaching dead ends and give up."

Master Li spat disgustedly. "The legendary Li Kao had better buy a bucket of worms and start practicing his goo-goo-goos," he said sourly. "It was the sheer simplicity of it that baffled me. If I hadn't been enchanted by complexity, I might have realized what was going on the moment I saw your studio."

"Oh, but you were magnificent!" the prince protested. "I simply couldn't believe it when you worked through one blind alley after another, knocking walls down if necessary, and you never really went off course. You were moving like doom itself straight toward the truth, and finally I had no choice but to try to kill you."

He threw his head back and laughed with all the old warmth and charm.

"I should have known that a man who would dare a mind trip to Hell would be harder to kill than the Stone Monkey." He inclined his head in my direction. "You too, Ox. You were a dead man the moment I led you to my unspeakable ancestor, and instead you will most certainly earn a place in the annals of P'u Sung-ling, the Recorder of Things Strange."

"Speaking of the Laughing Prince, how did he acquire his happy companions?" Master Li asked.

"My fault entirely." The prince grimaced and fined himself a slap on the cheek. "I may have been slightly precocious when I found my ancestor, but I was still a boy. One day I forgot to lock him back inside the burial chamber, and to make matters worse, I went off on a long trip. When I returned I discovered he had taken the opportunity to creep through the moonlight strangling wayfarers, and now he had companions to share his merriment. Ox, I'm deeply indebted to you for finishing him off. I was going to have to do so, but I wasn't at all sure of how to go about it."

I decided that Prince Liu Pao had been the most eerily precocious boy in history. Thirteen years old, killing two gardener friends when they opened a coffin for him and found a priceless suit of jade, carefully removing jade plates to gaze at a mummy, and gazing instead at the half-decomposed face of a monster that still breathed, learning to control the creature with sounds from a stone—thirteen going on ninety, with the heart of a hangman.

The hangman's eyes softened as they slowly moved to Grief of Dawn. He spread his hands helplessly. "I would like you to know that I really did love her," the prince said quietly. "I was pinned into a corner, and I had to make a difficult decision."

"It was a decision you made long ago when you first decided to sell your soul for gifts from a stone," Master Li said matter-of-factly. "Grief of Dawn made exactly the opposite decision—incidentally, Moon Boy, could you bring the soul-sound from this one piece?"

He picked up the piece of stone he had taken from the Laughing Prince and tossed it to Moon Boy, who shook his head and said, "No, not from a flat piece. I'd need two of them." From the tone of Moon Boy's voice, I assumed he had decided this was all a bad dream.

Master Li nodded. He got to his feet and walked over to the body of Grief of Dawn and pulled out his knife. Her life had drained away down in the tomb, and there was only a trickle of blood when he removed the ugly wooden shaft from her chest. He probed the wound and washed something in wine and dried it on his tunic. When he tossed it to Moon Boy, I saw that it was a small sharp sliver of stone.

"I was wrong about Grief of Dawn," Master Li said. "I thought she had been Tou Wan's maid in a previous incarnation. The truth is that she never left that incarnation. Tou Wan stabbed her with the hairpin. The top broke off inside her heart and kept her alive, and she fled and was hit on the head by soldiers who left her for dead. Again the stone brought her back to life, and the maid wandered into the world without a memory. A cruel and dangerous world for a pretty girl, and she was bleeding and unconscious when old Tai-tai took her in and gave her a home and a new name."

Master Li squeezed Moon Boy's shoulder, and walked back and squeezed mine and sat down beside his wine flask.

"Do not mourn Grief of Dawn," he said quietly. "Remember how she sang in her delirium when she thought she would ease the pain of an old lady she loved? Inside her heart she carried a gift from Heaven that was not rightfully hers. She could have become the most honored and celebrated woman in history, but she would not be party to stealing. I have no idea what her strange wandering life was like, nor how and why she moved from one existence to another without awakening her memory, but I do know that for seven and a half centuries she refused to steal from Heaven, and she is being greeted with the highest honors in Hell where her credit account could buy half the kingdom, and surely she will be allowed to ascend to K'un-lun and sit at the feet of the August Personage of Jade. Which is a good deal more than Prince Liu Pao will be able to do."

His eyes were cold and contemptuous as they moved across the gorge to the prince.

"He's already killed five people in order to dip his brush into the well of the stone and steal the touch of Heaven, and then paint pretty pictures and pass them off as his own." Master Li rinsed his mouth with wine and spat it out. "Fraud and forgery," he growled. "Paint slapped over dry rot and gilded with lies."

The prince turned white.

"Is that what you think, old man?" he whispered. "Is that what you really think?" Now he was turning red. "My paintings are private! I do not show them! What sort of fraud is that?"

"Masturbation," Master Li said. "In your circumstances, that still qualifies as rape."

"My paintings are for the purpose of learning the paths of universal energy!" the prince shouted furiously. "My loathsome ancestor sought truth in rivers of blood; I seek it in harmless paint, and even the Laughing Prince could claim that his was the proper goal of philosophy! You, on the other hand, waste your time with unimportant puzzles, which is the occupation of a child!"

Master Li raised his flask and drank deeply, and wiped his lips with his beard.

"Oh, I wouldn't call the puzzle of the stone unimportant," he said mildly. "I will, however, plead guilty to holding a certain childlike view of the universe."

The prince's color was returning to normal. He raised the purse and drank, and leaned back comfortably.

"Childlike? No, but very old-fashioned," he said with a chuckle. "In fact, everything you do is old-fashioned. Who in this day and age would charge all over China, even to the pits of Hell, trusting to the immediacy of experience rather than the trained objectivity of an army of investigators? You appear to take seriously the anthropomorphic folk concepts of gods and goddesses, and your concern for the stone appears to spring from a literal acceptance of fairy tales from the spurious Annals of Heaven and Earth. Li Kao, you are a very great man, but—and I say this with the greatest respect—an antique memorial to long dead concepts and practices and values."

The prince was laughing as he lifted his stone. I realized that it was attached to a cord around his neck, and the silver cup for his painting brush that had encased and concealed it was slipped down. Master Li leaned over and whispered to me, and I surreptitiously whispered to Moon Boy.

"He says you're to prepare to bring the soul-sound from the stone. He'll yell when he wants it."

Moon Boy's eyes were glazed and he tried to focus them. His fingers trembled as he lifted the two pieces in his cupped hands.

"Still, there are certain pleasures denied to an antique with a slight flaw in his character," the prince said. "Such as being able to hear the simple sound of total innocence. To be fair, half the villagers and monks couldn't hear the stone either. I would think, however, that at this distance, and with the acoustic effect of the cliffs behind us—"

"Now!" Master Li yelled.

Moon Boy's lips moved to his cupped hands. His throat vibrated rapidly, and my heart leaped as indescribable beauty and yearning and hope and sadness bounced back and forth between the cliffs.

Kung…shang…chueeeeeeeeeh….

Master Li reeled, but his reaction was as nothing compared to the stone of Prince Liu Pao. It tore loose from the prince's hands and literally flew toward Moon Boy, and the cord jerked tight around the prince's neck and pulled him forward.

I am so stupid that it wasn't until then that I realized what the prince had been planning to do to us. The gorge was only a few feet away, two hundred feet straight down to jagged rocks. Prince Liu Pao teetered at the edge, waving his arms for balance, and then he fell. I closed my eyes, and when I opened them I was looking at a miracle.

The prince was standing upon thin air. He walked across nothingness, intent only upon hauling the stone back and regaining control of it. Then he looked at us and smiled.

"Really, Li Kao, didn't you think I would expect that?" he said mockingly. "And didn't you think I would learn something from the stone and my ancestor's charts and formulas? I hate to brag, but I rather suspect I know more about the energy forces of the universe than any other man alive."

He pointed to his sandals, resting upon a void.

"That, for example, is a path of energy strong enough to support ten elephants, if the elephants could learn to see and adjust to it. I have, and I sincerely hope you are similarly capable."

"One of us is," Master Li said calmly.

"You mean Number Ten Ox?" the prince said. "I agree that no man alive could climb down one side of the gorge and back up the other without the proper gear, and

when Ox carried you from one peak to the other, he was crossing as I am now, upon a path of energy."

Master Li hopped up on my back, and the prince's smile grew wider.

"That's why in Hell you imagined him to show in the mirror that he was a firstborn, since walking on air can only result from absolute awareness or absolute innocence, but has it occurred to you that Ox was blinded by mist? He isn't now, and innocence cannot bear very much awareness."

His lips touched the rim of the stone in his hands, and the sound that came from the well was so pure and powerful that I heard not suggestive notes but the actual words from the soul of a stone.

"Come…to…meeeeeeeeee! … Come…to…meeeeeeeeee!"

Moon Boy and I were dragged to the edge. I saw no path of energy. All I saw were rocks rising like shark's teeth two hundred feet below, and terror shook me like a rag doll. I had no choice. I must obey the call or die, and my foot reached out into nothingness.

Moon Boy teetered on the edge. His throat was vibrating faster than a throat could, and sweat was pouring down his face, and something extraordinary was happening. He was projecting the sound of the stone, but at the same time he was blending another sound into it. It was wind and sunlight and rain and snow and a comfortable snug cottage—it was the song that Grief of Dawn had sung for old Tai-tai, but now she was singing to me. Grief of Dawn was calling me, and I couldn't imagine how I had missed the path before. There it was, not six feet from the empty space in front of my sandal, and I turned and walked to it. I stepped confidently out into the air, opening my arms to embrace Grief of Dawn, and I was only vaguely aware of the prince's white terrified face, and the click of the rattan coil inside Master Li's sleeve and the flash of his knife as it slashed out.

The sound of Grief of Dawn had turned. Now she was behind me, calling me back, and I turned around like a sleepwalker and stepped back over a path of swirling energy that was as smooth as a carpet. Master Li rode on my back, chuckling, and he laughed out loud when my sandals came down on rock and grass. Moon Boy collapsed, gasping and rubbing his throat, and Master Li hopped off.

The sounds had gone. I came back to reality and whirled around and stared at Prince Liu Pao, who was still standing upon thin air in the center of the gorge. He no longer wore the stone, and the warmth and charm was gone, and all I saw was a sly and selfish little man who looked like a terrified monkey.

"Really, Prince, there's no need to be frightened. Did you think I was going to slit your silly throat?" Master Li detached the stone from the cord he had cut from the prince's neck. Why do people take me for a crude assassin?" he asked plaintively. "I'm not crude at all."

The torch that Moon Boy had carried from the tomb lay on the grass. It still burned. Master Li pointed to it, and then across the gorge.

"Ox, can you put this thing through that window?"

I had a lot of pent-up emotion, and I released some of it. The torch tumbled over and over as it sailed across the gorge and plunged down through the window of the prince's studio. I thought it had gone out, but it hadn't. Oil and turpentine catch easily, and flames sprang up.

"Nothing to worry about, Prince," Master Li said reassuringly. "To cherish perfection is to commit creative suicide, and every true artist knows that a masterpiece is an accident that should be burned. Besides, your pretty pictures aren't to revel in but learn from, and you've already learned."

He reclaimed his flask and helped himself to another pint. "Not that I entirely approve of the goal," he said. "One of the previous possessors of the stone was Chuang Tzu. He had a disciple who spent seven years studying universal energy and then demonstrated his wisdom by walking across the surface of a river and back again, and Chuang Tzu broke into tears. 'Oh, my boy!' he sobbed. 'My poor, poor, boy! You spent seven years of your life learning to do that, and all the while old Meng has been running a ferry not two miles from here, and he only charges two copper coins.'"

Master Li replaced his flask.

"Besides, levitation can be positively unhealthy when one is accustomed to the support of a stone," he added.

The studio was blazing. Prince Liu Pao was weeping, and he turned and ran toward his paintings with outstretched arms. Suddenly he yelped in fear and stopped. I saw that his feet were slowly spreading apart as though the path was splitting into two paths, and he turned uncertainly this way and that. His white strained face turned back to me.

"Ox! Which way? Which is the solid path?"

"Prince, I can't see it anymore!" I shouted. "All I see is empty air!"

His legs were spreading wider. At any moment he would fall, and he squealed and jumped to the left. His feet came down on a solid line of energy and he began to run. He made two steps but not the third, and sometimes in dreams I still see a screaming feather duster turn over and over as Prince Liu Pao falls into the gorge, and I hear mocking echoes from the walls of the cliffs, and then I hear the sickening sound of a body splattering upon rocks far below.

Master Li walked to the edge and peered down. "Pity," he said. "He had real talent. Just the man for decorating dinner invitations."

26

The bottom of the gorge was leaping up at me, and I sat with my head between my knees until my stomach stopped heaving. Moon Boy was sitting beside Grief of Dawn with her limp hand held in his. Master Li turned from the gorge shaking his head in disgust, but not at the prince.

"When somebody performs my autopsy, he'll open the skull and pull out a turnip that's been masquerading as a brain," he said sourly. "I still can't begin to come to grips with this weird case."

I stared at him. Even Moon Boy raised his eyes from Grief of Dawn.

Master Li shrugged. "We'd have to be mindless as millipedes not to guess that the human involvement has been almost incidental. What matters is a stone."

He began pacing back and forth with his hands clasped behind his back. He stopped and glared up at Heaven. "How the hell do you expect idiotic human beings to *understand*?" he shouted impiously, and then he resumed pacing.

"The ancients gave up trying to understand," Master Li muttered. "After a couple of thousand years of watching fire transform solid pieces of wood into insubstantial heat and light, they produced the First Law of Taoist science: There is no such thing as a solid object. Five centuries later they produced the Second Law: All matter consists of bundles of pure energy called ch'i, the life force, and shih, the motion force. Another five centuries passed, and with the Third Law they threw up their hands and quit."

He stopped pacing and grinned at us.

"Believe it or not, there's a point to this," he said. "Ox and our late friend gave a marvelous demonstration of the First and Second Laws by adjusting their ch'i and shih to that of seemingly empty air and taking a walk, and Ox's dream about an orange-colored piece of clay unconsciously echoed the Third Law: All energy is controlled by adherence to classical patterns."

Master Li resumed pacing.

"Ox dreamed that the clay had a pulse that followed an unusual pattern. The Third Law states that the humblest piece of clay must adjust its ch'i and shih to that of

the perfect piece of clay, and the energy of stars must follow the patterns of the perfect star. Every plant, animal, insect, drop of water, mote of dust—everything in the universe has a classical model to guide it, and those perfect patterns are the building blocks in the barrier against anarchy called the Wall of Heaven. That's when the ancients said to hell with it and stopped. You see, the next step required understanding the nature of universal energy as a whole, and such a thing is completely past the capabilities of the human mind."

Master Li stopped and shook a finger at us for emphasis.

"This can be said. Nothing in all existence is more important than maintaining the Wall of Heaven. Nothing! The forces are so awesome that should the barrier fail and energy run amok, the universe itself wouldn't last a second. The task of maintaining the Wall is that of the goddess Nu Kua, and what the goddess wants, the goddess gets. For unfathomable reasons she wanted a stone that had a flaw in it, and then when she couldn't repair the flaw, she dropped it in our laps."

Master Li sat down between Moon Boy and me and took Moon Boy's pieces of the stone. He carefully fit them together with the piece from the prince and held the stone up to the light.

"There's the flaw. See? A tiny vein of gold ran through it. Gold is pretty stuff, but terrible for a stone. Particularly when you're building a wall."

I hadn't noticed it when the pieces were apart, but now I saw the faint yellow lines at the edges of the cracks.

"According to one of the Annals of Heaven and Earth, assuming it existed, the goddess finally had to reject the stone, but not until contact with her hand had given it a soul," Master Li muttered. "Two great philosophers later used it for an ink stone, and the touch of Heaven produced divine calligraphy. Prince Liu Pao used it to steal from the gods in order to paint pretty pictures, and I wonder…."

He let the sentence die a natural death while he swiftly bound the stone together with the cord he had cut from the prince's neck. He opened his wine flask and dipped the stone inside. After a minute he lifted the stone back out and removed the cord and placed the stone upon the grass. He lifted the flask to his lips, and I saw a slow sensual shudder spread throughout his body, and when he raised his head, his eyes were shining with reverence.

"Jade Emperor, if this is what you serve in heaven, preserve me long enough to become a saint," he whispered.

Moon Boy and I took small sips. I have no words for it. The raw alcohol of Haining Mountain Dew had become the Nectar of the Gods, and to describe it I'd have to steal from mystical accounts of divine revelations.

"Talk about temptation!" Master Li exclaimed. "I could start making this stuff by the lakeful and be deified on the spot!"

The taste had the greatest effect upon Moon Boy, who turned pale as death and began rocking back and forth with powerful emotion. I thought he was going to weep until I realized he never did. Moon Boy did not cry, not even when Grief of Dawn lay dead. Master Li was looking speculatively at him.

"You know, it's quite possible that I'm making the same mistake twice," he said thoughtfully. "I didn't see the obvious about the prince because it was too simple, and now I may be straining to understand something that doesn't require understanding. Perhaps all we need to know is that the goddess Nu Kua is blowing on the dice for one last desperate roll, and all we can do is pray they come up with a pair of Blind Queens. After all, we must assume that the stone is one of the most important objects in all the universe. Why else would she go to the trouble of Moon Boy?"

Moon Boy stared at him. So did I, and the old man threw his head back and laughed until tears flowed.

"What a creation is Moon Boy!" he chortled. "My lad, on the one hand you're the apotheosis of beauty, irresponsibility, and unbridled sexuality on a rampage, and on the other hand there isn't an evil, unkind, or even unpleasant bone in your body." Master Li shook his head wonderingly. "We may be sure that art is involved, for such a combination of excess and innocence is not to be found in nature," he said. "You couldn't possibly have perfected guiltless sin without experimenting with the common garden variety, and when Ox and I watched you stand before the Mirror of Past Existences, our subconscious minds played a duet. Buddha, what a series of incarnations! From baseness to depravity to malignancy to monstrosity, culminating in an incarnation as the most dissolute and irresistible slut ever to shake her rear end across the pages of history."

Master Li wiped his eyes and winked at me.

"Come, Ox, surely you recognized her? I thought every boy in China had memorized the more indelicate passages of her biography."

I remembered having seen Moon Boy dressed as a girl, and then I realized he *had* been a girl, and then I turned bright red. Suddenly his incredible beauty made sense, and I recognized the lady in the mirror, all right.

"Golden Lotus," Master Li said happily. "Moon Boy once walked the earth as a man-eating seductress so spectacularly immoral that she was elevated to Heaven to become the greatest Patron of Prostitutes in history, and I suspect that the goddess Nu Kua began to think deep thoughts about peculiar combinations of ch'i and shih the moment Golden Lotus began jiggling down the pearly paths, causing havoc among the young gods. Golden Lotus was removed from her post and given a new form. Remember it?"

I remembered Moon Boy in the mirror, changing and yet not changing, still beautiful but blending with bright colors, lifting his face and arms toward the sun, almost like—

"A flower," Master Li said softly. "A beautiful flawed flower named Purple Pearl who was placed in the path of a flawed stone, and the stone brought dew and raindrops to wash the evil from the flower, and the flower fell in love and vowed to repay its debt by shedding every tear in its body. It might take centuries, or even millennia for the time to be right for a flower to be reborn, but the greatest virtue of stone is patience."

Moon Boy's eyes were wide and wondering. Master Li picked up the stone, pieces still pressed together, and placed it in Moon Boy's hands. Then he took his wine flask and stood up.

"This will seem very silly, but who cares?" he said. "Clasp the stone tightly, Moon Boy. Close your eyes. Try to imagine a place without water near the River of Spirits, and dryness and wilting, and then a faithful stone flying up with the morning dew of Heaven."

Moon Boy closed his eyes and clasped the stone. Master Li waited, and then he tilted the flask and sprinkled drops of Heavenly Nectar over Moon Boy's head. The effect wasn't silly at all. Moon Boy trembled all over, and squeezed the stone against his heart, and from his lips came an indescribably beautiful singing sound that gradually resolved itself into words.

"Love…love…but I have no tears…. Not even as a child could I cry…. How can I cry for a stone? … Love…love…love…but I cannot cry…."

Master Li motioned for me to follow him.

"We will leave you for a while," he said quietly. "A flower that vows to shed tears is making a very serious commitment, and neither gods nor men have the right to influence the decision."

He walked away. We went around the peak to the far side of Dragon's Left Horn, and Master Li sat down on a flat rock and gazed out at the valley. Peasants were scurrying around fearfully, but so far as I could see the damage from the earthquake was limited to fallen thatched roofs and a few collapsed barns. Soft blankets of shadows were sliding over the fields, and the birds were singing their last songs. Master Li tilted the flask and reverently rolled the liquid around his mouth before swallowing.

"Ox, I think Prince Liu Pao should be a hero," he said thoughtfully. "It's better that way, even though it may cause long-term problems for his heirs. We'll tell the abbot that the prince fell in the final triumphant battle against the forces of evil, and never again will his abominable ancestor threaten the Valley of Sorrows."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"The peasants will want a temple for him, but a shrine should do."

Master Li was beginning to warm to the subject. "Make that two shrines," he said enthusiastically. "We'll say he wished to be cleft in half, from top to bottom, and each half buried in one of the destroyed areas of Princes' Path to fertilize new plants."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"He'll be the Holy Half-Princes of the Valley of Sorrows, each half turning the seeing side to the peasants' good deeds and the blind side to their bad, and the legend of what will happen when danger threatens and the two halves are reunited should be very interesting. I hope the cave of Wolf survived, because the boys should get to work on it at once."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"His last words were that he longed to lie in his graves and listen to the innocent laughter of children and the blissful bleating of little lambs and the—"

"No, sir," I said.

"I suppose you're right," Master Li admitted. "Peasants will go only so far. You'd better handle that part of it."

"Yes, sir," I said. "His last words were instructions to his heirs to repair the damage from the earthquake and give the monastery a new roof."

"Good boy," Master Li said.

"And fix the dike at the intersection of paths between the monastery, village, and estate. One torrential rain and the melons will wind up in Soochow."

"Anything else?"

"No, sir," I said. "Anything else and the peasants will expect the prince's heirs to repair their sandals and empty the chamber pots."

We sat in silence. Master Li's wrinkles seemed to be older than the seams and cracks in the hills across from us, and his mood was turning melancholy.

"You know, the prince was right," he said. "I'm almost the last advocate of the old way of doing things. Perhaps it's just as well. If one leaves out the Neo-Confucians, there's much to be said for the modern style. Still, I hope you keep filling your notebooks as a record of an archaic approach to problems. There's a good deal of fun to be found in the old way, and a good deal of beauty, and the practitioners seldom expired from ennui."

"Yes, sir," I said.

He looked at me gravely, and then he nodded. We got up and started back. I tried to prepare for it, but still it was like a blow to the pit of my stomach, and tears blurred my eyes.

"Oh, Moon Boy," I sniffled.

He always did things neatly. Master Li's knife had been carefully cleaned, and he had built a small dam of earth so the blood from his slit wrist would build up around and over the stone without staining the grass unnecessarily. Moon Boy had placed Grief of Dawn's hand over his, with the stone beneath them, and Master Li walked up and gently lifted the hands and picked up the stone. He washed it in the wine it had produced and dried it on his tunic and held it up to the light.

"Oh, Ox, what a beautiful piece of work," he whispered.

A stone had once washed evil from a flower. Now the flower had shed the tears it had saved up to wash the flaw from the stone, and there wasn't a trace of a crack or a sign of soft gold. The three pieces were one, and it was as solid as a stone can be.

Master Li turned and raised his head toward Heaven and drew in great lungfuls of air. I covered my ears, but still the high harsh eagle screams that burst from the old man's throat hurt my eardrums. The screams lifted one after another, shooting to the crimson clouds, and the echoes bounced back and forth between the peaks.

He dropped to his knees. I followed his example. "It is Li Kao," he said simply. "I pray to be allowed to address the goddess Nu Kua."

We knelt there in silence while clouds began to cover the sky. I suppose it was my imagination, but I began to sense something else that stretched from horizon to horizon: a vast maternal presence.

"Goddess," Master Li said politely, "forgive me for beginning with a minor matter, but I have sworn a vow. The current Patron of Prostitutes is an incompetent disgrace, and the whores of China wish her to be replaced. Since the great Golden Lotus is scarcely available, they have nominated Empress Wu."

The air was growing sulphurous. Thunder rumbled.

"Well, perhaps it might not be a good idea to let a woman like that run around loose," Master Li hastily conceded. "I have been authorized to select a substitute, and I humbly nominate Tou Wan, wife of the late Laughing Prince. It is true that she attempted to murder her maid, but I have yet to meet a lady of quality who has not had the same urge now and then. So far as I know she took no part in her husband's massacres and tortures, and as for her qualifications, she was immoral, lecherous, seductive, avaricious, blessed with a heart of the purest granite, and as tough as a person can get without infringing upon the supernatural. She was intelligent and brooked no nonsense, and would surely be a first-class manager. I cannot imagine a better representative of prostitutes, and should she cause trouble, it would only be necessary to send her a cool drink with lots and lots of ice in it. May I be so bold as to hope that a formal petition would receive favorable omens?"

The smell of sulphur faded away and the thunder died down. Master Li bowed again.

"Goddess, the world of men is a world of incomprehension," he said softly. "Our senses are woefully limited. Our brains are but tiny candles flickering in an infinity of darkness. Our only wisdom is to admit that we cannot understand, and since we cannot understand we must do the best we can with faith, which is our only talent. The greatest act of faith we are capable of is that of loving another more than we love ourselves, and occasionally we can be quite good at it."

He reached out and placed the stone upon the grass.

"We thank you for hoping that the one tiny talent of man might achieve what other forces could not," he said. "We thank you for sending us a flawed stone that would call across the centuries to a flawed flower. We thank you for sending us the flower that would answer the call, and come with the greatest gift love is capable of. We thank you for bringing the pieces together, and we pray that a stone and a flower will finally be granted the acceptance of Heaven."

He bowed flat to the ground. So did I, but I peeked, and Master Li did too.

A slanting sunbeam slid through the clouds and glided across the grass to the stone. I had the feeling that it was probing and testing as it moved over the surface. Then everything stood still. The birds stopped singing and the insects stopped buzzing and the animals stopped rustling. Even the breeze stopped blowing while the stone slowly lifted from the grass and came to a halt about four feet up in the air.

I heard a humming sound. A light was glowing inside the stone, and a vibration made my head spin. The inner light began to pulse faster and faster and the stone began to shake. The hum was now a muted roar of incredible power, and a halo of light began to spin around the stone. Another halo crossed it, and another and another. The stone was glowing with blinding light, and the halos formed a dizzying pattern of interlocking rings, and I knew with absolute certainty that the full ch'i and shih of a simple stone was powerful enough to reduce the Valley of Sorrow to a tiny pile of ashes.

The vibration still accompanied the roar, and the stone still shook. The roar increased and the stone threatened to shake itself to pieces.

Moon Boy was turning transparent, shimmering and melting and fading into nothingness, and something was appearing upon the shuddering surface of the stone. Colors deepened, buds lifted and opened, and we gazed at a lovely flower. The roar of power stopped vibrating and the stone stopped shaking, but then the power level lifted again—unbelievable force!—and the shaking and vibrating reappeared.

Now Grief of Dawn turned transparent. Her body melted like mist, and only the bent grass testified to the fact that it had lain there, and something else was appearing upon the stone. A slim graceful green creeper moved around the circumference, wrapping a stone and a flower in an eternal embrace, and the roar stopped vibrating and the stone stopped shaking.

Again the roar of awesome power grew stronger and stronger. The spinning halos were now seamless, and nothing could withstand the force as the energy level approached the infinite—nothing—yet the stone remained absolutely steady and resolute, and I lost my fear that it would burst. Then the blinding light faded, and the roar faded, and the halos spun slower, and the stone began climbing to the clouds, picking up speed, streaking like a tiny comet toward the Great River of Stars and the goddess Nu Kua and the Wall of Heaven. The distant twinkle of light faded away and was gone.

Master Li stood up and stretched. "How would I know?" he said, answering the expression on my face. "I'm no more capable of understanding the universe than the ancients were, and I applaud their good sense in leaving Heavenly matters to the gods. All I know is that certain things seem to work and certain things don't."

He turned and gazed across the gorge.

"Well, Prince, fraud may rule the world, but classicism still packs a wallop when one removes the neo from it," he said to the embers of the studio. "Classical truths still apply, and classical values still define the limits, and classical standards still hold the universe together."

He turned to me. "Come on, Ox. Let's find a place where they still know how to get classically drunk."

"Yes, sir," I said.

I bent over and he hopped nimbly up on my back. I turned and began loping down the path toward the monastery, and then on to Peking, and Heaven's Bridge, and the Alley of Flies, and the Wineshop of One-Eyed Wong.

EIGHT
SKILLED
GENTLEMEN

For Derk Bodde, Göran Aijmer,
and all the other pioneers
who almost got it right

I have no intention of setting down the disgusting details concerning Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu. I will only say that I was half dead by the time we caught him, and Master Li had been so sorely pressed that he actually volunteered to serve as imperial witness to the execution. This was unprecedented because the old man hates to dress up in formal First Rank attire, even though he's still entitled to wear it, and he cannot tolerate the noise.

Executions in Peking are public occasions, held at the Vegetable Market that forms the western boundary of Heaven's Bridge, the criminal area of the city. A large audience always attends, and this particular Execution Day was certain to draw a larger and louder crowd than ever because Devil's Hand was going for the record. "Devil's Hand" is a generic name passed from one Chief Executioner of Peking to the other, and several centuries ago the executioner managed 1,070 consecutive clean decapitations without needing a second swipe of his great sword. Our current Devil's Hand had 1,044 consecutive clean kills, and since thirty condemned criminals were scheduled for execution the old record could fail before the day was done.

It was the first day of the fourth moon in the Year of the Horse 3338 (A.D. 640) and every gambler in the city was packed into the square, besieging the bookmakers' booths, and Master Li said he hadn't seen so much money tossed around since Emperor Yang bet the city of Soochow on a cricket fight. (The bookmakers were facing ruin since they had originally offered astronomical odds against the record being broken. I had a small wager myself, but against Devil's Hand. The pressure on him was tremendous and would get worse with every falling head, and all it would take to miss would be a bite of a bug or a slip in a puddle of blood and anyone who thinks it's easy to hit a stationary target in the exact same spot again and again with a heavy blade is advised to try chopping down a tree.) That meant every pickpocket and confidence man in Peking was on hand, and with the audience in an unusually festive mood it was to be expected that every vender who could cram his wares into the square would do so, and the result was the shattering of uncounted eardrums. Like this:

"Sha la jen la!"
"Hao! Hao! Hao!"
"Hao tao!"
"Boinngg-boinngg-boinngg-boinngg-boingg!"
"My purse! Where is my silver necklace!"

Meaning Devil's Hand roared the ritual, "I've got my man!" and the mob howled, "Good! Good! Good!" and connoisseurs spread credit where it was due by screaming "Good sword!" and a dealer in household sundries crept up behind me and took aim at my left ear and unleashed the traditional sound that advertised his wares: wooden balls at the ends of strings smacking viciously against brass gongs. The last agonized wail speaks for itself, and it was really very interesting to look down from my vantage point and see the victim being divested of his valuables by Fu-po the Ferret.

I was seated beside Master Li on the dignitaries' platform, sweating in the uncomfortable junior nobleman's uniform he makes me wear on such occasions and which will land me in boiling oil one of these days since I am scarcely entitled to the badges of rank. Master Li was letting an underling handle the honors until it came time for Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu to receive the sword, and was passing the time by catching up on his correspondence. He leaned over and yelled in my ear, trying to shout above the ghastly din.

"Something for you, Ox!"

He was waving a missive that seemed to consist of tracks made by a chicken after gobbling fermented mash.

"A literate barbarian!" Master Li yelled. "Fellow named Quintus Flaccus the Fourth, writing from a place called the Sabine Hills! Somehow or other he got his hands on one of your memoirs!" He swiftly scanned the chicken tracks. "Usual critical comments!" he yelled. "Clotted construction, inept imagery, mangled metaphors, and so on!"

"Nice of him to write!" I shouted back.

"Sha la jen la!"
"Hao! Hao! Hao!"
"Who has taken my bronze belt buckle and my python skin belt!"
"Whangity-whangity-whangity-whang!"

That was a cobbler who had taken aim at my right ear and was advertising by smashing his metal foot-frame with a hammer. The head just chopped off by Devil's Hand, I noticed, was rolling like a ball across the cobblestones toward two little girls who were seated facing each other, playing the handclap game: clap opposing hands, clap left hands, clap right hands, clap own hands, and so on, while singing an ancient nonsense rhyme. They watched the severed head approach with large eyes, lifted their stubby legs in unison to let it roll past, and resumed clapping. Shrill happy voices reached through a momentary pause in the din:

"Kuang kuang ch'a
Kuang kuang ch'a,
Miao li he shang
Mei yu t'ou fa!"

Did barbarian children in the Sabine Hills chant something like that while clapping hands?

"Cymbals a pair,
Cymbals a pair,
The old temple priest
He has no hair!"

Master Li leaned over and began yelling again. "Ox, this barbarian is a remarkably sound critic! Listen to this. *'Inceptis gravibus plerumque et magna professis purpureus, late qui splendeat, unus et alter adsuitur pannus, ut proicit ampullus! Parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus.'* A bit prolix, but beautifully phrased, isn't it?"

I have no idea why he asks questions like that. I continued to sit with my mouth slackly ajar in flycatching position while another prisoner received last words from the junior official and was dragged to the chopping block. Master Li placed his lips back against my ear.

"A rough translation might be: 'Often on a work of grave purpose and high promise is tacked a purple patch or two to give it color, but throw away the paintpot! Your mountains labor to give birth to a laughable little mouse.'"

"Very nicely phrased," I said.

"That's not all," said Master Li. "He gets better, except he still uses more words than he should and like all uncivilized writers his prose is strangled by unnecessary punctuation. I'm half tempted to send friend Flaccus a manual on Chinese Poetic Shorthand. Do you know Li Po's 'Short Song'?

"'Earth too big
Sky too far
Ride six dragons
Around North Star
Crazy dragons stinking drunk
Enjoy self!'

"Think, my boy, of the benefit to the barbarian's style if he studied Li Po's technique and altered his missive accordingly.

"'Purpose grave
Promise high
Mountains labor
By and by
Out creeps mouse with purple nose
Throw away paintpot!'"

"A vast improvement," I said.

I forgot to mention the venders of soft drinks. These fellows are almost alone in advertising their wares with their own voices, and the reason is that each and every one is convinced he's but a temporarily undiscovered star of Peking opera, and one of the bastards had crept up behind me and was pointing his gaping maw at both my ears. Along with the rest of it, the result was like this:

"Sha la jen la!"
"Hao! Hao! Hao!"
"Hao tao!"

"Soothing syrups chilled with ice!
Try mine once you'll try them twice!
Ten cash a cup to beat the heat
With a taste like snow, but sweet-sweet-sweet!"

"Who has made off with my costly silk trousers! My pure velvet loincloth!"
"Clang-clang-clang-clang-clang-clang-clang-clang!"

That last was a scissors grinder. They advertise by clashing rows of metal discs sewn into the linings of their long, wide sleeves, and the sound has the peculiar quality of cracking the porcelain of your teeth. The latest severed head rolled to the little girls, who didn't even look up as they automatically raised their legs, and the sweet childish chant continued as the head joined the row of its bodiless colleagues, and I suddenly leaned forward and started to count: "…twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six." Twenty-six meant Devil's Hand had just tied the record, and the next would set a new one! I was going to lose my bet unless a miracle happened, but I didn't mind. In fact, for the first time that day I felt a glow of well-being, because I knew the next prisoner in line all too well. How delightful that the record should be set by Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu!

"Ox, here's a very interesting comment from Flaccus the Fourth!" Master Li was yelling. "He begins by bemoaning your excessive sensationalism, and then writes, *'Ut turpiter atrum desinat in piscem mulier formosa superne—'*"

I nudged his arm and pointed, and Master Li arose and adjusted his robes. He stepped to the front of the platform as the bailiffs dragged the prisoner forward, and

I could see the old man compose himself and begin formulating suitably dignified Confucian comments to help the hosteler resign himself to his imminent demise. Unfortunately Master Li couldn't quite attain the proper tone of serene gravity since he had to contend with the mob, the venders, the gamblers, and two little girls clapping hands, and the result was something like this:

"Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu—"

"Six to five! Last chance at six to five! Money-money-money!" howled Gold Tooth Meng.

"Your crimes are debased beyond belief—"

"Whap-whong! Whap-whong! Whap-whong!"

That was a peddler of combs and hairbrushes who advertised by bashing a drum and a gong simultaneously.

"And were it in my power to do so—"

"Soothing syrups chilled with ice!"

"Stop, thief! Bring back the lint from my navel!"

"I would sentence you to the Thousand Cuts—"

"Kuang kuang ch'a
Kuang kuang ch'a,
Miao li he shang
Mei yu t'ou fa!"

"Beginning with your polecat prick and baboon balls, you miserable turd!" Master Li yelled at the top of his lungs.

Further words would be redundant. He waved to the bailiffs who hauled Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu to the chopping block and kicked his legs out from under him. Devil's Hand began his breathing exercises and prepared to hoist his sword for the record-breaking attempt, and that was when the first of the extraordinary events that were to entangle us in the affairs of the Eight Skilled Gentlemen occurred.

I wouldn't have believed anybody could scream loud enough to make the mob in the Vegetable Market shut up and pay attention, or make the Chief Executioner of Peking come to a halt with his sword raised high, but that is exactly what happened. All eyes turned to six figures that were racing into the square through the Gate of Prolonged Righteousness. The five men in the lead had wide staring eyes, faces bleached white with terror, and mouths gaping like coal bins as they emitted one earsplitting scream after another. The sixth figure was the cause of the commotion, and one look was enough to freeze my blood. I had heard tales of vampire ghouls from Auntie Hua since I was five years old, but I had never expected to see one, and this *ch'ih-mei*, as Master Li later confirmed, was a specimen so classic it could

have been used to illustrate the famous scientific study by the great P'u Sung-ling, Recorder of Things Strange.

It had long greenish-white hair growing all over it, tangled and rank, dripping with decaying fungus from a tomb. Its huge red eyes glared like charcoal fires, and its vulture claws dripped with somebody's blood, and its huge tiger teeth glittered in the sunlight. The terrible thing moved with immense powerful strides and would surely have caught the fleeing men in no time if it had run in a straight line. Instead it weaved and stumbled, clawing the air with impotent fury, and when it ran into one of the vender's carts I finally realized what Master Li had grasped instantly. The monster was blind and dying. That was what Auntie Hua had always told me: "Number Ten Ox, if you are chased by a ch'ih-mei, run to daylight! The sun is poison to the living dead!"

The old lady had been right. The vampire ghoul stumbled around in circles, and when it started toward the chopping block Devil's Hand almost twisted himself in half. Instinctively he had started his great sword down toward the block, and then he tried to stop in mid-swing and arc the blade toward the monster, and the result was that he missed the neck of Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu by three feet and the sword shot up a shower of sparks as it struck the cobblestones.

"Ten thousand blessings!" screamed Gold Tooth Meng, and every bookmaker in Peking joined in an earsplitting howl of *"Money—money—money—money!"* because Devil's Hand had just missed his chance to break the record and the bookmakers had been saved from bankruptcy. They immediately took off after wealthy bettors they'd given credit to, joining the howling mob battling to escape from the square through the Gate of Peace and Harmony. I saw a young mother snatch up the little handclapping girls, one under each arm, and kick severed heads out of the way like calabashes as she galloped for safety. Venders' carts and stalls were flying every which way, and showers of shattered bamboo poles and brilliantly painted canvas awnings joined goods of every description that covered the square. In an astonishingly short period of time the only occupants of the Vegetable Market were Devil's Hand, Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu, bailiffs who couldn't flee because they were chained to the hosteler and had dropped the keys and couldn't find them in the litter, Master Li, a monster, and me. Master Li hopped down from the dignitaries' stand and trotted over toward the monster just as it ran into the Wailing Wall behind the chopping block and fell on its back. I ran after Master Li. Just as I got there the vampire ghoul hissed horribly, clawed the air one more time, shuddered, and lay still. Slowly the terrible fire died in its staring blind eyes, and I didn't need a medical examiner to tell me it was dead.

"Fried internally by sunlight, which penetrates putrid flesh to the vital organs," Master Li said matter-of-factly.

Putrid flesh indeed. It stank horribly of decaying matter, and its own body was just as responsible for the reek as were the bits of flesh and gristle from the person it had recently eaten sticking to its claws and teeth.

"Absolutely lovely," Master Li said reverently. "A specimen this perfect hasn't been seen in Peking for a thousand years, and I would very much like to know why it left the safety of a grave to commit suicide in burning sunlight."

The answer wasn't long in coming, because seven more figures were running slowly and exhaustedly through the Gate of Prolonged Righteousness. I recognized the one in the lead, Sergeant Hsienpo of the City Guard, with six of his men behind him. They were panting like a pack of winded hounds when they reached us, and dripping with perspiration. It was clear that the sergeant was delighted to find the monster dead, and almost equally delighted to find a First Rank official to take responsibility. He saluted Master Li smartly.

"Sergeant Hsienpo, sir, from the Coal Hill Watch," he said. "Got a report that suspicious men were at the Lin family cemetery. Found five grave robbers at work in broad daylight, as bold as you please."

The sergeant made no attempt to disguise his admiration for the thieves, who had avoided the guard dogs that patrolled at night by forging a work order for a drainage ditch and marching up the hill with pick and shovels over their shoulders, whistling cheerfully. They could tunnel like moles, and by the time the sergeant and his men had been alerted by the head gardener (he was suspicious because he hadn't received his customary kickback for Coal Hill contracts) they'd already cut two side passages from the central ditch and removed the jewelry and jade burial pieces from two coffins. They were starting on a third when the soldiers tiptoed up behind them.

"So this fellow lifts the lid and freezes solid like a chunk of ice, and these god-awful *claws* come crawling out around the edge, and this horrible *thing* sits up in the coffin and lets out a roar of rage—"

The sergeant told a vivid tale. The grave robbers had taken to their heels with the ch'ih-mei behind them, and the sergeant had rallied his men and given chase. The monster had hurled something at the robbers, but it had bounced harmlessly off the back of one of them, and then it had been a footrace which the vampire ghoul would easily have won at nighttime, but the searing sunlight had done its work and allowed the robbers to escape.

"And a smart piece of work, Sergeant!" Master Li said admiringly. "There aren't many men who would give chase to a ch'ih-mei, and if a promotion isn't forthcoming I'll be the most surprised man in Peking."

I could see that the sage was wrestling with temptation, and for once temptation lost.

"Actually, Coal Hill isn't my district," he said regretfully. "That's the responsibility of Magistrate Han-shan—you'll never find a better audience for your tale than Han-shan, whose grandmother was eaten by a weretiger—and a shortcut to his yamen would be to retrace your path through the Lin family cemetery."

He had something in mind, of course. The soldiers made a litter for the dead monster from pieces of venders' stalls while Master Li confronted an unfortunate fact concerning a fortunate gentleman. Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu could not now be executed.

Devil's Hand had swung his sword and missed, which meant that official soothsayers would have to ascertain that the phenomenon had not been caused by the will of Heaven, and the emperor would have to sign a new death warrant, but the emperor was off on another bandit-hunting expedition in Korea. So Devil's Hand and the bailiffs dragged the horrible hosteler back into the dungeon at Executioner's Tower, and then Master Li and I accompanied the soldiers and the dead monster back to Coal Hill.

We climbed the long path all the way to the top where the Lin family estate was. The grave the monster had occupied yielded a great number of gnawed bones, and some fresh bloodstains which seemed to interest Master Li.

"You say the creature hurled something that struck one of the robbers in the back?" he asked.

"It looked like it," Sergeant Hsienpo replied. "Right over here."

They searched through the tall grass until one of the soldiers let out a high sharp yell, and Master Li leaned over and took out his large green handkerchief, and when he straightened up he was carrying a man's half-eaten head.

"No wonder the monster was annoyed. Grave robbers interrupted his dinner," the sage said mildly.

The head had been ripped right from somebody's body, and a nasty tangle of tendons and part of the vertebrae dangled down, making it look like some kind of obscene sea creature. Nobody was going to identify the poor fellow. The vampire ghoul had devoured the face, and I have seldom seen a nastier mess. Master Li had the soldiers look around on the odd chance that the body might be nearby, and then he added the head to the litter and sent the soldiers on toward the yamen, with a note to the magistrate praising the sergeant's work.

Coal Hill is the domain of the wealthiest families of Peking, and when Master Li walked to the edge of the cemetery he was enjoying the most expensive view available. All the city opened up below us, and almost directly down I could see the rosy walls and emerald foliage and blue and yellow and crimson roof tiles of the Forbidden City. The old man was rocking back and forth on his heels with his hands clasped behind his back, whistling tunelessly, and I realized with surprise that he was as happy as a flea surveying the imperial kennels.

"Ox," he said, "the gods have decided to reward us for our ghastly encounter with Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu."

"Sir?" I said.

"Get plenty of brushes, ink, and notebooks," he continued cheerfully. "It might be a nice gesture to send Flaccus the Fourth an account of what's about to transpire."

"Sir?" I said.

He reached inside his elegant robes and pulled out his odorous goatskin flask and removed the plug, sending an alcohol reek in my direction that caused me to choke.

"Ox, something about that half-eaten head is almost as unusual as the creature that ate it," said Master Li. "The last criticism from our barbarian friend had to do with fish stories, and unless I am greatly mistaken a great white whale of a case is headed in our direction."

"Sir?" I said.

He swilled a pint of the stuff, and I briefly wondered if a vampire ghoul could have survived it.

"A livid leviathan," he said. "My boy, the spout reaches toward the stars, and the wake rocks offshore islands as it swims toward us, circumnavigating sacred seas with the awesome inevitability of an iceberg."

"Oh," I said.

Early on the following morning a palatial palanquin draped with white cloths of mourning and trailing plumes of smoke from sacrificial incense burners proceeded up the Imperial Way toward the Gate of Correct Deportment, with a bonze and a Tao-shih marching in front banging a gong and a wooden fish. I had no idea why I was riding in the thing with Master Li, both of us dressed for an aristocratic funeral. My experience with the old man has taught me to keep my mouth shut when the wrinkles around his eyes squeeze up in tight concentric circles, so I waited until his mind relaxed along with the wrinkles, and then he shook himself and turned toward me.

"Ox, have you ever visited the Forbidden City?"

Of course I hadn't. I was scarcely a mandarin or member of the imperial staff, as he knew very well.

"That's where we're headed. I have reason to believe something very peculiar is going on," said Master Li.

He reached into his robe and pulled out a Fire Pearl. (I don't know what barbarians call them. They're convex pieces of crystal or glass used to focus the sun's rays and start fires, and they can also greatly magnify or diminish the image of things. In my village they're "Big-Small Stones.") Then he reached into another pocket and extracted his handkerchief, and when he unfolded it I discovered I was staring at somebody's left ear.

Where had he picked up an ear? It was neatly severed and there was no trace of blood. Then I remembered Master Li the previous afternoon picking up a half-eaten head in the Lin family cemetery, and I remembered how he had been alone when the rest of us went searching for the body.

"Yes, I took the liberty of acquiring a piece of the ch'ih-mei's victim," he said calmly. "Take a look and tell me if you see anything unusual."

I gingerly took the handkerchief and held the Fire Pearl close to the ear.

"The skin is so smooth it shouldn't be real, except it is," I said after a pause. "There's something filling the pores. It's like butter, but not quite, and there's a

strange kind of glow to it." I ventured to touch the thing. "It's soft and slick, almost like soapstone, and the stuff filling the pores is just a little bit greasy."

He reclaimed the Fire Pearl and the ear.

"Excellent," he said. "I saw traces of the substance caught in the monster's claws when we examined its body beside the chopping block, and the discovery of the victim's head confirmed my suspicion. The slick stuff is an incredibly expensive compound made principally from rendered goose fat. It's called Protocol Soap, and it has the peculiar property of causing human skin to acquire a soft glow. The stuff is used almost exclusively by eunuchs and ministers in daily attendance upon the emperor, the idea being to suggest a reflection of the radiance that emanates from the Son of Heaven."

It took a moment for that to sink in, and then my eyes widened.

"Sir, do you mean that one of the ministers of state has been killed and eaten by a vampire ghoul?" I said in a shocked voice.

"So it would appear," Master Li said mildly. "Even more extraordinary is the fact that no hint of anything amiss has escaped the pink walls. There isn't a place on earth more addicted to gossip and rumor than the Forbidden City, but I checked every source I could think of last night and all I could learn was that something is going on and it's top secret. My boy, it isn't possible that a state minister can vanish without causing an uproar, and keep in mind the fact that we found not one trace of the victim's bones or body. Do his colleagues have it? If so, what could cause mandarins to cover up the crime of the century?"

What indeed? A scandal on a scale to shake the empire seemed not impossible, and as we passed into the Imperial City and started up toward the Altar of Earth and Grain a line began running through my brain: "…monsters, mandarins, and murder…monsters, mandarins, and murder…." The priests at the altar bowed in reverence to the dead as our palanquin passed, as did their counterparts at the Supreme Temple of Ancestors ("…monsters, mandarins, and murder…monsters, mandarins, and murder…"), and dignified Confucian clerks touched their caps respectfully. The Imperial City is the walled enclave of bureaucratic basilicas and aristocratic residences surrounding the Forbidden City of the emperor, but those who assume our funerary progress through such rarefied surroundings was solemn and sedate have never rented palanquins in Peking. I think I may have given a misleading impression, so I will correct it.

"Sheee-ut!" screamed Rat-Scurry-Down-the-Street from his front left bearer's pole. *"Why don't the big heavy kid sit in the middle with the scrawny old bird on his lap? This thing's as unbalanced as a raft rowed by a rat and a rhinoceros!"*

Viper-in-the-Grass had the matching position on the right bearer's pole.

"Stop squawking, gong-head! You ain't got the brains to talk and carry at the same time, and when you open your goddamn mouth your shoulders start shaking like tits at a wet nurse convention!"

Chamber Pot Chong and the Worm, at the rear bearer poles, did not approve.

"Eat vinegar, you turds! You think we like having our faces sprayed with spit from a pair of polecats with hoof-and-mouth disease!"

"Ox, from here on we should travel with decorum," Master Li said.

I stopped the palanquin and jumped out and picked up the front bearers' pole along with the bearers still attached to it, and slammed them back to earth in a manner designed to loosen teeth.

"Listen to me, *ming t'e mao tsei!"* (A very useful phrase for visitors to Peking, it means: "You mulberry caterpillar grain-eating grub thieves!") "One more squawk and I'll feed your combined remains to a gnat."

I climbed back into the palanquin and we proceeded in seemly silence between the Phoenix Towers and across the moat. Master Li has been out of official favor for years, but he still has the rank and proper credentials and the guards had no orders to stop him, and we passed without difficulty through the Meridian Gate and the Forbidden City opened in front of us.

"Now I need your sharp young eyes," Master Li said, "if I'm right, one of the senior mandarins made a meal for a vampire ghoul, and for whatever reason his colleagues are doing everything in their power to hush it up. They have to give the fellow a funeral, however, and under the circumstances they can't possibly deny him a pole."

I saw what he meant, but I'm not sure it will be clear to uncivilized readers, so I will briefly explain.

All people have two souls. The higher *hun* soul resides in the liver, and when a person dies a hole is bored in the coffin just above the liver to allow the higher soul to fly in and out when it wishes. The lower *po* soul resides in the lungs, and under no circumstances must it be allowed out. It is the seat of man's animal instincts and behavior, and it can easily go bad and wander the earth as an evil spirit. The hun soul must journey back and forth between the liver and the law court of the God of Walls and Ditches in Hell during the forty-nine days in which it is being judged, but when it is away from its familiar body it can easily become disoriented, and it is a great tragedy for a higher soul to get lost. It can panic and settle into a totally inappropriate body and become perverted, and when a higher soul goes bad it *really* goes bad. That is how creatures like vampire ghouls are formed, and that is why a beacon is erected to help traveling souls find their way home. It's a tall pole with a bright red flag at the top, placed outside a house where a death has occurred: left of the door for a man, right for a woman. Master Li's point was that the mandarins couldn't possibly take the chance that their colleague's hun soul might get lost and turn into the very kind of monster that had slain him, so they had no choice but to erect a beacon pole.

I kept a lookout for a red pole, and in a way it was a pity. This was my first trip to the Forbidden City and I would have liked to look around and ask Master Li about

it, but all I learned that day was that it might better be called the Forbidden Garden. Once we left the central avenue we were in mazes of trees and shrubs and flowers artistically designed to open to delightful or surprising vistas, such as great dragons and phoenixes in ivory bas-relief upon coral walls or exotic birds that appeared to be posing for artists as they settled upon quaint rocks beside turquoise pools. It was one of those bright birds that drew my eyes away from pole searching, and it took a moment to realize that not all the brightness came from feathers.

"There!" I exclaimed.

A tall slim line lifted behind a row of pomegranates, and at the top was a crimson flag. Master Li had the bearers turn at the Golden River and pass through the Gate of United Harmony toward the complex where he had spent twenty wasted years—at least he called them wasted—and we passed the Hall of Literary Glory, the Hall of Proclaimed Intellect, the Hall of Reverence for the Master (which is the second-greatest library in the world, the first being in Ch'ang-an), and there in the great courtyard of the Hall of Literary Profundity stood the soul pole, left of the entrance, and beneath the red banner flew the flag of a senior scholar who was entitled to display all fourteen symbols of academic distinction: wishing pearls, musical stone, good-luck clouds, rhombus, rhinoceros-horn cup, books, pictures, maple, yarrow, banana leaf, tripod, herb of immortality, money, and the silver shoe.

"That flag narrows the list of possible victims considerably," Master Li said happily. "Has there been any word that one of the foremost scholars in the empire has breathed his last? No, there has not, and now I'm beginning to think that my suspicion of conspiracy and cover-up is a certainty."

When we turned through the outer gates we saw a courtyard crammed with palanquins and carriages and sedan chairs like ours, swathed in mourning cloths. A mob of junior mandarins bowed deeply to Master Li's cap and badges, for he was wearing the whole works, including symbols of imperial office he hadn't held in sixty years, and the effect was very impressive. He marched up the steps as though he owned the place, and we entered a reception hall that was huge to the point of being grotesque. Several forests had been depopulated of wild animals to provide furs to cover the walls, along with immense tapestries and various hangings. A carpet that seemed to be made of white ermine stretched across an acre of floor to a marble dais, and upon the dais rested a huge coffin.

Senior mandarins were making their way with stately dignity up the carpet to pay their last respects to their colleague. Then somebody noticed Master Li. A sharp intake of breath caused heads to turn, and it was fascinating to see eyes widen in sequence and one elegant robe after another twitch backward as though avoiding contact with leprosy—almost a dance, and Master Li did his part by greeting each flinching fellow with a toothy smile: "Wang Chien, dear friend! How delightful that

these unworthy eyes should once more bask in your divine radiance!" And so on. At first nobody else said a word, but then the silence was broken.

"Kao! By all the gods it's Li Kao! Now why didn't I think of calling you in on this mess?"

The man who was painfully working his way toward Master Li with the aid of two canes was dried and shriveled and hunched with arthritis, and older than I could have believed possible. I thought Master Li had reached the limit of a human life span, but this gentleman added a good thirty years to the limit. I noticed that his progress was followed by deep bows, and greeted by Master Li with real pleasure.

"Hello, Chang! How are you these days?" he said warmly.

"How am I? Senile of course," the shriveled antique said. "A few days ago I had a long conversation with my eldest grandson, and I was wondering how he'd suddenly grown so intelligent when I realized he's been dead for twenty years and I was talking to the parrot. Who's the big kid with the muscles and the squashed nose?"

Master Li motioned for me to step forward and bow.

"Allow me to present my former client and current assistant, Number Ten Ox," he said. "Ox, this is the Resplendent Thearch, Supreme Lord of the Eastern Aurora and Grand Subtlety, Bearer of the Cinnabar Scepter of the Highest Mystery of the Great Mystery—or, if you prefer, the Celestial Master."

I honestly think the only thing that prevented me from bouncing up and down upon the floor was the fact that my body couldn't decide whether to topple forward or backward. This was none other than Chang Tao-ling, the highest high priest of Taoism, and the only man in the empire universally acknowledged to be a living saint. In my village he was worshipped both by the abbot of our monastery and by my atheistic Uncle Nung, and it was commonly said that a list of his good deeds would cover four of the five sacred mountains, and here I was standing right in front of him. Somehow I managed a jerky bow without falling on my face.

"Kao, you're just the man we need, and I'm glad somebody had the brains to think of it," the Celestial Master said. "It was one of the weirdest things I've seen in my life, which means it might have been designed for you."

The Celestial Master was partially deaf and didn't realize his voice level was just below a shout. Master Li had to speak loudly to make his words clear, and the effect was quite strange: hundreds of people standing stone-faced and silent in a huge vaulted chamber, listening to two voices bounce between walls until their echoes began playing tag above a coffin.

"You say you saw it?" Master Li asked.

"It happened right before my eyes, and if something that horrible has to happen it's just as well the victim was somebody like Ma Tuan Lin. Awful ass, you know, and a disgrace to scholarship," the Celestial Master shouted.

From the sudden gleam in Master Li's eyes I assumed he shared the Celestial Master's opinion of the late Ma Tuan Lin, but he tried to be diplomatic.

"Oh, I don't know. Ma had some good qualities when it came to research. It was only his conclusions that were idiotic."

"Kao, you're too damn generous!" the Celestial Master shouted. "He was a donkey from the top of his head to the tips of his toes, and his self-esteem was as bloated as was his body. You should have seen them try to squeeze that hunk of lard into the coffin."

The saint swiveled painfully on his canes and glared at the rows of tight-lipped mandarins.

"Damn fools!" he yelled. "If you'd given Ma's corpse an enema you could have buried what remained in a walnut shell!"

He turned back to Master Li.

"All right, this is your kind of thing, not mine. You're in charge, so tell me what you want and I'll try to help," he said simply.

"We'll start with what you saw, but let's get out of this mausoleum," Master Li said happily.

I felt a warm glow as the Celestial Master hobbled toward a side door. What a marvelous stroke of luck! Master Li would have been deader than Ma Tuan Lin if eyes could kill, but all the mandarins could do was glare. We took a corridor to a small office at the end, looking out over a small simple garden. It was a worn and battered sort of room, crowded but comfortable, with mementos from the time of my great-great-great-grandfather, and the Celestial Master gave a groan of relief as he let himself down on a cushioned bench and relaxed his grip on the canes. He went straight to the point.

"It was the night before last, Kao—morning, actually, around the double hour of the sheep. I couldn't sleep, as usual, and the moon was bright and you know how warm it's been. I got up and into a robe and grabbed my canes and made it to the dock and my boat. Rowing's the only exercise I can handle now. I get practice with the canes," he said, making cane-shuffling gestures that really were like rowing. "I rowed to Hortensia Island, where I have a special dock and path I can manage. I was taking a walk through the woods, admiring the moon and wishing my mind could still create poetry, when I heard the damnedest scream. Then I saw Ma Tuan Lin running toward me."

The saint tilted his head so he was looking down the sides of his nose at Master Li, and a faint smile tugged at his lips.

"Here comes the senile part, perhaps. I'm not sure, Kao, I'm just not sure. I can only tell you what I saw or thought I saw. To begin with, Ma was being chased by a little wrinkled man older than you, maybe even older than me, but who was running as lightly as a child, making sharp sounds that sounded like *'Pi-fang! Pi-fang!'*"

"What?" Master Li asked.

The Celestial Master shrugged. "No meaning, just sound. *'Pi-fang!'* Ma was holding something in his hands that looked like a birdcage, an empty one, and he let loose another scream of terror that made a pair of nesting grouse come shooting up through the darkness with their wings going pop-pop-pop! and they flapped right across my face and made me fall backward into some tall weeds, and that's probably what saved my life. The little old man didn't see me as he ran past. He waved his right hand and something started to glow in it, bright red, and then he hurled a ball of fire that struck Ma Tuan Lin square in the back."

Master Li choked and pounded himself on the chest. "A ball of fire?" he asked when he'd recovered.

"I know, I know. The old boy's finally had the last bit of his brains turn to butter," the Celestial Master said wryly. "I'm telling you what I thought I saw. Ma was dead before he hit the ground—I didn't need an autopsy to tell me that—and the little old man ran past him, leaping lightly as a leaf in a wind, and then there was a bright flash that blinded me. When my eyes cleared there wasn't any little old man. Ma was lying there with that cage thing sticking up through tall grass beside him, and his back was smoking, and I looked every which way. No little old man. Then I heard a high distant *'Pi-fang!'* and I looked up and saw a great white crane flying away across the face of the moon."

The saint drew a deep breath and spread his hands wide apart. "Think that was crazy? I haven't even started."

"I can hardly wait," said Master Li.

"Kao, beside the pavilion Ma uses on Hortensia Island there's a big pile of earth from some kind of construction project that was canceled, and it wasn't until I saw the pile that I realized I was at the pavilion," the Celestial Master said. "What made me look toward the pile was a small sound coming from it, and I knew I'd lost my mind for certain when a terrible claw came crawling out into the moonlight. Then another claw followed it, and earth fell away and something big heaved up into the moonlight, and when the dirt dropped off it I was looking at the prettiest ch'ih-mei to appear in China in a century or more. A classic vampire ghoul, Kao, and it was looking up at that crane in the sky. Then the crane dwindled to a speck and disappeared, and the ch'ih-mei looked down and saw Ma Tuan Lin. In two strides it had reached him, and I swear it ripped the head right off the body! It lifted the gory trophy and took a big bite, but I didn't see any more. I was crawling backward, sort of pushing with my canes, hoping the creature's chewing noises would drown out any sound I made, and I made it safely back into the trees. Then I got to my boat and rowed back and gave the alarm, and that's all I can tell you."

Master Li nodded appreciatively.

"To whom did you give the alarm?" he asked.

"The emperor has an officer attached to my household staff. A nursemaid, I suppose, but useful at times."

"And you told him what had happened?"

"I had to," the Celestial Master said. "He didn't believe a word of it, of course."

"Well, I do." Master Li grinned and winked. "I didn't say I believe *all* of it, but I'll keep an open mind and who knows? I've come to accept some incredible things in my time."

The Celestial Master grinned back, and then winced and tapped his head.

"Tired, Kao, tired. The time I have left is about as limited as my remaining brains, and if you want anything more from me today you'd better get it now," he said wearily.

Master Li leaned forward.

"What I want," he said, speaking slowly and clearly, "is a written commission to investigate this matter and anything that may be connected with it, with the full authority of, and signed by, the Celestial Master."

❁ ❁ ❁

Not long afterward Master Li led the way out through a series of side doors, and then around through the gardens to the courtyard and our palanquin. He was clearly depressed when he should have been exhilarated, and I looked at him questioningly.

"Well, Ox, we can forget about getting a case like a great white whale," he said.

"Sir?"

"I owe the mandarins an apology. They were hushing up the matter and hoping to cram the corpse into a tomb before busybodies like me came along, for the very sound reason that China's greatest living saint has confessed to the murder of Ma Tuan Lin," Master Li said sadly.

3

Master Li was getting weary, and once I had rowed over to Hortensia Island and tied the boat at a dock he had me bend over so he could climb up on my back. He weighs no more than a schoolboy, and his small feet fit easily into my tunic pockets, and I'm so accustomed to carrying the old man around that without him I feel undressed. I took the paths he indicated toward the pavilion where Ma Tuan Lin, according to the Celestial Master, had met his death.

The island has changed beyond belief in the short time since that day. New construction is everywhere, and scarcely an acre of wooded land remains. Then it was almost totally given over to trees and shrubs and grass, and outside of the Yu (much more about which later) there was only the collection of astronomical instruments first established by the great Chang Heng and fewer than twenty secluded pavilions used as retreats by eminent mandarins. It was peaceful and beautiful, and we saw and heard nobody at all as I followed the paths through the trees. Ahead was a grassy clearing and Master Li had me stop and set him down. He reached inside his robe and pulled out his wine flask and swilled moodily, spitting the pulpy residue at flowers. I expected them to shrivel and die beneath the bath of pure alcohol, but for some reason they didn't.

"Ox, I must congratulate you on your self-control. Not one single question," he said with a wink. He knows he's trained me well. "Let's look around. I'm betting the Celestial Master actually did see our vampire ghoul remove Ma Tuan Lin's head, thus greatly improving Ma's appearance, and I'll be disappointed if proved wrong."

We'd already learned that the body had indeed been found and removed from here, and as we walked forward I saw the outline of the pavilion and then I saw a huge pile of fresh earth beside it, and finally I saw something black and moving, sharply outlined against a green background. It was a cloud of flies buzzing around sticky black streaks that had recently been red, matting the grass. We walked to the pile of earth and found signs of a very recent disturbance that might have been caused by a creature crawling out, and I found sandal prints in a soft spot in the path close to the

pile. The toes had dug in and sprayed dirt backward, which would be consistent with somebody running for his life, and I soon found another soft spot with a huge print on it that might have been made by a creature like a vampire ghoul.

"The Celestial Master would have no reason to invent an item like a birdcage. Let's find it," Master Li muttered.

We found the cage in tall grass close to the bloodstains. The sage picked it up and whistled appreciatively as he looked at it, and even I could see the workmanship was superb, and very old. It couldn't have held a bird, however. The bars were oddly spaced with at least one gap through which a small bird would have escaped, and a peculiar maze of wires ran across them. A single bead was strung on the wires and with a little dexterity it could be made to slide this way and that, but Master Li said one bead couldn't possibly fulfill enough functions to serve as a primitive abacus. The bars were decorated with a jumble of symbols of every description, from animals to utensils to astronomy, and Master Li shook his head and shrugged.

"I have no idea what it was used for but it's almost unbelievably ancient," he said. "Say what one will about Ma Tuan Lin, he had a gift for discovering valuable artifacts. He was a considerable collector and claimed to be an authority, and maybe we'll find something about this in his papers."

He tied the cage to his waist with his long yellow sash and stood looking around for a moment with his hands on his hips.

"My dear old friend and teacher rowed over here and took a walk in the moonlight," he said in a slow melancholy voice. "As fate would have it, he arrived at this spot just in time to see a monster chasing its dinner, meaning Ma Tuan Lin, and he did indeed see the creature rip Ma's head off. Ox, you've heard the Celestial Master. You know he couldn't stand Ma Tuan Lin. Deep inside he felt guilty for not grieving at a terrible murder, and the guilt worked through a weary mind and projected images, and the result was that he really does believe his story about—pay attention—'a little wrinkled man older than you, maybe even older than me, but he was running as lightly as a child.' All right, what kind of hat does the Celestial Master wear?"

I thought about it. "It's a white hat, tall and conical, tapering to a point," I said.

"It's called Hat of Nine Yang Thunder," Master Li said dryly. "It's meant to resemble the beak of a crane. Did you notice his robe?"

"It was a Taoist robe, except for the First Rank emblem," I said.

"Which is?"

"A crane."

"Yes indeed, and did you notice his ring of office?" Master Li asked.

"Some kind of large red stone," I said.

"It's a garnet called Ball of Retributive Lightning," said Master Li.

"Oh-oh," I said.

"Oh-oh indeed," said Master Li. "Ox, the Celestial Master projected himself as a tiny wrinkled old man who could throw away his canes and run lightly as a child as he massacred bastards like Ma Tuan Lin, blasting them with his ring of office and then transforming himself into the crane he carried on his robe and hat, flying safely away across the moon, like in dreams. The mandarins feared that the wrong people might take that tale and cause a terrible scandal, but you and I are not going to be the wrong people."

"No, sir," I said.

"We'll go through the motions of an investigation," the old man said. "If nothing else I have the Celestial Master's authentic signed commission to show for it, which is scarcely to be sneered at."

"Yes, sir," I said, and then made something of a point of shutting my mouth. ("That," I added silently, "is the understatement of the decade. After he finishes doctoring a document like that he can present a pass allowing him to wander in and out of the imperial treasury with forty mule carts, eighty peasants with shovels, and a derrick.")

There was nothing more to be found at the scene of the murder, so Master Li led the way into Ma Tuan Lin's pavilion. I was rather surprised to find it was a simple austere place: one large room and a bathing chamber, opening to a small enclosed garden and a vista overlooking the lake. Master Li explained that mandarins like Ma were not allowed to build palatial establishments on the island. All the pavilions were identical, designed for peaceful contemplation, and were the property of the emperor. We looked through the mandarin's papers and collection of books and scrolls, and all we found were notes in scholarly shorthand I couldn't read and Master Li said were pure Ma Tuan Lin: idiotic garbage. The only point to the search was to see if there was any information about a peculiar old cage, so Master Li made it quick. Just as we were about to leave he stopped in the doorway.

"I almost forgot," he said. "Fifty or sixty years ago I took one of these pavilions for a week or two, and since they're all the same…."

He let the sentence hang in the air as he turned and walked back to the small wooden altar against the east wall.

"They showed me where to stick jewelry or whatever if I didn't trust the gardeners," he said, and he reached out and pushed a wooden panel and then slid it aside and stuck his hand into a tiny hole. "I'll be damned," he said, because when his hand came out he was holding a small thick notebook.

We sat at the table while he went through it. Not even Master Li could make sense of the entries because they were simply series of numbers and marks indicating percentages, and there was no indication what the numbers represented.

"The total goes up and up, dramatically, and all of a sudden the percentage doubles, and all I can say is if it's Ma's money he was getting rich enough to buy an estate on Coal Hill," Master Li said. Then he turned the last page and pulled something from the notebook. "Ox, look at this!" he exclaimed happily.

There was the cage we had found, in the form of a small ink rubbing apparently taken from an old stone surface. I say stone as opposed to metal because blurred and blotched places indicated a worn chipped surface, but it was clear enough to unquestionably represent the cage. Master Li hoped for some explanatory text when he turned the rubbing over, but instead he found Flying White shorthand, which he translated for me.

"'Eight! I've found all eight! Now they cannot deny me the principal share, and my bones shall lie on White Dragon Peak!'"

"Sir, do you know what that means?" I asked.

"Not really, but the last part is interesting," he said. "White Dragon Peak is the principal landmark rising above a large and rich valley near Shensi which Ma Tuan Lin—falsely, I always assumed—claimed was once his family's ancestral estate. This sounds as though he hoped to buy it back, and that would take an incredible amount of money."

❁ ❁ ❁

We soon left and I rowed without incident back to the city. We stopped at Master Li's shack long enough to hide the old cage beneath the platform that keeps our pallets dry when storms send water washing across the floor, and then he had me carry him to the Wineshop of One-Eyed Wong. (I've described Wong's in previous memoirs and it doesn't play a significant role here, so I'll simply say it's a place in the criminal area of Heaven's Bridge where Master Li can find useful people, and he found some now.) He had a couple of forgers make fast copies of Ma Tuan Lin's rubbing of the cage, and then he got a pack of street boys to take the copies to every first-rate burglar he could think of.

"You see," he said when we were eating dinner at his private table, "there's a chance that Ma was referring to cages rather than a hundred other things when he wrote on the back of the rubbing. If so, he had found eight of them. Where are the other seven?"

I shrugged. "His office, his house."

"Keep in mind, Ox, that the cage we have is very ancient and superbly made. It's a remarkable artifact, and if Ma Tuan Lin was holding eight of them he would certainly have made his extraordinary collection the excuse for banquet after banquet, at which he could boast of the infallible instinct and keen trained intellect that enabled him to

find treasures where lesser men failed. So far as I know he did no such thing, and let's remember the wording. 'Eight! I've found all eight! Now they cannot deny me the principal share, and my bones shall lie on White Dragon Peak!'"

"Sounds like he had partners in a business enterprise," I said hesitantly. "Sounds like the cages would be valuable to them, so much so he'd get the principal share in whatever the venture was."

"That's exactly what it sounds like, and thus he would give cages to partners in exchange for percentages of the business. Perhaps the very existence of the cages would be kept secret, perhaps not, and if not, we will consider an interesting possibility," the sage said. "Ma Tuan Lin would never dream of going into partnership with lesser mortals. His partners would have to be mandarins of his own rank or higher, and such men tend to collect rare items and display them in their homes to envious visitors.

From his silence I judged he wanted me to see how far my sieve-like brains could carry the thought, so I said, "If Ma Tuan Lin gave cages to his partners and his partners put them on display, the burglars of Peking can tell you exactly where the cages are."

"Good boy," said Master Li. "Every mansion in town has been scouted again and again by burglars using inside help. It would be asking too much to find all seven, but if we can find even one I'll satisfy a bit of curiosity by questioning the owner. If not, I think we'll just forget about cages and worry about what sort of a report we can give to the Celestial Master."

Within an hour we had a visit from a gentleman with shifty eyes and an interesting pattern of knife scars where his nose used to be, and an hour after that we were back inside a palatial palanquin, being carried up Coal Hill.

It was night, with a huge round moon that had orange circles around it, and Coal Hill was just starting to come to life. I never cease to be fascinated by the spectacle of the wealthy arranging to be seen seeing people who have been seen seeing people worthy of being seen seeing, if that's the proper way to phrase it. First it's a glow of light approaching, and then a rhythmic *"Hut-chu, hut-chu, hut-chu!"* and the foreman appears leading an army of jogging grooms carrying torches. Another glow follows, and another chant—*"Mi-chi, mi-chi, mi-chi!"*—comes from trotting servants dressed like royalty who surround aristocratic palanquins and carriages, carrying brilliantly colored lanterns. *"Yi-cha, yi-cha, yi-cha!"* chant yellow-gowned eunuchs who mince beside the principal palanquin swinging censers of smoking incense, and one may be lucky enough to see a flash of emerald and turquoise, glittering gems and glowing jade, gold-stitched silk and embroidered satins, a crimson gleam from a

long lacquered fingernail, a liquid glance from a languid eye, and then trumpets blast *"Ta-ta-taaaaa! Ta-ta-taaaaa!"* and heralds puffed like peacocks in their pride prance forward and turn down the awaiting lane where other trumpets answer *"Tum-teeeee! Tum-teeeee!"* and lights appear as if by magic, a thousand paper lanterns illuminating trees that in winter have artificial leaves sewn to them, and an orchestra in a clearing plays a hymn of welcome, and dancers leap and vault ahead of the heralds, and a flock of pink geese hiss and squawk and cackle, and those gorgeous butlers in the courtyard are not spreading yellow sand to receive the illustrious footprint of the eminent guest—oh no, that's real gold dust forming a path to the door.

I have a cousin who works on Coal Hill. He's a professional and proud of his mastery of the craft. What he does is dress in black clothes and blacken his face and hands with soot so he won't be seen at night. Then he takes a long sharp pin—much longer than a knitting needle—and crawls into the pen where the geese are kept, and just at the right moment when guests arrive he jabs the geese in the ass. The hissing and honking of geese is considered a lucky omen, you see, and the trick is to get a chorus of squawks just as wealthy people descend to the lowly cringing earth, and he's very good at it. I once asked him if he considered expanding his trade to include dyeing the geese pink (also a lucky omen) and he was furious. He's a master *bird-butt jabber*, and lowly *pinion painters* are scarcely in his social class! Besides, they have a closed guild and the only way to qualify is through heredity.

The lane our palanquin turned into wasn't lit up for guests but our informant had been certain the owner was home. Master Li put on his grandest air of Neo-Confucian superiority and sneered lesser servants out of the way until he got the majordomo, and a flash of the commission from the Celestial Master was sufficient to send the fellow bowing and cringing upstairs to seek the master of the house. We waited in a very elegant room where ancient artifacts were displayed, but Master Li was not impressed.

"Nine tenths," he stated flatly, "are palpable fakes, and the tenth that isn't is of little value. The one exception is this toad dropper, which is done in the earliest example of the glaze called Pretty Girl Sky-Clearing I've ever seen."

Toad droppers are little ceramic toads with a chamber to hold water and a built-in dropper. You use them to moisten an ink stone with just the right amount of ink for a perfect stroke, and Master Li has a very nice collection of them. When he bent over and slipped aside the false heel of his left sandal I turned pale.

"Sir…ah… Venerable Sir, don't you think it would be unwise to…ah…."

He came up with his lock picks, and a moment later the case held one less toad dropper. I mention this to explain why I was already unnerved when we heard the screams. They were high strangled screams, clearly from somewhere in the house, and I automatically bent over for the old man to leap upon my back.

"Quick! We'll make a run for it!" I cried.

As soon as I felt his weight I galloped to the hall and out the door, and I was halfway across the outer courtyard before I realized that Master Li was pounding my head and shoulders and yelling, "Stop, you idiot!" I skidded to a halt and he twisted on my back, and then a gnarled finger shot past the side of my head and pointed. "There!"

It finally dawned on me that I was supposed to run toward the screams, not away from them, and in a way it was fortunate that I'd panicked and run outside. Master Li was pointing to an upper story where the silhouette of somebody who seemed to be fighting could be seen behind a gauzy curtain, and I made a mental note of the location and charged back inside and started up the stairs.

The screams were coming from the majordomo, but I doubt he was aware of the noise he was making. His eyes were wide and glazed with shock and his mouth opened and closed automatically as he stood petrified at an open doorway on the second story. I shoved him out of the way. Master Li slipped down off my back and I heard the sharp click as the rattan coil inside his right sleeve shot the throwing knife from the sheath strapped to his forearm up into his hand. I dove through the door low and fast, hitting the floor and rolling left and jumping up braced for an attack, but there was no attack. I stood there rather like the majordomo had, frozen in place with my mouth gaping foolishly, and from the lack of motion behind me I assumed Master Li was also standing and staring. The scene was complicated, and took a bit of sorting out.

In the foreground, meaning the center of the elegant room, stood a man whose face was covered by the hood of a big old-fashioned cloak. He was methodically using a stone striker to bang the most ancient of all instruments, a set of stone chimes. He was standing on one leg because that's all he had: one single leg, growing squarely from the center of his body. In front of him a man in elegant mandarin dress was dancing to the chime music, but it was a dance of death.

His robes whipped wildly through the air as he leaped and capered across the floor, twisting and jumping with manic energy, kicking his legs high above his head, whipping his feet down to pound the floor as though attempting to drive holes through it. His eyes were quite insane, driven mad by pain, and he would have been howling if he had the breath. I gasped and jumped back instinctively when I saw white splinters of bone thrusting from his silk-covered thighs, and blood dripped down his knees. This mandarin had danced until both thighs shattered, and he was dancing still, and now blood was bubbling from his mouth and nose and I realized his insides had been pounded to jelly. He leaped even higher. His feet struck the floor even harder as the stone chimes thudded monotonously, and the bone splinters thrust out farther and farther, and then a great gush of blood came from his mouth and the light of insane agony died in his eyes.

When the one-legged creature continued to pound on the old stone chimes he was making a corpse dance for him. That mandarin was dead. I knew it as surely as I knew I was still alive, but I also knew the body was dancing like a doll of straw around the room, head lolling and bouncing lifelessly on his shoulders, arms and hands flapping around without guidance, both broken legs bending almost double where they shouldn't bend, between knee and hip, blood from the gaping mouth spraying around the room in a fine pink mist.

That, mind you, was only the scene in the foreground. Simultaneously my brain was trying to accommodate the background as well, but it was difficult because with an overdose of grotesque images they tend to cancel one another out. Everything was getting blurred, and I shook my head vigorously—the first motion I'd been capable of—and decided I really was looking at another weird creature. It was a man, yet the face was that of a hideous ape with a silver-gray forehead, a scarlet nose, bright blue cheeks, and a yellow chin. I can't explain why, but I knew in my bones this wasn't actor's makeup. This was real, and the man-ape bared strong white teeth in an expression between a grimace and a smile as it looked at Master Li and me, and then in one powerful bound it was at the wall, and with another effortless leap it was out the window and down into the garden and gone, vanished into the night, but not before I'd seen that it was carrying something.

The weird creature had been carrying a cage precisely like the one Master Li had.

Master Li had stepped up beside me, and now he whirled back toward the center of the room just as the stone chimes stopped playing and the dancing corpse collapsed limply to the floor, as though someone had cut the strings operating a puppet. The one-legged hooded figure stood motionless.

"Careful, Ox."

As if I needed the warning. I moved forward cautiously, scooping up a heavy bronze figurine as a weapon, and Master Li made a flanking movement with his knife cocked beside his right ear. The chimes player still made no motion. I was at an angle where I could look straight at him—or it—and in the dark shadows behind the opening of the hood I thought I saw the gleam of a single eye in the center of a forehead.

Suddenly there was a bright flash that blinded me. I gasped and stepped back, covering my eyes, and gradually the orange haze and black spots cleared, and I stared at the room. So did Master Li, blinking and rubbing his eyes, and there wasn't any one-legged chimes player. He wasn't in the room, and he wasn't in the hall outside, and the wind whipped the curtains away from the window and we gazed out and up at the night sky, where a great white crane was slowly flying away across the face of the moon.

"Well, Kao, have you found anything interesting?" the Celestial Master asked.

"Mildly so," Master Li replied. "To begin with, another mandarin—I assume you know, or knew, Mao Ou-Hsi?"

"Revolting fellow. Third-greediest man in the empire," the Celestial Master said disgustedly.

"The fourth-greediest will be interested, because he's just been promoted," Master Li said. "Mao bade farewell to the red dust of earth last night in a rather spectacular manner. Ox and I happened to be there at the moment, and the creature who killed Mao then disappeared in a bright blinding flash, and the next thing we saw was a white crane flying away across the moon."

The Celestial Master paused with a teacup halfway to his lips. Briefly, in an instant in which his eyes sharpened and hardened, I glimpsed the brilliance and sureness of long ago, when he had been considered to be the finest mind in the empire.

"How convenient," he said dryly. "Did it carry a sign in its beak saying 'Save the Celestial Master from Mother Meng's Madhouse?'"

Master Li tossed his head back and laughed. "Believe it or not, this actually happened," he said. "As soon as we'd looked around and found nothing we summoned the magistrate to take over, and at the moment the gates opened at dawn we entered the Forbidden City and chased the honor guard away from the remains of the late Ma Than Lin, and I had Ox open the coffin. You tell it, Ox."

I gulped nervously as the bright eyes of the saint flicked toward me

"Most Reverend Sir, the corpse was lying on its back, of course, but I managed to lift it upright—"

"That must have been a hell of a job," the Celestial Master said, with real concern in his voice.

"Yes, sir," I said. "The body was covered with Dragon's Brains (Borneo camphor), which made me choke, and after I scooped it away I started to choke from the smell

of the corpse, and there wasn't any head and it looked horrible." I started choking again, just at the memory. "The body was stiff as a tree trunk and I almost got a hernia trying to lift it."

"Ghastly tub of lard, wasn't he?" the Celestial Master said sympathetically.

"He hadn't missed much rice," I said diplomatically. "Master Li had me prop him up so we could examine the back."

"And?"

"Reverend Sir, it was just as you told us!" I said excitedly. "The entrance mark of the fireball was very small and the folds of robes covered it up, but Master Li cut through the clothes and skin, and just beneath the outer flesh there was a great big hole! Everything inside had been burned to a crisp."

The saint sipped his tea and put the cup down, and then he leaned back and rubbed his eyes.

"How odd," he said. "Kao, I'd just discovered what caused me to hallucinate about that old man and his ball of fire, and now you tell me I wasn't hallucinating."

He leaned forward, and his eyes were clear and keen. "I'm going to show you what might have stimulated a senile imagination, but first I'm interested in a matter of symmetry. You say Mao Ou-Hsi died spectacularly. Was a monster involved?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about it."

Master Li told what we had seen, simply and clearly, and as he talked I saw wonder and speculation form in the saint's eyes.

"Well, Kao, I said at the beginning this was your sort of case, but I didn't know how right I was," the Celestial Master said. "Before I tell what I know, is there anything else you want to add?"

"Indeed yes. Beginning with this," said Master Li, and he pulled the cage we'd found from beneath his robes and placed it on the table.

"Pretty, and it looks like the thing Ma was carrying, but what is it?" the Celestial Master asked.

"Damn. I was hoping you could tell me once you got a close look at it," Master Li said. "It is indeed the cage you saw and we found it where you said it was. The interesting thing is that Ma Tuan Lin had made a rubbing of an old stone carving depicting a cage like this. On the back he indicated he might have found as many as eight of them. A plausible inference is that he gave cages to partners in some sort of enterprise, and I had traced one to Mao Ou-Hsi, which is why we were there. Simultaneous with the murder the cage was being stolen, and the burglar was another monster. It was a man resembling an ape like the one the emperor takes such pride in at the imperial bestiary: silver-gray fur or skin on the forehead, bright blue cheeks, a crimson nose, and a yellow chin. The eyes are deep and shadowed, and the gaze is highly intelligent."

The Celestial Master nodded. "A mandrill, if one excepts the intelligence. Why do you say man-ape?"

Master Li shrugged. "So far as I could tell, the body was that of a medium-sized but very powerful and acrobatic man, and both the body motion and eye contact were human."

The saint nodded and said, "The creature means nothing to me. He got away with Mao's cage, you say? Another crane?"

"No, he simply leaped out the window to the garden before either of us could move. Speaking of monsters, the vampire ghoul who decapitated Ma Tuan Lin is dead, in case you haven't heard, and I haven't the slightest idea what its connection to the rest of it is. I'm trying to track down the owners of the other cages, and until I can find out why monsters would want them I'm at the end of a blank alley."

Master Li leaned back and the Celestial Master leaned forward, taking a sheaf of papers from a lacquered box lying on the table.

"I can't tell you why the cages are valuable, but I can give you something to think about concerning monsters," he said. "When I was a young student—long before you were born, believe it or not—I went through the normal period of fascination with ancient shamanism. That means shamanism of the aborigines who originally inhabited China, of course, practiced by priests of beliefs and rites that to some extent evolved into our own, and I found repeated but maddeningly unspecific references to a small group of shamans who seem to have been greatest of all: Super Shamans, if you will, aloof and mysterious, to be appealed to only as a last resort. I was never able to prove this, Kao, but I became convinced that they're the mysterious hooded figures depicted on the walls of the Yu."

"Really?" Master Li appeared to be very interested. "Any specific reason?"

"One specific, one not. The nonspecific is simply the fact that they were spoken of with awe as always being silent, always performing mysterious rituals with mysterious objects beyond the grasp of man—the general atmosphere of the Yu, if you will, and the Yu and the shamans would seem to date from the same period. The specific is that there were eight of them, like the eight Yu figures, and indeed they were known as *Pa Neng Chih Shih."*

"'Eight Skilled Gentlemen,'" Master Li said thoughtfully. "Sounds like they may have practiced alchemy or engineering or astronomy in addition to their priestly and magical duties."

The Celestial Master shrugged. "I never found a clear reference to their exact function, and I doubt anyone did. There was, however, one extraordinarily interesting fragment concerning them that I put down at the time as primitive myth, but peculiar enough to make notes of."

The saint picked up the sheaf of papers and shook his head wonderingly as he looked at them.

"So long ago," he said softly. "It had completely fled what's left of my mind, and then suddenly, after you'd left for Hortensia Island, I remembered, and at least I keep good files. Long, long ago, the Eight Skilled Gentlemen were said to have enlisted the aid of eight very minor demon-deities, siblings although physically dissimilar. What they wanted them for was no longer known, but a brief description of each was provided. You can see why I planned to show you the origin of a hallucination."

He slid a paper across the table. It was old and somewhat faded, but still clear, and I caught my breath. Years ago as a young scholar the Celestial Master had sketched a little old man who carried a glowing ball of fire, and beneath it he had written, "Third demon-deity: *Pi-fang*, kills with something like a tiny comet."

Master Li whistled sharply.

"Save your whistles," the Celestial Master said with a smile, and he slid another sheet across the table. This time I uttered a distinct yelp, and then turned bright red as the Celestial Master winked at me.

We were looking at a one-legged creature who was playing something like stone chimes, and beneath it was neatly written, "Fifth demon-deity, *K'uei*, the Dancing Master. Kills by forcing victims to dance themselves to death."

Master Li's eyes were gleaming. He seized an ink stick and a stone and a brush and some paper and went to work, swiftly copying each sketch and brief descriptive comment. Each of the eight creatures was very odd in that it was a killer whose ability to kill was limited to a specialty that couldn't possibly massacre large numbers of people, such as our modern crossbows and exploding charges of Fire Drug—but then, I had to admit that the very limits and peculiarities made violent death seem real and terrible, like strangling hands around one's throat as opposed to a random missile that strikes by accident on a battlefield.

"I said there were these eight and they were siblings, but later in a passing reference too insignificant to lead anywhere an anonymous commentator said there was a ninth child, a boy," the Celestial Master said.

"Could he possibly have had a face like a painted ape?" Master Li asked sharply.

The Celestial Master smiled. "Not a chance, Kao. I said he was a boy, and I meant it. He was human, which implies one of his parents was mortal and one divine, and he was said to possess extraordinary beauty." The saint shrugged. "That's why I never tried to follow up on a ninth child. It reeks of a thousand fairy tales."

"If not a million," Master Li muttered.

I looked at the sketch he was making. It was of the fourth demon-deity, a huge snake, and it was very strange. Part was terrible: two human heads with fangs, a great crushing constrictor's body—but it wore two silly little hats and a jacket far too small

for it, and somehow it seemed lost and lonely, and beneath it the Celestial Master had written, "The *Wei Serpent* has known greatness and sorrow. It cannot abide noise, and when a carriage rattles past it raises its heads and hisses."

Apparently the Celestial Master was reading my expression, and he said, "I know, Ox. There's something sad about these creatures as well as terrible. They seem ancient to us, but they had to be among the last recognized by the aborigines, and gods—even minor demons like these of a dying race are often creatures of pathos. You must ask Master Li about it sometime."

Master Li had finished. He folded the papers neatly and put them in his money belt and reclaimed the cage.

"I've told all I know. Do you have anything else?" he asked.

"If I did I've forgotten it," the Celestial Master said. "What's next for you?"

"Ox and I are going to pay our respects to Eight Skilled Gentlemen," he said. "Meaning I'm going back to Hortensia Island, and I want to show Ox the Yu. After that—well, I have a theory worth testing. I'll report when I have anything worth talking about."

The effort to maintain mental clarity had been exhausting. The Celestial Master managed only a wink and a wave as we bowed our way backward and then out the door, but Master Li was as full of energy as he'd been in a year.

"Ha!" he exclaimed as we walked out into the sunlight. "What a delightful development! I take back everything I said about white whales turning into minnows. What kind of case did I originally predict this would be?"

I thought about it.

"The spout reaches toward the stars, and the wake rocks offshore islands as it swims toward us, circumnavigating sacred seas with the awesome authority of an iceberg."

"Slightly over-alliterative, but not bad," said Master Li.

We stopped at Master Li's shack in the alley and changed into comfortable clothes and replaced the old cage in the hiding place beneath the pallets, and I boiled some rice and went out and found a vender of the strong fermented fish sauce we both like. We hadn't slept in thirty hours, but the excitement of the case was keeping us wide awake, and a short time later I was at the oars again, rowing back to Hortensia Island.

I'd never seen the Yu. The island is mandarin territory, and the visit I've recounted was my first, but before I can describe the Yu I have to explain it.

The history of China is punctuated by more Great Floods than scholars know what to do with, and one of them a couple of thousand years ago left the Peking Plain covered with thirty feet of mud and silt. The city that was to become Peking was built in many stages on the hardened crust, and geomancers decided that in the process too much attention had been paid to male yang influences and too little to the female yin, and the imbalance must be corrected. The fastest way to strengthen yin is through water, so the North, Central, and South lakes were created by digging down through the crust and filling the holes with water drawn by canals from the Hun and Sha rivers. (Actually the lakes are called "seas," but that's confusing, so they'll be lakes on these pages.) The earth from the lake beds was heaped up and tamped down to form Coal Hill, thus creating the world's costliest pile of dirt, and while digging the bed for North Lake workmen ran into a mass of nearly solid rock, which was left as it was. Water filled up around it, and eventually it was covered with a layer of earth and planted with pretty pink-and-blue-flowering shrubs imported from the Cannibal Coast (Japan), and thus Hortensia Island was born.

One day when the water had risen to a certain level an extraordinary thing happened. A great burst of sound suddenly arose from North Lake: hauntingly beautiful, but without apparent theme or musical form. It was like the sound of a huge horn except it had a husky hollow undertone as it swooped between *huang-chung* and *ying-chung,* the low and high notes of the untempered chromatic scale. The

eerie sound lasted only a minute or so. Then it died away and wasn't heard again until six months had passed, at which time excited scholars announced that the sound seemed to be occurring at the precise moment of the winter and summer solstices.

The phenomenon was tracked to a cavern on Hortensia Island, in a crag jutting out over the water's edge on the southeast side facing the city. The cavern had been notable only for ancient wall carvings and statuary, but now a brilliant young musical student announced that in uncovering the island the workmen had uncovered a cave that was actually a musical instrument devised by aborigines to work as a solstice-sounder, although he had no idea why they wanted such a thing. A hole in the floor of the cavern seemed to lead down through a hundred feet of solid rock to an unreachable lower chamber, and the musical student theorized it was some sort of wind-chest. When the water reached a certain level, and the temperature and humidity—perhaps even the intensity of sunlight—were just right, pressure was created that caused great amounts of air to be sucked inside. The air swooshed up through a network of tiny tunnels in the stone that had been thought to be natural but revealed marks of axes and chisels, and exited up through the cavern root.

"In short, the tunnels out over the lake are mouthpieces for air intake, the lower cave is a wind-chest, and the upper holes are pipes. It's an organ, except it operates primarily by inhaling rather than exhaling," said the musical student, but nobody paid him the slightest attention, so he went away and built a miniature model and made enough money to buy a dukedom.

(His organ was the *sheng,* which has been a standard orchestral instrument ever since. It's a little hard on the lungs because it works by inhaling, so a totally false legend has grown around it to the effect that no great sheng master has lived past the age of forty. This allows a player to win wild applause and be pelted by bouquets hurled by lovely ladies, who often hurl themselves as well, simply by pausing to cough during a performance and then wiping his lips with a handkerchief daubed with blood-red rouge, and when the other members of the orchestra can bear it no more they toss away their instruments and set upon the bastard with fists, feet, and fangs.)

The cavern became known as the Yu, first in popular reference and then officially, because Yu is a legendary emperor who is said to have invented all the musical instruments Fu-hsi didn't. It continued to sound the solstices with incredible accuracy, but since nobody knew the point of it the phenomenon had long ago settled into the peculiar atmosphere of Peking, like sweet-sour wells and red brick dust and blowing yellow sand and the Mandarin dialect, and that was how things stood when I tied at a dock in the shadow of the crag that held the famous cavern, looming above us like a giant hand lifting from the water. Master Li led the way up a path that wound through thick shrubbery toward the entrance tunnel. He stopped and pulled reeds aside, and I jumped backward with a sharp yelp.

"Striking, isn't it?" he said.

"I think the word is ghastly," I said when I stopped gulping.

It was only an old stone statue, but it had seemed alive when the light first struck it. It depicted a creature that was half man and half lizard, crouched and hissing, with a jagged edge at the open mouth where a long stone tongue had broken off. The face was contorted with rage, and hatred exuded from it as naturally as the odor of fermented fish sauce exuded from me. The old man kept uncovering more of the grotesque statues as we climbed, ten in all, and even the most human of them was ugly beyond belief.

"Oddly enough, Ox, there are art lovers who consider these to be very beautiful," Master Li said. "Whether those who created them thought they were beautiful or ugly cannot be determined, but the terms really aren't relevant. These are carvings of minor gods, demon-deities, and unless we and the Celestial Master have been taken in by extraordinary illusions we've seen creatures that may be of the same breed."

I thought of the one-legged chimes player and the ape-faced burglar and the Celestial Master's little man hurling fire, not to mention a lowly monster like a vampire ghoul. "Sir, can such creatures really be beautiful?" I asked.

"Beautiful and terrible," he said. "Our distant forefathers swept across this land exterminating a people and a culture, seizing and reshaping whatever interested them. Theologians will tell you that simultaneously an invasion was taking place in Heaven, with old gods being ruthlessly overthrown and new gods taking their place, while the most dangerous and powerful of the old deities were placated by titles and duties and honors and absorption into the pantheon."

I had nowhere near enough knowledge or experience to feel the same excitement that was making Master Li look forty years younger, but something of his intensity was being transmitted to me.

"Ox, here on Hortensia Island and in a few other scattered places the last of the great artists of an expiring race took up their chisels one more time. One assumes they were starving, since famine was the principal weapon our ancestors used," Master Li said sadly. "One assumes they were half mad, and they honored their gods by carving deities in death agonies. You're looking at an unparalleled psychological self-portrait of an exhausted race, teetering upon the edge of extinction, but don't you see the wonder of our recent experiences? Some of the old gods were sure to survive. They're stirring, my boy! They're awakening from their long sleep, yawning and stretching, and you and I are right in the middle of it! Damn it, Ox, I feel like a boy who's been bemoaning the fact that he was born too late for the age of giants, and then one day he hears a snore that rocks the sky, and it's accompanied by an earthquake that knocks down his house, and he discovers that the valley his village is sitting in bears a very strong resemblance to an immense navel."

There was power mixed with the twisted pain of these stone idols, I had to admit it—still, my conservative peasant taste has definite limits. I pointed ahead through a gap in the bushes.

"Venerable Sir, look at that," I said.

A hideous head was just visible, rising above leaves. It was as though a sculptor had molded a man's face in soft clay, and then reached out and cruelly dug his fingers into the surface, poking and twisting.

"Isn't it possible that the artists carved at least a few evil creatures along with the gods?" I asked. "I can't for the life of me see how anyone could find beauty in that."

The hideous head gazed back at me. Then the mouth opened, and a resonant baritone voice said, "Be it known, boy, that legions of lovely ladies have praised these features."

"Yik!" I said, or something like that as I leaped backward into a tangle of rose thorns.

"Ha!" said Master Li, who seemed to be enjoying this.

Unless I was going crazy there was a twinkle of amusement in the eyes of the grotesque face, and bushes parted and a middle-aged strongly built man stepped to the path. He made a superbly graceful gesture that was like an exaggerated shrug, and added, "Of course, that was before the God of Beauty went quite mad with jealousy, so I shall forgive your impertinence."

For the first time I saw a smile I was to see often, as warm and brilliant as the sun rising, and it was accompanied by a bow so superb that no opera star could have matched it.

"This humble one is called Yen Shih, and his insignificant occupation is to manipulate mannequins upon a stage, and he is honored to recognize and greet the legendary Master Li, foremost among truth-seekers of China."

He turned to me.

"You would be Number Ten Ox, and you really shouldn't feel as uncomfortable as you look at the moment." The extraordinary man offered a wink that absolved me of guilt once and for all. "I told my daughter just the other day that when I die she can spare the expense of a funeral by propping my corpse beside these statues, since nobody will notice the difference."

The God of Beauty had been jealous indeed. What I had taken to be an artist's depiction of torment was in reality the ravages of smallpox, and rarely have I seen such destruction to a human face. It was a miracle that his eyesight remained, and as for his craft—who hadn't heard of Yen Shih, greatest of puppeteers?

Master Li's bow wasn't quite so graceful, but it was very good.

"The honor is mine, for Yen Shih is said to be puppeteer to the gods on temporary vacation from Heaven, and Yen Shih's daughter has also earned the jealousy of mere

mortals." Master Li dropped the artificial air and accent of formal speech and switched to the people's vernacular. "I've seen you perform three or four times. If you got any better you'd be accused of witchcraft, speaking of which I've heard your daughter is absolutely the best."

Master Li turned to me. "No, she isn't a witch," he said with a laugh. "She's a female shaman, a shamanka, who specializes in the old rituals, and nothing but good is said about her." He turned back to the puppeteer. "Ox has never seen the Yu, so I'm taking him inside for a look," he added casually.

That was a subtle way of inviting information without demanding it. Yen Shih might be famous and respected, but as a puppeteer his social rank was precisely at the bottom. He had absolutely no right to set foot upon aristocratic premises like Hortensia Island—even less right than I would have if I hadn't been with Master Li—but on the other hand he wasn't being pressed to explain his presence. He decided to do so voluntarily.

"I come here often just before the seasonal sacrifices. The purpose is to steal something," he said matter-of-factly. "I've offered to buy the stuff time and time again but I always get turned down, and I would be honored to have witnesses to my crime."

"The honor shall be ours," Master Li said graciously.

So there were three of us as we continued up the path. Master Li was perfectly content to let Yen Shih take the lead, and the puppeteer pulled weeds aside and ducked low and stepped into the opening of a natural rock tunnel. Inside the entrance was a barrel holding a stack of torches and Yen Shih and I each lit one, and then we followed the tunnel on and up into the heart of the famous Yu.

I really don't know what I was expecting. I do know that I was disappointed. There was practically nothing to see. It was only a cavern of stone worn smooth by water, with a small round hole in the center of the floor and a maze of little tunnels leading up and out through the roof. Even the ancient altar was no more than a large stone blackened by fires of thousands of years ago, and I have to admit that I found the modern touches more interesting than the ancient ones. The modern part was simply the stack of crates holding ceremonial material for the rites of the next moon, since the Yu cavern was traditionally used for such purposes, and Yen Shih walked over to one of the crates and lifted the lid and smiled down at the contents.

"What thief could resist it?" he asked.

I stared at the stuff. "Clay?" I said.

"Very special clay," said the puppeteer. "It comes from the bank of a river near Canton, and it's used to blend with incense and form fragrant figures of sacrificial animals. I've been trying without success to buy it, because it's perfect for modeling puppets I'll eventually carve in permanent form."

I watched with awe as his fingers swiftly kneaded a ball of the clay. A marvelously funny laughing face appeared, a merry woman, and then with a flick of fingers it became the sorrowful image of a weeping old man.

"I don't need much, but it's fragile stuff and several times a year I have to steal a bit more of it," Yen Shih said with a shrug, and then he neatly wrapped some clay inside a piece of oilskin and tied it around his waist beneath his tunic.

"I'll see if I can get you a permit," was Master Li's only comment. Then he changed the subject. "Let's show Ox the wall carvings. A friend of ours has an interesting theory concerning who they're meant to represent, although he hasn't the slightest idea what they're supposed to be doing."

Again Yen Shih led the way with his torch, and I must honestly report that again I was disappointed. The famous frieze was in a long side tunnel that tapered to a tiny hole looking out over the lake, and at first I didn't see anything at all. It was only when Master Li had me hold my torch close to the wall that the figures appeared, and even then I could barely make them out.

Eight hooded men were seen over and over, apparently performing different stages of some sort of ritual. The stone was worn almost smooth, and no details were visible. Each of the shamans—if that's what they were—seemed to be carrying something, but no trace of the objects remained. So far as I could see they could have been doing anything from sowing a field to celebrating a marriage, and the few surviving symbols above them that Master Li identified as birds of some sort didn't mean anything either.

"It's a real pity there isn't a clearer record," Master Li said regretfully. "One would expect to find more carvings of the eight figures, but so far as I know none have come to light."

I realized that Yen Shih was standing very still with his eyes fixed on Master Li's face. I could see he was weighing various factors, and then he came to a decision.

"I haven't been totally truthful. I come to the island to steal something else as well, and I think you may be interested in looking at it," he said.

We followed the puppeteer back into the sunlight. He turned left and began to climb a small winding trail to the top of the crag and the row of astronomical instruments that were used to confirm predictions of eclipses in the annual imperial calendar.

"Incredible waste," Yen Shih said, pointing at the huge metal base the instruments rested on, glinting dully in the sun. "That's partially high-grade bronze and partially Dragon's Sinew, meaning an alloy of a small amount of copper, twice as much antimony, and a great deal of tin. It costs a fortune, relatively speaking, and I need a lot of it to make nearly invisible wires for my puppets. Fortunately, I could keep digging this stuff out for several centuries."

A long flat rock lay beside the platform, and when Yen Shih lifted it I saw a deep hole, big enough to slide into. He did so, taking the torch he still carried, and when he climbed back up the torch was still below, illuminating a small cave.

"There isn't space for two, but you may find my Dragon's Sinew mine rather interesting," he said cryptically.

Master Li went first, and I heard a sudden sharp exclamation, and then his voice lifted happily. "Yen Shih, everything I have is yours!"

Some minutes later he had me lift him out, and then I squeezed down through the hole myself. The torch was stuck in a crevice, burning brightly, and the first thing I saw was the puppeteer's "mine." The workmen had poured Dragon's Sinew with lavish abandon, leaving large congealed pools of the stuff, and Yen Shih had been very neatly chipping away at the edges. As I followed the glinting path of the metal I saw it run into a shelf of solid rock.

"I'll be the Stone Monkey!" I yelped, and I heard Master Li laugh up above.

Yen Shih had led us to his private gallery as well as his private mine. "Eight! I've found all eight!" Ma Tuan Lin had written before a monster burned a hole in his back, and here carved in stone were the eight hooded shamans of three thousand years ago, and the details had not worn away. They were carrying eight cages precisely like the one concealed beneath Master Li's pallet.

6

A short time later we were seated on the bronze platform beside the astronomical instruments sipping wine—meaning Yen Shih and Master Li were emptying the latter's wine flask while I drank plum juice with vinegar from my own flask. The puppeteer appeared to have insides of solid copper. Alcohol didn't seem to affect him at all, and he was getting on splendidly with Master Li, who was in an expansive mood.

"Yen Shih, my friend, when you come to this island you scarcely announce your presence," Master Li said. "By any odd chance did you happen to be here two nights ago, about the double hour of the sheep?"

"No, I was sound asleep in my house at the time," Yen Shih said.

Master Li pointed in the direction of Ma Tuan Lin's pavilion. "Something peculiar has been going on down there," he said. "You've heard about the vampire ghoul who caused Devil's Hand to lose his chance for the record? Well, a few hours earlier, around the double hour of the sheep, that ch'ih-mei was unquestionably right where I'm pointing, at one of the pavilions."

The puppeteer looked where Master Li pointed, and then raised his eyes to the water of North Lake lapping at the bank beside the pavilion, and his eyes continued to lift to the opposite shore and Peking and the Vegetable Market, where the ch'ih-mei had fallen and died. The terrible smallpox craters deprived the puppeteer of normal facial expressions, but his right eyebrow was eloquent as it lifted toward the top of his head.

"But how…."

"Ah! You see it. I thought you would," Master Li said happily. He turned to me. "Ox, that's the most important reason for coming back to the island. We're now absolutely certain that the vampire ghoul was outside Ma Tuan Lin's pavilion a few hours before it crawled into its coffin on Coal Hill. All right, how did it get from the pavilion to the cemetery?"

"Why, I suppose it just—"

I halted with the sentence half formed. North Lake was between the pavilion and Coal Hill, and could a ch'ih-mei swim? The idea of such a monster rowing sedately across in a boat with a ripped-off head neatly stored between its feet was ludicrous, and I seemed to hear Auntie Hua on the subject of monsters: "Ox, if you can't get to sunlight, run toward water! The living dead fear it, and will brave it only as a last resort."

Master Li shared the last of the wine with the puppeteer, and then pitched the goatskin flask to the water below.

"I would assume you have a pick and shovel stored somewhere," he said to the puppeteer. "Our meeting has been so fortunate that I'd like to prolong it, and if you have nothing more pressing to attend to you might like to help track the path of a vampire ghoul."

Yen Shih's eyes could also be expressive, and they were sparkling. "Delighted! If nothing else I can dine on the tale for a month," he said.

Master Li got on my back and the three of us made good time to the pavilion, pausing only to collect Yen Shih's pick and shovel from a ditch where he'd concealed them, and soon we were standing close to the spot where flies still swarmed around grass stained with a mandarin's blood. I thought Master Li was going to have us fan out and search for claw prints, but he had something more specific in mind and he pointed toward the huge pile of dirt the creature had apparently crawled from.

"That's supposedly dirt dug for a construction project that was canceled," he said. "Construction on Hortensia Island is rare, and I hadn't heard of anything scheduled. See if you can find the hole this stuff came from."

We worked around the great pile, hacking through weeds. Then we circled out farther and farther until we reached the limit at which dirt could reasonably be pitched where it was, but still we found no hole. There remained the possibility that the workmen had been terrible amateurs who tossed dirt so that half of it slid back on top of them, and we dug a series of holes down through the pile itself, but always the shovel scraped against solid earth and dead matted grass.

"Venerable Sir, the dirt didn't come from here," I finally said. "It had to be hauled in from some other location."

"That," Master Li said complacently, "is precisely what I expected, and it's a hundred to one that the other location is across the lake near Coal Hill. Vampire ghouls never stray far from their coffins. This one happened to fall into, or was taking a nap in, a pile of dirt near the cemetery, and it was accidentally carried here, and its homing instinct allowed it to find the path the dirt had taken. If a ch'ih-mei can find a path, so can we."

It didn't take long now that we knew what we were looking for. Yen Shih swung his pick at thick reeds against the bank of a low cliff nearby and almost spiked himself

in the left leg as the pick met no resistance and whipped around. We pushed reeds down and found a large dark hole, and any doubts vanished when we found dribbles of loose dirt and marks of large sleds that had been carrying heavy loads. I raced back to the Yu and returned with torches, and then we started down the tunnel that was headed east, toward the Imperial City and Coal Hill.

The path dipped down and down, and finally leveled off, and I nervously lifted my torch and studied the stone ceiling. This tunnel hadn't been dug recently. It was old, perhaps as old as the Yu, and I saw black spots on the ceiling that seemed to move like giant spiders, and a slow menacing plop-plop-plop sound announced the dripping of water. We were making our way beneath the surface of the lake now, and I didn't want to think about things like rockfalls. There was no sound except that which we made.

"Hold up," Master Li said.

He had turned aside and was waving his torch around an alcove that opened on the north side. It was about thirty feet long and ten feet deep, and the floor was littered with fragments of rock. I saw a huge scar in the stone wall, recently made, and Master Li found traces of ancient chisel marks on some of the smashed fragments.

"It almost looks as though somebody discovered an old frieze and then smashed it to pieces before anybody else could see it," he said. "Ox, do you remember that rubbing we found in Ma's pavilion? I wonder if it came from here. After all, dirt was carried through this tunnel and dumped right in his backyard, and I doubt that he knew nothing about it."

There was nothing else to be seen, so we continued on. I was very nervous. For all I knew the ch'ih-mei had his whole family down here, and our torchlight was announcing the approach of dinner. I clutched the pick like a battle-ax, but nothing happened. The path began to rise, and far ahead we saw a flicker of light. We finally came to a flight of steps that led up to a stone landing, and a wooden framework and a pair of large doors confronted us, and the hazy yellow light was coming through the crack between the doors, which stood slightly ajar. Master Li signaled for us to extinguish our torches.

"I think we've come up to ground level," he whispered. "I also think we're inside the artificial mound of Coal Hill, and that explains why dirt was removed and carted to the island, where it wouldn't cause comment. This is a cave that was dug recently and secretly, right beneath the palaces of the wealthiest mandarins."

We slipped silently through the doors into a large room that was piled with packing cases, stacked one on top of another almost to the ceiling. Across from us was another pair of doors and the light in the room was coming in through cracks at the edges, but this wasn't artificial. It was sunlight, and when we put our eyes to the largest crack we were looking down at water.

"Ha!" Master Li whispered. "That's it. This is a smuggling operation, and it must involve mandarins of very high rank. That's the canal at the base of Coal Hill. Their barges pass through customs at Ta Kao Tien, preferably at nightfall, and begin inching up toward Export Clearance at Shou Huang Tien. Halfway through they pass here, where well-trained crews are ready: doors are opened, cargoes are switched, and with scarcely a pause the barges proceed to Export Clearance, and stamps will be applied automatically since the cargoes have just been inspected and couldn't possibly have been altered in the middle of a canal."

He paused, and then added, "The point has to be twofold: they pay negligible import duty on cargoes that are practically worthless, and then switch cargoes for goods that are both costly and restricted, meaning forbidden for export. If the goods are coveted by wealthy barbarians they must be making an incredible profit."

He turned from the doors and we tiptoed toward the back of the room where there was another door, a large single one. As we drew closer we could hear voices, and Master Li gently shoved the door partially open. We were looking at an alchemy laboratory where vast numbers of vials and jars were stacked on worktables, along with burners and mortars and a great number of arcane instruments. Five people were visible.

One dominated the room, even though he was the softest-spoken. He was dressed in costly silks and gold-trimmed satin, and his rings and other jewelry could probably have ransomed a king or two. He was immensely fat, and moved with the peculiar dancer's grace that some bulky people possess—probably half in the viewer's imagination, because one expects ungainliness. The next three men obviously deferred to the fat man. Seldom have I seen more unpleasant people than those three, who seemed closer to the world of animals than to that of men. The leader was a man who looked exactly like a wild hog, and Hog I was to call him ever after. The second and third might have been brothers, sneaky, skulking, backstabbing brothers, and I dubbed them Hyena and Jackal.

The fourth man had clerk written all over him. He was on his knees with his hands tied behind him, and a brush was stuck in his topknot and ink stains marked his shabby tunic, and he quivered in terror as the fat man addressed him.

"My agents inform me that in a wineshop you mentioned that I was soon to leave on an important mission," the fat one said softly, and I realized he had a tiny lisp that gave his voice a purring sound, like a cat.

"I said nothing about purpose or destination!" the clerk protested. "Your Excellency, I swear I—"

"My dear fellow, I don't doubt it for a moment," the fat one purred. "Why should you bother to tell what you could show?"

"Show? But I've shown nothing!" the clerk cried.

The fat man took a jeweled pillbox from a pocket and opened it. He extracted something I couldn't make out at that distance and held it up for inspection.

"No? How odd that my agents should pick this up from where you foolishly left it, right on top of your table in that wineshop," the fat man said.

Hog and Hyena and Jackal leaned forward, licking their lips, and I've seen prettier sights at feeding time in the imperial tiger pit.

"Your Excellency, I swear I forgot I had such a thing with me!" the clerk squealed. "It was only an accident, and I have been faithful and hardworking. I ask only the chance to redeem my moment of forgetful stupidity!"

"You shall have your chance, and it shall be more than a moment," the fat man said in his cat-purr voice. "I grant you all eternity for redemption, unless Hell has other chores that take precedence."

He hurled whatever he had taken from the pillbox into the clerk's face and swiveled around and walked gracefully away and through one last door at the rear of the laboratory. The moment he turned the other three had moved forward, and the sounds of the door closing behind the fat man were drowned out by terrible screams. I don't want to go into details. The three were precisely as animalistic as they looked—with the addition of human ingenuity—and they took their time killing the clerk. It was horrible. At the end they had a gory mess on the floor and they laughed about it as they went to a storeroom to get rags to mop up.

Before I knew what was happening Master Li had slipped through the door. He sidled on tiptoe through the mess so as to avoid prints, and pushed and poked through ghastly pieces of the late clerk, and finally came up with something that made him grunt in satisfaction. He turned and tiptoed back and rejoined us, and we silently shut the door and went back into the shipping room. Master Li whispered to us to find an open case and we split up and went through the rows of stacked boxes. From my end it was a futile endeavor. Every case I found was numbered, nailed tight, and sealed with wax symbols bearing customs stamps that certainly looked real to me. Meaning the wax had melted here and slopped over the imprint there, and been chipped and broken, and at times had been stamped in a totally inappropriate spot: real.

Master Li was doing a great deal of swearing under his breath, and when I passed the puppeteer he lifted his eyes heavenward and shrugged. Not one case was accessible, unless we wanted to leave calling cards in the form of broken seals, and finally we had to give up.

Coarse laughing voices were moving toward us. The door opened. Master Li winced and pointed, and Yen Shih and I followed the sage back toward the tunnel entrance, stooped low behind cases, moving like mice. Hog and Hyena and Jackal were too busy joking about the way the little clerk had screamed to notice. We could probably have walked out carrying a case, but Master Li didn't want to deal with an

alarm from a careful tally clerk and he signaled for us to keep going. We made it easily back into the tunnel, and then I sensed that Yen Shih was going to ask questions, so I put a hand on his arm and squeezed no-no-no. In the last light before darkness closed around us I had seen the old man's wrinkles twist into tight circles on his face, and I knew he wanted silence for thought.

When we were far enough down the tunnel and I was tired of groping I lit a torch and the sage made no objection. In fact, he took it from me when we reached the place where the wall of an alcove had been chipped away and examined both the wall and the cracked fragments, swearing monotonously. Then he snapped out of his reverie and turned to the puppeteer.

"Well, Yen Shih, I got you into more than anyone bargained for," he said. "At least you weren't spotted."

Yen Shih flashed that gorgeous, astonishing smile. "I enjoyed it," he said openly and frankly. "Can you have them arrested?"

"I would tend to doubt it," said Master Li. "That fat fellow who ordered the murder happens to be the second most powerful eunuch in the empire, commonly called Li the Cat. He holds ministerial rank. I'd need a warrant signed by the Son of Heaven, and by the time I got it the contraband would have vanished and the cave would be a Home for Hapless Orphans and the clerk's dear old mother would swear her darling boy expired from typhoid fever at the age of four."

He reached for wine and realized he'd finished it. "I need to nail them for the smuggling racket, not murder, and that won't be easy. Because of this." Master Li pulled out a tiny object and held it to the torchlight.

"A tea leaf?" Yen Shih said.

"Indeed yes, and it's also a very bad tea leaf," said Master Li. "Good tea is restricted, of course, so fortunes can be and are made smuggling it to barbarians, but this stuff can be shipped out by the ton. It's *ta-cha,* the cheapest of all boheas, and on top of that it's been damaged, probably by a flood. Tea like this is worth no more than ten cash a pound, yet this is what Li the Cat threw in the clerk's face, and apparently it was so important that leaving the premises with a leaf of it in his possession cost the clerk his life. You figure it out."

"No, thank you," said Yen Shih. "I do, however, have a favor to ask."

"If I can grant it, it's yours," Master Li said grandly.

"Consider that I now have a small stake in this affair, and command my services, night or day, when something comes up." Small points of light flickered deep inside Yen Shih's eyes, dancing and glowing, and again his sunrise smile belied the ruins of his face. "One gets bored," said the puppeteer.

We got back to the island, where we left Yen Shih, who had unfinished business, and I rowed back to the city. Master Li still had things to do and wanted to waste no time. He had me rent a palanquin, and then we went to office after office of bureaucrat after bureaucrat, gathering a bit of information here and a trace of a rumor there, and it was long past sundown when we started home. I was starving, but Master Li had at least sated a different sort of hunger.

"It's official," he said firmly. "Li the Cat has arranged to get the protection of the Wolf Regiment, and he's traveling to Yen-men, in Shansi, to confer with the Grand Warden. Ox, I'd give a great deal to be a fly on the wall when they meet. That poor clerk was already condemned to death for having even hinted that Li the Cat might be going on a trip, and what's so secret about a conference with the Grand Warden of Yen-men?"

I had no answers, of course. I concentrated on the rumblings of my stomach until we paid off the palanquin and walked up the narrow winding alley toward Master Li's shack to change clothes before going to dinner at One-Eyed Wong's. Again there was a very bright moon, and old Grandmother Ming from the house next door was waiting for us.

"No big monkeys!" she yelled from her window, leaning out to shake a fist.

"Eh?" said Master Li.

"Burglars you got! Pickpockets you got! Cutthroats and grain thieves and robbers come calling day and night! Drunks and mushroom-heads and whores and pirates and jailbirds and embezzlers—all right, all right, all right—but no big monkeys!" screamed Grandmother Ming.

Master Li was standing very still.

"Would this particular big monkey have a rather gaudy face?" he asked.

"What kind of monkey would come calling on *you*?" the old lady howled. "No big monkeys with red noses and blue cheeks and yellow chins!"

I dove inside the shack, but the damage was already done. The place had been ransacked, and the mysterious old cage was gone.

7

Before, we had seen the Celestial Master at his office, but now Master Li took me to the saint's house, just at daybreak, saying that the old boy awoke with the morning star. An old female servant let us in. She knew Master Li well, and led us without question through a simple bare house where tame deer were playing with dogs they had been raised with, and pet parakeets jabbered at cats, and a huge old owl opened sleepy eyes and said "Who?" We stepped outside again at the back into the most famous private garden in the empire. I could see the water of North Lake glinting through gaps in shrubbery in the first rays of the sun, and the little dock and special ramp that allowed the Celestial Master to hobble down to his boat. The garden itself can't really be described, although countless writers have attempted it. The problem is that it's so simple. I counted three small fishponds, a pile of rocks, ten trees so old that even small branches had beards of moss or creepers, one small patch of lawn where a statue of Lao-tse stood, innumerable shaggy shrubs, and flowers beyond counting. That was all, and none of it explains the sense of timelessness that wraps like a blanket around every visitor, the suggestion of continuity without beginning or end. Perhaps the closest anyone has come is Yuan Mei in his popular song "The Master's Garden," and even he admits failure except for the opening lines:

> A wind ancestral sings,
> Soft with scents of summers and springs,
> "Draw near, draw near!
> Ten thousand yesterdays are gathered here."

The Celestial Master was finishing the last of his morning tea when we approached, seated at a table made from a small millstone. "Hello, Kao!" he said cheerfully, but I had the sense that he was forcing his air of cheer through a curtain of immense weariness. "A bright good morning to you, Number Ten Ox. Any more grotesque murders?"

"One, but while it was extremely nasty I can't really call it grotesque," Master Li said, and then he went on to explain what we had seen, step by step, pausing to go back over points when he felt the ancient saint's attention was slipping.

"Li the Cat, eh?" the Celestial Master said at the end. "That's bad news, Kao. He's powerful and he's slippery, and I very much doubt that you can convict him on a murder charge."

"That's what I told our puppeteering friend," Master Li said sourly. "I think our only hope is to find out exactly what their smuggling racket involves, nail them on that, and then put pressure on underlings to implicate the mandarins in murder, true or not, and squeeze the mandarins into involving the powerful eunuch. Messy and probably illegal, but I don't know what else we can do."

"Keep it legal, Kao," the Celestial Master said gently.

"Yes, sir," Master Li said like a schoolboy, and like a schoolboy he had the fingers of his left hand crossed behind his back. "To tell the truth, it isn't eunuchs and mandarins and their rackets and murders that interests me, because I'll bet anything you like that their involvement in really important matters is peripheral, if it exists at all. Old friend and teacher, what can you make out of the reappearance of ancient cages that may have belonged to the Eight Skilled Gentlemen? The simultaneous appearance of minor demon-deities of a destroyed religion? And what about that damned ape-faced creature who may be helping to murder mandarins, and is certainly stealing cages, including mine?"

The Celestial Mandarin scratched his nose and shrugged. "How would I know? Kao, are you absolutely positive that the ape man's gaudy face is real? Not clever actor's makeup?"

"It's real," Master Li said flatly. "Ox?"

"Yes, sir, it's real," I said. "The moonlight was very bright when we saw him, and so were the lamps in the room, and I could almost see the pores of his skin, and that wasn't paint or dye."

The Celestial Master sat silently for a moment. Then he said wearily, "I can't concentrate anymore. I'm like an old tree, dying from the top down, and I'll tell you something: I've had the same dream six nights in a row. It starts with my mother, who's been dead for fifty years, and it ends with me trying to find my father's shoes. I'm not going to see the leaves turn this year, Kao, and I can't think clearly enough to make sensible suggestions. What do you plan to do?"

I could see that the saint's skin was almost transparent, and even the effort to sit up straight was tiring him, and I felt tears burn my eyes. To dream of the dead and then of shoes is an irrefutable omen of joining the former, because "shoes" and "reunion" are homophones: *hsieh.*

"The key to the whole works would seem to be the cages," Master Li said. "Both

cages were held by murdered mandarins, and we can assume they belonged to the smuggling ring. It can't be an accident that the tunnel entrance was practically at Ma Tuan Lin's back door, and his note on the back of the rubbing seems to link cages to a business enterprise. A reasonable assumption is that the remaining cages are held by the remaining members, so to find the cages is to find the conspirators, and, I hope, to discover what in hell makes the cages so special. Li the Cat is traveling to Yen-men to confer with the Grand Warden, and I think it would be a good idea for Ox and me to attend the meeting."

The tired old head lifted. "How?" the Celestial Master said with a trace of revived vigor. "To get to Yen-men you have to pass through three different bandit territories. There's always the sea route, but can you afford a couple of accompanying warships for protection against pirates? And once you get there, how do you join the meeting?"

Master Li grinned. "Li the Cat is indeed taking the long, slow sea route, protected by the Wolf Regiment. If everything goes right Ox and I will leisurely travel overland, enjoying the sights and not losing sleep about bandits."

This was news to me, and I leaned forward intently, and Master Li winked at me.

"You heard Yen Shih, Ox. He's caught the fever and wants to stay on the case, so far as he understands it, and have you ever heard of a bandit insane enough to interfere with a traveling puppeteer?"

He was right, of course. Nobody interfered with puppeteers. They brought laughter and joy to everybody, bandit and soldier alike, and they traveled under the protection of more deities than most priests could count. Master Li turned to the Celestial Master and winked.

"On top of that, Yen Shih's daughter is a renowned shamanka, young as she is. With the protection of a puppeteer and a shamanka I'd travel into the den of the Transcendent Pig," he said. "As for spying on the conference, we'll wait and see what comes up. It all depends, of course, on Yen Shih's decision, and whether or not his daughter will join us."

The saint nodded. "Bring them for a blessing if they wish one," he said. "Ox, too," he added with a nod in my direction. "You won't need one, Kao, because I decided long ago that the August Personage of Jade is reserving your blessing for himself, just as soon as he can stockpile enough lightning bolts."

The following morning there were four of us at the Celestial Master's door, along with the morning star and the first light of the sun. Five, if one counts the gift.

Yen Shih had listened intently to all Master Li said, and when I told him of the pets wandering around the saint's house he wondered if one more pet would be an appropriate gift, and after seeing it Master Li was sure it would be welcome indeed. It was a small bright-eyed monkey with greenish silky fur, and I had never seen such a wonderfully intelligent creature. Once taught it could bring designated objects on

command, and it had been trained to pluck out three recognizable tunes on the pi-pa (although it was likely to switch abruptly from one to another), and it was a marvelous mimic of human gestures. Yen Shih led it in by the hand, dressed in a small cap and tunic, and when he touched his own forehead and said, "Where are your manners?" the creature bowed quite beautifully to the saint, who was enchanted.

"Yen Shih, eh? I saw you once, incognito of course, because you were doing *Hayseed Hong*. I haven't laughed so hard since Abbot Nu confused one of the newfangled ceremonial vessels with a Sogdian chamber pot and anointed his acolytes with the contents of the latter," the Celestial Master said happily. "And this is your lovely daughter! My dear, Tao-shihs and shamankas have a great deal in common, to the despair of theologians, and if I'm feeling a bit stronger when you return we must sit down for a long talk."

He blessed us and prayed for safety and success, and the old female servant had already learned the list of command gestures and got the little monkey to wave goodbye as we left. I can't describe our leave-taking in more detail because my mind was concentrated on one overpowering ingredient, and that was the puppeteer's daughter.

❁ ❁ ❁

Her name was Yu Lan. Shamankas learn their craft young, and she had learned from her mother, and I felt very callow and ignorant when I realized that the puppeteer's daughter—no older than I—was already a fully accredited priestess of the ancient Wu cults, and practitioner of shamanistic mysteries and magic I didn't dare dream about. She lived in a world far above me even when we shared the same physical area and conditions, but there was nothing unfriendly about her. When capitalized as a personal name Yu Lan means "Magnolia," but uncapitalized and in a different context *yu lan* can mean "secretly smiling," and that is how I came to think of her: silent, graceful, distant as a drifting cloud, but never haughty, never reproving, secretly smiling.

She worked with everyone else to help her father's puppet shows, but her own personal work could not be shared. I remember when we reached hills where strange wild people still lived in dark ravines. That night Yu Lan suddenly stood up in the light of our cooking fire and walked to the edge of the shadows where a boy had appeared as if by magic. He had brown skin and high sharp cheekbones and an expressionless face, and he silently extended a stripped branch with notches cut in it. Yu Lan studied the notches and then told the boy to wait, and a few minutes later she was dressed in a robe made from bearskin and carrying a case of various sacred things, and she disappeared with the boy into the night.

Her father had said nothing. Only when she was gone did Yen Shih remark, "Her mother would sometimes vanish for days on end, but she always found me when she was ready to." Then he changed the subject.

She hadn't gone far, however. Later when we were preparing to go to sleep we heard wailing and chanting from above us on a hilltop, and then a high clear voice exclaimed, *"Hik!"*

Master Li yawned and muttered, "The next sound you'll hear is *'Phat!'*"

"Sir?" I said.

"Phat!" rang sharply from the hilltop.

"It's Tibetan. Didn't you notice the boy's Tibetan features? Somebody's died and they've asked Yu Lan to guide the soul safely into the hereafter," he explained. "She has to start by freeing it from the body, which is done by opening a hole in the top of the head to let it out. Shamans practice on themselves with a piece of straw."

"Sir?"

"Watch."

He plucked a piece of straw from his pallet and laid it carefully on top of his head, down flat. *"Hik!"* he exclaimed, and I stared with bulging eyes as the straw began to tilt and move, as though one end was sliding down into a hole. *"Phat!"* he cried, and the straw was standing up straight. He made a show of plucking the thing out of the hole in his head, and then tossed it away.

"Neat trick, isn't it?" he said. "Yu Lan now has to guide the soul through wild country populated by demons and beasts, strengthening it by prayers and incantations, and she'll be at it all night. Go to sleep."

He rolled over and soon began to snore, but I stayed up for hours acting like a fool with a piece of straw. I never did learn how it's done.

I'm getting ahead of myself, however. I really wanted to write about our very first evening on the road, even though nothing at all happened. We camped on a hill as the sun was setting. Yen Shih's huge puppeteering wagon was bathed in rosy light, and he and I prepared to fix the canvas awning that served as a dew catcher above our pallets. We were swinging mallets, knocking metal sockets into the ground to hold the bamboo poles that supported the awning, while Master Li chanted the count for the mallets and Yu Lan's clear pure voice lifted to the crimson clouds, improvising on the scene in the style of Liu Chu:

"*Five*
perching crows
four
low clouds
three

wild geese
two
rows of willows
one
flame of setting sun."

"Pole!" cried Master Li, and the hand of the puppeteer's daughter happened to brush mine as she helped the sage set the pole in the socket.

"Venerable Sir," I said that night as we lay in our pallets, "is it true that shamankas can't stand presumptuous males?"

"Bllppsshh," he muttered, or something like that.

I searched for omens in the stars. "Sir, is it also true that an angry shamanka is as dangerous as a tigress with cubs?"

He rolled over. "You may be right, my boy," he said drowsily. "Knew a great lusty fellow once. Half rearing stallion, half raging bull. They called him Tong the Tumescent. One day Tong laid his paws on a pretty little shamanka, and she gave him the Eye and spoke words in an unknown tongue."

That seemed to be that. Snores arose from Master Li's pallet, and then I heard a sputtering sound and the old man said between yawns, "Now they call him Yang-wei."

The snores resumed, and it took me a moment to connect Tong the Tumescent to Yang-wei, which means "Droopy Penis."

"Oh," I said.

8

Since Li the Cat was taking the slow sea route we had time to allow Yen Shih to replenish his coffers along the way with puppet shows. I think I mentioned that everyone helped out. Yu Lan played a variety of instruments and sang very beautifully, and Master Li put on magic or fortune-telling or medicine shows, depending on his mood, and I donned a black hood and an evil smile and wrestled the local champions, who had to pay for the privilege and could claim a substantial prize if they won. I'd been tossing people out of rings since I was ten, so I wasn't worried about losing, and I never hurt anyone. I have too much to tell about important things to spend much time describing those days, even though I'd like to, so I shall settle for three brief sketches. For the first, it was a warm afternoon in the market square of a small town, and the puppeteer and his daughter were inside the tent preparing for the show, and I had finished my wrestling act and was pouring dippers of water over my head, and it was Master's Li's turn. He wore a flat hat that looked like a board, with peculiar things on the ends of tassels dangling down, and his robe was covered with symbols representing the 101 diseases and the gods thereof, and he was standing on a platform examining a local dignitary who had a potbelly, a purple nose, and crimson cheeks.

"The kidneys, my misguided friend, are not to be trifled with," Master Li said gently, waving a cautionary finger in the fellow's face. "The season of the kidneys is winter, and their orientation is north, and their element is water; their smell is putrid, their taste is salty, and their color is black; their animal is the tortoise, their mountain is Hang Shan, and their deity is Hsuan-ming; their virtue is wisdom, their emotion is fear, and they make the low moaning sound *yu;* the emperor of the kidneys is Chuan-hsu, they take the spirit form Hsuan Yen—the two-headed stag commonly called Black Darkness—and of all body parts they are the most unforgiving. What have you been doing to these great and dangerous organs?"

The old man has sharp bony knuckles rather like chisels, and plenty of snap in his right arm when it comes to short body punches.

"You have been drowning them in the Shaoshing wine of Chekiang!"
"Eeaarrgghh!"
"The Hundred Flowers wine of Chen-chiang!"
"Eeaarrgghh!"
"The Orchid Stream wine of Wusih!"
"Eeaarrgghh!"
"The Drip-Drop wine of Taming!"
"Eeaarrgghh!"
"The Golden Waves wine of Chining!"
"Eeaarrgghh!"
"The Grain of Paradise wine of Hunan!"
"Eeaarrgghh!"
"The Fragrant Snow wine of Mouchow!"
"Eeaarrgghh!"
"The Old Cask wine of Shanyang!"
"Eeaarrgghh!"
"The Peppery Yellow wine of Luancheng!"
"Eeaarrgghh!"
"The White Double wine of the Liuchiu Islands!"
"Eeaarrgghh!"
"The December Snow wine of Kashing!"
"Eeaarrgghh!"
"The Top of the Cask wine of Kuangtung!"
"Eeaarrgghh!"
"The Spring on Tungting Lake wine of Changsha!"
"Eeaarrgghh!"
"And the Double Pepper wine of Chingho!"
"Eeaarrgghh!"

The sage stepped to the front of the platform and addressed the audience in solemn tones, while the patient held his wounded parts and moaned pathetically.

"My friends, consider the wondrous nature of the kidneys, and the beneficence of the deities who have granted them to us," Master Li intoned. "It is the kidneys that produce bone marrow and give birth to the spleen. The kidneys convert bodily fluid into urine, and give birth to and nourish the hairs. The kidneys are the officers of bodily strength, and thus the top pair are attached to the heart. The kidneys are the officers of intellect, and thus the bottom pair winds through the pelvis and climbs up the spinal cord into the brain. The kidneys store the germinating principle that contains the will, and their song is 'Somber Darkness,' and their dance is 'Engendering Life,' and when mistreated they become swollen, sensitive, and very, very sore."

"Eeaarrgghh!"

"Fortunately," said Master Li, opening a large case to display rows of small vials, "the Academy of Imperial Physicians is allowing me to part with a very limited amount of Pao Puh Tsi's amazing tonic for the kidneys known as Nine Fairies Elixir, and you need scarcely be reminded that this is the very elixir that saved the life of Emperor Wen. The ingredients are cinnabar, flowers of sulphur, olibanum, myrrh, camphor, Dragon's Blood, sulphate of copper, musk, burnt alum, bear's gall, yellow lead, centipedes, earthworms, silkworms, plum blossoms, cow bezoar, toad spittle, white jade dust, borax, tree grubs, and snails, and while some may consider the price slightly steep, the wise will consider the alternative."

"Eeeeaaaarrrrggggghh!"

Yen Shih was in charge of the show, not Master Li, and he politely but firmly prevented the old man from shearing the sheep right down to the skin. "After all," he pointed out, "I have to return year after year, and it is difficult to entertain lynch mobs."

I just said that Yen Shih was in charge, and the next sketch requires some expansion on the theme. To begin with, right from our first meeting I had sensed two very powerful elements in the puppeteer's being. (Leaving out the tragedy of smallpox that disfigured him, the shock must have been unimaginable, because his natural movements and gestures were those of a good-looking youth who had grown into a handsome man.) The first was the light dancing deep inside his eyes when danger threatened, and I suddenly remembered the boy we had called Otter in my village, and his glowing eyes when he prepared to do a pelican dive into the shallow water in the quarry pit, far below at the base of Torn Tree Hill—a feat the rest of us didn't dare daydream about. I often felt that staying too close to the puppeteer would be like staying too close to a fire where a thick piece of bamboo is burning slowly and steadily, meaning that at any moment the flames may reach a large air pocket surrounded by soft sap, and the explosion may send you sailing in a ball of fire through the wall of your cottage. That leads to the next fact about the puppeteer. He was an aristocrat, and I don't mean that as a figure of speech.

"From a noble family? Oh yes, or so I assume," Master Li said when I asked him about it. "He practically reeks of a rarefied upbringing. Confucianism mandates a family's continued nobility whether they maintain imperial favor or not, and the empire teems with proud younger sons working incognito as fishermen and gamekeepers, so why not puppeteers? Yen Shih may decide to tell us his story someday, and until then we can at least extend the courtesy of keeping our mouths shut."

The scene I want to describe is this. We had reached an inn on the outskirts of a town and been held up by rain that turned the roads to mud. Yen Shih had started drinking early in the morning in the large common room, seated by himself

at a small table in the corner. He was still drinking, slowly and steadily, in late afternoon, showing no ill effects from the strong wine, but sinking more and more into his own private world. Yu Lan (thank Buddha!) was resting in the wagon. Suddenly the door burst open and a party of noblemen strode in. They were dressed for the hunt and drenched to the skin, and the others deferred fawningly to the leader, who had a flushed petulant face and hot hasty eyes. He yelled for wine and a larger fire, ordered us peasants out, and in almost the same breath he turned to the closest peasant and commanded him to sweep the stinking floor clean enough to receive superior feet. The closest happened to be Yen Shih, who leisurely arose and picked up a broom that was propped against the wall. He surveyed the nobleman with speculative eyes.

"Gad, the resemblance is remarkable," he drawled. "Would Your Magnificence perchance be related to radiant Lord Yu Yen?"

The sheer audacity of a worm daring to address a tiger left the lord speechless. Besides, Yu Yen means "Fish Eyes."

"No? How odd. I could have sworn you were brothers," Yen Shih said. "Masters of the hunt, legends in war—Lord Yu Yen, for example, having heroically won high rank, medals, and military command upon the field of primogeniture, was granted the honor of accompanying the Son of Heaven upon a bandit-hunting expedition, and as fate would have it he was granted an early opportunity of displaying his worth when his men encountered a band of marauding Miao-chia."

The nobleman had finally grasped the incredible fact that this low creature was addressing him in familiar language, and he uttered a roar of rage and pulled his sword from the scabbard. I started forward, but Master Li grabbed my shoulder and held me back. Yen Shih was casually balancing the broom on his right forefinger and seemed to be unaware of the shining sharp steel that glittered coldly in the afternoon sunlight.

"What a hero he was," the puppeteer said admiringly. "'Send forth your champion!' cried valiant Lord Yu Yen. 'He against me! Man to man and hand to hand!' It was seemly said, but one regrets to report that the rabble to which it was addressed was disgustingly drunk."

"That's the Miao-chia," said Master Li.

The nobleman screamed with rage and lunged with a swipe that was meant to remove the puppeteer's head, but Yen Shih casually flicked the handle of the broom and sent the blade flying harmlessly aside so that it chopped a candle in half and knocked a tin bowl from a table.

"Indeed yes," the puppeteer said sadly. "The swine clung together, laughing and giggling in drunken disarray, pointing greasy fingers at Lord Yen Yu. Then they sent their cook."

The nobleman screamed and swung again, and the broom handle sharply rapped his wrist. Yen Shih appeared not to see the fellow dive to the floor and scramble to pick up his sword.

"The cook was a rather large woman," he said mournfully. "Fat mottled arms and the evil eye. 'I'll not fight a female!' roared gallant Lord Yu Yen, and the bitch grabbed his lustrous locks and jerked his head forward and bit off his noble nose."

"That's the Miao-chia," said Master Li.

The nobleman tried a thrust to the heart. The parry spun him around, and then a small amount of blood sprayed into the air as the broom handle rapped his nose.

"Lord Yu Yen," said Yen Shih, "decided to unsheathe his sword—a bit late, some might say—and the harridan treated his fingers most foully in the process of taking it from him. Then she hacked off his aristocratic arms at the elbows."

"That's the Miao-chia," said Master Li.

The nobleman's savage swipe swung him around in a circle when Yen Shih leaned back. The blade swished harmlessly through the air and then the broom handle flicked out and the nobleman yelped and grabbed both elbows, and his sword again hit the floor.

"Valiant Lord Yu Yen was somewhat handicapped, but still undaunted!" the puppeteer said proudly. "He stepped forward and attempted quite a savage kick, and might even have essayed another had not the hag chopped off both legs at the noble knees."

"That's the Miao-chia," said Master Li.

The nobleman straightened up and tried to fend off the broom handle with his sword, and then he hopped around the floor clutching both aching knees.

"What a champion was Lord Yu Yen!" Yen Shih said emotionally. "He magnificently managed to wriggle forward on his stomach and inflict a very painful bite upon the lady's left ankle, and would surely have wounded the right one as well were it not for the slattern's total disregard for the rules of civilized warfare, which became apparent during the process by which she removed his lordship's teeth."

"That's the Miao-chia," said Master Li.

The nobleman wasn't a complete idiot. When the broom handle pointed at his head he jumped four feet backward, raising his left arm protectively in front of his mouth.

Yen Shih wiped a tear from his eye. "Although deprived of teeth, legs, arms, and nose, gallant Lord Yu Yen was still magnificent in battle. He went on the offensive with some genuinely harsh language, and was even contemplating spitting when the hussy made such action academic. I regret to report that details of her subsequent behavior are quite unsuitable for circulation in any country other than Tibet."

"That," said Master Li, "is the Miao-chia."

The nobleman raised his sword again, and then paused to think it over.

"We scoured the field of battle, searching for a piece of our hero large enough to place in a sacristy at the Military Academy, from which valiant Lord Yu Yen could inspire generations yet unborn. Alas! All that remained was a greasy spot on the grass," Yen Shih said mournfully. Then his eyes lit up. "But wait! Possibly a twin would suffice, and all we need is a piece!"

His teeth bared in a small tight smile, and he twitched the broom back and forth like a cobra's head as he stepped forward, and the nobleman uttered a small shrill shriek and ran out the door and disappeared, leaving his sword behind him.

The minor noblemen of the hunting party had remained absolutely still throughout this. The puppeteer turned and looked them over, and then he growled. That's all. Just the low snarling growl of a bear about to lose its temper, and in less than five seconds there wasn't a nobleman to be seen. I was paralyzed, but Master Li was not.

"Ox, pack up. We're leaving fast," he said. Then he turned to the puppeteer, and his voice was sharp and hard. "Pretty, but self-indulgent. I sincerely hope you wouldn't have done that yesterday, and we had better be where I assume we are."

Yen Shih's eyes slowly changed as the dancing, leaping light died down. He took a deep breath and bowed his head in apology that seemed to be half mock and half real.

"You're right, of course, and I'm not quite enough of an idiot to have done that yesterday," he said. "We're at the border of bandit country, and inside of two hours no nobleman would dare follow us with his private army."

Master Li grunted, and the affair was never mentioned again, but I would be less than truthful if I didn't admit that when I gathered firewood I spent part of the time swinging a stick in my hand, fencing imaginary noblemen.

The third scene is not so tidy and not so triumphant, and I wouldn't describe it at all were it not for the fact that it turned out to be important.

We had no trouble at all going through bandit territory, just as Master Li had predicted. Everybody welcomes a puppeteer, and in addition there is superstitious awe in outlaws where magic-makers are concerned, and that includes beautiful young shamankas. I soon learned not to worry about Yu Lan, and certainly her father never showed that he did. On the fifth day through the bandits' domain (which officially doesn't exist) we ran straight into one of those coincidences that people who know nothing about life insist happen only in books. The guest of honor at the camp of the bandit chief we were to perform for turned out to be the man we were traveling to see, the Grand Warden of Goose Gate (Yen-men).

We soon learned he had every reason to be there, because he had recently wed the bandit chief's daughter, which showed intelligence, according to Master Li,

and we also learned that the bride, who was back at Yen-men, was suffering from a mysterious illness that no physician had been able to cure. We were able to split up and enter the camp as two separate groups traveling together for companionship: Yen Shih and Number Ten Ox as puppeteer and assistant, Master Li and Yu Lan as shaman and shamanka who specialized in healing. They had no trouble impressing the grand warden, and it was arranged that they should try their hands at treating his young wife.

The scene I want to describe is very humiliating. I had to warm up the audience without the help of Master Li and Yu Lan, so I pretended to be on the verge of defeat a couple of times, and then pretended I was losing both temper and judgment when I doubled the wager, and the crowd got quite excited. The noise drew distinguished visitors. I looked up to see the Grand Warden of Yen-men sneering at me, with a party of noblemen and one fellow dressed as a commoner.

"Professional wrestler, eh?" the warden said jovially. "Bill yourself as Muck-Muck the Mule, or some such, eh? Buddha, look at all those bulging things! Muck-Muck the Muscle-bound Mule, eh?"

His entourage treated that as the apex of humor, but I happened to notice that the warden's shifty little eyes didn't laugh when his mouth did, and there was something cowardly and cruel in his voice when he volunteered to provide a friend of his as my next opponent. The friend turned out to be the commoner, and a minute later I reached two decisions. The first was that the commoner's familiar manner suggested a relationship with the grand warden that was far more than friendly, and the second was that he wasn't human.

He was a good deal shorter than I was, but I guessed he was actually heavier. His head seemed to be rammed down on his shoulders without benefit of neck. I've been told I look like that too, but this creature also had little in the way of discernible shoulders, waist, hips, or thighs. The bastard was all of a piece, one solid tube of sinuous muscle from his jaw to his knees, and then tapering only slightly from his knees to his feet. As he stripped to his loincloth a bee landed on his left shoulder, and instead of brushing it away he simply shuddered his flesh donkey-style, the entire hide twitching effortlessly, under total muscular control.

"Number Ten Ox," I said silently, "you are in bad, bad trouble."

The creature stood surveying me with glittering, expressionless eyes, and when a smooth ripple of muscles sent him gliding to the challenger's place in the ring I dubbed him the Snake. The warden had claimed the judge's flag as a prerogative of rank. He suddenly dropped it to catch me off guard, but that's exactly what I'd expected him to do and I was ready. I decided there wasn't any point looking for weakness in a snake, so I was airborne the moment the flag started down, twisting in midair to aim a vicious leg whip at the reptile's ankles. He hadn't expected it. He simply dropped

a hand and slapped my extended foot so hard that I spun around like a cordless kite and crashed to earth in a cloud of dust. I managed a backflip and landed crouched in a defensive position, but he wasn't bothering to attack me. He was waiting for me to come and entertain him again, and this time he was so contemptuous he didn't try to stop me when I went for a waist hold. That's when I discovered the slick shine of his flesh wasn't an optical illusion. My hands slipped helplessly over oil, and with another effortless donkey shudder he'd sent me spinning harmlessly away.

What kind of creature walks around covered with oil? I didn't get a chance to think it over. The Snake stepped forward and the next thing I knew I was sailing up toward the clouds, and then I was looking at them upside down, and then I returned to earth with a crash that knocked the breath from my body. He could have finished me then and there, of course, but he was gliding snakelike around the ring as he bowed to the applause of the warden and his entourage. I used the opportunity to dig up handfuls of dirt, and I lunged when his back was turned and managed to smear the stuff around his waist. Now my hands had dirt to cling to, and before it became oily mud I got a full grip and heaved, harder than I ever had in my life, and I managed to get full extension. The Snake was poised in the air above my head as I strutted around the ring, and then I tossed him down at the warden's feet with everything I had.

I sometimes wonder how I've survived this long with a couple of plover's eggs masquerading as brains. There I was bowing to the bandits, swollen like a blowfish in my conceit, but since when do you incapacitate a reptile by tossing it to the ground? You annoy it, that's what you do, and when I was able to think again I had a dim impression of having been struck by a cyclone. I flew this way and bounced that way and flipped over and over, and then I was lying flat on my back and the Snake was seated comfortably behind me. He had my arms pulled backward and pinned, and his legs were wrapped around my neck, and slowly, very slowly, he was squeezing them as a constrictor tightens coils around its dinner.

The Grand Warden of Goose Gate was leaning over me, watching. His tongue flicked out and licked his lips, and he was making little snickering sounds as he waited for me to perform a song for him. It was to be the drumming of my heels against the ground as breath left me, faster and faster and then slower and slower, and then silence. I couldn't hear anything except a muffled gong sound in my ears, but suddenly the pressure lessened and allowed me to breathe a little, and I realized the warden had looked away and up, and then I saw a beautiful and terrible figure looming above me. It was Yu Lan, and she had wrapped the aura of her priesthood around her like shining armor, and her eyes flashed with anger.

"Would you arouse the sickness demons that are attacking the body of your wife?" she said to the warden, snapping each word like the crack of a whip. "You

have asked aid of the Mysteries of Wu, and taken vows of purity until a cure is accomplished, and now you dare to kill?" Her hair was actually rising like cat's fur, and if I hadn't been in my current position I would have cringed like a whipped dog. "Know you not that you run the risk of angering the Three Corpses and Nine Worms inside your own body, and of visiting upon yourself the very Death Spirit you incite? Release him, and pray to the gods for their forgiveness."

She made a commanding gesture. The Snake looked to the warden for guidance, and the warden looked at the Snake—very much the gaze of bedmates—and then the warden nodded. The pressure relaxed completely and my arms were freed. I managed to sit up and massage my neck, and the warden and the Snake and the entourage strode away. Yu Lan also turned and walked off through ranks of bandits who nervously jumped aside to let her pass.

Master Li had arrived when Yu Lan did, and in case awe and moral superiority needed some support he'd taken a crossbow from a bandit and had the Snake in the notched sights. Now he bent over and examined my bruises.

"Nothing broken," he said cheerfully. "The only thing damaged is your pride, and I wouldn't lose sleep over that if I were you. That fellow simply isn't human."

"Soivnzd," I wheezed, which is as close as I could come to "So I've noticed."

So the stage was set for our arrival in Yen-men, with Master Li and Yu Lan invited to enter the palace walls to treat the grand warden's sick bride, and Yen Shih automatically welcomed as a puppeteer, with me as assistant, and also arriving would be Li the Cat, and waiting for us would be the Snake, and I had a powerful premonition that the combination was going to be interesting.

The palace at Yen-men was a great gloomy place complete with a drawbridge and a moat, built to withstand sieges during the wars of the Three Kingdoms many centuries ago. I was interested to see that Master Li and Yu Lan looked the place over, came to some sort of unspoken agreement, and arranged to see the grand warden's sick wife immediately. When they emerged from the bedchamber Master Li said "Parasites?" and Yu Lan said, "Almost certainly." Then they closely questioned the lady's maids, following which they examined some ornamental ponds that were scattered here and there in the gardens. They prepared a vial of some odorous liquid and made sure that the sick woman drank it, and Master Li said, "That should do it."

"You mean that's all?" I asked.

Yu Lan looked at me with a faint smile tugging at her lovely lips, and Master Li laughed.

"Ox, in terms of conventional medicine the answer would be yes," he said. "In shamanistic terms we've barely begun, and I think you'll find the next two steps to the cure to be rather interesting."

That turned out to be an understatement, although I was disappointed at first when it seemed that I was excluded. They huddled with Yu Lan's father. Yen Shih rapidly wrote out a detailed script of some sort, adding a few suggestions of his own, and they announced that the warden's wife was being attacked by exceptionally vicious demons who were trying to steal her higher soul, and they set sunrise the following morning as the time for the decisive battle with the Agents of Darkness. I was told to collect a bag of rice and a sack of bees (I had no idea what they were for) and to ride out into the hills and gather huge amounts of poppies. Yen Shih let me help him fix various puppeteering equipment in the grand warden's audience chamber, but after that all I was allowed to do was play the drums and I was forced to admit they were right. I would have lost my head and done something foolish if I'd been in a more responsible position, and in my defense I will offer the following description.

The Doctors and the Demons

SCENE: *The palace audience chamber at dawn; curtained, almost airless, heavily shadowed. Torches flank a table placed upon a dais at the end of the room, with heavy hangings on three sides. Incense burners send thick fragrant smoke into the air, and the smell of poppies is overpowering. A bat wobbles erratically through the air and collides with a burner, flaps upside down around the room, and lands on the floor—under the impression it is the ceiling—and clings to a chair leg, giggling. A drum begins a slow monotonous beat, and a parade of dignitaries led by the Grand Warden of Goose Gate enters Silence, except for the drum. Coughing and shuffling of feet. More silence. More coughing and shuffling. The drum slows: da-dum, da-dum, da-dum… dum…dum…dum…. Dead silence, then the grand warden and the dignitaries leap three feet into the air.*

Voice From Nowhere: Bring…the…afflicted…to…me….

Dignitaries leap aside to form a path as the grand warden's wife is carried in on a silken litter. She is a young woman, not bad-looking, powerfully built, with a commanding presence but clearly ill. The litter is carried up the steps to the dais and placed upon the table facing the audience. The carriers bow and back away through the side curtain. Silence.

Voice From Nowhere: The Demons of Sickness, in the days when they lived as men and women of this world, committed the 9,999 Offenses. For their sins they are linked to the Nine Darknesses. Their foul souls have fallen into the sufferings of the Thousand Ages, and to gain warmth and light they seek pure souls to serve as lantern and hearth in the Domain of Eternal Night. Ye who would steal the soul of this woman, I command thee, show thyselves!

Silence. Then a snickering sound is heard, malicious laughter, and points of bright light flicker in the shadows to the right of the litter. A child's face appears, but an evil child with teeth like those of a rat, and horrible eyes. More children appear until there are seven of them. They laugh as they approach the litter, menacingly.

Voice From Nowhere: The Hag of the Nine Hollow Hills sends her grandchildren, but fears to show herself? So be it.

A blinding flash of light is followed by a bang and a cloud of smoke, which clears to reveal Master Li standing to the left of the litter. He wears a tall winged hat covered with stars, indicating the path he takes when consulting the gods, and in his right hand is the Horse of

Night he rides to visit the underworld. When not in use the horse takes the form of a cane with an iron horse head at the top and an iron hoof at the bottom. In his left hand is the Magic Tambourine: top side shows sunrise, two blackbirds, two horses, and the bear's tooth; bottom side shows the birch tree, two frogs, seven nests, seven maidens, and the Mother of Fire. His long white robe is covered with bells, dolls, bones, icons, and the twenty-eight metal discs symbolizing the Palaces of the Moon. He levels his cane at the demons.

Master Li: In the name of the Supreme Born-of-Chaos Lord of the Tao of the Five Transcendents and Seven Luminaries, I bid thee begone!

The evil children laugh at the shaman. Their mouths gape wide, wider, impossibly wide, and great clouds of poisonous bees pour out and buzz in a deadly cloud toward Master Li. He opens his own mouth wide, and as bees buzz in he transforms them into grains of rice and spits them back out. More and more bees attack. Piles of rice cover the shaman's feet, but suddenly he must fight on two fronts at once because there is another blinding flash, another loud bang, another cloud of smoke, and beside the demon children stands the Hag of the Nine Hollow Hills. Her face is blue, her wings are black, her arms end in raptor claws, and she hurls the poisoned arrows that form her feathers. Master Li catches arrows on the shield of his tambourine, but he cannot defend the patient on the litter as the demons move closer.

Master Li: O Lady Immortal of the Mysterious Supreme, Flower of the Middle Original, Bearer of the Sword and Girdle of Supreme Purity, heed this cry of your servant and come in thy anger and glory!

A third flash, and a third bang, a third cloud of smoke, and Yu Lan stands behind the litter. She is absolutely breathtaking. Her hair is woven like a cloud over the silver tricorn Night Moon Crown in the Primal Daybreak, and then allowed to flow freely down her back like an ebony waterfall. Her cape of kingfisher feathers bears the Seven Sapphire Flowers. On her vermilion silk caftan is the Grand Ribbon of the Phoenix Pattern, and around her waist is the Fire Jade Girdle of the Six *Mountains. Suspended in a silver seaboard is the Sword of Fluid Yellow and Pulsating Phosphors, and her boots are embroidered with the steeds she rides into shadows or sunlight: Blood Horse of Day, Pearl Horse of Night.*

Yu Lan: Back to your hole, Hag! No innocent soul shall light the blackness nor warm the bone-chill of the pit to which you were sent by the Celestial Venerable of the Sacred Jewel and Nine Breaths!

Hag of the Nine Hollow Hills: O Winged Ones! Fanged Ones! Clawed Ones and Horned Ones! Fly to me! Fly! fly!

A horrible horde of demons with edged wings like swords and beaks and horns like spears shrieks down upon Master Li and Yu Lan, who counter with sword and iron cane, and the clash-clatter-clang-bang sounds like six simultaneous blacksmith conventions. The creatures swoop high out of range and then dive in sneak attacks, and Master Li holds out his cane at arm's length and shakes it as he shouts words in an unknown tongue, and suddenly a great horse is standing there. He leaps on its back as Yu Lan stamps her left boot and cries out in arcane language and lo! her foot is bare and the Blood Horse of Day receives her lithe leap. The shaman and the shamanka ride up into the air, and the battle rages overhead. Master Li's tambourine releases the carnivorous Horses and the terrible Bear, the eye-pecking Blackbirds and the poisonous Frogs. Yu Lan battles the demons swarming around her with the Sapphire Flowers that turn into blue tigers, the Grand Ribbon that becomes a dragon, and the Fire Jade Girdle that explodes with sheets of flame and bubbling lava.

Hag of the Nine Hollow Hills: Fight, my lovely ones! Fight!

The Hag is wiser than her advice. She slips from the fray and swoops down toward the litter where the patient lies, and when she flies up and away she has something warm and shining in her claws. Master Li is routing the demons by reversing his tambourine to release the Trees, the Nests, the Maidens, and the Mother of Fire, and Yu Lan wheels her great horse around and sees the Hag. The shamanka jerks her tricorn crown free and hurls it, and it is the whole glorious moon that spins toward the Hag, who screeches in fear. The small shining light of a soul slips from her claws and flips and flops wildly away, and then disappears. Master Li and Yu Lan pursue the Hag and the last of the demons, and then they too disappear, and their voices are heard here, there, and everywhere.

Master Li: O soul, come back!
In the east are giants a thousand fathoms tall,
And ten suns that melt metal and dissolve stone.

Yu Lan: O soul, come back!
In the south the people have tattooed faces and blackened teeth;
There coiling snakes devour men as sweet relish.

Master Li: O soul, come back!
In the west the Moving Sands stretch for leagues;

You will be swept into Thunder's Chasm and dashed to pieces,
And beyond lies a desert with red ants huge as elephants.

YU LAN: O soul, come back!
In the north is the Frozen Mountain of the Torch Dragon,
Its eyes glaring red, with serrated teeth and wild mad laughter,
And the sky is white and glittering and rigid with cold.

MASTER LI: You cannot climb to Heaven above, O soul,
For leopards and tigers guard the gates,
And slant-eyed wolves pad to and fro.

YU LAN: You cannot descend to the Land of Darkness,
For there the monster lies, nine-coiled;
Three eyes has he in his tiger's head, and his body is a bull's.

Smoke rises around the litter. When it clears Master Li and Yu Lan are flanking the patient, beads and bands lifted toward the stars.

MASTER LI: O soul, we call to guide you, standing by your body to lead you back in.
The quarters of the world are full of harm,
But here in your old abode are high halls and deep chambers,
Stepped terraces, storied pavilions.
Warm breezes bend the melilotus, and set tall orchids swaying,
Sending scents through chambers of polished stone
With ceilings and floors of vermilion.

YU LAN: Many a rare and precious thing awaits in your chamber;
Braids and ribbons, brocades and satins,
Bedspreads of kingfisher feathers, seeded with pearls,
While damask canopies stretch overhead
Lit by bright candles of orchid-perfumed fat.

MASTER LI: O soul, the food is ready.
Rice, broomcorn, early wheat mixed with millet,
Ribs of fatted ox, tender and succulent,
Stewed turtle and roast kid, served with sauce of yams,
Geese cooked in sour and bitter, casseroled duck,

fried flesh of the great crane,
Braised chicken, tortoise seethed in soup of Wu,
Fried honey cakes and malt-sugar sweetmeats,
And jadelike wine, honey-flavored, fills your cup,
Strained of impurities, cool and refreshing.

A tiny twinkling light appears high overhead, in the deepest shadows of the vaulted ceiling.

YU LAN: Hear the musicians take their places, O soul,
Set up bells, fasten the drums, sing the latest popular songs:
"Crossing the River," "Gathering Caltrops," and "The Sunny Bank."
Dancers await you, attired in spotted leopard skins.
Bells clash in their swaying frames, the zither's strings are swept,
Pi-pas and lutes rise in wild harmonies, the sounding drum sonorously rolls.

The shining light glows larger and brighter as it sinks down toward the dais, Master Li and Yu Lan guide it to the liver of the grand warden's wife, who has been observing all this with eyes like soup bowls.

Your household awaits you, O soul!
MASTER LI: } Lovers await you, O soul!
YU LAN: } Life awaits you, O soul!
Come back! Come back! Come back!

The light disappears and the shaman and shamanka ease the soul back into the patient's liver. Master Li doses her eyelids and has her lie back and softly tells her to sleep. Yu Lan steps to the front of the dais and speaks in the general direction of the grand warden, while still maintaining the distance of the Mysteries.

YU LAN: The sickness is gone. Life and love await, but forget not the Tao. Take great care in your sacrifices and prayers, for evil influences seek to return where once they have sported, and to the Three Venerables should be offered nine lengths of green embroidered silk. The Servants of Wu ask nothing, being content with the thrill of battle and the joy of triumph. Return now to the red dust of the world.

Doors are flung open, and sunlight pours in, and the audience stumbles out. The litter is carried back to the lady's bedchamber, while poppy fumes carry their thick sweet fragrance toward the clouds.

I picked myself up from the floor (I was lying beside the giggling bat) and gasped deep lungfuls of fresh air. Yu Lan and Master Li were pouring pitchers of water over their heads, and Yen Shih descended from his perch on the rafters, grunting and gasping and practicing eye-focus as he stretched his arms and legs.

"That went rather well, considering we didn't have time for a decent rehearsal," said Master Li.

"I've seen worse," Yen Shih said.

Yu Lan, as was her habit, made no comment. She walked out past me: silent, graceful, distant as a drifting cloud, secretly smiling.

"You see, Ox," said Master Li some time later as we were walking through the palace gardens, "to a shaman the identification of a medical problem and its appropriate treatment is merely the beginning. In this case the problem was easy to identify. It was tadpoles."

"Tadpoles?" I said.

"Precisely," he said. "You've had a rather unfortunate encounter with the grand warden, so perhaps you can sympathize with his bride. She's a bandit chief's daughter, my boy, practically born on horseback and happy out in the hills where she grew up, and here she is in a gloomy pile of stones where she's supposed to spend her time sewing and gossiping with maids. On top of that it's her duty to present her husband with children, and one can imagine what she thinks of that shifty-eyed cowardly creature as the father."

Master Li stopped at one of the decorative ponds in a courtyard close to a high gray wall, where a balcony ran beneath tall windows.

"Tadpoles," he said, pointing down at the green water. "One of the oldest of old wives' tales holds that a woman who swallows fourteen live tadpoles on the third day after menstruation, and ten more on the fourth, will not conceive for five years, so the poor young woman has been swallowing the creatures. They're harmless. What isn't harmless is the parasitic flatworms that transfer from the tadpoles to the swallower's stomach and make her sick as a yellow monkey. Yu Lan and I gave the lady a powerful vermifuge and forbade tadpoles until further notice, and since she's basically as healthy as a horse she's already recovered in a physical sense."

He thoughtfully regarded the tadpoles, and reached into a pocket and took out a small vial with a stopper in it.

"That," he said, "is where conventional medicine stops and shamanism begins. What good is it to cure the body when the real damage is to the spirit? Think of the humiliation to a bandit chief's daughter forced to swallow tadpoles, the destruction to her self-esteem! So Yu Lan and I—with the invaluable assistance of Yen Shih—made the lady feel she was the most important person in the whole world as the forces of good and evil battled for her soul. The final step to the cure is eliminating

the need for tadpoles, of course. She'll find the obvious solution to the problem of proper parenthood in due course, but no respectable shaman would take the chance of a relapse while she's figuring it out."

With that he removed the stopper from the vial and pulled out the front of my tunic and dumped a live scorpion down inside. Until an official disrobing contest is held in all the major provinces, the record belongs to me. I was out of my clothes and into the pond in three seconds flat.

"Wha-wha-wha—" I said, or something equally intelligent as I splashed scorpions away.

"Sorry, Ox. I assure you that I'd first removed the venom from the thing, and I thought it would be funny. I must be farther on the road to senility than the Celestial Master is. Dear me, dear me," he said as he sauntered happily away.

The pool turned out to be less than two feet deep, so I was not in a modest position as I tried to untangle my clothes and get them back on, and while I was trying to squeeze my left foot into my right sandal a very elegant footman appeared and informed me my presence was demanded inside. He turned me over to a maid who did a great deal of giggling as she led me upstairs, and I was ushered through elegant doors into a luxurious bedchamber with tall windows opening to a narrow balcony that overlooked a shallow pool where tadpoles swam, frolicking through the thongs of my missing left sandal.

"Tee-hee!" said the warden's wife.

That wasn't really her style, so she dropped the coyness and crooked a commanding finger.

"Come here, you," growled the bandit chief's daughter.

I subsequently learned that nine months later she gave birth to a son (thirteen pounds eleven ounces) and chose the milk name Liu Niu. The assumption was that she was thinking of a minor deity called Liu-hai, so the milk name meant "Lucky Calf," but if she happened to be thinking of another minor deity called Liu-lang the milk name means "Sexy Ox," and I will leave it at that.

10

When I passed the tadpole pond again that night I had Master Li riding on my back, and this time I slipped silently behind bushes and then began to climb. Away from us, at the drawbridge, trumpets were blaring and soldiers were standing at attention. The sage had wanted to get the matter of the grand warden's wife out of the way before we got down to serious business, and the timing couldn't have been more perfect, because Li the Cat was just entering in a sedan chair decorated with imperial dragons, escorted by the elite Wolf Regiment.

The climb was ridiculously easy. The huge stones that formed the wall were set irregularly, giving all the foot and handholds I needed, and it was possible to swing back and forth so I could reach the grand warden's private suite without once leaving the shelter of overhanging parapets and balconies. When I crawled up over the edge of the last balcony we could look through a window into the corridor and outer offices and see just where guards were stationed, and another window let us into the warden's private sanctuary.

"Why don't they hang out a sign: 'Rob Me!'" Master Li whispered disgustedly.

It got even better. There was a five-panel decorative screen in a shadowed area away from lamps and moonbeams, but still close to the low jade-covered conference table surrounded by silken sitting pillows, and a cabinet provided Master Li with a jar of excellent wine and me with a jar of the finest pickled seaweed I have ever tasted. We settled down to wait, and we didn't have to wait long. Within an hour the sounds of guards' boots clicking together and weapons being grounded announced the arrival of the grand warden, and it was only the warden and Li the Cat who entered, along with two servants, and when the servants had prepared a brazier and placed a pot on it for water to boil they bowed backward from the room and the door shut firmly behind them.

"I can't wait for the palate of a connoisseur to evaluate this batch," Li the Cat said unctuously. "To my taste it's an improvement of fifty percent at least, but I don't pretend to be an expert."

"Neither do I. I'm just facile with experts' clichés," the grand warden said with a mock bow, and they both laughed heartily.

Li the Cat opened his money belt and extracted a small round object that seemed to have the imperial seal stamped on it. It was pale green with light purple shadings, and apparently as hard as a hunk of wood. Master Li's fingers dug into my shoulder.

"Ox, that's Tribute Tea," he whispered. "How in hell did that slimy eunuch qualify for Tribute Tea?"

The question was rhetorical, of course, so I said nothing. The eunuch shaved thin pieces from the little hard cake with a silver knife, and the grand warden used a silver pestle to powder the shavings in a silver mortar. With great ceremony they passed the powder three times through a silver sieve, and then poured equal amounts into two wide, shallow *chien* saucers. The water in the pot (actually it's not a pot but a "soup bottle") was boiling, and the grand warden carefully poured it into the chiens. They briskly stirred with bamboo whisks. At first the liquid was white, then it turned bluish gray, and then bluish gold, and the aroma that reached my nostrils was the delicious subtle scent of tea of the very highest quality. They bowed to each other and raised the saucers to their lips and sipped, and then the warden grimaced and spat the stuff into the fire.

"It still tastes like camel piss," he said petulantly.

"Well, I didn't claim perfection, and it really does taste better," the eunuch protested. "Try another sip, and don't expect miracles."

The grand warden cautiously tried again, and this time kept it down.

"All right, it is a bit better," he said grudgingly. "It still wouldn't fool a baby, however."

"Who's in the business of fooling babies? We're fooling barbarians," the eunuch said with a chuckle. "Look at the uncompressed leaves and tell me there's something wrong with *them*!"

He extended some tiny things from his money belt, which the warden viewed admiringly.

"Buddha, that's marvelous. You used the same batch?"

"Exactly, and some of the worst of it at that. We have the technique down perfectly, and I'm now guaranteeing a success rate of ninety-five percent. How are things going at your end?" Li the Cat asked,

"Four more barbarian kings have expressed strong interest, two of them are certain customers," the grand warden said briskly. "The real market would be Rome, of course, but sea routes are very risky and every caravan runs the risk of capture by aspiring princes, who might send the stuff back to China as *tribute.* Can you imagine?"

Li the Cat shuddered. "Don't even think about such things," he said. "Any change in the basic sales tale?"

The grand warden shrugged. "Why change it? We have to explain how we got the merchandise, and the story of bandits capturing caravans and then discovering the cargo was intended for the emperor can't really be improved upon. My recent marriage into a bandit clan provides authenticity, and it's easy to explain that my illustrious father-in-law can't dispose of his loot inside the boundaries of civilization, and has to turn to me for outside markets. Let's not gild something that's glowing."

That was when matters changed dramatically. The warden had taken out a large map and they were starting to discuss routes and new markets when a high and shrill, but rather pretty sound, rang through the room. It was like the rapid tinkling of a small silver bell, and instantly both men were on their feet. The warden ran to the west wall and pulled aside a calligraphy scroll stretched on a bamboo frame, and behind it was the door of a safe. Then his back covered the view and I couldn't tell how he opened it, but when he turned again I had to suppress a loud exclamation. In his hands was an ancient cage, precisely like the other two, and the sound seemed to come from it. The warden trotted back to the table and set the cage down. Then I could see a tiny flickering light glowing in the center, pulsing to the bell sound, but the warden's shoulder blocked my view and I couldn't see what he was doing as he reached out to the front of the cage. The ringing of the bell stopped abruptly. The little glowing light expanded until it filled the cage, and then my eyes nearly popped from their sockets. Human features were forming inside the bars, and they resolved themselves into the face of a senior mandarin I had seen at the funeral of Ma Tuan Lin! Master Li's fingers were digging into my shoulder like knives, and wrinkles had screwed up so tightly around his eyes I wondered how he could see. Then the mouth of the mandarin opened, and we heard his voice as though he were right there in the room.

"Esteemed colleagues, an incredible development has taken place! Incredible!" he said so excitedly he was spraying spittle, and he made a visible effort to calm down. "All our hopes and dreams, the ultimate goals we have aspired to but despaired of attaining, may be in our grasp! I would never be believed should I explain it myself, and I am honored, I am awed, I am exalted to bring you the message from the source. Further introduction would be gross impertinence."

His image wavered and dissolved like a cloud breaking apart, and then the pieces began to re-form, and I smothered a yelp as an unmistakable face filled the cage. It was the Celestial Master.

"So you're the colleagues of this creature, eh?" the saint said softly. His face flushed and his voice raised to a roar. "You doltish donkeys! You emasculated earwigs! You idiotic apes whose sole talent is to make dinners of your own defecation! Stick the turd-stained tips of your fingers into your ears and dig out the dung beetles, because I am about to demonstrate the error of your half-witted ways!"

The grand warden was transfixed, but unfortunately Li the Cat was not. He was clawing at the warden's arm and pointing urgently at the door, and the warden grasped the simple fact that palaces breed eavesdroppers the way granaries breed rats, and he picked up the cage and ran with the eunuch to the south wall. They opened a small door and dove through, and the Celestial Master's furious roars abruptly stopped when the door slammed shut.

Master Li supplied corrosive words of his own as he bolted from behind the screen and ran to the door. It wouldn't budge, and when I bent down and peered through a tiny crack I could see that lock picks wouldn't be of any use. There was a heavy bar rammed through slots on the other side, and the only thing that would help would be a battering ram.

"We have to hear what the Celestial Master is up to," Master Li said grimly. "He's been too long away from the grimy affairs of the world, and he doesn't really understand how dangerous it is to try to trick men who stand to suffer the Thousand Cuts if they're caught. Ox, go back out the window."

He jumped up on my back and I vaulted out over the balcony and down the wall until we reached the level of the formal reception hall, which was really like a throne room with the grand warden's high gilded chair raised on a small dais that extended from the central tower. I haven't mentioned that the castle was constructed in the style called Pine Tree, with a stone tower in the center supporting floor beams that arched like branches to the outer walls.

"Ox, the passage they took seemed to lead in toward the tower, and almost all Pine Tree palaces use the tower for secret conference rooms, as well as the central source of light and air," the sage said.

He had me climb inside and race to the dais and pull tapestries aside on the wall behind the warden's chair. I found what he expected behind the third tapestry: a small lacquered door that opened to reveal a staircase winding up inside the circular walls. I took the steps two at a time, trusting that the Celestial Master would still be roaring loud enough to drown out the sound of sandals clattering over stone, but when we reached the level of the warden's office we found not one secret room, but two, and to reach the second we had to pass through the first. I sensed disaster the moment Master Li slipped down from my back and opened a gold-embossed door. He pointed ahead at a second gold-embossed door across from us and whispered, "If my orientation is right, they should be in there." I thought I could hear a faint voice that might belong to the Celestial Master, but I was more interested in the territory we would have to cross to reach it.

We had stepped upon an ermine carpet about four inches thick. The walls of the room were covered with velvet, and the centerpiece was an immense bed draped in satin, and all over the place were flattering portraits of the same creature. They

were portraits of the Snake, and I was not in a mood to compliment the warden on his cleverness at placing both conference room and catamite within easy reach of his office. I gulped noisily and tried to pretend I was invisible as I tiptoed over that carpet behind Master Li, but it didn't do me any good.

I stepped past a dragon screen and was instantly hit by a flying tree trunk, or something that felt like it. I think I may have still been sailing through the air when the Snake picked up Master Li and neatly stuffed him down inside an immense malachite urn. The velvet on the wall cushioned the crash as I hit it, and I picked myself up from ermine and dove toward a reptile who was making happy hissing sounds. Since I was being kind enough to lead with my head he kicked my chin from his left sandal to his right sandal and back to the left again, rather like playing with a child's bouncing ball, and as I hit the carpet I saw a strange rictus tug at his face. The Snake was smiling at good little Number Ten Ox who had come to entertain him by dying very slowly. The chop of the side of his hand was almost friendly, not hard enough to snap my neck in half. I managed to roll over and kick feebly, and it was clearer than ever that the Snake was playing with me when he let me regain my feet.

Behind him a wrinkled old hand had lifted from the mouth of the urn, holding a throwing knife. Master Li could move his arm only a few inches, so a throw was out of the question, but he could try to give it to me. The problem was getting past the Snake to reach it. All I could do was charge and pray, and I almost managed to lift him and spin him around. Unfortunately I was making him angry, and he hissed at me and stopped playing. The Snake's arms whipped up inside mine and broke my grip effortlessly, and then it was his turn. He wrapped me in a constrictor's embrace, squeezing with power that would turn my bones to jelly and while I still had breath I gasped, "Throw! Throw!"

I'd hoped for a distraction, and I got it. Master Li flipped the knife as well as he could, and it made one slow revolution in the air before it reached the Snake's back. It must have felt like the bite of an ant. He glanced behind him and saw the extended hand, and he was not pleased. Hissing rather loudly, he tried to get his balance to aim a full-force kick and see which would break into more pieces, the urn or the old man, and in the process he lessened pressure on me. I jerked back with everything I had and broke free, and then I grabbed his waist and almost snapped my spine as I lifted. His feet were clear of the carpet. I only had enough strength for one desperate move, and all I could do was try to bring his spine down on the sharp edge of a large marble table. I gave it all I had, but it wasn't enough. I knew I'd missed the moment I started the downward toss, and his back missed the edge and landed on the smooth flat surface. His cold reptilian eyes were staring straight at me, and there was no force left in my arm as I tried to chop his neck. The eyes didn't even bother to blink. My legs were numb, and I helplessly held to him as I began sliding backward, and the

eyes moved with me, cold, hard, without any emotion whatsoever, and then I fell to the floor and the Snake fell beside me.

He was lying on his side with his motionless reptile eyes still fixed on mine, and I finally realized I was staring at a minor miracle. Master Li's knife had stuck to him by no more than a fold of cloth and a tiny pinch of flesh, flopping harmlessly back and forth, but somehow it had flopped into exactly the right position as he descended to the tabletop. It had been driven into his back right up to the top of the handle, directly into his heart, and the Snake was stone-cold dead.

11

Master Li's eyes were incredulous as I peered down into the urn. "You're alive?"

"Sir," I said, "does any deity owe us a favor? If not, we'll have to go into bankruptcy buying incense for the pantheon."

I got him out without smashing the urn and he was able to hobble around quite well after I massaged his legs. He looked at the body of the Snake and shook his head wonderingly when I told what had happened, and then he pointed out a nasty aspect I hadn't got around to considering.

"There's no way this wound in the back can be made to look like an accident," he said. "We're faced with unpleasant complications no matter what, but the first step is a necessity. We have to make the corpse disappear."

I opened my mouth one or two times to make suggestions and then closed it again. The grand warden was going to pull apart the castle stone by stone, if need be, dig up every inch of dirt, drain the moat, and send divers down the wells, and when Master Li said we had to make the Snake disappear he meant *disappear*.

"Step one is to get him out of this revolting love nest, and that, at least, is easy," the old man said decisively.

I made two trips back down the stairs and then down the outer wall to the garden, one carrying Master Li and the other carrying the Snake. The corpse fit into a large wheelbarrow (an invention I have explained to barbarians in a previous memoir) and some burlap from manure sacks covered it. Then Master Li sprawled comfortably on top and I wheeled him out and past the guards while he hiccupped and waved his wine flask and sang bawdy songs, and the captain of the guards did no more than bow. After a battle like the one the old shaman had put on to save the grand warden's wife he was supposed to get stinking drunk, and nobody dreamed of interfering. I wheeled him to the puppeteer's wagon and left the wheelbarrow outside with the covered corpse still in it, certain that nobody was going to get close to the old man's conveyance. Nothing is more dangerous than a drunken shaman. Yen Shih greeted

us inside, which had very little space despite the size of the wagon because every inch was filled with puppeteering gear.

"We have a problem," said Master Li.

Yen Shih raised an eyebrow.

"There's a corpse in that wheelbarrow," said Master Li.

Yen Shih raised the other eyebrow.

"The corpse is that of the snakelike creature who damn near killed Ox, and we have to assume the grand warden will search every drop of water and mote of dust until he finds the son of a serpent," said Master Li.

Yen Shih nodded.

"I have precisely two ideas at the moment," Master Li said. "The first is to disguise the corpse as one of your larger mannequins."

Yen Shih pointed out at the moon and made revolving motions, indicating time passing, and then held his nose, indicating a bad smell.

"The second is to find some way to explain how a tiger managed to get past the moat and walls and eat the bastard," said Master Li.

Yen Shih shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands apart—how?

"We shall think," Master Li said, and his wrinkles contracted while Yen Shih gazed up at the canvas roof and hummed. Then he stopped humming.

"Tomorrow," the puppeteer said slowly, "the Grand Warden of Goose Gate has scheduled a great feast in honor of his wife's recovery."

"At which a tiger will eat the Snake?" said Master Li.

"At which the Grand Warden of Goose Gate will eat the Snake," said Yen Shih.

I thought that was weak humor, but Master Li didn't. In fact, he was regarding the puppeteer with vast admiration.

"My friend, you're a genius!" he cried.

"But he isn't being serious," I said. Then I looked at Yen Shih, and back to Master Li, and back to Yen Shih. "Are you?" I asked weakly.

I don't want to describe what happened next but I have no choice if I am to provide honest accounts of the cases of Master Li, so I will include a detail that will make me look even more foolish than usual. Throughout the next horrible hours my mind insisted upon clinging to a totally irrelevant image. An image I had acquired in the very first scene with which I began this narrative, and I haven't the slightest idea why it popped back up to lodge like a barnacle on my brain, but there it was. I kept seeing a despicable barbarian with a face of stone and eyes like icicles, squatting in squalor and scratching for lice in a place called the Sabine Hills, dipping his brush in viper venom to send his idiotic criticism all the way to China.

"All right, Flaccus," I said silently as I wheeled a huge load of fresh vegetables to the castle kitchens, "what would you have me do? Pretend there isn't a corpse beneath

the turnips, because corpses are excessively melodramatic? Bah, friend Flaccus! Bah! Bah! Bah!"

A great castle always has a small separate kitchen for the preparation of ceremonial dishes to be offered to ghosts or gods, and it was to be expected that a shaman would wish to offer to the gods who had aided him and invite his esteemed host to share the feast. Master Li had no difficulty commandeering the place, and in a few minutes he and Yen Shih had the corpse stretched out on the kitchen table and were cutting the clothes away. To tell the truth, I still didn't truly believe this was happening.

"Ox, would you see if they have any pigs' feet jelly?" the puppeteer asked. He turned to Master Li. "It seems to me that the thighs might best be marinated in a broth of pigs' feet mixed with honey and the lees of wine, and then baked inside a crust formed of the marinade thickened with peanut paste."

"A connoisseur!" said Master Li.

"Gllgghh!" I said.

"Ox, while you're at it, see if they have any pickled jellyfish skins!" Master Li called after me as I lurched into the larder. "I've discovered they go marvelously with bears' paws," he continued to Yen Shih. "Bears' paws taste to me like sixty percent glue, so jellyfish skins might be a good accompaniment to glutinous parts, like the soles of this bastard's feet, and perhaps the spermatic cords."

"Gllgghh!" I said.

One of the shelves yielded the pigs' feet, and in a cabinet I found a jar of jellyfish skins. When I started back toward the table Master Li was preparing to remove the top of the corpse's head with a saw, and Yen Shih was measuring fibula and tibia for ax strokes.

"You see, Flaccus, there is more to this world than the uncivilized can possibly imagine," I silently said. "For example—"

Whack! Whack! Whack!

"Gllgghh!"

"Yen Shih, shall we do the brains in a traditional turnip sauce, or would you prefer oyster broth?" Master Li shouted over the sound of the puppeteer's ax.

"You know, I rather favor poaching brains in coconut milk, if Ox can find any," Yen Shih said thoughtfully.

"Brilliant!" Master Li said admiringly. "Ox, see if they have any coconuts, and do you know why our erudite friend made the suggestion? Once upon a time, so the story goes, the great king of Nam Viet was stabbed by assassins, and he realized he was dying, so he pulled off his head and stuck it on a tree as his final gift to the people. The head turned into the coconut, and because the king was drunk at the time the fluid inside it is the most easily fermentable stuff on earth."

"Gllgghh!" I said.

"I shall again seek your invaluable advice before possibly ruining something," said Master Li. "Shall we keep the tongue whole, possibly baked inside a crust of walnut paste, or should we slice and sauté it with butter and garlic?"

"I'm a butter-and-garlic man," the puppeteer said. "Why don't we save the walnut paste for broiling the bastard's balls?"

"Splendid," said Master Li.

"Gllgghh!" I said.

Whack! Riiiip! Whack! Riiiip!

"Ox, would you extract the marrow from these?"

"Gllgghh-gllgghh-gllgghh!" I said.

"Don't bother, I'll do it. How about a casserole of toes and ears?"

"Maybe with breast meat added," Master Li said. "Stewed slowly with bean curd, fagara, red peppers, and a lot of mushrooms added at the end."

"Sounds marvelous," said Yen Shih. "We have time to make a few sausages, don't we?"

"Oh, certainly. Here, let's see what his intestines look like."

"Gllgghh!" I said.

"Ox, look for some of that mustard from the south that goes so well with sausages!" Yen Shih called out. "I once knew a fellow named Meng Kuan who claimed he bought mustard of Tan and took it home and forgot about it," he said to Master Li. "The stuff began to grow, and it sprouted a torso, a head, a tail, and four legs, and Meng Kuan swears it bit him and galloped out the door and he never saw it again."

"What was he drinking?"

"Paint remover, I assume. Speaking of which, is there some way we can disguise the features, yet leave it intact, and serve the grand warden crisp fried face of boyfriend?"

"Gllgghh!" I said.

I staggered back with mustard and a coconut. "You see, Flaccus," I silently said, "there are times when gentlemen must engage in activities which they normally—"

"Will you look at this fellow's kidneys and pancreas!"

"Gorgeous! And the liver!"

"Eggplant! Ox, we must have eggplant, tomatoes, onions, green peppers, and at least two kinds of squash!"

I dumped bones into cauldrons and boiled them for the broth, and then I pulverized them into a coarse gray powder that I mixed with meal and molasses to make tiny balls, and leaned from the far window and tossed the balls into the moat and watched fish snap at them. The Snake's clothing went up in flames. His unburnable possessions were melted beyond recognition before joining the bone balls, and drifted down through the water to the accompaniment of piscine burps

and belches. Not a trace of the creature remained, except for the succession of splendid dishes that were carried to the grand warden's table the following evening at the banquet. I lacked the social status to receive an invitation, of course, and so did Yen Shih, but Master Li and Yu Lan were guests of honor, and it was a great comfort for me to know that Yu Lan never ate meat. Master Li could eat anything, including "Twelve-Treasure Five-Taste Herb-Honeyed Unicorn," which was served to the grand warden as the dish of distinction. (Yen Shih and Master Li had boiled the Snake's buttocks in an infusion of hibiscus petals, and I had to admit it gave them a lovely shade of blushing pink.) As I said, I didn't attend, but I did hear satisfied comments from departing guests, including the assessment of two very exalted prelates.

"A bit rich for my taste, but quite well done," said the High Priest of Yen-men, and his Confucian counterpart put the seal on it.

"Singularly succulent comestibles."

"Gllgghh!" I said.

12

Master Li pleaded exhaustion, as did Yu Lan, and both excused themselves before the banquet ended in boring speeches. Yu Lan slipped away and put on boy's clothes for quick movement and blackened her face and hands with soot. She was preparing to help her father, and Master Li and I were perched on a small parapet on the castle wall looking down at the courtyard and the grand warden's chair in front of Yen Shih's wagon. The grand warden had not been able to pay proper attention to his food, Master Li told me, since he kept getting reports from search parties scouring the castle for the Snake, and it shouldn't be long before he'd get anxious enough to lead a party himself. That, said the sage, would give us our chance.

"Ox, we must get our hands on the warden's cage," Master Li said urgently. "Those incredible things can apparently project images and sounds across half of China, perhaps even farther, and if we can figure out how they work we may be able to contact the Celestial Master in time to prevent him from getting his throat cut."

"Would they dare?" I said in a shocked voice.

"From the excited words of the mandarin whose face first appeared, it's almost certain that the Celestial Master is playing some sort of game to lead them into indiscretion, but I doubt that he grasps the danger," he said grimly. "Mandarins in danger of losing money will do anything, and in this case they're also threatened with losing their hides."

I thought of people like Li the Cat and his servants Hog and Hyena and Jackal closing like rabid rats around the saintly old gentleman, and I shivered.

"Venerable Sir, have you ever heard of anything like those amazing cages?" I asked.

He chewed his scraggly beard thoughtfully.

"Not exactly," he said. "Su O in his *Tu Yang Tsa Pien* describes the Mirror of the Immortals he saw in the country of Lin. He said it was a crystal used by physicians, and when a patient stood in front of it he became transparent, so the physician

could examine the internal organs or find cracks in bones. Su O is not the most reliable of witnesses, of course, but in this case his story has been confirmed by a reputable source, the *Hsi Ching Tsa Chi*, which repeats the description with the additional information that the crystal is four feet wide and five feet nine inches tall. Su O also asserts there are smaller portable versions called Discerning Pearls, and that's as close to the cages as I can get. It seems to me that the operating principle of the one shouldn't be much different from that of the other, although I could be totally wrong."

I said we were looking down at the courtyard and Yen Shih's wagon, in front of which the banqueters were gathered, but I haven't yet described the wagon in detail. It was huge, and one whole side could be lowered to form a stage with sliding extensions to make it even larger. The canvas top also extended, and a loft ran from one end of the stage to the other. There Yen Shih practiced a craft that approached magic. The loft was a maze of wires and strings and gears and wheels and pulleys and pendulums, and the puppeteer leaped and bounded across bamboo rafters with the agility of a cat as one hand spun this and pulled that, and the other hand manipulated a tangle of wires so fine they were nearly invisible, and below on the stage the lead puppet soared in the leaps and whirls of the Dragon Dance while an entire chorus of puppets pirouetted in the background. (It is literally true that a deranged duke once had Yen Shih arrested for devising a puppet so lifelike it seduced Lady Wu, and only the intercession of the duke's mother prevented a great scandal.) A battery of bamboo tubes led down to various parts of the stage, through which the puppeteer projected the voices of the characters. In complicated plays Yu Lan would help out from below, hidden behind a screen, providing female and children's voices and manipulating scenery. Backdrops were painted on canvas panels that could be revolved to give four different views, and Yu Lan could do wonderful things with lanterns.

Master Li told me quite seriously that Yen Shih was the greatest puppeteer he had ever seen, and possibly the greatest who ever lived. I mention this in a fit of self-pity. This was the climax of the evening, and Yen Shih was to perform his masterpiece, and I was going to miss it.

A clash of cymbals brought a great cheer from the audience, and the curtains of the brightly lit stage pulled apart to reveal a famous set: the combined house and yamen of Magistrate Po on the left and the town brothel, Mother Hsien's House of Joy, on the right. An even louder cheer greeted the first two puppets, Fu-mo (straight man) and Fu-ching (comic) who would warm up the audience before joining the play as major characters. They traditionally swap fast lines that satirize local dignitaries and lampoon current scandals, uttering howls of mock outrage at each sally and bashing each other over the head with pig bladders. Much of the dialogue that drifted up to us meant nothing to me, but roars of laughter from the audience

indicated that Yen Shih had done his homework. Then Fu-mo and Fu-ching began establishing their own characters, bemoaning the fact that suspicious householders were resorting to locks and barred doors and fierce guard dogs, and gamekeepers were making poaching a dangerous occupation, and there were practically no purses to pick, and it had been a month since an easily fleeced simpleton had come to town. While this was going on I was trying to put a spell on the grand warden. "Stay, stay," I said silently. "Watch all of it before you start searching." Yu Lan was strumming the pi-pa chords, and tears filled my eyes when I heard the first lines of the most famous song in the civilized world, sung in a peasant accent so pure it practically reeked of mud and manure.

"I be a farmer, and damn proud of it,
For soft city slickers I don't give a shit.
Don't want to hear no opera star a-squawkin' through a role,
When I can listen to the toads back at my water hole!"

The voice was followed by the singer, and I actually began to cry when I saw the puppet. It was a rustic so close to the simple soil that he was barely one step up from a water buffalo. Every inflection, every slap of a sandal, every scratch at hair lice, every coarse gesture was so perfect that for a moment I could have sworn I was back in my beloved village, and homesickness swept over me like heavy surf. He carried the pig he was taking to market, and Fu-mo and Fu-ching were so stunned by this gift of the gods that they toppled over backward.

The incredibly complex plot of *Hayseed Hong* deals with the peasant's efforts to regain his pig from the two crooks, and in the process Yen Shih would use every puppet he had. I was settling back happily to watch when Master Li jabbed my ribs.

"Let's go," he said.

The grand warden, curse him, had left his chair and collected his bodyguards and was striding toward us, and I could do nothing but bend over so Master Li could climb on my back, and then I had to move around the corner of the parapet and lose sight of the greatest of all puppet plays performed by the greatest of puppeteers. Life can be very unfair.

The grand warden and his search party pounded down corridors and through rooms and closets while we followed their progress on the balconies outside. The damn place had more chambers than an anthill and it was slow going, but we had to be absolutely sure that we would be undisturbed when we went for the cage. The maddening thing from my point of view was that we kept crossing balconies with views of the wagon below. I would see scraps of action, as when Fu-mo and Fu-ching bought Hayseed Hong's prize pig with a rare priceless diamond from the frozen north

(Hayseed Hong, from the south, had never before seen a piece of ice), and then I had to move, and when I again got a glimpse of the stage the country bumpkin was on his way home and had decided to take out his diamond and admire it.

"Sheeeeeee-ut! The son of a bitch done pissed in my pocket and run away!"

Then I had to move away again, missing the part where the crooks greet the returning peasant with drugged wine and make off with all his clothes, and I just got a glimpse of Hayseed Hong as he toppled through a window into the bedchamber of the wife of Magistrate Po.

"Help! I am assaulted by a naked fiend!"

Magistrate Po, at another window, was admiring the moon in suitably Neo-Confucian fashion.

"Will you be quiet, woman? The superior man does not perceive lewd sounds or indecent spectacles."

Then I was out of sight and sound again, and around another tower, and then back to the glow of stage light.

"I am assaulted by a naked fiend who is not entirely bad-looking!"

"Woman, I must have quiet! The ears of the superior man are undefiled by unpleasant sounds, just as his kidneys and liver are purged of laziness and negligence, falsehood and depravity."

The grand warden had vanished, and I had to crawl through a window and tiptoe down hallways until we found him again. Then I had to race back and dive out to another balcony before his men could see us.

"I am assaulted by a naked fiend who is not entirely bad-looking and who appears to be hung like a horse!"

"Silence, woman! The superior man listens only to the correct chants, accompanied by flute and zither, so that the splendor of his complete virtue shall make the four seasons revolve in harmony and establish the right order of all things."

That was when one of those accidents that cause people to tie rocks around their necks and jump into wells occurred. The grand warden had disappeared again, and again I climbed through a window after him. When we spotted him he was just leading his men into the reception room, and Master Li grunted happily when he saw him open the door behind his thronelike chair and lead his men up the stairs. Now all we had to do was climb up outside his private quarters and wait for him to come in through the door that led from the central tower. Once he left we'd know he was through searching the areas we wanted. Master Li would have time to get that safe open, and if the cage wasn't there we'd be almost sure to find it in the conference room in the tower. I climbed out a side window to a small parapet divided by a large clay drainpipe, and eased around the drainpipe and started toward another window, and I just managed to jump back into dark shadows beside the pipe when a

soldier stuck his head out and leaned his elbows on the sill. He wasn't looking in my direction, but I couldn't move an inch so long as he stayed there.

"Of all the goddamn luck," he growled.

"Why complain? It's the kind of luck we always have, damn it to hell," a second voice snarled, and another soldier stuck his head out beside the first.

"You'd think that once, just once, we'd get guard duty on the good side," the first one said. "Can you imagine? Here we are looking at the moon, and what are the guys on duty on the other side looking at? *Hayseed Hong*, that's what, and we can't even hear it."

"So what? We'll hear *about* it, won't we? Over and over, everybody saying it was the greatest goddamn thing ever." The second soldier spat disgustedly, and then reached into his tunic. "Here. We deserve it."

I groaned inwardly. He had a goatskin wine flask in his hand, and it was a fair-sized one, and if they decided to keep on leaning on that windowsill in the moonlight….

They did, and there we stayed, and it seemed as though hours passed. The moon was moving in the wrong direction, and the shadow from the drainpipe was getting narrower and narrower, and when I looked down I found I couldn't get my sandals out of a small streak of pearl-white light. A few more minutes and Master Li was going to be faced with a very hard decision, because the only sure way to deal with the soldiers if they saw us would be to kill them. Fortunately he didn't have to do anything drastic. Relief made his voice tremble when they finally pitched the flask away and walked back through the room to the corridor.

"Let's go," he whispered. "If the safe has a simple lock we may still have time."

I hurried as fast as I could, and when I got back around to the south side a gale of laughter nearly knocked me off the wall. Looking down, I could see the wagon clearly, and the stage, and I realized we'd arrived toward the end of the first half of the play. *Hayseed Hong* is quite long and is broken into two parts with an intermission to allow the puppeteer to rest. The end of part one may well be the most famous scene in theater, and there isn't one line of dialogue even though it takes up a third of the first half.

The scene has shifted to Mother Hsien's House of Joy, where Fu-mo and Fu-ching have taken the stolen pig. Magistrate Po, who has run out of Confucian clichés long enough to grasp that something is going on with his wife, has arrived to search for her. She is pursuing Hayseed Hong, who is pursuing his pig, and the action takes place in a long corridor lined with doors on both sides.

Magistrate Po bends and peers through a keyhole. He recoils in horror, forearm across brow, other hand outflung, and as he does so another door opens behind him and Fu-mo and Fu-ching dash out carrying the pig. They race across the corridor and

dive through the opposite door, and Magistrate Po bends to the next keyhole. From the room the crooks just left comes Hayseed Hong, pursued by the magistrate's wife, followed by a customer who happens to be a pious bonze and is accompanied by a lovely young lady known as the Little Lost Chicken. Nobody has any clothes on, and the last two stand staring in the corridor with eyes like saucers while Hayseed and the lady dive through the opposite door. Magistrate Po recoils from his keyhole, forearm covering shocked eyes, and behind him a door opens and out they come, the crooks, the pig, Hayseed, and the magistrate's wife, followed by a pious Tao-shih and a young lady expeditiously named P'o-shen ("To Be Deflowered") who have no clothes on and whose eyes are like saucers. Customers and ladies remain in the hall while the magistrate bends to keyholes, and doors open and close, and people race back and forth, and gradually the corridor of Mother Hsien's House of Joy fills with every pompous, preaching, self-righteous type of gentleman in the empire, all of whom have no clothes on (except for identifying caps or hats), and all of whom will eventually join the chase for Hayseed Hong's pig.

I wanted to describe that scene with a bit of detail in order to explain the noise that hit us on the wall, bouncing back and forth from towers so we got echoes as well: laughter mixed with howls of recognition, and jeers and catcalls. It wasn't until I had climbed almost to the level of the grand warden's quarters that we could hear a different sort of sound, and even then it took a while to realize the screams weren't screams of laughter. Master Li sharply squeezed my shoulder, and I grabbed a pair of balusters and hauled us up so we could peer over the balcony through the tall window into the room where we had eavesdropped on Li the Cat. Just as I did so the grand warden came running right at us, but he didn't see us. His eyes were glazed with shock and terror, and he was screaming his head off, and I gulped hard when I saw what was following him.

Second of the sketches of demon-deities the Celestial Master had shown us had been *Chu-K'uang*, "mad dog," which had been depicted as a dog with no head, and here it was. The grand warden turned at the last moment and raced back into the room, and as the stalking beast turned to follow I got a close look. The head hadn't been cut off. Hair grew smoothly over a strong thick neck that ended in nothing. It was as though it had been born with no head, yet I was clearly hearing barking. How could it bark with no head?

For that matter, how could it bite and chew and rip and rend with no head? When I raised up a bit higher I could see farther into the room, and I was looking at the remains of the grand warden's bodyguards, who looked as though a tiger had ripped them to pieces. Blood was everywhere, lakes of it, and most of the dead men seemed to have had their throats ripped out. The barking was louder. The headless creature wasn't chasing the grand warden, I suddenly realized, it was *herding* the

grand warden, and it backed him against long thick curtains at another window, and the curtains pulled apart. I stared at a disembodied dog head, huge, mouth gaping, teeth dripping red, and then the head lunged and the teeth snapped together and the Grand Warden of Goose Gate departed the red dust of earth, very messily.

Something else was in the room. A dark shape was standing at the far window. It stepped into moonlight as it reached the sill, and it turned and looked right at us. Once more we were gazing at a creature that was half man and half ape, grotesque but unquestionably real, with a silver-gray forehead and bright blue cheeks and a crimson nose and a yellow chin. In its hand was the cage Master Li so badly wanted, and with one smooth movement it was over the windowsill and down the wall and gone.

A bright flash blinded me. My eyes slowly cleared, and I gazed around and there was no dog's body, and there was no dog's head, and howls of laughter were lifting to the sky where a great white crane was slowly flying away across the face of the moon.

13

Master Li had me haul him up over the balustrade and then he slipped down from my back and walked into the room, avoiding the blood as much as possible.

"Sir, the cage is already gone!" I said urgently. It felt strange to shout when I wanted to whisper, but the laughter from the courtyard below made whispering useless. "I can't possibly catch that creature! It goes down walls as fast as I can run on a flat field, and how can I fly up and catch a crane?"

"Ox, stop driveling," he snapped. "I know the cage is gone, but we're damn well going to get something out of this!"

He looked this way and that, standing on a dry patch of floor that remained like a narrow island in a sea of thick gooey red, and then he turned and pointed.

"Get those curtains. Spread them across the floor to the conference table so we won't leave sandal prints."

"Yes, sir."

I did as I was told, and the old man walked over a path of green damask dragons that looked quite pretty with the crimson background, silver moonbeams, and golden candlelight. At the low jade-patterned table he searched beneath the end where the tea brazier stood, examining every inch of the thick fur rug, and then he picked up some tiny things and grunted in satisfaction.

"When the bell sound announced a message coming from the cage, the grand warden and Li the Cat jumped like rabbits," he said. "I was almost sure the warden dropped something, and he did. Praise the gods for sloppy cleaning maids."

He had some shavings from that cake of tea and one of the uncompressed leaves, and he put them in a compartment of his money belt. His wrinkles were squeezing so tightly around his eyes that they resembled the pattern on the ball of one's thumb seen through the lens of a Fire Pearl, and as usual he was considering problems I wouldn't even see until it was too late to do anything about them.

"Murder is not easily dismissed if the victim is Grand Warden of Goose Gate,"

he said, thinking aloud. "Li the Cat won't be a problem. The slayings are grotesque and the cage is gone. He knows very well that two other mandarin accomplices have been impossibly murdered and robbed of cages, and his first instinct should be to get the hell out and hurry home and see that nothing weird is taking place with his own cage, or with the other members of the plot. The problem will be the senior members of the grand warden's staff, who must prove they're faithful and efficient if they hope for future appointment. They'll launch an investigation that will hold us here three months, and if we escape before the bodies are found they'll charge us with murder and send the whole army in pursuit."

The wrinkles squeezed tighter, and then relaxed as he came to a decision. He pointed and said, "It will have to be a tiger after all. Get that, and keep your sandals out of the blood."

The walls were partially covered with animal skins. One of them was from a large tiger, complete with head and paws, and the old man had me take it down and neatly cut off the paws, and then hang it back up so the mutilation was as unobtrusive as possible.

"Nobody looks closely at such things. The upper classes say, 'Ah, a tiger skin,' and leave it at that, and for every servant who says, 'Didn't that thing have paws?' there'll be two who'll say, 'You're crazy,'" Master Li said confidently.

He spread curtains until he had a path to the little door that led to the central tower, and he breathed a long sigh of relief to find the door unbarred on the inside and easily opened with a lock pick.

"Ox, dip those paws in blood and give us the clear tracks of a homicidal feline," he ordered. "Make it look as though the tiger ripped the curtains down while chasing men around the room, and plant prints over them. Don't forget bloody prints on the corpses, and work your way backward to this door. I'll return as fast as possible."

So I did as I was told, all the while wondering how on earth he planned to get away with it. Tigers don't swim moats and climb sheer stone walls and make their way through crowded courtyards and palaces, but I knew better than to say it was impossible. If Master Li thought it could be done, it could be done. I was able to cheer myself up with that thought, but I wouldn't then have believed how easy it was going to be and what an extraordinary turn of luck would come with it.

I was just admiring my handiwork when the little door to the central tower opened and there stood Master Li, as I expected, and someone else I most certainly did not expect. The old man had brought the bandit chief's daughter. She had not been considered well enough to attend a play that might last more than three hours, and her eyes widened as she saw the carnage. Then she hissed and reached into her robe and whipped out a very efficient-looking dagger, and the next thing I knew the point was pressed to my throat.

"Playmates should not be presumptuous," she snarled. "I granted you a few minutes in bed, not a claim to be warden of Yen-men!"

"Lady, great lady, Ox is strong but not *this* strong," Master Li said soothingly. "A monster who happens to be a friend of ours lost his temper, not Ox, and we thought it might be a good idea to blame it on a tiger. Pretty paw prints, aren't they?"

The point left my throat, but not very far. The widow's eyes were warily fixed on Master Li.

"It seemed to me, my lady, that a tiger would be useful in more ways than one," Master Li continued. "While treating you I have seen your amulet. You were born in the Year of the Tiger, and the gods are not necessarily subtle when they choose to make their will clear. Very possibly they wish you to wed another and breed heroes."

His voice was half shamanistic, half sage adviser, and for some reason the background of hysterical laughter from outside made the words seem weightier, not lighter.

"Now that you're all out of husbands," he said, "you'll be required to choose either pious Confucian widowhood or priestly dispensation and a second marriage like the first: a business alliance to advance your father's fortunes. There's nothing wrong with that, of course, if the bride is in a position to pick and choose among prospective grooms. Essential to that happy circumstance will be our clean and unchallenged departure."

I knew he had won when she put the dagger away, but I most certainly didn't expect her next words.

"I had not expected murder, but I will admit I saw the monster. When it climbed down the wall it came close by my window." Then she tossed the armload of bamboo on the fire, to coin a phrase. "The moonlight struck the garish face, which is, of course, unmistakable. It is dangerous for you to be a friend of Envy, but not, I think, dishonorable."

I might have said something foolish, but Master Li was close enough to kick me in the ankle.

"Ah, you know him!" he said with pleased surprise. "So few do. Except, of course, for the owners of the cages."

She ignored the baited hook and shook her head negatively. "I did not say I knew him. I have seen the ancient painting in my father's country and had the verses read to me, that's all. Now I must know more of what you have in mind," she said firmly.

So Master Li told her, and then I made gooey red tiger prints down the tower stairs and to various places including a passage known only to the young widow and a few senior ministers, and I suppose the story is now known in villages from here to the Sabine Hills: how a beautiful princess was married against her will and carried off to a loathsome country, and how a magical tiger opened the secret escape

passage that led from the bridegroom's castle (the doors were later found wide open, with bloody paw prints leading out) and massacred the unworthy fellow and all his men, and how the princess awakened to find upon her pillow one half of a marriage contract ripped in a peculiar pattern, with a bloodstained tiger paw on it, and how a great shaman read the yarrow leaves and explained that the princess when a child had been affianced to the Tiger Spirit by the ghost of her grandfather, and how her brief widowhood was ended with the appearance of a prince (whose mighty chest could not be seen because of all the medals) who had been born clutching a piece of parchment ripped in a peculiar pattern, and lo! it was half of a marriage contract stained by a tiger's paw….

It doesn't matter that the lady hasn't actually chosen the lucky fellow yet (at least I haven't heard of it), because not even her father dares cross tiger spirits. She has all the time she wishes to closely examine candidates. I hope she enjoys herself, and I think village storytellers, who are free to edit where historians are not, are wise to leave out the tadpoles.

We had no trouble. The grieving widow took charge of the whole works, bellowing orders right and left, and Neo-Confucians who were outraged at the presumption of a lowly female received white wooden calling cards marked with red tiger paws, and protests ceased. Yen Shih's wagon rolled freely across the drawbridge the following afternoon, with me on the seat beside the puppeteer. Master Li and Yu Lan followed on mules, laden with gifts, and soon we were back in the land of the bandit chief, following his daughter's directions.

❁ ❁ ❁

The bright sunlight seemed to be swallowed by a long slitlike mouth as we climbed down a narrow ravine. Cicadas were demonstrating why they're called "scissors grinders," and lizards with eyes of coral and agate and turquoise practiced push-ups as they watched Yu Lan study the area's *feng-shui* ("wind and water"). She was clearly disturbed by the totemistic arrangements of two piles of huge rocks.

"From your description the creature called Envy is strongly masculine, but this place is overpowering in yin influences, not yang," she said in a puzzled voice. "Instead of being proud and priapic the totems are humble and bent, and seem to have been planned that way, but why would a shrine to an ape man suggest crawling on one's knees in a female environment?"

Master Li rechecked the map the grand warden's wife had given him.

"This is the place. Unquestionably," he said. "Yen Shih?"

The puppeteer smiled and flicked a hand in an eloquent gesture of passing the cup. "My daughter is the expert, and I can offer only an instinctive reaction." The

gesture ended with the forefinger lifted toward the totems. "That doesn't strike me as being strictly symbolic or strictly representational, but something in between. Like primitive writing, for example."

Master Li grinned. "My friend, I'm beginning to think our minds move in lockstep," he said. "I'm guessing it's a pictograph; specifically, the pictograph of a mourner with bowed head kneeling beside a corpse, representing a word in the earliest Shang dynasty writing known to exist. The word is 'death.' Yu Lan?"

"Yes, it could be," she said. "Many goddesses are linked to the Land of Shadows, which would account for female emphasis in the geomancy. Still, that says nothing about a man with the face of a painted ape."

What I wanted to know was whether or not the death influence was aimed at us, but I managed to keep my mouth shut. We fanned out and began to search for the landmarks we had been given, mindful of the fact that the grand warden's widow hadn't been here for ten years and floods and rockslides could have altered things dramatically. She had been sure about a stretch of cliff marked with a white scar, however, and when I hacked through huge thistles I found myself staring right at it. The livid streak where shale had fallen from reddish rock was supposed to point almost straight to the entrance, and I yelled to the others and got a bigger stick and began beating a path through reeds. Inside ten minutes we found the small round opening in the side of the ravine, just as it had been described, and Yen Shih and I prepared to light the torches we'd brought. Then we discovered we didn't need them.

About fifteen feet inside the little cave was a natural chimney leading up to sunlight. The place was illuminated like a corridor in a gallery with wall carvings on both sides. Perhaps a third of the carvings were pictures, but the other two thirds were pictographs, and Master Li was enchanted.

"It's an early form of the Book of Odes!" he said delightedly. "Very close to the shamanistic sections called Nine Songs, but it tells a tale with a far different emphasis than anything found in later versions."

As the sage translated the old script a tale began to unfold that was very real in parts. This was the voice of a girl seduced by a god:

"His spirit came like a dense cloud descending,
Lit by a voice of blazing radiance:
'Beauty is destined to find its mate,
For who so fair should be without lovers?'
He came thus with sweet words, with no words he left,
Flying aloft, riding pure vapor, leaving below
A soiled skirt abandoned in billowing folds.

'Speedily, Lord, will I go with you!
Let me follow over K'ung-sang Mountain!
Let me see the teeming people of the Nine Lands!'
But my lord is riding the whirlwind, with cloud banners flying.
'I will wash your limbs in the Pool of Heaven!
I will dry your hair on the bank of Sunlight!
I will gather sweet flowers to weave wreaths for the one I love!'
Wildly I shout my song to the wind
And stand where I am, slowly twisting a spray of cassia."

The pictorial carvings had not fared so well as the crisply incised old script. Time had done its work, but enough remained to show the children born to the sad singer. If children they could be called, because they were the demon-deities described by the Celestial Master.

I caught my breath and instinctively stepped backward as I saw a little old man hurling fire, a murderous dancing master, and a disembodied dog head. But the subject of the verses wasn't eight monstrous children but the ninth one, the boy born human, whose only godlike attribute was his beauty. Master Li's eyes were sparkling as the verses followed the boy's growth and triumphs until as a young man he had become companion to a king. No hero could stand against the brave cavalier, no woman could resist him. He rode one day upon K'un-lun Mountain, where a great goddess was said to dwell, and this is his voice:

"Bamboo fragrance fills this lonely place,
Long-haired grass weeps dew.
Tall trees form a winding tunnel
To curtain the sun with red roses
Whose thorns catch at clouds.
Drunken reeds dance in the pool's mirror,
Sporting with sky shadows;
Dragon's eggs bubble and break upon the water—
Or is it fish spitting pearls?—
And in the depths the Lady lies on her sea-green pillow.
'Lady, don your coat of fig leaves and rabbit-floss girdle,
Climb to your kingdom in the folds of rocky peaks,
Come with rainbows for hair combs and eyes bright with laughter,
Resentful with idleness, seeking a dream—
O Lady of Lakes, Mistress of Mountains, seek me!'"

The cavalier has never been refused and he isn't now. Idle, bored, looking for amusement, a being who might send wise men racing for holes to hide in answers the presumptuous mortal:

In a carriage of lily-magnolia, banner of woven cassia,
Cloak of rock orchids, sash of asarums
Trimmed with three-blossomed iris,
She drives tawny leopards, leads great striped lynxes—
Thunder rolls and rumbles! Lightning splits the sky!
"I shall build a soft mountain bower
For a pretty boy, peach-flushed with pride.
With walls of iris, and purple stone the chamber,
Flowering pepper shall make the hall,
With beams of cassia, wild plum rafters, lily-tree lintel,
A room of lotus thatched with white flag,
And melilotus to make a screen.
Chrysanthemums strewn to make the floor sweet,
Sweet pollia, deer parsley,
Autumn orchids with leaves of green and purple stems,
And a thousand flowers shall fill the courtyard."

The cavalier becomes a favorite, as he has always been a favorite wherever he's been, and finally the goddess allows him to use her chariot to bring the Peaches of Immortality for a banquet. Driving the team of plunging dragons on the homeward journey, he passes Jupiter, around which spins the never-ceasing belt of skulls that measure Time.

Pearls of the moon seed the cavalier's headdress,
His tunic of rainbows brightens the sky;
Cape woven from comets, a belt of lost stars,
Shining bright in his scabbard is a shaft of the sun.
"He dies who dares not!" he cries to the time-star,
And his sword strikes a skull. "All rot who won't rise!"
The cavalier eats of the Peach of the Goddess,
And wins life as eternal as Heaven, or Hell.

The cavalier has been blinded by his envy of immortality, and when nature shudders in horror he sees a dance of delight. He has been deafened, and when the *chiao-ming* bird screeches its warning he hears paeans of joy. He has been maddened,

and would take his whip to any mere star that might stand in his path as he calls to the dragons to race faster.

Alone on the peak of her kingdom
Stands the Lady of Lakes and Mountains.
Billowing clouds kneel before her,
Gray and lowering,
Smothering silver moonbeams
While the Lady summons thunder
To rumble a path for her feet.
Tiger eyes lift to a streak in the sky;
Tiger teeth bare, tiger claws scrape,
Tiger screams reach out to jade dragons
Bucking in traces, leaping and rearing,
Tiger laughter greets a small figure
Turning over and over, through starlight and moonbeams,
Falling through sky to the mud of the earth.

The cavalier lands unhurt in a bog and makes his way down a path that takes him to one of the Lady's shrines. There he finds the fruits of his life with a goddess. In two boxes he finds two babies and two amulets with names on them. The boy is a twisted, shrunken, miserable little thing, and his amulet reads *Huai-I*, "Malice." The girl is beautiful but her eyes are frightening, and her amulet reads *Fmtj-lo*, "Madness." In a third box the cavalier finds a mirror and a third amulet, which reads *Cbi-tu*, "Envy." When he looks in the mirror he sees that the goddess has indeed given a handsome cavalier the face of Envy. He snatches up Malice and Madness and runs wildly into the woods, and his story abruptly ends with a very peculiar verse.

Blue raccoons are weeping blood
As shivering foxes die,
Owls that live a thousand years
Are laughing wildly.
A white dog barking at the moon
Is the corpses' chanticleer;
Upon its grave a gray ghost sings
The Song of a Cavalier.

We stepped back from the last inscription and looked at each other.

"Great Buddha, that sounded like a demented nursery rhyme," Yen Shih said.

"Either that or Li Ho with a horrible hangover," said Master Li.

He had insisted upon translating every word of text before continuing to the artifact the bandit chief's daughter had told us about. Now we squeezed through a narrow gap and turned sharply left to another chamber lit by a shaft of sunlight, and the usually imperturbable Yu Lan gasped, and I yelped.

We were looking at our burglar, painted upon a wall uncounted centuries ago, and still clear in most details. Around the ape man's neck was the amulet "Envy," and in his arms were the terrible children Malice and Madness. The head was bowed, and in a moment I learned why this place was sacred to yin and not yang. Master Li took my torch and lit it and swung it around to the black shadowed area opposite the transformed cavalier, and my liver turned to ice. Nobody moved or spoke. We were looking at a painting twice as large as that of Envy, and I have seen few things more frightening in my life.

"Envy had to be the most daring cavalier in history," Master Li said in an awed tone of voice. "This is Hsi Wang Mu, the great and terrible Lady-Queen of the West, as she was in her glory before we Chinese tried to domesticate her and ease her safely into the pantheon. No wonder the death totems stand outside. The lady is Patron of Pestilence, and her servants are the Ravens of Destruction."

Yu Lan was already on her knees performing the obeisances and kowtows, and Master Li joined her, and Yen Shih and I weren't far behind. We arose in silence, chilled by the image that looked back at us from the wall. The goddess was beautiful except for the fact that tiger teeth protruded from her mouth, and her hands ended in tiger claws, and her lower body reflected the water origin of all goddesses by ending in something like a dragon's tail, huge and scaly and shining and coiling. Her eyes had no knowledge of time, and no knowledge of weakness, and no knowledge of pity, and I thought I might almost be close to understanding the famous line by the great poet Master Li had mentioned, Li Ho: "If Heaven had feelings, Heaven too would grow old."

Master Li broke the spell by turning back to the transformed cavalier.

"Either he's still wandering around after three thousand years or Ox and I have seen the greatest impersonator in the world," he said. "One wonders what's happened to his charming children, and what he's trying to accomplish."

Yen Shih's eyes were burning as he looked at the painting. Burning with bitterness? I couldn't tell, but in his position I might be. Here was a once handsome cavalier given the face of a painted ape, and Yen Shih himself had surely been handsome before smallpox made him grotesque, and the Patron of Pestilence had mutilated both. Just as I was thinking that, the puppeteer reminded me he was an aristocrat, and aristocrats don't waste time with self-pity. A sudden sunrise smile brought beauty to a landscape of pockmarks.

"I can't speak for anyone else, but I find this delightful!" he said cheerfully. "Whenever I feel sorry for myself I can think of this happy fellow, and when nasty brats like Malice or Madness creep toward me I can put an arm around Yu Lan." His smile faded. "Speaking of which, this cannot be easy for her," he said softly. "As priestess of Wu she is servant to the Lady-Queen, and all the lady's servants live in terror of their mistress."

I hadn't realized that Yu Lan hadn't risen with the rest of us. She was still on her knees before the goddess, white-faced and still, and the puppeteer gently lifted his daughter and put an arm around her, and led her back out of the cave and into the sunlight.

14

Heat waves were twisting and distorting things, making it hard to get my bearings. I saw a lake beside our cottage and I knew it couldn't be real, and I squeezed my eyes tightly closed and opened them again, and the lake was gone but the cottage seemed to be floating three feet up in the air, shimmering and dissolving at the bottom.

"What are we going to do, Number Ten Ox?" said my mother.

My father was silent as usual, speaking through the tired slump of his body. I tried to remember: do about what? Something was wrong, I knew that, just as I knew that both my parents had been dead for years, but what was wrong?

My father had one of the cages in his hand. Then I realized it wasn't an ancient cage but a modern one, a simple bamboo birdcage, and it was filled with swallows, and he was standing on the bank of the river that runs past my village. Now I knew what was wrong. I looked up at the sky and saw there were no clouds, and I stepped up beside my father and looked down at the river.

The river was dry. I was staring at hard cracked earth and dying weeds and a few lizards, so how could my father offer swallows and pray for rain? Every year swallows turn into oysters and back again (the exact date is listed in the Imperial Almanac), and oysters are the favorite food of *lung* dragons, but the dragons who control water had either fled or tunneled deep underground, and I knew without asking that the wells had run dry.

"What are we going to do, Number Ten Ox?" my mother said again.

Behind me someone was weeping softly, and I turned and saw Auntie Hua holding an armload of paper boats. I knew it must be the fifth day of the fifth moon, Dragon Boat day, when real boats race and paper boats called *chu* would carry away the pestilence that comes with hot weather, but if there was no water how could the boats sail? Uncle Nung stood beside the old lady, twisting his hands together, his face taut with fear, and I thought I heard the bells from the monastery on the hill sounding the alarm, so I began to run toward them. Heat waves lifted around me

like a dense cloud. The sound was changing, growing higher and shriller not from the mouths of bells, but from the mouths of excited children.

The heat waves blew away and I was looking at something that hadn't dried up, a patch of green grass upon which children played. There were seven children with linked hands dancing in a circle around an eighth child, and all eight were extraordinarily ugly: squat stunted bodies that supported grotesquely large heads; features badly out of proportion. Someone was accompanying on a lute as they sang a nonsense game song, high and shrill.

"Goat, goat, jump the wall,
Grab some grass to feed your mother;
If she's not in field or stall,
Feed it to your hungry brothers.
One…two…three…four…five…six…seven…eight!"

At the count of eight the child in the center jerked up a handful of grass and charged, low and mean, and I decided it was a variation of Hog on a Hill, which is not for the timid. The children forming the wall seemed to be limited to kicking, butting, and smothering with massed bodies, but the goat was free to use hands and teeth and anything else he could think of, and it was a grand melee. Eventually the goat broke through and the other children raced away, shrieking with laughter. When the goat gave chase I assumed the child he caught would become the next goat, but I lost interest in them when I saw the musician who had accompanied their song.

Yu Lan was carrying one of the ancient cages, strumming the bars like strings, and a bright flash made me stop and blink, and when my eyes cleared the beautiful shamanka lifted her right hand and touched her left eyebrow, her right eyebrow, and the tip of her nose—one flowing movement—and then nodded to me, and I realized I was to mimic her. I made the same ritualistic gesture. Yu Lan smiled, her hand lifted, and she opened the clenched fingers as though showing me a treasure: a tiny metal object something like a pitchfork, but it had only two prongs.

I found myself walking up to her, very close. Slowly she lifted the little thing to her lips and blew between the tines and a cool breeze reached out to me. Lovely soft mist closed around both of us, a tiny drizzle pattered down, rainbows formed, the scent of wet grass and earth and flowers was strong enough to walk on. The generating yin influences were so powerful that I had no choice but to reach out to Yu Lan, gently wrap my arms around her, whisper her name; the puppeteer's daughter stood very still, and then lifted her lips to mine.

❁ ❁ ❁

"This is horribly humiliating," I said.

"Oh, I don't know," Master Li said. "You have an extra pair of trousers and there's much to be said for wet dreams. Most men meet a far better class of women that way, and the financial savings are immense. Besides, you have such *good* dreams. Are you positive you've never heard that children's song before?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "I've heard songs like it all my life, but not that one."

"Your ear is a good one," he said matter-of-factly. "Most people inventing fight songs for children use words about fighting. Real rhymes don't mention the subject at all, and stick to things like goats, grass, mothers, and brothers. Were you aware of the fact that those children looked amazingly like the statues of aboriginal gods you saw on Hortensia Island, outside the Yu?"

I hadn't been aware of it, but now I realized he was right, although I couldn't see why my sleeping mind would turn contorted statues into cavorting children.

"It's scarcely a mystery why your dream began with drought, but something I can't quite put my finger on intrigues me," he said. "Let me know if you go courting in dreamland again."

What he meant about my dreams beginning with drought was that we were traveling through one. Everywhere we looked we saw peasants deepening wells and trying to save every drop from drying streams. Not a cloud touched the sky, and the heat was oppressive, and bonzes and Tao-shihs worked day and night at rain prayers and charms. When Yu Lan was summoned at night it was almost always to work a rain ceremony. We heard from travelers that conditions were similar where they came from, and if anything it got drier and hotter the closer we came to Peking.

Along the way Master Li acquired alchemists' drugs and equipment and a bale of horrible cheap tea and began experimenting with techniques that might turn contemptible *ta-cha* into *choo-cha* perfect enough to please an emperor, and one night when we'd pitched camp he cried, "Gather around, my children, and I will show thee a miracle!"

Yen Shih placed a grate over the cooking fire as Master Li directed and Yu Lan got out the largest frying pan. The tea leaves Master Li piled on a table were really awful, large and coarse and ragged, and the smell was equally unappetizing. Master Li heated the pan, tossed tea leaves in it, and added small amounts of yellow powder.

"Tamarind," he said. "It's from the fruit of a large tree with astringent seeds rich in tartaric acid and potash, and it costs a fortune. However only minuscule amounts are necessary. The name is Arabic and means 'Indian date,' which is odd because the tree is neither Arabic nor Indian and must be imported all the way from Egypt."

He had Yu Lan toss the leaves and tamarind powder in the hot pan while he poured stuff from two jars into a mortar.

"Prussiate of iron and sulphate of lime," he said. "See the prussiate change color?"

The blue was turning lighter as he blended the elements with a pestle, with subtle hints of green and purple. Meanwhile, the leaves in Yu Lan's pan were blending with tamarind and changing from ugly black to lovely yellowish orange. When the blue color was very pale Master Li dumped his mixture into the pan and took over from Yu Lan, stirring and shaking vigorously, and something very dramatic began to happen.

"I'll be damned!" Yen Shih exclaimed.

Those miserable leaves were turning green, just like real hyson. What's more, the smell that rose from the pan was beginning to be delicious, and then I stared at the most amazing thing of all. Real before-the-rains, the finest early-spring tea leaves, are very delicate and must be carefully rolled and twisted by hand, and these leaves were doing that by themselves! The coarse shapes became graceful as the leaves rolled and tightened, the frayed edges vanished, and we were looking at perfect tea of the highest possible quality. Fit for an emperor, which was precisely the point.

"In appearance and smell it's perfect Tribute Tea," Master Li said happily. "Actually the only flaw is that it's too perfect: uniformly bluish green, whereas the real thing would have faint yellowish imperfections. For purposes of transport it would be molded into little cakes and stamped with the imperial seal, like the stuff the mandarins are selling to gullible barbarians, and they can turn it out by the ton. I would estimate the profit margin at ten thousand percent. What a lovely racket!"

The taste was another matter. We boiled a pot of water and tried it and promptly spat it out. It was awful, and Master Li said the mandarins had to be adding a certain percentage of decent tea to make it drinkable.

The steam from my saucer swirled upward, distorting images, and I thought Yen Shih was glaring angrily at me, but I blew steam until his ravaged face was clear and all he was doing was grimacing at the tea taste. Yu Lan began putting things away: silent, graceful, distant as a drifting cloud, secretly smiling.

❁ ❁ ❁

Heat waves were twisting my village as though it were made from soft wax, and laughter was rising on all sides—harsh laughter, hard laughter, forced laughter—and I looked through a gap between cottages and saw the abbot of our monastery gazing toward something. His eyes were pitying and his face was sad. I ran forward until I could see the central lane, and there was my mother laughing and my father trying to. Everybody was trying to. A wedding procession was just ahead, and my heart sank to my sandals. "Laughing at the Dog" is the last resort in time of drought. If sending swallows to water dragons and putting the statues of our Place Gods out in the hot sun doesn't work the only thing left is to fit out a bridal procession complete with flower-decorated cart and gongs and bells and drums, except the bride is a dog. A

bitch dressed in a girl's wedding dress, and everybody points and laughs and makes a lot of noise, and maybe that will cause the Little Boy of the Clouds to look down at the silly sight and laugh until he cries, and his tears are rain.

I walked forward toward my parents but the heat waves were back again, swirling like clouds, and I couldn't see anything clearly. The laughter was getting shriller and higher. I saw something moving in a circle, and then I realized I wasn't looking at dancers around a wedding cart, and it wasn't laughter I was listening to.

"Goat, goat, jump the wall,
Grab some grass to feed your mother;
If she's not in field or stall,
Feed it to your hungry brothers.
One…two…three…four…five…six…seven…eight!"

I came through heat waves in time to see the goat break free and run after the other children. The lute that had accompanied them still played. I turned toward the sound and walked through more heat waves. A sudden flashing light blinded me, and when my eyes cleared I saw Yu Lan standing with a cage in her hand. She lifted the other hand in the ritual gesture and I imitated her: left eyebrow, right eyebrow, tip of nose. The shamanka's fingers opened and I saw another little two-pronged pitchfork. This time she didn't raise it to her lips. She looked somberly at me and turned and walked toward the low stone wall around a well, and then she pointed to a huge bucket attached to a windlass. Her gestures made it clear that I must take both of us down inside the well.

The bucket was just big enough. I released the rope and lowered us slowly down into darkness. The windlass was creaking loudly, but the rope was thick and strong. I could see a pattern carved on the walls: frogs circling around and around, head to tail. A terrible odor was lifting from below. It was the reek of rotting flesh, and something down there was growling like muted thunder. I tried to tell Yu Lan we must go back, but she pointed firmly downward.

I kept lowering the bucket. Yu Lan was looking hard at the walls, straining to see in the faint light from above. Now I could bear a bubbling sound below us, and the air was so hot we might have been in an oven, and again a low murderous growl reached up to us. The stench was almost unbearable.

Yu Lan touched my shoulder and pointed. I saw a large dark circle on the wall, but I couldn't reach it. I began rocking, swinging the bucket, hauling back and forth on the rope. We swung in wider and wider arcs. My hands were covered with sweat and I was terrified that the rope might slip through them and send us tumbling down to whatever was waiting below. I held on, though, rocking farther and farther, and

finally my left hand could reach out to the circle. It was a hole in the wall. The third time I swung to it I caught a projecting rock, and I was able to haul us right to the edge, Yu Lan lithely swung up and into a narrow tunnel, and I followed her after tying the bucket to the rock.

The shamanka led the way toward a soft glowing light. It was a chamber that had a floor of moss like a thick soft carpet, and holes high up in the ceiling that let sunlight in. The puppeteer's daughter smiled at me and lifted her hand to her lips. She blew between the two prongs of the tiny pitchfork and the healing and generating power of yin filled the chamber, mist and pattering raindrops and rainbows, and Yu Lan stepped into the circle of my arms.

❁ ❁ ❁

"Peculiarly lascivious," Master Li said, lingering lovingly on "lascivious." "The fact that sex is women's business is recognized in the yin metaphor we use for it, 'clouds and rain,' which accounts for the mist and rainbows, but then you wake up—and clean up—and do you really have to turn the color of a ripe tomato and get your tongue entangled in baling twine every time Yu Lan walks past?"

"I can't help it," I said miserably. "I know it's ridiculous but I can't help it."

"How about jumping like a frightened rabbit every time her father looks your way?"

"Put yourself in my position!" I yelped.

"How can I? I haven't played the cloud-rain game since I was ninety."

The sage sauntered off to collect his wine jar, whistling "In Youth Did Beauties Seek My Bed, but an Old Man is a Bedful of Bones," and I gathered up an armload of rushes to use for towels and rolled over and went back to sleep.

The terrible drought had showed no signs of slackening by the time we reached Peking. The city was stifling in heat and choking in the acrid red brick dust it's famous for, and in addition the sky was thick with Yellow Wind, meaning clouds of fine yellow sand blowing in from Mongolian deserts. Usually the sandstorms are over by the fourth moon, but when Yen Shih's wagon rolled through the gates on the evening of the second day of the fifth moon the wheels scraped furrows through a hard grainy yellow blanket, and the wind against the canvas was making hissing sounds like cats warming up for a fight.

Master Li arranged for Yen Shih to meet us the following morning on Hortensia Island, and then the puppeteer and his daughter turned the wagon toward their house. I rented a palanquin and proceeded with the sage to the house of the Celestial Master, and we arrived just as drums announced the closing of the gates to the Forbidden City, which was sparkling like a jeweled crown in the light of sunset. We

were admitted at once, but at the door to the saint's study our way was blocked by an old woman who had served the Celestial Master for years.

"He is not well today," she said. Her face was worried and tired. "He has great energy, but something is wrong, and I must beg you to come back tomorrow. He usually gets better after he sleeps."

The study door was partially ajar and I could hear the Celestial Master inside talking to somebody, using archaic formal language almost like a priestly chant, and from what little I knew about him that wasn't his style at all.

"If it continues to feel ill," the Celestial Master was intoning, grandly and resonantly, "anoint it with clarified fat of the leg of a snow leopard. Give it drink from eggshells of the throstle thrush filled with juice of the custard apple, in which are three pinches of shredded rhinoceros horn. Apply piebald leeches, and if it still succumbs remember that no creature is immortal and you too must die."

The door opened. I had a brief glimpse of the saint standing beside his desk, eyes closed, hands out as in a blessing, and then the door closed behind a young servant girl who was carrying a small dog on a silken pillow. The dog was clearly sick, panting weakly, and the girl was so concerned with it she didn't even see us. She had a plain, simpleminded sort of face, and I would have bet anything she made her own slippers: a pattern of pink chipmunks hopping through yellow flowers.

"Does your master get like that often?" Master Li asked the old woman.

"No, Venerable Sir. Only now and then, but then he rests and he's his old self again."

"We'll call again tomorrow," Master Li said, and he turned and led the way back outside.

Riding back in the palanquin was like swimming through a sea of fantastic colors—sandstorms are glorious when it comes to sunsets—and Master Li's face was changing from gold to vermilion to purple to pink, while deep furrows of worry made black jagged lines across the palette.

"I fear for my dear old teacher," he said. "Let's not forget that he somehow tricked a mandarin who had one of the cages, and used the thing to give a tongue-lashing to the others. Those fellows are dangerous. If his mind wandered off on a side trip when he was dealing with them we could all be in bad trouble, and we'd best get the bastards behind bars as fast as possible."

"Sir, don't you have enough already?" I asked. "We know about the cave, and now you know how they're counterfeiting Tribute Tea."

"We also know that the top man is Li the Cat, and he has enough power to make a cave beneath Coal Hill disappear," Master Li said grimly. "He can hold up an investigation for six months, during which time every single witness against him, including us, will drop dead from mysterious diseases. No, our next step must be to

identify the remaining mandarins of the conspiracy, find the weak link, and force him to testify against the others."

He flung his hands apart and gazed up toward the stars.

"But, damn it, the mandarins' affairs aren't *important*," he said in a frustrated tone of voice. "It's those cages, and the creatures that seem to be associated with them, and a burglar that may or may not be a cavalier transformed into Envy. If only the Celestial Master could regain full mental control! Nobody knows more about the gods and demons of three thousand years ago, and he'd get to the bottom of it if anyone could."

We'd reached Heaven's Bridge at the junction of the Street of Eyes and the Alley of Flies, and Master Li had the palanquin bearers let us out at the Wineshop of One-Eyed Wong. He hired a few slinky people to trace the whereabouts of Ho Chang-yu, the mandarin whose image had appeared in the cage before that of the Celestial Master, and in two hours we learned that the mandarin had journeyed to the imperial palace in Ch'ang-an and wasn't due back for a day or two. After eating dinner we made our way to the shack in the alley, and this time Grandmother Ming didn't greet us with screams about big monkeys. Both of us slept soundly, but I would have preferred to sleep fitfully, dreaming of Yu Lan.

15

Just after dawn on the third day of the fifth moon, when the Yellow Wind had temporarily ceased and the sky was clear pale blue, fingers of sunlight reached across the water of North Lake and crawled across the stern of our rowboat as we splashed toward Hortensia Island, and I was astonished to see that already the first heat waves were wriggling like transparent lizards on top of the looming crag that housed the Yu. It was going to be another scorcher, but as I tied to the dock my heart lifted. Yen Shih was already there, and he had torches with him as Master Li had requested.

"It seemed to me that you'd been cheated," Master Li said cheerfully to the puppeteer. "Ox and I witnessed all the excitement at the grand warden's palace while you were stuck with a stageful of puppets, so with any luck you'll get some action today."

"How delightful," Yen Shih said, and it sounded as though he meant it.

"I should have thought of this before," the old man said ruefully. "We need a list of the mandarins and other eminent gentlemen connected to the tea ring, and I also need every bit of information I can find about the peculiar cages Ox and I have described. The key may be the man who apparently found the cages, the late Ma Tuan Lin."

We were making our way down the path toward the place where that gentleman met his end, and Master Li pointed in the direction of the pavilion.

"Ox and I discovered all that was of interest in his island retreat, and I've had his house and office searched, as well as his country estate. I thought we'd reached a blank wall, but now I'm not so sure. Ever hear of Ma before this mess?"

"The honor was never mine," Yen Shih said.

"You were lucky," said Master Li. "To know Ma was to invite ulcers. He was one of those scholars blessed with a marvelous memory, one talent—in his case, a gift for languages—and absolutely no brains or judgment whatsoever. His linguistic skills brought him into the Interior Ministry as an expert on our minority populations, and it is no exaggeration to say that Ma Tuan Lin soon became a living legend."

Master Li seemed to feel a peculiar admiration for the late mandarin, whose career had been amazingly consistent.

"His first post was administrator to the Hu Peh. He arrived during a flu epidemic, during which time that remarkably hygienic tribe fashioned and wore gauze masks," Master Li said. "His official report stated that his subjects were like human beings except they had nothing but blank spaces between nose and chin, their mouths, he surmised, being placed on top of their heads. He was rewarded by promotion to the land of the Kuang Tung, and it was their ghastly luck that he arrived as they were celebrating their Creation Myth. The official report stated that they would require neither arable fields nor fishing rights, since they existed by eating mud."

"Sounds like a delightful fellow," Yen Shih said wryly.

"He got better," said Master Li. "Ma Tuan Lin was promoted to oversee the Chiao, which led to the massacre of uncounted bewildered grandmothers when he accepted as literal truth a tale designed to make youngsters behave, and reported that the old ladies of the tribe turned into bats at night and flew around devouring the brains of Chinese children. They promoted him to Hainan, and he arrived on the island during a full moon, and one can imagine what moonlight did to Ma Tuan Lin. His official report stated that the girls were actually mermaids who wept pearls instead of tears, so legions of unsavory gentlemen set sail for Hainan to grab girls and make them cry, and I don't want to go into the disgusting details."

Master Li had come in sight of the pavilion, and he stopped and waved his hand at it.

"My point is that Ma's fellow conspirators would scarcely trust a man like that with important documents. My guess is that he was still useful to them, so rather than slit his throat they made sure that he worked on anything connected to the scheme—and that includes the cages—in a place *they* supervised. His pavilion was right beside the tunnel, giving him ready access to the cave beneath Coal Hill, and that, I'm willing to bet, is where they gave him an office and had somebody search him for sensitive papers before he left."

"So we're going back into the cave, to find and search Ma Tuan Lin's office?" Yen Shih asked.

"Precisely."

The puppeteer didn't say anything, but those little lights were dancing deep inside his eyes. I helped him reopen a hole in the weeds covering the tunnel entrance, and we stopped just inside and lit our torches. So far as I could see the tunnel hadn't been used since the last time we'd been there, and the evidence was fairly good because white dust still covered the ground in the area where something had been chipped from the wall and we saw no fresh sandal prints. We descended to the path beneath the lake. All I heard was the ominous drip-drop of water trickling from the roof, and the rapid

thudding of my heart. The path began to rise toward Coal Hill. As we got close to the cave I heard a sound that resolved itself into laughter, and it was the laughter of men who had triumphed over the problems men are heir to by reverting to bestiality. I can't describe it. Either one knows that sound or one doesn't. We extinguished our torches. As we got closer the laughter got louder, and when we peered into the cavern we saw ten men at a table eating a breakfast of roast meat. Dog bones littered the floor at their feet, and dog grease dripped down their jowls, and they roared with mirth as they swapped one stale dirty story after another. The three leaders were all too familiar: Hog, Hyena, and Jackal, who had brutally murdered the little clerk, and I took note of the fact that all the men wore daggers, and there were three crossbows propped against the table beside the leaders.

They were too occupied with greasy dog meat and greasier jokes to notice much else. Master Li promptly slipped into the cave and began crawling between stacks of packing cases, and Yen Shih and I followed him to the back wall. He changed position several times, scanning the ceiling and angles of the walls to judge the acoustics, and then he whispered to us to gather pebbles and take positions where we could throw them through deep shadows back through the tunnel entrance. At his signal the puppeteer and I pitched pebbles, and the rattling sound made the men jerk their heads up and turn their eyes toward the tunnel.

Master Li had his hands cupped around his mouth. He's tried to teach me how to do it many times, but I have no talent for such things, even though I realize ninety percent of it is getting the listener's attention focused on the place the sound is supposed to come from. The effect was really remarkable. A high quavering voice seemed to drift from the blackness of the tunnel, a voice I remembered well.

"Give… me…back…my…eeeeears," wailed the ghostly voice of the murdered clerk.

The thugs sat frozen, dog legs and haunches half crunched between their teeth. Hyena spat meat onto the table and turned to Hog.

"That was Cricket, sure as you're born," he whispered.

One of the other thugs jumped to his feet, spilling a wine jar and knocking a platter to the floor.

"Cricket? Cricket? But you said you'd killed the miserable little bastard!" he squealed.

"Give… me…back…my…nooooooose."

Jackal stood up, white-faced, clutching his dagger.

"That's Cricket's ghost," he said flatly. "The little insect's come back to haunt us."

The other thugs were standing now, looking at each other for support. Only Hog remained seated as before, at the head of the table, gnawing on a bone.

"Ghost? Your mama raised you better than that," he sneered. "Don't you know a dead person's got to stay in Hell three years before he can return in ghost form?"

"Then what the hell was that!" Jackal shouted.

"Give…me…back…my…eeeeeeeeyes."

"That's Cricket. His *hun* soul got lost," Hyena whispered. "Can't you hear? It's searching for its body, except we cut those parts away."

"Why couldn't you have strangled the bastard!" one of the thugs shouted.

"Hun soul, hun soul," Hog sneered. He made a show of dignity as he slowly got to his feet and picked up his crossbow. "Listen, you ignorant turds, the hun soul lives in the liver and we didn't touch Cricket's liver. I chopped out the bastard's *lungs*, not liver, and it's the *lower* soul that lives in the lungs, and if you think I'm scared of the *po* soul of an insect like Cricket—"

"Give…me…back…my…luuuuuuuungs."

Hyena and Jackal were slinking away, but Hog halted them and rallied the troops.

"Alive or dead, Cricket don't have the guts of a sparrow!" he yelled. "Come on, boys, let's give that turd something to moan about!"

He charged to the tunnel entrance, scooping up a torch from a bracket on the wall, and after a moment of indecision Hyena and Jackal and the other thugs followed the leader, whooping and cursing to keep their spirits up, whacking the air with daggers. They disappeared down the tunnel shouting, "Show yourself, you coward!" and "I'll chase your worm-eaten soul halfway to Tibet!" The snap-whang of a crossbow suggested that imagination was providing images to shoot at, and Master Li grunted with satisfaction as he trotted out and started across the cave to the door in the back wall.

"I'll be surprised if they don't keep going until they reach the island, and then they should spend an hour or two hacking holes in underbrush," he said contentedly.

The alchemy laboratory seemed unchanged, but Master Li wasn't interested in it now. He continued back to another door at the rear, and when he opened it we were looking at a long corridor with little alcoves for offices on both sides.

"Ox, Yen Shih, I knew Ma Tuan Lin and how he worked, so I'll do the searching," Master Li said. "Go back to the main cavern and keep watch—not that I expect our friends to return before I'm done."

He was right and wrong at the same time. The puppeteer and I were standing in the center of the room looking at packing cases ten or fifteen minutes later, secure in the knowledge that we'd get plenty of warning from the thugs' voices and footsteps and torchlight, when a sharp clicking sound was followed by the tread of feet, and before we had time to hide a whole new pack of thugs marched out from a doorway we hadn't seen, concealed in a corner behind cases, and stopped in their tracks and stared at us. They were every bit as nasty as the others, and the leader flushed with anger mixed with bloodlust and opened his mouth to yell to his men, and then he gurgled and clutched at his throat and slumped to the floor.

Yen Shih had whipped up a crossbow left leaning against the table, cocked, aimed, and fired so quickly that I hadn't had time to move. There weren't any more bolts for the bow, so the puppeteer hurled it at another thug and grabbed his torch in one hand and his knife in the other. By then I'd snatched my own torch to use as a club, and then the thugs were on us.

I'm better with a club than a weapon that requires skill, and I bashed and battered quite effectively, but we were outnumbered and I would surely have been killed if it hadn't been for Yen Shih. The puppeteer was a graceful whirlwind as he hacked a path of death through the center of the pack, and then neatly kicked over a stack of packing cases to block pursuit. A case split open and a thousand small hard cakes of fake Tribute Tea spilled across the floor, and thugs slipped and slid as the puppeteer turned and smashed back through them like the Transcendent Pig on a killing spree, and survivors who howled in fear and jumped away were jumping right into my range. I managed to hurl my torch and drop a man who was about to stab Yen Shih in the back, and his knife flashed through the air to the throat of the man who had his spear poised at my chest, and then it was all over. I couldn't believe we'd done it, but there lay the bodies, and none of them moved.

The puppeteer regarded the mess thoughtfully. "We may be in a bit of trouble when we try to hide the bodies and clean up," he said.

"Forget it," a voice replied, and I turned to see Master Li shake his head rather admiringly as he surveyed the carnage. "The important thing is that I've found Ma's papers. We'd raise more questions than we'd answer by hiding bodies, so we'll leave them as is. Or almost."

He swiftly went through pockets and purses and money belts until he had a stack of silver coins, which he poured upon the table, and a pack of cheap marked cards, which he scattered over the coins and down on the floor. My club went into the bloody hand of one corpse. Yen Shih's lay beside another, and the crossbow was squeezed beneath the body of a third.

"A trained investigator would find ten things wrong with this pretty picture in ten minutes, but they aren't likely to call in trained investigators," the old man said confidently. "The relief guards showed up, found a table with wine and dog meat and decided to take advantage of it, started gambling, somebody got too cute with his cards, and for once in their lives the dolts didn't miss when they started swinging. Nothing is missing, so why not accept the easiest explanation?"

I wasn't about to argue with him, but we still had to get out of there. The tunnel was out of the question. Master Li was standing at the door the relief guards had used, and he obviously didn't like it.

"This has to lead up to the basement of a mansion on Coal Hill belonging to one of the mandarins, and it would take magic to get out through the basement and the mansion without being stopped," he said thoughtfully.

"Over here!" Yen Shih called.

The puppeteer had seen what we hadn't. The remnants of an earthslide could still be seen on the floor beside the west wall, and a patch of light that wasn't artificial was filtering down through a gap that led up to the ceiling. Yen Shih and I widened the gap enough to see that the earthslide had opened a chimney leading up to a patch of blue, and with Master Li on my back I was able to worm my way up to what seemed a very odd closet made from twisted old wood. Light was pouring in through a gap wide enough for Master Li, and then I pretended I was nine years old and forced my clumsy body through, and Yen Shih climbed up and joined us. We had come out on familiar terrain. It was the Lin family cemetery on top of Coal Hill, not far from the grave the vampire ghoul had inhabited, and the "closet" turned out to be the interior of a hollow tree.

"So! The ch'ih-mei happened to use this tree as a resting place during its night stalks, and the earthslide dumped it down to the cave, from which it was accidentally carted with the dirt to Hortensia Island," Master Li said happily. He hates loose ends. "No doubt the mandarins decided not to fill in the chimney that had been formed because it could easily be turned into a rather neat emergency exit."

That tree would never be disturbed by gardeners, and I shuddered as I looked at it: twisted, crouching, powerful, malevolent—as sick and dangerous as the dread dead trees on the Hill of Kites and Crows, and it would remain untouched until a wind finally blew it over.

16

As duly appointed investigator of anything concerning the death of Ma Tuan Lin, Master Li had every right to be at the cemetery where the monster had lived. He sauntered down the hill quite openly and as he did so he reached into his robe and took out a stack of papers. They were rubbings he had taken from the late mandarin's desk in the cave, and they were so superb that Master Li was willing to bet Ma had destroyed the frieze on the tunnel wall so no one else could share his treasure. Not even Ma was so stupid he couldn't figure out how the cages were used in communication.

Even I could see it. To begin with, we were once again looking at the same hooded figures that had been carved on the walls of the Yu, the Eight Skilled Gentlemen. These were the sharpest impressions yet, and one detail was visible that hadn't been before. Each cage they carried contained an object like a writing brush, with the handle sticking up through a hole in the center of the junction of bars at the top, and one sequence was practically a lesson for the slow-witted. (1) One of the gentlemen lifted the brush from his cage. (2) He was shown touching the brush to symbols of the five elements depicted upon the bars. (3) His image appeared inside the cage. (4) Wavy lines symbolized crossing water and distance. (5) A second gentleman was depicted looking at a duplicate image of the first one in his own cage.

"Even Pea-head Chou in my village could understand this!" I exclaimed.

"Pay attention," Master Li said sharply. "Ma's discovery of cage communication led him to conclude he'd found what really mattered, and perhaps he had, but that's as far as he went, and any scholar worthy of the name would realize he had in his hands the only known record of the event still honored in bastard form today, the Dragon Boat Race of the fifth day of the fifth moon." He grimaced violently and shook his head as though trying to rattle meanings from molasses. "Meaning the day after tomorrow," he said. "Supposedly the race honors the great statesman and poet Ch'u Yuan, who drowned himself as a protest against corrupt government, but in fact the race was being run a thousand years before Ch'u was born—if not two thousand.

The frieze Ma found and destroyed was clearly a pictorial account of the original event that inspired the race of the dragon boats, although it would take the Celestial Master in his best days to wring the full truth from it."

Seldom have I seen the old man so frustrated. As his right forefinger danced over the rubbings he quickly and surely interpreted ancient symbols and placed them in the context of a story, yet his hand chops and roars of profanity testified to lessons he might have learned at the Celestial Master's knee uncounted years ago; lessons that the saint might not now be able to repeat. He started with something other than pictographs, however. One rubbing was of ancient writing at the very beginning of the frieze, and the old man pointed to the brief inscription.

"The story is clearly a solstice myth, based to some extent upon historical events, and this written title was added by a scholar or priest perhaps a thousand years after the actual carving." He turned and winked at Yen Shih. "A bit gaudy, but rather prettily descriptive, don't you think?"

The puppeteer glanced up sharply. Knowledge of ancient scripts was the province of the privileged, and never before had Master Li directly alluded to Yen Shih's upper-class origins. Then the puppeteer shrugged, and translated the symbols for my benefit.

"'*Sky-flame Death Birds Ghost Boat Rain Race*,' and the only language other than Chinese given to fashioning poetic lines from strings of unmodified nouns," Yen Shih continued in a marvelous imitation or a pompous scholar's lecture voice, "is barbaric Latin."

Master Li took over, and this is the sketchy outline of the solstice story he was able to decipher from ancient symbols and images.

Long ago, before writing had evolved to record events, invading barbarians who were to become the Chinese battled aboriginal settlers of the Central Kingdom for earthly supremacy, and at the same time a battle was waged in Heaven between gods of the old people and those of the new. Somehow the earthly combatants managed to infuriate both celestial sides. As a result the gods who normally controlled the physical operatic of earth rode off to Heavenly battlefields and left men to manage as best they could, and in no time the world was in chaos. It was clear that men must establish harmonious accord with the powers of nature if they were to survive, and to this end the warring kings finally united and humbly petitioned the greatest of wizards and shamans, *Pa Neng Chik Shih*, to come from the corners of civilization and take charge.

"The Eight Skilled Gentlemen began by ordering the kings to build something," Master Li said. "See the large square? That means 'earth' or 'of the earth.' It has a squiggle carved inside to indicate it's hollow—a cave, for example—and these little lines sticking through the top—"

"Pipes!" I exclaimed. "They had the kings build them the musical instrument of the Yu!"

"I sincerely hope so, since it's a lovely idea," Master Li said in a gentle voice. "They also commissioned two marvelous boats, one yang and one ying, and to seal a pact—this isn't clear to me, but it seems to have been a covenant to bind men and nature in harmonious accord—the Eight Skilled Gentlemen ran the most spectacular boat race in history."

With the most deadly stakes, it seemed. Somehow the Yu was used to form a path of magical water to race on, and the air above the boats was filled with flames, indicating the sky was so hot it was catching fire, as in the days before Archer Yi shot down nine of the ten suns. Obviously the yang influence was grotesquely strong, and when nature is unbalanced disease moves in, and the terrible Ravens of Pestilence wheeled above the boats. Water boiled beneath the Eight Skilled Gentlemen, waves threatened to capsize them, hideous monsters reached out from the banks and sea serpents threatened from below. The yang boat was shown moving ahead, and the death birds of disease swooped down—

"And just when it gets really exciting we lose the thread," Master Li said disgustedly.

The stone hadn't escaped time's ravages where the last panels were. It had worn so that ink from the rubbing gathered in little puddles, smearing and distorting, and in some sections there was nothing but a ridge here and a gouge there to suggest what might have been carved. Then, at the very end, the soft worn area gave way to firmer stone and the frieze became visible again.

"Yin has won after all," Master Li said. "See the slanting lines? Rain is railing, the generating force and symbol of renewal, and the boat has reached some sort of dock crowded with *kuti*, ghosts. What's happening isn't clear. The flames of the sky have been extinguished and the death birds of disease are fleeing, so one must assume that ghosts have joined forces with the Eight Skilled Gentlemen and tilted the balance. After all, the unknown commentator called the crafts 'ghost boats.' If only the Celestial Master can regain his wits for a few hours!" the old man cried passionately. "He's capable of tying this to the demon-deities connected with the cages, and maybe even to their brother Envy, and above all he might be able to tell us why portions of a solstice tale three thousand years old are popping up today, and why certain monsters aren't myths, and, in short, what in hell is going on."

"Good luck," said the puppeteer.

Yen Shih was delighted with the "interesting morning," as he phrased it, and placed himself at Master Li's service day or night, but for the moment he excused himself to attend to some work at home. He was being tactful. Master Li's next stop would be to give a full report to the Celestial Master, and there might be details he wouldn't want the puppeteer to know about, so Yen Shih simply bowed out before

anyone got embarrassed. Master Li insisted upon hiring a palanquin for the puppeteer, and we took another one, and not long afterward we entered the Forbidden City and went straight to the Celestial Master's office. He wasn't in, but he had left a note for Master Li in a sealed pouch, and Master Li took it back to the palanquin and opened it as we started back toward the Meridian Gate.

> Kao,
>
> I'm tired and stupid and senile. I confronted a mandarin who had to know about that cave in Coal Hill. I got him to produce his cage and explain they're for communication. Then I used it to do some shouting, but then my mind stopped functioning. All I could think of was to hit the bastard over the head with the thing. I'll have to leave more constructive approaches to you. I've tracked a cage to Yang Ch'i. He keeps it in a case in that damned greenhouse of his, and you can handle the guards if anyone can. I'll send word when my brains are up to something tougher than prechewed baby food.
>
> Chang

❁ ❁ ❁

"How do I look?"

"Sir… Sir…."

"Ox, not over my robe!"

"Sorry," I managed to say between retches.

Civilized readers will be familiar with Ink Wang's famous portrait of Master Li, and I was there when Wang painted it. After examining the sage's face from all angles the artist pitched his brushes into a corner, unbound his long lank hair, dipped it into the inkpots, and jumped around swinging his head in front of the silk as he sprayed ink all over the place. The end result was a pattern of incredibly complex interwoven lines. Ink Wang then sketched a head-shaped outline, blacked out everything outside the perimeter, painted in a pair of bright eyes, and there was Master Li, so lifelike I almost expected him to walk from the surface and call for wine. Ink Wang said it was the only way he could reproduce the landscape of wrinkles that constitutes the sage's face, and the reason I mention it is to suggest something of the effect when the wrinkles were filled with green phosphorescent Cantonese clay. (Neo-Confucians who have been left behind are invited to think: incredibly old man, bony, labyrinthine wrinkles packed with clay that glows in the dark.)

I was driving a blue-hooded upper-class donkey cart beneath a bright moon that was occasionally obscured by sand clouds. The Yellow Wind hissed against the canvas,

and the metal torch brackets lining the elegant lane on Coal Hill seemed to be passing sand-scrape sounds from one to another like one long vibrating lute string. We came to a halt and the guards at the gate of mandarin Yang Ch'i's mansion crowded around demanding passwords or engraved invitations, and the silken curtains parted and the head of a six-month-old corpse slid out, inch by inch.

"Good evening," said Master Li.

The guards were no longer present, although high-pitched notes remained for some time, rending the air, and we proceeded placidly up the drive. At the courtyard another row of guards stood ready for promotion, keen and alert.

"Excuse me. We have been summoned to collect a gentleman, and which one of you is…." I fumbled for a list.

Hands pushed the front handle of a coffin through the blue curtains, followed by the head and face of Master Li.

"Good evening."

Since there seemed to be nobody in the courtyard we left the cart and proceeded to the mansion, where a butler automatically accepted Master Li's cape, turned to receive the white wooden calling card, and toppled over backward like a board, bouncing up and down three times with a distinct whang-whang-whang sound. Servants, guards, and various flunkies appeared at every doorway and staircase.

"Hello, the house!" I cried desperately. "My beloved great-great-grandfather has contracted some silly little ailment that ignorant medicasters call vehemently virulent, and we merely seek—"

"Good evening," said Master Li.

Since nobody seemed to be around to receive us we proceeded through the inner courtyards to a central tower, and entered a huge room beneath a great vaulted dome that consisted almost entirely of windows. The heat outside had been bad enough; here it was awful. What's more it was as humid as a southern rain forest, and Master Li explained that Yang Ch'i was an avid horticulturist who specialized in exotic tropical flowers. Beneath the floor was a great vat of water kept constantly bubbling by charcoal fires. Vents released steam through a thousand tiny apertures, and moisture coalesced into droplets that splashed down from the ceiling with tiny pit-pat sounds. The room smelled of manure and decay, but most of all it reeked of the gross pulpy stalks of immense orchids: sticky sweet, rotting inside.

"Yang also prides himself on his knowledge of primitive artifacts, and in that respect his pride is justified," Master Li said. "He's one of the few who truly respects the craftsmanship of aborigines, and that's why the Celestial Master said he kept his cage in a case. Yang Ch'i couldn't possibly keep such a thing hidden away; it would be the jewel of his collection."

The avenues between plants were lined with display cases containing everything from a costly jeweled hair comb to a child's doll carved from cheap teak, and I may have learned something when I noticed that moonlight made materials irrelevant, and if craftsmanship was the criterion the doll was the more valuable. The avenues converged at the center of the dome where a single case stood on a circular patch of floor. Here steam was taking the place of heat waves; outlines blurred, and everything seen from the corners of my eyes seemed to be floating up and down as on billows of the sea. The moon was directly above the dome. As I walked forward I watched it change color and shape seen through differing patches of glass: now round and golden as a fabled peach from Samarkand, now elongated and yellow as a squash—a crab must see the moon like that, I thought, peering up through water as it scuttled over sand and seaweed.

The glass alone must have cost a crown prince's ransom. Never had I seen so much in one place, and never of such quality.

We reached the center display and gazed down at the case and there it was, an ancient cage like the ones we had seen before. Master Li frowned. "Damn. No brush," he said, and indeed there wasn't a brush like the one shown in the rubbing. It was like the one we'd picked up outside Ma Tuan Lin's pavilion, but this time I noticed the hole at the top through which a brush handle could protrude. I reached forward, but Master Li stopped me.

"Careful."

He examined everything about the floor, the stand, the display cage, the ceiling, and only when he was sure there was no visible trap or alarm mechanism did he reach out and carefully lift the glass cover. Steam billowed around us, hissing, blocking my vision, and when it cleared I saw Master Li nod. I reached out and picked up the cage and pulled it back, and Master Li gently replaced the lid.

"Let's take a look at it," he said.

In a far corner was a workbench where a bright lantern glowed, giving clearer illumination than moonlight, and we started toward it. My throat tickled badly and I coughed, and then the old man coughed. The sound seemed to linger inside the dome, moving slowly through the moist air. At the lantern Master Li examined the top of the cage and took note of the symbols of the elements on the bars, symbols the Skilled Gentleman had touched with the brush in the rubbings, and then he turned the cage over and looked at the bottom. He became very still.

"Ox," he said quietly after a long pause, "do you see this tiny little cross scratched on the rim?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"I put it there."

"Sir?"

"I put it there, Ox, from force of habit, as an identifying mark on a piece of physical evidence. This is the same cage that we found on the island, and that the ape man stole from the shack," Master Li said.

I stared blankly at him. Nothing made sense to me, and I was about to ask stupid questions when a flute began to play. The sound was quite shocking in the thick dripping stillness of the greenhouse, and I jumped a foot. In an instant Master Li's throwing knife was in his hand, and I turned toward the sound and began stalking it, bent low behind great pungent flowers. The music was strange and discordant, almost mindlessly rhythmic, like the monotonous sounds of shamanistic drummers putting an audience in a trance, and it was difficult to pin down: now to the left of me, now to the right. I seemed to be moving with unreal slowness, and as I wormed my way through pulpy orchids beneath the changing moon I began to get the profound impression that I was underwater, like that crab I'd imagined, pushing a path between algae and the limp dangling limbs of drowned men.

I stopped and stared, with my heart trying to get out past my tongue. I'd reached a gap in huge leaves and I was looking at a bright patch of moonlight shining on a stool upon which a small figure sat cross-legged. It was a child. A beautiful child playing a flute, but something was wrong with it, and I heard in my head the faint voice of the Celestial Master.

"The first demon-deity is *Fang-liang*," the saint had said. "It resembles a three-year-old child with red eyes, long ears, and beautiful hair, and it kills by forcing its victims to strangle themselves."

I realized that the tickling sensation inside my throat had been growing stronger, and I tried to cough but all I did was choke, and I whirled and looked back. Master Li had dropped his knife and was staggering in a little circle with his hands clasped around his throat, strangling himself.

I tried to go back to him, and then thought better of it and tried to charge the child with the flute, but all I did was trip and fall. I couldn't breathe. The itching inside my throat was unbearable and I tried to reach it, clasping my neck tightly with my hands. My vision was dimming and I could barely see that Master Li had gone mad and was trying to climb what looked like a tiny tree rising above orchids, shinnying up like a young boy, and then I couldn't see that far. I rolled over on my back, clawing helplessly at my throat.

The flute music had stopped. The moon was blocked out. The child was bending over me, looking down. A happy smile was on the innocent face, and the eyes were indeed red, and the earlobes nearly reached the shoulders. Beautiful hair glistened in moonlight, and a pretty little tongue slid out and licked pretty little lips. Then, suddenly, a dark form hit the child like a hurricane and sent it flying away, and hands grabbed my head and pried my mouth open, and burning acid began to scorch a hole

through the obstruction in my throat. Air suddenly entered my lungs. I breathed and gasped and choked and sat up, and in a few more seconds I realized it wasn't acid in my mouth but lime juice, and the dark shape was Master Li.

"Get him, Ox!"

The weird child had been entangled in plants, but now it was free and it had grabbed the cage and was scrambling toward the door. I couldn't possibly catch it—my legs tried to move and gave up—but a small, heavy, earth-packed flowerpot lay close to my hand. I grabbed it and threw as hard as I could, and then regretted it.

"I wanted to hit the legs," I panted.

"You did well to hit anything at all," the old man said comfortingly.

He wasn't going to need to perform an autopsy to determine what happened when that pot landed squarely in the back of the child's small head. We could hear the bones crush from where we were, and before the body hit the floor we knew that Master Li wasn't going to be able to question the creature. I got shakily to my feet and we walked up and looked down. The wig of beautiful hair had been knocked five feet, and one of the fake earlobes had come loose. Red eyes gazed blindly up at us.

"Some kind of ointment to give an effect like pinkeye," Master Li said matter-of-factly. "I recognize him. One of the dwarfs who entertain eunuchs in the Forbidden City, and I rather think I've seen him in the company of Li the Cat."

He picked up the fallen cage and bounced it up and down in his hand.

"Somebody's gone to a hell of a lot of trouble," he said. "When we lifted the cage from the case a concealed spring released a cloud of stuff that looked like the steam in the room. It wasn't. It was a powder derived from *yuan ha.* Barbarians call it Lilac Daphne, and it's related to laurel and the mezereon herbs. It contains an immensely powerful irritant that can inflame the larynx to the point where airflow is cut off, and since a victim instinctively tries to get at the constriction he appears to be strangling himself. One antidote is citric acid, and it was a lucky thing that a lime tree was growing among the orchids."

The sage glared at the tiny corpse.

"But why such a ridiculously complicated murder plot?" he asked rhetorically. "There were a thousand surer ways to kill us, and all this did was tell us that Li the Cat has a spy in the Celestial Master's household. Somebody managed to read that note and set a trap before we arrived, and we'd better make sure they haven't harmed the Celestial Master himself."

"Yes, sir," I said, and I automatically bent over and he hopped up on my back, and I set out at a gallop.

17

We paused only long enough for Master Li to remove the clay from his face and make himself presentable. Then I turned the donkey cart into the entrance of the Celestial Master's house, and my heart sank when I saw the outer courtyard crammed with soldiers from the Black Watch, which is the militia guarding the important eunuchs of the Forbidden City. Clearly something was wrong and Master Li didn't waste time. He simply climbed out and marched toward the door yelling orders right and left as though he'd arrived to take charge, and we strode inside like conquering generals.

As we reached the inner court a body was being carried out on a litter. One foot protruded from beneath a cloak. It was enough to tell me that the body was not that of the Celestial Master, but of a woman, and then I realized who she was. On the foot was a silly little embroidered slipper with a pattern of chipmunks hopping through flowers, and I recalled the young maid who had been carrying a sick dog on a silken pillow. Master Li held up a hand and stopped the procession.

"The Celestial Master?"

"Not here, sir. He's been away and doesn't know about this yet."

An oily eunuch had come out and seen Master Li, and he trotted forward as the old man lifted the cloak and looked at the body. Master Li's back blocked my view, and I saw him stiffen, and then he gently replaced the cloak. His eyes lifted to the eunuch, who seemed to be the official in charge.

"The blood isn't fresh. When did this happen?" Master Li asked in a calm, unemotional voice.

The eunuch licked his lips nervously. An old woman shoved her way through the soldiers, and I remembered her as the one who had turned us away the last time. Her eyes were red and her voice was hoarse.

"She was murdered yesterday," she said. "We thought she had gone to her family, and we only found her body a few hours ago, but the men who killed her came yesterday. I know. I admitted them myself. They had a note from the Celestial Master allowing them to enter."

"Adoptive daughter, can you read?" Master Li asked gently.

"No, Venerable Sir, but the Celestial Master always draws a little bird on messages sent to the house, and I saw the bird," the old lady said. "They called poor Little Numskull out to the garden, but then I was busy and forgot them. Just now we found Numskull's body in the boat shed down by the lake."

"Could you identify the men if you saw them again?" Master Li asked.

"Yes!" the old lady said vehemently. "How can I ever forget? The leader looked just like a hog, and the two men with him were like a hyena and a jackal."

I felt sick to my stomach as I remembered those creatures back at the cave, first murdering the clerk and then laughing at dirty stories while dog grease ran down their jowls. Master Li had pointed out there had to be a spy in the Celestial Master's household, and had the little maid called Numskull discovered the spy, and was this her reward? Master Li was looking thoughtfully at the eunuch.

"The Celestial Master's house and office are under imperial jurisdiction. Do you have proper authority to investigate the murder?"

The eunuch was suddenly self-assured and oozing honey. "This worthless one has indeed been so honored," he said, bowing to the ground, and he presented a scroll with imperial seals all over it.

Master Li glanced at the document and handed it back. Foxes would investigate the death of a hen, but what could he do about it? "Very well. Carry on," he said crisply, and he swiveled on his heels and I followed him back outside to the donkey cart.

"Sir, was it very bad?" I asked as I drove away.

"The killing? She was sliced to pieces," the sage said gruffly.

"Bastards!"

"If you mean Hog and Hyena and Jackal I agree, but they didn't kill the girl," Master Li said.

"What?" I yelped.

"They may have taken her, and they may have held her, but they didn't kill her. Those animals would have hacked and chopped like amateur butchers, and the man who killed Numskull was a master of the art."

"Do you mean we have to deal with an insane surgeon on top of everything else?" I said weakly.

"Not at all," the sage said. "We have to deal with a very competent fellow whose craftsmanship in slaughter is as unmistakable as fine calligraphy, but first we're going to pay a call on a puppeteer. Ox, don't forget that the spy in the Celestial Master's household might have learned that Yen Shih and his daughter have been helping us, and helping us could be an unhealthy occupation."

Yen Shih did well in his trade and his house was large and comfortable, although on the wrong side of the Goldfish Ponds southeast of Heaven's Bridge. Nobody was

in the courtyard, and my heart began to hurt when nobody answered the door, but then I heard the sound of a hammer in back, and cheerful whistling. We found Yen Shih at his wagon beside the stable, whacking away at a mechanism for a new puppet by the light of a lantern.

"Yu Lan's off again on shamanka business and I couldn't sleep," he said after greeting us. "She'll be gone all night. Anything interesting come up?"

Master Li tersely explained what had transpired, and Yen Shih appeared to hang on every word. I've mentioned that his horribly disfigured face couldn't register normal emotions, but his eyes and body could be eloquent. He was furious when Master Li told about the peculiar murder plot, and his rage was barely contained when he heard of the fate of little Numskull.

"You say those three animals didn't kill her," the puppeteer said quietly enough, but his hands were shaking with the urge to strangle somebody. "Who did?"

"We're going to talk to him about it now, if you'd care to come along," Master Li said. "There's something else I want to do while I'm there, so it will take a little time."

"I have all night," Yen Shih said grimly, and he hopped up on the cart seat beside me.

Half an hour later Master Li and Yen Shih and I were admitted to a gloomy room in a gloomier tower that squatted at the end of the Wailing Wall behind the chopping block at the Vegetable Market. Devil's Hand was red-faced and sweating and drunk, and he spilled wine over the big wooden table he sat at as he shoved a jar toward Master Li.

"Hell of a time we live in, Kao," he growled. "The whole world has gone mad. Monsters pop up to ruin my swing, and the swords won't forgive me for missing, and people hand me horrible orders to carry out, and I have to— Listen! Listen to them! They've been like this ever since that vampire ghoul wrecked the record!"

He meant listen to the swords, and my blood was running cold as I heard the hard mocking jangling sound of clashing steel. The Chief Executioner of Peking is entrusted with the four greatest swords the world has ever known: First Lord through Fourth Lord, children of the incestuous union between the male sword Gan-jiang and his sister sword Mo-ye, who had been forged from the liver and kidneys of the marvelous metal-eating hare of K'un-lun Mountain. When not in use the swords hang by velvet cords attached to their handles in a small tower room with a window overlooking the chopping block, and on windy nights people who pass the Wailing Wall can hear the four bright blades sing of sanguinary triumphs. They were singing now, mockingly, and the executioner buried his head in his hands.

"Make them stop, Kao, can't you? Tell them it wasn't my fault I missed. I didn't mean to disgrace them," Devil's Hand sniffled.

"Certainly," Master Li said. "You've forgotten that royalty must be addressed in writing; only those of equal rank can speak directly to princes. Ox, remember your manners and ask permission to read this appeal, and I'm sure the swords will forgive our friend."

He scribbled a note and handed it to me and I trotted up the stairs to the tiny tower room where the great swords hung on their pegs. I unfolded the note.

"Close the goddamn window."

The glittering blades made small screeching sounds as they rubbed the stone wall behind me. I shuddered as I looked out and down to the chopping block, and then I shut the window—which was slightly ajar—and fastened the catch and the swords stopped complaining.

"Well, is Devil's Hand forgiven?" Master Li asked as I trotted back down.

"Yes, sir. They say the circumstances of his error were extreme, and they will protest no more," I said.

"Thank Buddha," the executioner whispered. He swallowed a pint of alcohol and opened another jar. "That's only one demon off my back, Kao. There are others," he said gloomily.

"Yes. Like that silly little serving girl. That was a Slow-Slash sentence?" Master Li asked.

"What a world, Kao, what a world," Devil's Hand muttered. "Slow-Slash is no joke, and on top of that I had to put up with those three animals as witnesses. The bastards snickered and joked as though they were at a fair, but I rammed it to them anyway. After the first few seconds that poor girl didn't feel a thing, and they never knew the difference."

Yen Shih had been silent and motionless. Now he looked up quickly. "You used the bladder?" he asked.

"Damn right," the executioner said.

"Good man," said Master Li. "Explain it to Ox, who has question marks in his eyes."

"I'll do better than that." Devil's Hand lurched to his feet and fumbled in a drawer and pulled out something like a pig bladder with peculiar knots tied in it. He slipped it beneath his left arm. His right hand flickered, and as if by magic a long slim blade had appeared in it. Then with another flick the blade was gone. "An executioner distracts the witnesses for half a second and the victim's sufferings are all over," he said in a solemn lecture voice slurred by alcohol. "The witnesses don't know the difference, because the executioner has the Squealbaby under his arm, and he makes another long slow slash…."

Even Master Li and the puppeteer jumped, and they knew what was coming. I almost hit the ceiling as a hideous horrible scream smashed against my eardrums, and then another one.

"Short rapid squeezes for a man, long slow ones for a woman," Devil's Hand said. "I'll tell you a secret. I've used the Squealbaby on every Slow-Slash for the past ten years, and that's whether the family's bribed me or not."

"You do beautiful work whether it's blades, bladders, or both," Master Li said. "I'm certainly not complaining, but I would like to take a look at the execution order, if you don't mind."

"Mind? Why should I mind? It's like I said, Kao, the world has gone mad. Everybody's crazy, and this proves it if nothing else will."

He fumbled in another drawer and tossed Master Li an official document, and the sage held it close to the light for a long moment. Then he folded it and handed it back.

"My friend, I'm about to add to your opinion of the world's sanity," Master Li said. "I want to confer with an eminent gentleman, and on the way over I even bothered to compose a document making it official. You can add this to your collection of lunacies."

He took a piece of paper from his robe and passed it over, and Devil's Hand stared at it as he might view a cobra.

"You can't be serious!"

"Ah, but I am."

"Kao, you might just as well invite the Black Plague to tea! Or take a swim in boiling oil! I'm a killer, Kao. That's my job and I'm good at it, but I turn faint and pale when this creature—"

"Would you mind?" Master Li interrupted, adding a slight official intonation to his voice.

Devil's Hand turned and lurched out the door, and I could hear him muttering "Crazy! Whole damn world!" as he stamped away down a hall. Master Li turned to the puppeteer.

"Yen Shih, I think it might be a good idea for you to try to trace your daughter's whereabouts and stay with her," he said quietly. "I don't quite know what to make of it, but one thing is sure: this affair is entering a rather nasty phase."

The puppeteer raised an eyebrow.

"The execution order for that little maid specified Slow-Slash," Master Li said. "I know the signature well, and it was authentic. The order was issued by the Celestial Master."

I stared at him, stunned and uncomprehending. Yen Shih stood as if frozen in place. Then he took a deep breath and spread his hands wide apart. "The executioner had it right. The whole world's gone mad," he said, and he turned and walked rapidly out the door, and as his footsteps faded away I could hear his soft baritone voice fading with them, singing to the sand-scoured sky.

"Blue raccoons are weeping blood
As shivering foxes die,
Owls that live a thousand years
Are laughing wildly.
A white dog barking at the moon
Is the corpses' chanticleer;
Upon its grave a gray ghost sings
The Song of a Cavalier."

I walked to the table and picked up one of the jars and swallowed some of the raw alcohol that Devil's Hand and Master Li called wine, and after I stopped coughing I felt a little better, although not much. The executioner was returning, and by the sound of it he was dragging a prisoner in chains.

"You're ten times as crazy as the rest of the world, Kao!" Devil's Hand shouted.

"Why? For seeking the company of a splendid fellow who's as cute as a little lamb and twice as gentle?" Master Li said sweetly.

The executioner and his prisoner came through the door, and I reeled. The soft squat body, the froglike posture, the saliva spraying from fat flabby lips….

"Three times as gentle," said Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu.

18

Every historian is faced with a chapter in which he cannot win. If he includes the relevant material he will send his readers screaming into the night, and if he doesn't include it he isn't writing history. Thus scholars wrestling with the wars of the Three Kingdoms must grit their teeth and include learned commentaries on the Seven Sacrileges of Tsao Tsao, and I must confront the task of transcribing the words of a horrible hosteler. It was difficult for those first hearing him not to conclude that his speech was simply another weapon in an overstocked arsenal, but no, it simply reflected his second obsession, his first being murder.

"Ox," Master Li once told me, "never forget that Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu is half aborigine. Our forefathers stole the fertile fields from his people and chased them into rocky mountains where there was almost no food. Then mineral deposits were discovered, so we chased the survivors into malarial marshes where there was even less food. Hunger became the heritage of aborigines, their birthright, and in a psychological sense Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu was born *starving*."

Today as the hosteler comes closer and closer to deification, even minor editing of his pronouncements is considered to be heresy. If I leave out one adjective I may be ripped to pieces by the howling mob, but I plead special circumstances. When I saw his ghastly face in the executioner's office everything went fuzzy, and for some time I heard nothing but a loud buzzing sound in my ears, and when the buzzing died down the interview was already underway.

"…oh yes, oh yes, oh yes, the Yu was built by the Eight Skilled Gentlemen to make music that turned into water, 'Water of the Setting Sun' my old grandmother called it, although the name is probably as misleading as 'Three Fish Lamb Soup,' which contains no fish. It also contains no lamb. The characters for 'lamb' and 'fish' when written together mean 'delicious,' so the name is actually 'Three Delicious Soup,' and it is made from chicken breasts, abalone, ham, bamboo shoots, snow peas, sesame seed oil, chicken stock, and rice wine. I like to serve it followed by Su Tung-po's carp, which is extremely simple, as befits a creation of genius. You just

wash the carp in cold water and stuff it with hearts of cabbage and rub it with salt, and then—"

"Hostler Tu," Master Li interjected, "the Eight Skilled Gentlemen carried—"

"—pan-fry it with onions, and when it's half cooked you add a few slices of ginger, and finally some bits of orange peel and a little turnip sauce. Su Tung-po also invented Poor Man's Salad, which goes wonderfully well with the carp: *sung* cabbage, rape-turnip, wild daikon, and shepherd's purse. Add a bit of—"

"Hosteler Tu—"

"—rice and some boiling water and you can turn it into soup, but you must be careful about the water. The great Chia Ming wrote in his *Essential Knowledge for Eating and Drinking* that the water for Poor Man's Soup must be from snow or frost, which had to be swept into the pot with a chicken feather. To use a duck or goose feather was to invite stomach cramps, which he also said could be caused by cooking pork, eels, or mud loaches over a fire made from mulberry wood, and Chia Ming grew quite upset over the subject of spinach."

"Hosteler Tu! The Eight Skilled Gentlemen carried cages that they sometimes used for communication, but I think they contained something else that was guarded by eight demon-deities. Do your people say anything about that?" Master Li asked.

"Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes, cages—oh my, yes. The cages held the keys."

"Keys to what?"

"Keys to the music that turned into water, of course, and the guardians were said to be very strange and almost as dangerous as spinach, which Chia Ming said is an alien substance imported from Nepal, a very unpleasant country inhabited by perfidious men, and its character is cold and slippery and eating it weakens the feet and causes stomach chills, and if young dogs or cats eat spinach it will cause their legs to bend so they can't walk. In that case the dogs can at least be used for *k'eng hsien*, the canine stew Confucius loved so much he put the recipe in the Book of Rites, but I don't know what one can do with bent-leg cats.

"Hosteler—"

"Unless the cats happen to be nursing mothers. I've read that the boy emperor Ching Tsung was devoted to 'Clear Wind Rice,' which was made with rice, dragon's brains, dragon eyeball powder, and cat's milk, but to tell the truth I think 'cat' is a misprint—besides, that could be a dangerous dish if the cat was white, because white cats climb up on roofs and eat moonbeams, and eating moonbeams can cause people to go mad. Of course, cats are consumed along with everything else in the south, where they even eat giant water b—"

"Hosteler Tu!" Master Li shouted. "The eight demon-deities who guarded the keys in the cages had a brother, born human, who became a great cavalier. Do your people know anything about him?"

"Brother? I didn't know they had a brother who was human. They were very strange, and a brother would probably be like the giant water bugs they eat in the south. They say they taste like lobster but in fact they taste like soft overripe cheese, and they serve them with dried salted earthworms that don't taste of anything except salt. In southern Hupeh they eat the fried flesh of white-flower pit vipers, and stewed marmots, and in Lingnan the delicacy is baby rats. 'Honey peepers' they call them, because the little things are first stuffed with honey and then released upon banquet tables and they crawl around going 'peep-peep-peep' and diners pick them up by the tails and pop them into their mouths and eat them raw. The better houses tint the creatures with vegetable dyes to harmonize with the service; emerald baby rats peep-peeping around purple porcelain bowls, for example, from which come faint hiccups."

"Hosteler Tu—"

"The hiccups are made by soft-shell crabs floating in rice wine flavored with rock salt, black Szechuan peppercorns, and anise, and the crabs are far too drunk to mind when diners scoop them from the bowls and eat them raw. Like the rats. On the opposite end of the scale are elephants, of course, and the elephant feet of the south are among the great delicacies of the world, providing one steers clear of the bile. Elephants store their bile in their feet and it moves from foot to foot with the changing of the seasons, and a bileless foot is stuffed with dates and baked in a sweet-sour mixture of vinegar and honey. The only thing they won't eat in the south is—"

"Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu!" roared Master Li. "How about a creature that's half man and half ape, and has a silver-gray forehead, blue cheeks, a crimson nose, a yellow chin, and is sometimes called Envy?"

"Envy, oh yes, oh yes. Envy caused it, of course. Somehow he got the gods to turn their backs on earth, and he had the sun ready to set the sky on fire, and he had the birds of pestilence ready to strike, because of the solstice, you see. If the solstice didn't take place and the sun got hotter and hotter—but that was where the Eight Skilled Gentlemen took over, and when they finished with Envy he was as harmless as a lamb, which is what they won't eat in the south. I think it's a misunderstanding involving lamb *liver*, which can be poisonous if eaten with pork. Just as common ginger can be poisonous if eaten with either hare or horse meat, not that horse meat needs help to be poisonous. Emperor Ching swore that horse kidneys were deadly, and Emperor Wu-ti told Luan Ta, the court necromancer, that Ta's predecessor had expired from eating horse liver. Still, a horse's heart when dried and powdered and added to wine will restore memory, and sleeping with a horse skull for a pillow will cure insomnia—"

"Hosteler—"

"—and another use for horses leads us back to lamb. In barbarian Rome lambs grow from the earth like turnips, and when they're ready to sprout the farmers build

a fence around them to keep out predators. The baby lambs are still tied to the earth by their umbilical cords and to cut them is dangerous, so the farmers get horses and have them run around and around the fence."

"Hosteler—"

"The lambs get alarmed and break the umbilical cords themselves and wander off in search of grass and water, and when I get a lamb I like to save pieces of shank meat for 'Eight Exquisite Lion Head,' which doesn't contain any lion, of course: lamb, lichees, mussels, pork, sausage, ham, shrimp, and sea cucumbers. The name is ridiculous because 'lion head' in culinary terms is simply a large sausage, and I think the error was on the part of a tipsy scribe who heard *shi-zi*, 'lion,' when a chef really said *li-zi,* 'lichee,' as in the case of the fish stew called—"

"Hosteler Tu!" screamed Master Li.

And now I must confess I blanked everything out. I saw the hosteler's horrible mouth opening and closing, but all I heard was a chirping sound like a small cricket inside my skull, and I don't think I was alone. The Chief Executioner of Peking was sitting at his desk with a silly smile on his face and glazed eyes, apparently listening to birdies chirp in the woods, and he was not pleased when Master Li finally dragged him from his reverie.

Master Li had learned nothing else of value. He huddled with Devil's Hand and discussed something I didn't overhear, eliciting more cries of "You're crazy!" and "The world has gone mad!" and finally we prepared to leave. Devil's Hand dragged the prisoner away in a rattle of chains, and there was something oddly pathetic in the hosteler's last words to Master Li.

"Wait! It's very important! I wanted to tell you that the best lotus roots are those from Nanking ponds! Get the red horned nuts from Ta-pan Bridge! Jujubes should be from Yao-fang Gate and cherries from Ling-ku Temple! You must try the sea horses of Kwantung served with Lan-ling wine flavored with saffron, and pork glazed with honey and cooked with cedar wood in the style of—"

The iron door slammed behind them, and that, I prayed, was the last I would ever see or hear of Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu.

19

The fourth day of the fifth moon began with a bang of fire-crackers. A great many bangs, as a matter of fact. It was the Feast of Poisonous Insects that warms things up for the great Dragon Boat Race of the double fifth, and usually it's a merry affair, but not this time. The heat wave hadn't broken and rain still hadn't fallen, and everybody knows that when there is no fluctuation in weather for an extended period of time an unhealthy atmosphere is created in which sickness spreads like swarms of locusts, and great plagues begin their incubation cycles, and horrible omens tend to appear: flesh and frogs falling from Heaven, for example, or hens turning into roosters.

Children enjoyed themselves, of course. They'd been laboriously embroidering tigers on their slippers for months, and their mothers dressed them in black-and-yellow-striped tiger tunics, and they shrieked with delight as they hopped around the streets stamping imaginary scorpions and centipedes and spiders, or battled clowns dressed as toads and snakes and lizards with long leaves of *ch'ang-p'u* grass, shaped like the blades of swords. The parents dutifully set off firecrackers and daubed everybody's ears and noses with streaks of sulphur as a precaution against poisonous bites, but their eyes were worried and their faces were drawn as they watched heat waves again lift from the streets. The temples were crowded with grandparents praying to Kuan-yin, Goddess of Mercy.

Tempers were rubbed raw. A bloody battle erupted at the Dynastic Gate when a herd of sheep with red-painted tails, meaning they were being led to sacrifice at the Altar of Heaven, somehow got entangled with camels on their way to the caravan loading area at the other end of the city, and nobody could go anywhere for two hours. The Mongol herders were forced by custom to wear heavy sheepskin robes caked with grease, and the Turkish camel drivers were bound to their thick grimy robes and huge felt-lined boots, and everybody was melting, furious at the world, and spoiling for a fight. I mention the incident because Master Li and I got trapped in the middle of it when we set out early that morning for the Celestial Master's house, and

we had to abandon the palanquin and hack our way through the mobs and eventually hire another one, and when we finally reached the house we were told by a soldier guarding the gate that the saint had indeed returned, late at night, but had already left for the Forbidden City.

I didn't know what to think, and Master Li had withdrawn into his own thoughts the moment we left the executioner's office the previous night, and he was still uncommunicative.

We entered the Forbidden City without incident, and instead of going straight to the Celestial Master's office the sage made a stop at the Bureau of Import. When he came back out a short time later the look on his face suggested that at least one thought sequence had paid off.

"Ox," he said as he climbed back into the palanquin, "I should have done this earlier, but things kept happening to distract me. Do you remember the drugs I used to turn cheap bohea into Tribute Tea?"

I turned red. "No, sir," I said.

"Prussiate of iron, sulphate of lime, and powder from the fruit of the tamarind tree," he said patiently. "That last item is rare. Very little is imported, and one must be licensed to buy it. One legacy of late unlamented Legalism is the requirement that companies requesting such licenses must list the names of all corporate officers. Secrecy can still be maintained because such lists are filed by the company name. An investigator has to have the name before he can ask for the file, and some of the names are quite ingenious. Suppose you were one of a group of mandarins involved in a counterfeit tea racket. Suppose you were able to communicate with each other because of old cages, and suppose the use of the cages was explained by a rubbing of an ancient frieze, and suppose you didn't want people asking for your file. What would you call your company?"

He knew very well I couldn't answer that. He let me stew in confusion for a moment, and then he took out a piece of paper upon which a clerk had obligingly copied a list of company officers beneath the corporate name Master Li had specified: *Sky-flame Death Birds Ghost Boat Rain Race Tea Company, Ltd.*

"This is the bunch?" I asked admiringly.

"Exactly. Every bastard involved, including Li the Cat and two other eunuchs of ministerial rank," Master Li said. "Now, if only…."

He let the sentence die a natural death. He meant "If only the Celestial Master is sane and in one piece and able to help," and worry returned, and he was silent the rest of the way to the Hall of Literary Profundity. There we were told that we had just missed the Celestial Master, who had hobbled out for his morning walk, but we would surely find him on the lawn leading to the Palaces of the Young Princes. Master Li dismissed the palanquin and set out on foot, and both of us stopped in

our tracks and let out long sighs when we reached the lawn. Ahead of us, painfully pushing his canes toward Nine Dragon Screen, was the unmistakable form of the Celestial Master, unchanged from the last time we'd seen him.

"I had feared torture," Master Li said quietly.

So had I, since that or insanity was the only explanation I could think of for the saint's signature on a terrible execution order. Now Master Li had to face the likelihood that for once he'd made an error judging calligraphy, and the signature had been forged, but the prospect didn't seem to bother him. He was almost cheerful as we took a shortcut past the Archery Grounds, but when we came to Nine Dragon Screen there was no Celestial Master.

"Ha! That was a remarkable optical illusion," Master Li said. "I could have sworn he was right here, but look."

He pointed to the left and far ahead, and my eyes bulged as I saw a small distant figure hunched over a pair of canes, inching like an arthritic snail past the Gate of the Bestowal of Awards toward the Gate of Peaceful Old Age.

"Better carry me. Somebody must have given him a lift, and it's too damn hot for my rickety legs."

I took the old man on my back and started off again, but soon we were out of sight of the saint, wending our way through mazes of high hedges. The gardens of the Forbidden City are for aristocrats, not peasants, so every view is planned for eyes riding at ease at palanquin level. Pedestrians can't see much of anything until they reach clear spaces, and when I got to a clear space I stopped so suddenly Master Li almost bounced over my head, and when he was settled again I asked in a tiny voice, "Sir, can there be more than one Celestial Master?"

The ancient saint was so far past the Gate of Peaceful Old Age that he had actually reached the Great Theater, and I would have been hard pressed to cover the distance in the elapsed time even at a trot.

"Let's concentrate on this one," Master Li said in a tight grim voice. "Catch him, Ox."

I took off at a run, taking an angle to come out far ahead of him, and I kept racing through lanes of flowering oleander and pomegranate until I panted to a halt at the Well of the Pearl Concubine. I turned and looked back where the saint should be. There was no slow shuffling figure, and I saw nothing to my right. Ahead of me was the outer wall of the Forbidden City, so the only direction remaining was left, and I turned and almost toppled over. Far, far away, between the Hall of Imperial Peace and the Pavilion of Ten Thousand Springs, a tiny stooped figure was straining to move a pair of canes ahead of his shuffling feet.

Master Li was very still on my back. Then his hands squeezed my shoulders. "Let's try something," he said quietly. "Turn away and cut between the Palaces of

Tranquil Earth and Sympathetic Harmony, as though we're giving up and making for West Flowery Gate."

I did as I was told, and in a few seconds I was again running through mazes of shrubs and trees, and after about four minutes Master Li told me to stop, double back, and take the first opening to the left. I climbed a small hill and got down on my stomach and wormed through low shrubs, and Master Li reached past my ears and parted a pair of leafy branches. We were looking out across the long velvet lawn in front of the Palace of Established Happiness, and my liver turned ice cold.

The Celestial Master was racing across the lawn like a panther, stooped low, leaping gracefully over obstacles. His simple Tao-shih robe billowed behind him like a kite, and he was running so fast the robe's ten ribbons and cloud-embroidered sash were pop-pop-popping in the air like the blurred wings of racing pigeons. He leaped over a huge stone I would have had to climb, hanging suspended in air, legs spread like a dancer's, and pushed down with his canes to give his body an extra forward vault as he hit the ground. The saint sped on until he reached the Hall of the Nurture of the Mind. Had we continued on the path we had taken we would now be coming out of the shrubbery in view of the hall, and of the Celestial Master, and suddenly he stopped, and tentatively extended his canes, and an aged, frail, crippled gentleman was painfully pushing himself across the grass.

"Sir…. Sir…. Sir…."

"Why the note of surprise? We haven't witnessed a miracle since a disembodied dog head chewed the grand warden, so we were overdue," Master Li said in a high hard voice. "Ox, back to the Hall of Literary Profundity, and hurry."

At the hall he had me go around the side and through a maze of little gardens, and then he pried a window open and we climbed through. He picked a lock, made his way through an empty office, had me carry him out the side window and across a balcony, and we climbed through another window into the office of the Celestial Master.

"Remember the little object like a brush used by the Eight Skilled Gentlemen to activate the cages? I assume the Celestial Master had one when he sent his message to the mandarins. Find it," Master Li ordered.

The room was crowded with mementos of more than a century of service and it could have taken us a month to search it all, but now and then the obvious choice pays off. Master Li overturned the jar of writing brushes and pawed through them, and suddenly his hand stopped. Slowly he picked up a brush and held it to the light. It was incredibly old, with a stone handle and a tip made from the tail of a musk deer.

"Same period, same type of craftsmanship, and same feel to it," Master Li muttered.

We went outside again, back in the silent shadowed recesses of the library garden. Nobody was around. Master Li wasn't going to take any chances with the cage we'd

almost been killed for in the mandarin's greenhouse. He had it firmly tied to his belt beneath his robe, and he took it out and examined it with speculative eyes.

"We know that it's activated for sending messages by touching the symbols of the five elements with the brush," he said thoughtfully. "What I'm hoping is that it also *retains* messages. If so, one would logically assume the Doctrine of the Five is also involved, such as the five colors, directions, seasons, celestial stems, mountains, planets, virtues, emotions, animals, orifices, tissues, or flavors."

My knowledge of the Five begins and ends with the fact that the odor and sound connected with the planet Mercury are "putrid" and "groaning," so I kept my mouth shut.

It took some time because there was a maze of symbols engraved on the bars, but finally he decided to try the animals associated with the seasons in backward order, and I jumped a foot into the air when the brush touched the head of a tortoise. A sudden glow of light filled the cage, and then I was looking at the face of a mandarin I didn't know. He was obviously struggling with fear and rage as he tried to keep himself under control.

"Why haven't we killed the old fool!" he demanded. A tic jumped in his left cheek. "I must know, I demand to know, why haven't we killed him? Don't you fools realize that since the Cat dealt with that clerk we have corpses to account for? If we don't slit Li Kao's throat he'll toss us to the dogs!"

Touching the tiger got us another mandarin demanding Master Li's head, and the water buffalo and phoenix produced boring messages about trading routes and sales figures. Then Master Li touched the brush to the dragon, and the face that filled the cage was that of the Celestial Master. From the first scathing words I realized this was the message Master Li sought, the message to Li the Cat and the Grand Warden of Goose Gate we had almost heard, but not quite.

"…Stick the turd-stained tips of your fingers into your ears and dig out the dung beetles, because I am about to demonstrate the error of your half-witted ways!"

Oh, he flayed them. He turned them inside out. Acid scoured the air as he depicted the idiocy of getting involved in some sort of smuggling racket that could lead to the Thousand Cuts, confiscation of estates, loss of rank and privilege for entire families, and the near certainty that pauperized wives and concubines and children would be led to the auction block and sold as slaves.

"If you idiots have to steal, why not steal something worthwhile?" the saint roared. "In the process you might do good despite yourselves and contribute to the restoration of morality! Listen to me, my wayward children, and I shall lead you toward the light."

Then he led them toward the light, and I listened with disbelief, and then horror, and then despair to an agonizing degree I have seldom known. The Celestial Master was proposing to revive the ghost scheme of Confucius.

❁ ❁ ❁

Barbarians must understand that in a civilized country the dead are immensely influential. The living are far too busy with the process of staying alive to pay attention to anything else. Human senses are in actuality "the Six Evils" because sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell, and thought are barriers against the messages of Heaven. Only the dead are free from such shackles, and when the ghost of an ancestor appears in moonlight or in dreams and bears a cryptic message it is the most important event in a family's existence. Sometimes it's a hugely dramatic warning: the Black Stag God is angry and you must flee the valley before influenza strikes, and sure enough ten people who stayed behind die from influenza. Sometimes it's a great-grandmother appearing in a dream to provide the perfect protective milk name for a new baby, and speaking of babies, who doesn't know of the ghost of a child who died at birth suddenly appearing to make an older brother jump back in fright—just before that brother's foot was to land on a poisonous snake? The power of ghosts is awesome, and their pronouncements are unchallengeable.

Confucius knew that, and it inspired a brilliant scheme. He counseled his aristocratic clients to grind the lower classes into the mud once and for all by imposing strict ghost laws. The only ghosts recognized to be valid would be those that had the decency and civility to appear at a properly hallowed shrine in a respectable family temple, and who could afford hallowed shrines in private temples? Aristocrats, of course, and no peasants need apply. Any claim to "ancestral" lines by those without decent family estates would be greeted by lashes of the rod, a second occurrence would mean mutilation, a third would merit death. Any claim to having received a message from a family ghost by one too low to have a "family," in the feudal Confucian sense, would be justification for being sold into slavery.

What made the ghost scheme so glorious was the fact that it was without limits. An aristocrat who coveted fertile land belonging to a commoner merely had to reveal that the ghost of his great-great-great-uncle had appeared to tell him that the land in question actually belonged to the family, and deeds to that effect would be found in the brass box in the cellar. (If need be, the ghost could reappear to explain that the deeds may have been written on paper that hadn't been invented at the time of the supposed transaction, but that merely applied to the earth. The paper had already been invented in *Heaven*, and the gods had graciously presented the great-great-great-uncle with a sample.) Any legal challenge was referred to a feudal court composed of other aristocratic landowners, and as Confucius himself so charmingly put it: "The superior man is like wind, and the common man is like grass. When the wind blows, the grass bends."

In the days of Confucius there was no empire. China was a collection of squabbling feudal states, and the single most important reason for the ghost scheme

never being put to full effect once the empire was formed was Taoism. The Tao-shihs battled tooth and nail to protect the rights of the peasantry, but now the Celestial Master, leader of Taoists and the empire's greatest living saint, was proposing that the mandarins put the profits from their illegal operation into judiciously placed bribes, and together with his immense influence and active support the ghost scheme could at last be installed throughout China. In practically no time only aristocrats would be entitled to power, property, and legal protection, with—as the Celestial Master put it—"unimaginable improvement in public morality and civility."

I should mention that throughout this incredible speech the saint showed no signs of senility. Indeed I had never heard him so forceful and coherent, and when he finally ended his proposal and the cage went dark I turned helplessly to Master Li.

"Sir, can he have suffered some sort of a stroke?" I asked.

Rarely have I seen the old man as perturbed as he was then. He was furiously chewing the end of his scraggly beard as he thought, and then he spat it out and said, "I've yet to hear of a stroke that allows an arthritic centenarian to race across lawns like a Tibetan snow leopard. No, Ox, something far more dramatic than a cerebral disorder is going on, and the consequences could be almost beyond imagining."

He had been sitting cross-legged in front of the cage. Now he jumped up and gazed at the searing brassy sky. The Yellow Wind was a huge hand lifted above the horizon; great grasping fingers reaching toward a sun that was blood red and pulsing in haze as it began to set—I hadn't realized so much time had passed—and fine grains were whipping against branches and leaves, hissing, scraping: a giant invisible cat at a scratching post, playfully unsheathing its claws.

"Something as dramatic as a solstice that doesn't take place?" Master Li said softly. "My boy, few disciplines are more dismal than theology, but it may be important to consider the Doctrine of Disaster, which is the Han dynasty's chief contribution to the subject. Both the I-ching and the *Huai-nan-tzu* assert that natural disasters are not caused by Heaven, but allowed by Heaven. If men willfully disrupt the natural order of things, the gods will refuse to intervene while nature purges itself of the toxin, usually violently, and if the innocent suffer along with the guilty—well, the only way men learn anything is to have it smashed into their heads with an ax."

He picked up the cage and retied it to his belt and covered it with his flowing robe.

"According to Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu, aborigines believe Envy almost caused a solstice disaster that was prevented by Eight Skilled Gentlemen," he said slowly. "We know damn well that either Envy or an incredibly talented impersonator is still with us and up to something, and the problem with Chinese myths is that in China it's difficult to tell where myth ends and reality begins. The August Personage of Jade will not be pleased to receive a petition to install the ghost scheme from the leader of Taoists, but that in itself shouldn't…."

He fell silent, and then he told me to bend over and take him on my back.

"All we can do now is go down that list of involved mandarins and find the weak link. You may have to break a few of the bastard's bones, my boy, but one way or another he's going to enable us to toss the rest of them in jail," the sage said grimly. "Back to the city and One-Eyed Wong's, and hurry."

"Yes, sir," I said, and I took off like a racehorse.

20

At the Wineshop of One-Eyed Wong, Master Li recruited some idlers and sent them out to track down each mandarin and eunuch on the list, and then he led the way out the back door to a maze of buildings squeezed together and leaning over each other to form the dead end of the Alley of Flies. Interconnecting passages run every which way, and by the time bailiffs can make their way to somebody's room he's probably in Tibet.

"The Weasel is an aborigine," Master Li said. "I very much doubt he can add much to what we've learned from Hosteler Tu, but I'd like to ask. Do you know where he lives?"

I was delighted to provide something. "Keep turning left," I said. "Believe it or not, you won't wind up back where you started."

We turned left, left, left, left, and would have been back at the end of the alley if there hadn't been a tiny parallel passageway that led up and across and to the right. The Weasel lived on the top floor, but we stopped short when we saw prayers pasted to his door and smelled incense and heard wails of woe. I pushed the door open, and it was obvious that Master Li wasn't going to be able to ask questions. The Weasel was in a very bad way, rolling over his pallet in delirium while his young wife tried to do what she could. She was overjoyed to see Master Li.

"Save him, Venerable Sir," she begged. "If anyone could save him, it would be you. Everyone else fears contagion and has fled, and I don't know what to do."

Master Li had me hold the Weasel still. He examined the red eyes, and a dry tongue that had a peculiar yellow fuzz coating it, like fur, and he probed small swollen bulges like boils on the man's groin and armpits.

"Did he complain of headache and lethargy?"

"Yes, Venerable Sir."

"Followed by fever, and a peculiar reaction to light?"

"Yes, Venerable Sir! He screamed that light was burning him!"

Master Li straightened up and squared his shoulders. "My dear, I promise nothing," he said gently. "We must hope and pray, and to that end I'll need food, wine, some paper money, twelve red threads, and a White Tiger Great-Killer-Thunder."

I knew it was all up with the Weasel. Master Li resorts to faith healing only when he wants to give the grieving something to do, and now he opened the tiny window that looked out over mazes of rooftops of Peking, and muttered, "One hundred thousand White Tiger Great-Killer-Thunders, and it still may not be enough."

"Sir?" I said.

"Not enough, Ox. Not if Envy has his way." Then he shook himself like a dog shedding water, and added, "Hell, I'm probably imagining things. Let's do what we can."

That meant cutting a tiger shape from a piece of paper and writing on it, "The Unicorn Is Here!" This invokes the auspicious star that neutralizes baneful influences, and I cut the sick man's arm to draw enough blood to stain the tiger red. The Weasel's wife had brought the other things, and the two of us knelt in prayer while Master Li spread his arms above the patient.

"Weasel, having fallen ill on a *jen-hsu* day you have collided in the north with the Divine Killer with Hair Unbound Who Flies in the Heavens," the old man intoned as a priestly chant. "In the south you have encountered the Vermilion Bird, and in the east you have met the Five Specters, but it is in the west where danger lies, for there you have angered the Tiger Who Is the End of Autumn, the Edge of Metal, the White of Mourning, and the End of the Great Mystery."

Master Li spread water and incense around and lifted his eyes and arms to the west.

"O Divine White Tiger of the Despoiling Demons of the Five Directions, of the Talismans of Sickness and Ruin of the Year, of the Gate of Mourning and the Funeral Guest and the Spirits of the Dead, of the Celestial Departments and Terrestrial Forests, of the Earth and of Heaven, of the Seventy-two *Hou* and the Eight Trigrams and the Nine Palaces and the Central Palace Thunder, O Great Lord Tiger who enters houses and carries out great massacres, O Tiger who lies in wait beside the road and behind the well, O Tiger who lurks behind the stove and in the hall, O Tiger who stands beside the bed and behind the door of each dwelling, O Tiger who must enter into all fates, O White Tiger, Great White Tiger, your humble servant the Weasel has grossly insulted you, and we bring you his food! We bring you his wine! We bring you his money! We bring you his blood!"

Master Li signaled for the wife to rise and make offerings of food, wine, and money after touching each item to the bloodstained paper tiger.

"O Tiger, eat of the Weasel's food, and take away with his food the Divine Killer of Ascents and Descents and the Beginning and Ending of All Roads! O Tiger, drink

of the Weasel's wine, and take away with his wine the Large Dead King and the Small Dead King Who Pulls Out the Intestines and Drains the Stomach! O Tiger, take away the Weasel's money as you take away the Divine Killer One Meets as One Moves the Bed and Replaces the Matting, and the Killer Who Drives In Stakes and Puts Up Enclosures! O Tiger, Great White Tiger, eat of the blood upon this talisman of your sacred image, for it is the blood of your offending servant, and if your anger still demands his death, we offer his body in sacrifice."

Master Li pulled straw from the patient's pallet and swiftly twisted it into a man-shaped doll. He touched the doll all over with the bloodstained tiger image.

"You that are nothing but a body of straw have been touched by White Tiger Great-Killer-Thunder, and lo! you have become the body of the Weasel," Master Li chanted.

He signaled, and the Weasel's young wife connected twelve red threads to the straw doll and touched the other ends to her husband's body, and Master Li made hieratic passes as he coaxed the last sickness demons to cross the bridges of the threads from the Weasel into the doll. Then Master Li removed the threads, symbolically cutting each one. He passed the doll three times over the Weasel's stomach and four times over his back, and finally he raised the doll on high and plunged his knife through it.

"Behold, Ye Who Are the Beginning of all Endings and the Ending of all Beginnings, he who has offended you is dead! Great White Tiger, Lord of the Universe, your triumph is now complete!" the sage cried.

The Weasel had been in delirium throughout all this, but the mind is a strange creature. Somehow something got through, and he calmed and breathed much easier, and his fever had almost vanished when we left. Nonetheless, Master Li immediately proceeded to the neighbors to make sure help was ready and waiting when the worst happened. He has great respect for faith healing, but there are limits.

When we wound back through the labyrinth and out into the Alley of Flies the sage stopped at One-Eyed Wong's refuse mound, stinking in the heat. It was sunset. Again the Yellow Wind compensated for lack of clouds to form an incredibly gaudy sky, and rainbow colors played through the seams and wrinkles of the old man's hand as he swatted flies away and reached down and came up with a dead rat, swinging it by the tail. He tossed the thing to me.

"Any visible cause of death?" he asked.

I looked it over. "No, sir," I said.

He tossed a rotten squash away and swung a second dead rat over to me. "And this?"

"Not a mark on it," I said after I examined it.

He tossed more garbage aside and produced three more dead rats, all unmarked so far as I could tell.

"Well, what do we have here?" he asked. "Five consecutive coronaries? Five simultaneous suicides? Five adverse reactions to bee stings at the same time in the same alley?"

He picked up another piece of junk from the pile and looked at it gloomily.

"How about five early victims of a disease that has the capability to spread very rapidly?" he said. "You know, Ox, we tend to sneer at the medical ignorance of our ancestors. Brilliant in other matters, perhaps, but childlike when it came to science. For example, when they finally got around to devising a written word for 'plague' the best they could do was to attach the radical for 'rat' to the character for 'sickness.' Childlike, wasn't it?"

He was still looking at the piece of junk in his hands. It was the remains of a cylindrical parchment shade that fit on a revolving rim around an oil lamp. Eight views of a moving horse were drawn on it, each one having the feet in a different position, and when the heat of the wick made the shade turn round and round the effect of movement was amazing.

"Pacing Horse Lantern," Master Li muttered. "Pacing…horse…lantern…." Whatever was trying to work up through his mind didn't quite make it, and he shrugged and tossed the thing back to the mound, "Oh hell. I was talking about rats, and speaking of the creatures, let's go see what's been learned about our mandarins."

What we learned wasn't good. Every single one that Wong's men had been able to trace had gone to hiding in the most unreachable place in Peking: the barracks of the Black Watch. It's actually inside the walls of the Forbidden City, separated from the sacred confines by another interior wall, through a gate in which the soldiers can charge to the aid of the emperor—or the eunuchs. One reaches the barracks from the Imperial City through a sloping tunnel leading under the moat, and no place is more heavily guarded.

"Li the Cat is gathering his kittens around him," Master Li muttered. "Damn it! Something big is scheduled, and soon, and I don't know quite enough to ask the right questions. Even if I had somebody to ask questions of," he growled. "Still, two mandarins are unaccounted for, and Wong's men are out looking. Better get some rest, Ox. It's going to be a long night."

❁ ❁ ❁

Yen Shih was dressed in black, with a great lord's winged hat, and a scarlet sash around his waist. His black cloak billowed in the stinging Yellow Wind as he gracefully waved toward a landscape of cracked dry earth baking in heat waves.

"This puppet play, Ox, requires a proper setting," Yen Shih said, and his voice was soft and melancholy. "A setting for shrieking phoenixes, shivering hares, toothless

tigers, crying mole crickets, half-starved horses, drooling dragons, blind owls, weeping camels, and old aching turtles endlessly dying in dry wells."

Yen Shih strode forward into the heat waves. I tried to keep up but he was melting in mirages, and I stopped short with a hard stinging pain in my heart when I saw an old cottage standing forsaken on desolate dead cracked ground. It was my cottage, and this was all that remained of my village, and tears blinded me. Something lived, however. I could hear a sound and I tried to run toward it, groping through sweat and illusions woven from hot rising air. Suddenly I stepped through miasma into clear light and green grass and moving figures.

"Goat, goat, jump the wall,
Grab some grass to feed your mother,
If she's not in field or stall,
Feed it to your hungry brothers
One…two…three…four…five…six…seven…eight!"

The laughing children ran over a low hill, and I turned eagerly to Yu Lan. The lovely shamanka strummed the bars of a cage, and my eyes blinked shut when light flashed, and when I opened them she was making the ritual gesture. I touched my eyebrows and my nose, and Yu Lan opened her hand to display another of the tiny two-pronged pitchforks.

As I stepped closer I saw beads of perspiration on her forehead, and I could have sworn there was a look of desperation in her eyes. Yu Lan reached out and took my hand and turned and pulled me rapidly toward the well. Again I lowered us down in the bucket, and again something growled below, and again I smelled the stench of rotting flesh. I swung to the hole and we made it into the little tunnel, but this time Yu Lan didn't stop.

The shamanka took my hand again and began to run. We ran through twisting passages lit by green phosphorescence, and finally we reached a stone shelf and I gazed down into a great cavern. I gasped and jumped back in fear because it was filled with immense coiled serpents, but Yu Lan tugged me forward again and started down stone steps, and then I saw they weren't serpents but coiled pipes of some sort, connecting at junctions to smaller ones, and then smaller and smaller, and finally eight tiny pipes ran into eight small boxes in two groups, four on the left and four on the right.

Yu Lan reached down and opened the lid of one of the boxes. There was a small rack inside. Her eyes lifted to mine, and the two-pronged pitchfork lifted to her lips. She gently blew between the tines and placed the pitchfork on the rack, where it fit perfectly. She closed the lid.

Mist was swirling. Cool refreshing raindrops pattered down, and rainbows were wrapping around us, and I reached out to take the shamanka in my arms. She was smiling at me, her lips parted and her eyes half closed. Then her eyes opened wide and she gasped. Yu Lan jumped backward into the mist, and her voice was filled with pain and loss and fear.

"No! Please, no!"

Something terrible was attacking the shamanka. Mist made it indistinct, but I saw a flash of teeth like fangs in the area of her head, and claws at her waist. A great thick terrible slithering thing was at her legs, and I tried to reach her but I couldn't. I was running blindly into clouds of mist like heat waves, and everything was twisted and distorted. Yu Lan's voice reached me from very far away.

"Ox, the boats! Both boats must race! Both of them! One boat must not race unchallenged!"

Then the voice was gone, and the shamanka was gone, and the mist was gone, and I was lying on a pallet in the Wineshop of One-Eyed Wong beside Master Li, and bright moonlight was pouring through the window, and the Yellow Wind was hissing like a great scratching cat against the roof tiles of Peking. I rolled over and shook the old man's shoulder. He awakened in an instant.

"Sir, I can't explain it, but something is wrong with Yu Lan," I said urgently. "I don't know where she is, but she's in bad trouble, and unless you have a better idea I'd like to get to her father's house as fast as possible."

He looked at me for a moment. Then he hopped up and prepared to climb on my back. "Why not. We aren't getting anywhere here," he snarled.

Yen Shih's house was dark and quiet as we turned through the gates. Master Li slid down from my back and hid behind a post with his throwing knife cocked behind his right ear as I stepped forward in moonlight and hammered on the door. All I heard was echoes.

"Yen Shih!" I shouted. More echoes answered me. "Yu Lan! Hello the house!"

Something stirred and I jumped back and looked up and saw a curious cat looking down at me from a corner of the roof, and then there was a sudden outburst of sounds, wheels rattling, horses' hooves pounding like a bamboo grove exploding in a brushfire, and I had to leap out of the way to avoid being crushed as a black carriage pulled by a team of four horses raced into the courtyard from the stables. Ten horsemen served as outriders, black-cloaked, hats pulled low, swords glittering in moonlight, and more men clung to the sides and back of the carriage, holding on very professionally with one hand while the other wielded a short spear. In an instant they had come and gone, racing out the gate and down the street, and Master Li stuck a leg out and tripped me as I ran after them.

"Ox! You can't catch them, and you know damn well you can't follow where they're going," he shouted at me, and then he grabbed my arm and held on. "You'd

only get killed, and what would that accomplish? All we can do is wait until morning when the gates open to the Forbidden City."

He was right, of course. I had recognized the insignia. Those men were of the Black Watch, and their carriage would soon roll down the tunnel and beneath the moat into the barracks where the mandarins had taken shelter, and to try to sneak in at night would be suicide.

"But, sir…sir…."

He squeezed my shoulder. He'd seen what I had when wind whipped window curtains aside and moonlight poured in. Four people occupied the carriage. Three, laughing as they rode away with their prize, were Hog and Hyena and Jackal. The fourth was Yu Lan.

"Come. Her father may have been here, and if so he may need our help," Master Li said.

So now we searched for the puppeteer, or his body, but Yen Shih wasn't in the house. Instead we found a sealed missive that had been left in plain sight on a table in the little entrance hall and it was addressed not to Yen Shih but to Master Li. He opened it. The script was elegant scholar's shorthand, unintelligible to me, and Master Li read it aloud.

> "Most esteemed Li-tzu, supreme among scholars, unchallenged among seekers after truth, greetings. This unworthy one begs the honor of your company in order to discuss the future of the young lady who has sought to improve her position by entering our humble household. Should your young assistant and the lady's talented father care to join you they will be more than welcome, and so desirous am I to bask in your glorious light that each hour of darkness will be agony."

The old man raised his eyes. "It's signed by Li the Cat," he said quietly. "Ox, don't get overly concerned about 'each hour of darkness will be agony.' Eunuchs like to play around with elegant threats, and Yu Lan is not only a shamanka, she's one of the best I've ever encountered. She isn't defenseless. Now let's check the stable for her father, and if he isn't there we'll get more men from Wong's to search the city for him."

The stable was dark and deserted. The moon was so brilliant that I realized a sand haze must have partially obscured it before, and the wind was causing a branch to move back and forth. The shadow of the branch moved across the shining canvas of the puppeteer's great wagon and the image looked amazingly like a maid mopping a floor. Back and forth, back and forth.

"Pacing Horse Lantern," said Master Li, who was standing very still.

Then he ran forward and jumped up into the wagon. I followed, searching for Yen Shih, but Master Li was looking for something else. He had clambered up on the walkway above the stage and was examining the maze of gears and wires and wheels. Puppets dangled below, swinging slowly as the wind reached them, and I realized that the *Hayseed Hong* set was still in place. Suddenly Master Li spun a wheel and set a pendulum swinging, and I stared as a door in the set swung open. Out came two crooks carrying a pig, followed by Hayseed Hong, followed by the magistrate's wife, followed by the occupants of a bedchamber who had no clothes on and whose eyes were like saucers. Master Li started another pendulum and the magistrate puppet sprang to life, bending to a keyhole, reeling back in horror with a forearm covering his eyes while behind him the mad procession moved in and out of another bedchamber. It was quite eerie to see puppets move to the moan of wind rather than howls of laughter. They continued to move for some time after the sage climbed down, and then once more they dangled limply on wires, slowly swinging to and fro.

Master Li took a deep breath. "Well, Ox, you always knew you'd come to a terrible end if you continued to assist me," he said.

"Yes, sir," I said. I was so miserable with fear for Yu Lan that I really didn't care one way or another, but I went through the motions. "Which terrible end did you have in mind?" I asked.

"That's up to Li the Cat," he replied. "I've just realized we have no choice but to try swan dives into boiling oil, so we're going to accept his kind invitation. The moment the gates to the Forbidden City open we're going to pay him a call, and if you can sleep during the hours until then you'll be immortalized by P'u Sung-ling, Recorder of Things Strange."

21

The morning of the double fifth is traditionally one of the busiest times of the year. Before dawn on the fifth day of the fifth moon the streets of Peking were already crowded with people, and I knew some of them.

Mrs. Wu of the bakery was standing in line at the shop of the Persian alchemist to buy arsenic, sulphur, and cinnabar mixed into an insect repellent lotion, and her next stop would be a public scribe's booth to buy a paper stencil of the written word "king." Then she would hurry home and apply the stencil and lotion to her sleeping children to give each one the 王 mark on his forehead. It resembles the wrinkles on the forehead of a tiger. Even sickness and bad luck run away from tigers, and it's most effective for children early on the fifth day of the fifth moon.

Old P'i-pao-ku, "Leatherbag Bone," was Mrs. Wu's grandmother, and she was waiting at the confectioner's to get hard sugar decorations of the five poisonous insects (centipede, scorpion, lizard, toad, snake) to spread over the top of her *wu tu po po* cake, which she would purposely make as inedible as possible without being actually deadly. Every family member eats a slice on the fifth day of the fifth moon, and sickness demons stare at people capable of eating stuff like that and go elsewhere.

Feng Erh, "Phoenix," was the chandler's concubine, and she was waiting for the first finger of sunlight to reach a patch of grass she had staked out in a park. She would pluck a hundred blades and put them in a jar and walk straight home without looking left, right, or back. Boiling water would be added to the jar to make Hundred Grass Lotion that the whole family would use as a cure-all until the next double fifth.

Ko Sheng-erh never had any luck. His name means "Left Over from a Dog," and he had idiotically gone up on his roof to fix some thatching three days ago, and he was waiting for a down-at-heels shaman to open shop and chant "Grow, grow, grow!" at his head, not that it would do any good, because everyone knows that working on a roof during the fifth moon will cause you to go bald.

T'ien-chi, "Field Chicken," was a God Boy, meaning a male prostitute, who wasn't getting any younger and he was waiting with his best friend, Lan-chu, "Lazy Pig," an

ageing courtesan. They had been saving for years, and they were disguised in beggars' rags as they clutched sacks of gold and waited at the door of Szu Kui, "Dead Ghost," a mysterious magus three times arisen from the grave, who would sell them pieces of polished cedar wood, hollowed out and filled on the fifth day of the fifth moon with twenty-four beneficial and eight poisonous ingredients, and if they used the logs as pillows for one hundred consecutive nights the lines on their faces would smooth out, and after four years their youth would be completely restored. The ingredients are a closely guarded secret, but Master Li once told me they included cassia, ginseng, dry ginger, magnolia, broomrape, angelica, plumeless thistle, kikio root, Chinese pepper, japonica, aconite seeds and root, slough grass, and cockscomb.

The Imperial Way was jammed almost from the Phoenix Towers to the Altar of Earth and Grain with the crowd waiting for the Meridian Gate to open and admit them to the Forbidden City: aristocrats in sedan chairs and palanquins and blue-painted carriages; merchants and entrepreneurs in donkey carts with canvas hoods emblazoned with crimson slogans praising the occupants' genius; scholars ostentatiously listening only to little songbirds they carried in bamboo cages at the ends of long poles; petitioners of all sorts who wore artistically ripped rags to prove the hazards of their journeys and waved buffalo horn lanterns to show they had traveled without rest day and night; legions of secretaries, battalions of bureaucrats, armies of clerks. Rumors flew as thickly as the flocks of vultures that circle a peace conference, and leading the list was the news that for the first time in a thousand years there might not be a Dragon Boat Race. There were four principal reasons:

1) Six reliable members of the Tanners' Guild had seen a white bird (white is the color of mourning) fly over North Lake carrying a burning candelabrum, following the exact route the race would take.

2) At the exact same time a huge lizard had appeared at the Bakers' Guild dock and breathed flames over their Dragon Boat, reducing it to cinders.

3) The ghost of Emperor Wen had walked into the great hall of the Salt Monopoly and passed right through the hull of their Dragon Boat while wailing, "Beware the fifth day of the fifth moon!"

4) The Physicians' Guild had issued a statement saying all the above was rank superstition. What wasn't superstition was seventeen fatalities in the past ninety-six hours from a disease that looked suspiciously like a form of plague, and the authorities would be wise to consider canceling any activity that would bring great masses of people into close contact, such as squeezing together on the banks to watch the Dragon Boat Race.

And finally, as a considerable anticlimax, Master Li and I were waiting for the gate to open so we could go in and be killed in a ghastly manner by Li the Cat.

It was not a pleasant period. Pain is bearable because there's a limit to it. The body takes only so much and then goes into shock, but I had plenty of time to think

about clever eunuchs and their little games and I didn't think I could take it if he had me sewn up in a sack with the mangled remains of Yu Lan. Master Li, as usual, kept his own counsel. It was quite impossible to tell from his face whether he was agonized or bored, and when the gate did open and our palanquin carried us toward the Palace of Eunuchs he decided to entertain me with a witty travelogue, pointing out things that should certainly be interesting since I wasn't likely to see much else on this earth. I must admit that little stuck, although I do remember the "prettiest and most pathetic prison in the world," the Garden of Dispossessed Favorites, where imperial concubines who lacked the means to properly bribe eunuchs were sent to live lives of celibacy, after having been slandered and removed from favor. Lonely ladies were made to suspire in the shadow of the Tower of Raining Flowers, which is a tall white cylindrical structure capped with a pink dome, from the top of which splashes a river of white oleander blossoms. "The delicacy of the deballed is somewhat overrated," observed Master Li.

I remember nothing else until we came in view of the eunuchs' palace. "Notice, my boy, how eunuchs have cleverly arranged to have their quarters rise a good fifty feet higher than the neighboring Palace of Southern Fragrance, where portraits of the emperors are displayed. Thus, in China, do the gelded squat above the gilded," said the sage, but I was not in the proper mood to provide an appreciative chuckle.

I doubt that an imperial audience could be more impressive. Massed trumpets and a roll of drums announced the opening of great gilded doors, and a gorgeous creature with a golden censer marched in front of us down a dragon carpet between ranks of soldiers who stood at attention in uniforms of red brocade studded with pearls, with gold-sprinkled turbans emblazoned with the emblem of the double phoenix. The walls of the audience chamber were studded with turquoise, tourmaline, amethyst, topaz, malachite, and opal, and more soldiers stood against them: red armor and a yellow banner with a green dragon at the west wall, blue armor and a white banner with a yellow dragon at the east. Li the Cat sat upon a throne facing south, like an emperor, and as on an imperial throne, the back bore the seven-jeweled pattern and the arms were five-clawed. The eunuch himself was dressed quite simply, however, in a red gown embroidered with flowers and stars, and a hat with a single straight plume that designated a Eunuch of the Presence. As befitted one allowed to attend the emperor, his face glowed with Protocol Soap and his breath was sweet with Chicken Tongue Aromatic, meaning cloves. The only jewelry I could see was the crystal vial on a golden chain around his neck that contained his pickled parts. (Castration in China is total emasculation, performed with a special tool like a small sickle, and the unsexed person keeps the organs to be buried with him so he can be made whole again in Hell.) At the approach of Master Li there was a flurry of bowing by lesser dignitaries, and Li the Cat graciously descended from the throne and offered a courteous greeting as to an equal.

It was impossible to ignore the charm of the eunuch's smile, accentuated as it was by perfectly placed dimples, but I noticed that the smile didn't lift as far as his eyes. They were completely without expression, and cold as first-moon clams.

"Well, Most Exalted One—congratulations on the recent promotion, incidentally—how goes your scientific inquiry into the strength of square holes?" asked Master Li, who seemed to be employing the badinage of the court.

Square holes meant money, of course, and the eunuch modestly displayed a lack of rings. "Paupers and braggarts are reduced to vomiting clouds and spitting out mist, and since gold still flees my fingers I do the best I can with fog."

"And no man in the empire can better becloud an issue," Master Li said warmly. "I've obviously been misled, since I was informed you'd joined me in investing in the tea business."

"Indeed? And how much had you invested?" the eunuch asked blandly.

"Too much," said Master Li. "In fact, I was just thinking about trading my shares for an equal equity in the flower business, although one investing in flowers must first inspect them for aphids or beetles. It's shocking to consider how much damaged merchandise is offered for sale."

"Shocking and silly," Li the Cat said sympathetically. "One continually hears of such things, yet it's such a stupid business practice! After all, one can always get a far higher price for flowers whose beauty is intact. The trade you had in mind was without conditions?"

"Providing the goods are undamaged, yes," Master Li said. "I might even toss in a bonus, for the simple reason that I've become fascinated with certain unusual teas and have some ideas about improving the taste."

"Better and better," the eunuch said warmly. "The taste we've been able to get is just one step up from awful."

I didn't know what to think. Clearly the flower they meant was Yu Lan ("Magnolia"), and clearly Li the Cat was saying she was still in one piece, and clearly Master Li was offering to buy her back in exchange for forgetting he knew anything about the tea racket—but would Master Li really do such a thing? Could Li the Cat be trusted to make an honest trade? It was too much for me, and my head was chasing thoughts in circles as the eunuch led the way out a side door and down a flight of steps. He and Master Li seemed to be getting on splendidly as they quite freely discussed the difficulty of making fake Tribute Tea taste better than donkey piss.

"Your profit margin couldn't stand the expense of enough real hyson to make a significant difference?" Master Li asked.

"It was ruinous. You must remember, Li Kao, that we need to make enormous profits and then get out of the business fast. The chances of winding up as *tsang shen yu* are simply too high," the eunuch said matter-of-factly.

That means "bodies buried in fish bellies," and Master Li nodded sympathetically. "What I had in mind was something nowhere near as costly as pure *choo-cha.* Specifically, a blend of light but acidic Yunnan such as Drunken Concubine Wang with semi-fermented oolong like Iron Goddess of Mercy."

"Expensive!" Li the Cat protested.

"Not if used in minute quantities, and I think I see the way to manage it. But you're right, I've chosen the very finest of the types I have in mind, and experiments involving slightly lesser grades would certainly be called for."

They continued to discuss fake tea like partners, considering the virtues of adding Trouser Seat as opposed to Old Man's Eyebrows, or Purple Fur and Hairy Crab combined to equal the same quantity of White-Haired Monkey, and I was actually charmed by the dimpled smile as Li the Cat stopped and turned and said with an apologetic gesture, "Number Ten Ox, would you mind? I'm quite incapable of moving the thing."

He meant a heavy iron door. I had to grunt as I hauled it open, and then we started down a steep flight of stone steps.

"I apologize for the environment, but the builders provided no other quarters for sudden guests," the eunuch said wryly.

He meant the dungeons, and I briefly thought I was getting all too familiar with dank dripping stone walls covered with rotting lichen, clanging metal doors, guards stamping heavy nail-studded boots, weeping sounds from cells, and all the rest of the atmosphere that so frequently embraces those who accompany Master Li. Li the Cat delicately held his nose. I wanted to ask about Yu Lan, but what could I say? Whether or not she was in one piece she would be down here, and we reached the end of the corridor, where two guards flanked an iron door, and at the eunuch's gesture they tugged and panted and finally got the door open. We entered into darkness.

A light flickered, a wick flared up, and we saw the bright points of a circle of spears aimed at us.

"What is the meaning of this?" Master Li asked.

"Li Kao, how is it that a man who has seen so many moons speaks with a mouth still redolent of mother's milk?" the eunuch said contemptuously. "Did you seriously think I would bargain with an antique? Frankly I am disappointed to find a senile petitioner where I hoped to enjoy a formidable opponent, but I will at least honor the man you once were."

Yes, first-moon clams, I thought as I watched the eunuch's eyes in the lamplight. No more emotion than a sea creature reaching into the food chain. But then I decided I was wrong.

"You have annoyed and inconvenienced me," Li the Cat said softly. "Not many

people can do that, and therefore I shall honor you with the most remarkable last minutes known to man."

That wasn't clam-cold. A tic momentarily disturbed the perfect dimples, and then the eunuch turned and marched out. The soldiers closed around us and in seconds we were chained to two thick wooden posts in the center of a circular cell, and then the soldiers marched out and slammed the iron door shut, taking the lamp with them. Pitch-blackness closed around us. I listened to my heart pound, and then to the slow drip of water from the rank lichen-covered stone walls.

"I'll be damned," Master Li finally said. His voice was slightly incredulous. "I didn't dare dream we'd be so lucky. Is this some sort of trick?"

What could I say. I was trying to get my tongue unwrapped from my larynx, and that might take days.

"I thought he'd at least string us from the ceiling by our heels, although there are very good reasons why he wouldn't ruin the final effect by wrapping the wires around our balls," Master Li said. "You know, Ox, I've underestimated that creature. I thought it would take an artist to understand that the best torture would be none, since pain creates its own universe in which further considerations are impossible. A greater agony depends upon thought, upon imagination, upon expectation growing wilder and wilder with each drip-drop from dank walls, and then the hideous reality finally appears and it's far worse than imagination can conceive—ah, that is the stroke of artistry! Yes, I've badly underestimated Li the Cat, and I hope I don't do it again."

Again? What did he mean by again? If he meant some tenuous Buddhist concept of a later existence as a mosquito I wasn't interested, but I was interested in a fate far worse than hanging from the ceiling by my balls. What on earth did the eunuch have planned for us? I had to admit that Master Li had a point about subtlety when I noticed that moving my left thumb three inches to touch the chains binding my wrists took six and a half minutes, according to the count of my pulse, and I seemed to be measuring the drip-drop of water in terms of months.

I won't speculate how long it took. All I know is that I wasn't 306 years old at the time—although I would have taken bets on it—when the silence of our cell was shattered by an incredible scream, and then another, and then a ghastly sequence of shrieks, howls, squishy squealing noises, loathsome sucking popping sounds, a final sequence of screams so horrible I thought my bones would shatter like vibrating porcelain, and then silence. A silence that grew to be as horrible as the screams, and was finally broken by slow, sucking, squashing, slithering noises moving toward our cell door.

The door creaked open. A low, squat, hulking black outline was briefly visible against the dim light from the corridor, and then the door squealed shut. The blackness was as heavy as a shroud of velvet soaked in blood. Slithering sounds were slowly

moving toward the stakes we were chained to, and I began to hear something panting moistly. I glimpsed a faint yellow streak that gradually resolved itself into a pair of tiny luminous eyes. A slobbering noise was followed by heavy hard panting, and a hiss of insane excitement, and a spray of spittle: *"—and tell you of the dried oysters of Kwantung! The frogs of Kuei-yang! The summer garlic of south Shensi and the limes of the Yangtze Valley! The clams of the Shantung coast and the sugar crabs of southern Canton and the dried ginger and thorn honey of Chekiang!"* shrieked Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu.

22

My mouth burned as bile and stomach acid surged up around my teeth. A red haze replaced the blackness, and a high buzzing noise filled my ears. Then the happy thought that this must be one of the recurring nightmares in which I was a helpless victim of the hosteler flooded my mind, washing terror away, and I almost laughed with relief as the red haze faded and the buzzing sound died down. I was rewarded with pale luminous yellow eyes moving even closer, and soft fingers like worms crawling over my left cheek, and excited spittle flying like ocean spray.

"The sago cakes of central Honan, and desert thorn honey with almonds from—"

"Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu—"

"But you must know! A record must be left! Finest of all caviars is roe of the Yangtze sturgeon simmered in a decoction of the seeds of the honey locust!"

"Hosteler Tu!" Master Li shouted. "You know very well that you hyperventilate and collapse in gustatory orgasms after you've murdered and mutilated in your inimitable manner, and I've told you a hundred times that it will be the death of you! Now get hold of yourself before you suffer a stroke, and you might begin by unlocking these damned chains."

I had lost my mind, that was it. Terror had driven me completely insane. So much so that I imagined I was hearing keys click in locks, and the rattle of Master Li's chains falling to the stone floor. Splayed froglike fingers slid over my ankles to the lowest locks, and I stopped breathing.

"Sorry, Ox," Master Li was saying apologetically. "I thought you'd be better off not knowing about this little precaution. You see, before leaving the Celestial Master's house when we learned the poor little maid had been murdered, I asked about the dog."

"S-s-s-sir?"

"The dog, Ox. Remember that the maid had been carrying a sick dog the first time we saw her? Well, the dog died."

"Died?"

The old man sighed in exasperation, and then relented and said in a kindly voice, "Yes, my boy: The…dog…died. The maid's murderers had been carrying a note supposedly written by the Celestial Master, authorizing their admittance, and that was very much on my mind when I went to Devil's Hand to find out who had ordered such an execution. When the Celestial Master's signature again popped up, I decided I had better plan for the worst."

This, I decided, would probably begin to make sense in a month or two, if I survived that long.

"The eunuchs," Master Li said, "are always after Devil's Hand to find them truly monstrous executioners for their own dungeons, so I arranged for the release of Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu and his transfer to the prison of the Palace of Eunuchs. I assumed he'd have no difficulty taking over as king of the butchers, and apparently I was right."

A series of moist snickers suggested that Hosteler Tu was enjoying himself. "The others were rather jealous, but eventually they saw the effectiveness of my little ways," he said.

"And felt it as well, no doubt," Master Li said. "I assume they were the ones screaming their heads off just now?"

"Oh, I could have done better!" the hosteler protested. I could hear the soft wet smack of his long froglike tongue against his flabby moist lips. "One needs time for such things if art is to be fully honored."

"Hosteler, you're preaching to the converted," Master Li said dryly. "Don't you recall that we were once guests in your very peculiar cellar? Ox, you might as well know the rest of it. Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu is to do his best to aid us in escaping from the eunuchs' dungeons, and then we're to do our best to aid his escape from the authorities. He gets three months to settle where he likes and get back in business, and then we go after him again."

"Oh no. Not again," I faintly whispered.

"But, Ox, it was so exciting!" the hosteler hissed.

Exciting? He thought that ghastly chase had been as entertaining as a horse race or a sled down an icy slope? Suddenly I was free of chains. I felt like a dog released from a tether and I almost bolted and ran into a wall, but then the image of a dog stuck in my mind. A small sick dog on a silken pillow carried by a little maid with silly slippers, and I heard the voice of the Celestial Master chanting archaic words like a priestly chant. "If it continues to feel ill, anoint it with clarified fat of the leg of a snow leopard. Give it drink from eggshells of the throstle thrush filled with juice of the custard apple, in which are three pinches of shredded rhinoceros horn. Apply piebald leeches, and if it still succumbs remember that no creature is immortal and you too must die."

Master Li had checked. The dog had succumbed. "And you too must die," said the Celestial Master. You too must die…you too must die….

I snapped out of my reverie as the cell door creaked open. Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu was tugging at it, and dim torchlight played over his unpleasant features and those of Master Li, and I trotted out after them into the corridor. Master Li took the great ring of keys from a hook on the wall and began unlocking cell doors, but prisoners didn't stream out. They were all huddled in corners in fetal positions with their hands over their ears, trying to block the screams the junior executioners had made when the hosteler got his hands on them, and I doubted that any would dare to move.

"Hosteler, last night the Black Watch brought in another prisoner. A girl named Yu Lan. Do you know anything about her?" Master Li asked.

"No, I have heard of no girl."

"Anything unusual?"

"Yes," the hosteler said thoughtfully. "A number of prisoners condemned to death have been taken from their cells to some other holding place where they are to be dedicated for a ceremony sometime today."

"Dedicated? You mean like animals for slaughter?" the sage asked.

"I assume so. Rumor has it that the ceremony is to be held in the eunuchs' courtyard at the time of the solstice," said Hosteler Tu.

Master Li was silent for a time. Then he whispered, "Yes, that might do it. The August Personage of Jade is hot-tempered, and if Heaven turns its back…." Then he broke from his reveries and snapped, "Hurry. We have to get up to the courtyard where that ceremony is to take place."

Hosteler Tu knew part of the underground labyrinth, and what he didn't know firsthand Master Li could fill in theoretically, from architects' plans seen fifty years ago and never forgotten. Like everything else in the Forbidden City, the Golden River is artificial, and a marvelously effective system allows it to pour prettily over a fall and then travel uphill so it can splash down another. The water boils down through crevices into connecting caverns where huge waterwheels lift it level by level to the desired height, and then back up to the surface. We slipped through side passages from the dungeons into caverns that reminded me somewhat of the Sixth Hell. Cursing overseers lashed rows of slaves who powered great horizontal wheels connected to vertical ones, and water splashed incessantly as immense buckets lifted and vanished through crevices in the roof. One good thing was the noise level, which meant we wouldn't be heard as we made our way along a narrow path close to the overseers. The misty spray from the water helped hide us as well, and I was just thinking how lucky we were when one overseer turned to another.

"Did you hear the latest?" he shouted. "The guilds made it official! They've canceled the Dragon Boat Race, and they even canceled their banquets!"

I could have strangled him.

"Tragic, even though the banquet of the Beggars' Guild is totally unimaginative," said Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu. "Eleven courses for beggars of the first and second degrees, seven courses, two jars of wine, and a box of salted meats to take home for third degree beggars, five courses, two jars of wine, and a box of preserved fruits for the fourth degree, and fifth through seventh degree beggars receive three courses, one wine jar, and no home box."

His voice was getting louder and louder as he warmed up, and I tried to clap a hand over his mouth. The trouble was that we had to walk single file and he could easily fend me off unless I wanted to start wrestling and really give us away.

"The Merchants' Guild, on the other hand, is a credit to civilization and cancellation of their banquet is a national tragedy," the hosteler said loudly. "Even the lowest degrees, seventh through fifth, receive birds' nests, pigs' trotters, domestic duck, chicken, and three kinds of pork. Merchants of the fourth and third degrees are entitled to the same plus shark fins, salmon, and fried lamb. These courses are also offered to second and first degree merchants who additionally receive bear paws, deer tails, goose, crabs, and mussels. The merchants of the Mongolian guild, however—"

"Hosteler Tu!" hissed Master Li.

"But you must know!" yelled Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu. *"It must be recorded that guilds are allowed local delicacies, and in Mongolia they add for all degrees slices of mutton dipped in a mixture of raw eggs beaten with chopped ginger and then seared over charcoal fires!'*

That did it. Overseers wheeled around and yelled for soldiers, and an officer and ten men appeared out of nowhere and charged with spears, and after that things got very confusing. We'd backed into a wall that was almost beneath one of the great rising waterwheels, and the spray that closed around us was blinding, and the noise of wheel and water blocked out almost everything else. Li the Cat hadn't bothered to have Master Li's throwing knife taken away—after all, we'd been chained to posts—and he was able to fend for himself. I was trying to pick up one soldier and use him as a battering ram against others, but that left most of the work to the hosteler, and I will freely admit that of all the killers I've encountered few could come within leagues of Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu. Those long webbed fingers, those sharp-pointed teeth filling a mouth that could stretch wide enough to swallow a muskmelon, the feet that slipped from sandals to reveal prehensile toes planned for strangling, that soft unresisting body absorbing the hardest blows like a feather pillow, and then falling in folds over a victim and clogging air passages like an obscene shroud of flabby fat. All the while the hosteler giggled, mind you, and his reptilian tongue flicked happily over his lewd lips—still, not even Hosteler Tu could ignore blows from a dagger.

When I finally staggered up from my pile of bodies and looked around I saw Master Li apparently unhurt, but the hosteler had been battling the bulk of them

and now he had his arms around the last, the officer, crushing him in a bear hug. The officer was stabbing the hosteler in the back with his dagger, again and again, and then the two of them toppled to the ground beside the water, wrapped in their final bloody embrace. There was a gasp and a sickening snapping sound, and the officer twitched and lay still. Master Li knelt beside the hosteler and examined him.

"I'll be damned. He's still alive."

The hosteler's eyes opened.

"Hosteler Tu, I wanted to ask you something very important," Master Li said, speaking slowly and carefully. "I have reason to believe that Number Ten Ox has been receiving a message, again and again, but the meaning has been disguised because to impart it is taboo."

Me? A taboo message?

"I also have reason to believe that the disguise is formed from slang of the first Dragon Boat Race, slang which your people may still preserve," Master Li said. "The first slang term is 'mother.'"

Hosteler Tu's eyes were partially focused on this world and partially on the next. "Mother? Boat race?" he whispered. "The mother is the same as *t'ou,* the head, meaning the boss of the boat. Mother stands on the high prow and sends commands with long flowing scarves, but what you must understand is that the Merchants' Guild of Canton offers all degrees an additional course of *fo siu u,* 'roast pork fish,' which actually does taste a little like pork but is poisonous if cooked with broccoli."

"Hosteler Tu, the next word is 'grass,'" Master Li said urgently.

"Grass is slang for *k'i,* the scarves used by mother to send commands. They're green with white tips and look like tall grass waving in the wind, and in Shanghai the guild adds herrings called 'little father's eldest sisters,' and—"

"'Brothers,' Hosteler Tu, the word is 'brothers,'"Master Li said.

"Brothers, yes, oh yes. Eight of them. Four in front of the wall and four behind. Lead oarsmen who set the stroke, and they wear red bandannas and have red ribbons around their oar handles, and in Shanghai they also add a delicious threadfin called 'horse-friend-gentleman-fish,' which is—"

"Hosteler Tu, you just mentioned the 'wall.' What is it?" Master Li asked.

"The wall is the raised platform in the center of a Dragon Boat, where the drummer takes the commands of the mother and transmits them with his beat," the hosteler whispered.

He was sinking fast. Master Li raised his voice to shout directly in the hosteler's ear.

"Hosteler, I assume the ancient *wu hing* system of parallels was in place, so 'field' means east and 'stall' means west, but I must know about the goat!" the sage yelled. "What is…the…goat?"

I thought Hosteler Tu was dead. Then his eyes opened, and they were perfectly clear, and his voice was firm.

"The *shao*, the steering oarsman of a dragon boat, is always called the goat for two reasons," he said as if lecturing. "First, he butts head with almost the entire stern while wrestling with his oar, and second, he's an outsider who's expected to take the blame if the boat loses. A goat is a professional, a hired oar. No amateur can handle a hunk of wood that stretches forty feet and weighs more than a ton, and no amateur can cook for the guild of Nam Viet, where the additional course is lips of *hsiang-hsiang*, meaning gibbons, seethed in beer made from juice of the areca nut."

His eyes popped wide, staring up at something invisible to the living. A spasm caused him to jerk backward, and then Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu slid down the bank with the dead officer in his arms. They landed in the water and disappeared. Frothy pink bubbles popped to the surface, and a red stain slowly spread and drifted toward the huge lifting buckets of the wheel.

"Farewell, Hosteler," Master Li said softly, and the frothing water answered, "Burp…. Burp…. Burp."

23

We met no more soldiers as Master Li directed me toward one of the staircases that led to gardeners' sheds, but when I took the old man on my back and climbed up and out beside a swirling pool where water was being dumped from a wheel we both received a shock, this time from nature. I was sure the day had passed and it must be midnight at least, but it was only early afternoon, and what an afternoon! The Yellow Wind had closed around Peking with a vengeance, and whirlwinds danced and darted through the city and sent clouds of debris spinning up into the air to sail this way and that and then drift back down to earth like dirty snowflakes made from ripped canvas, reed matting, splintered bamboo, garbage, and dead rats. Sand lashed our faces. Wind howled like wolves as gusts ripped between rows of elegant palaces, and a giant hissing noise came from lashed leaves and scraped tiles. The water of the Golden River was covered with a frothy cloud of spray from the impact of a billion tiny yellow grains, and the sun behind the haze seemed grossly swollen and as red as blood. Rows of blackbirds sat motionless upon towers and parapets, silhouetted against a burning sky.

"Sky-flame," Master Li muttered in my ear. "What happens once can happen twice, even including a Death Birds Ghost Boat Rain Race. Ox, the fastest route to the eunuchs' courtyard is the Golden River, so find a raft and a pole and let's go."

I knocked the shearing blade from the end of a long bamboo tree-trimming pole and ripped the large wooden door from a gardener's shed and tossed it down into the water. It made a good enough raft, with enough buoyancy for the two of us, and I pushed off with the pole and caught what current there was. I rammed the pole rhythmically, shoving with long smooth strokes, and we picked up respectable speed. Several times we plunged down over falls that were too decorative to be dangerous, and soon I could see ahead to our destination, and my heart felt squeezed as I realized the huge basilica I was looking at was the barracks of the Black Watch, where Hog and Hyena and Jackal had taken Yu Lan. In front of it was a low wall that also formed the back wall of the eunuchs' courtyard, between their elegant palace and

the Palace of Southern Fragrance. All this was slightly downhill from us. The Golden River was taking us to falls that frothed down a low stone cliff that was one of the few natural barriers in the Forbidden City, and formed the front wall of the eunuchs' courtyard. I want to clearly establish the scene as viewed from that little cliff. One looked down into a large circular courtyard paved with marble, in the center of which was a raised stone platform around an ancient well that had once been used for sacrifice during religious rites. A second raised platform stood at the base of the cliff so the waterfall could form a dramatic background, and there dignitaries perched in their pride during great occasions. Left was the Palace of Southern Fragrance, right was the eunuchs' palace, and back was the basilica of the Black Watch.

The closer we got, the more clearly I could see that every window and balcony was packed with people gazing down to the courtyard, which was in turn packed with eunuchs and soldiers. When we were close enough to see the river disappear over the cliff Master Li had me pole to shore and lift the raft out. We continued on foot, and when we stuck our heads through some reeds beside the waterfall we were looking almost straight down at the dignitaries' platform, where chairs were arrayed like thrones. In the center sat Li the Cat, flanked by the two powerful eunuchs whose names had been on the list of corporate officers. Then on each side were the chairs of the remaining mandarins of the tea conspiracy, and Master Li's fingers tightened on my shoulder as we saw the five ancient cages beside the thrones.

"It's the cages, Ox," Master Li said quietly. "Now our only hope is to reach those cages before Envy gets to them. If I'm right he only needs one more, and that must not be allowed to happen."

Apparently we had arrived at a pause in some sort of ritual. I hadn't realized how abnormally silent the crowd had been until a vast collective sigh greeted the chief figure of the ceremony, who stepped from behind a screen decorated with sacred symbols. It was the Celestial Master. His cape was decorated with skulls, and behind him came a high priest carrying an ancient stone club on a gold-embossed pillow. They slowly mounted the steps to the platform around the old well. There was a long ritual prayer I couldn't hear and probably wouldn't have understood anyway, and then the ranks of soldiers parted to make way for two lesser priests leading a line of chained prisoners. The first prisoner was released from the lead chain. Still manacled, he was hauled up the steps and kicked down on his knees before the Celestial Master.

The high priest raised his arms and voice to Heaven, chanting something or other, and the Celestial Master raised the stone club above his head. I gaped in disbelief as the club swung viciously down and smashed the skull of the prisoner, and then with a powerful contemptuous kick the ancient saint shoved the corpse to the edge of the well, and it toppled down into darkness. A great cheer rang out from the crowd, and the mandarins applauded. I stared at the sage.

"They've been praying to get the attention of Heaven, and the emperor of Heaven is not likely to be pleased," he said in a hard tight voice. "If the August Personage of Jade has a fault it's his hot temper, and we'd better do something fast before the Doctrine of Disaster gets an unfortunate workout." He punched my arm with short rapid strokes. "The cages, Ox. We must get those cages and we can't worry about risk. Let's go."

"Yes, sir," I said.

A second human sacrifice was being hauled to the Celestial Master's ax, which meant nobody was watching the cliff as I carried Master Li down it. I heard the cheer as again the stone ax crushed a human skull, and I began praying for help. Fervently, but not blindly. I had a very clear image in mind. Where was the puppeteer? If Yen Shih would only appear with that dancing daring light in his eyes, swords in each hand flashing faster than the wings of hawkmoths….

We reached the shallow pool behind the platform and started slogging forward, and then Master Li let out a tiny yelp and stared up and to the left. I gasped as I saw a figure climbing down the wall of the Palace of Southern Fragrance. It was not the figure I'd been praying for, but it was just as powerful, and it was headed straight toward that platform and those cages. Blue cheeks and crimson nose and yellow chin and silver forehead seemed appropriate to the scene that framed them: whirlwinds tossing dark clouds of debris into the air, hissing Yellow Wind, a swollen blood-red sun, gusts howling around palaces.

"Hurry, Ox! He can't get another cage!" Master Li yelled.

I did my best, leaping forward with the old man on my back, vaulting to the platform. I was still on my knees on the platform's edge, preparing to stand and leap, when the great ape man landed light as a leaf between the thrones. He snapped a mandarin's neck with an easy chop of one hand and scooped up his cage, and for a moment the creature's eyes looked directly at me, and at Master Li, and I almost thought I saw amusement in them. Then with two more leaps Envy was off the platform and racing to the wall. One alert soldier managed to hurl a spear that fell five feet short as the ape man began to climb. I could scarcely run as fast as Envy could scale a wall, and in a few seconds he was gone, carrying the cage.

Unfortunately we were still there. The mandarins were shrieking and pointing at us, and squads of soldiers were racing forward, and we were saved from being turned into pincushions by massed arrows because they would have hit mandarins and eunuchs as well, but it was only a brief reprieve. Li the Cat was howling for blood, and the Black Watch was closing around us, and at that instant something happened that caused every head to turn. I thought I had heard the most horrible screams possible when Hosteler Tu had practiced his art down in the dungeon, but I was wrong. These screams were even worse, and they were coming from the Black Watch's basilica, and my eyes jerked that way along with everyone else's.

Just above the level of the intervening wall was a long balcony in front of apartments on one of the upper floors, and Hyena and Jackal were staggering along it. They were stark naked, and they screamed in unimaginable agony as they tore their hair and rent their flesh. Hog followed, also naked, with a naked girl riding on his back. It was Yu Lan. Hog howled as horribly as the others as he tried to pluck his eyes out, and I realized that the three men were mad. Hopelessly, horribly insane, and the heat waves that rose around them were causing illusions like dreams, and as in a dream I thought I saw glittering fangs in the blurred area of Yu Lan's lovely head, and terrible claws at her waist, and something scaly and coiling near her legs. The mirage made the beautiful shamanka appear to be laughing with delight as she rode a madman's back—but Master Li was pounding me, jerking at my arm, and I felt him jump from my back.

He was diving for the cages. Li the Cat and the soldiers stood transfixed, staring at the balcony while Master Li snatched a cage from beneath a throne and jerked the brush from it. He squinted at the symbols engraved upon the bars, and then touched the figure of a man at an oar with the tip of the brush, twice.

"Goat, goat, jump the wall," he chanted, and the brush touched the symbol of a drum, "grab some grass to feed your mother"—the brush touched a scarf and a head—"if she's not in field or stall"—the brush moved to the blue dragon of the east and the white tiger of the west—"feed it to your hungry brothers"—the brush moved rapidly over a sequence of rowers—"one… two…three…four…five…six…seven…eight!"

A bright flash blinded me, and when my eyes cleared I was gaping at *Tuan hu*, a great toadlike creature squatting in the center of the platform. Terrible eyes glared at me, the immense mouth opened.

"Ox!"

Master Li was touching the tip of his right forefinger to his left eyebrow, right eyebrow, and the tip of his nose, and I hastened to repeat the sequence I had dreamed of, and the horrible eyes moved away from us. The mouth gaped, a huge tongue flicked out, and streams of burning acid shot over soldiers and mandarins, scorching through flesh and clothing alike.

"Ox, this is what the cages carry! This is what we need!" Master Li yelled.

A small compartment had opened in the bottom of the cage, and Master Li slid his fingers between the bars and pulled out something else I knew from dreams: a tiny object shaped like a pitchfork, but with only two prongs. He swiftly stuck it in his money belt and dove for another cage, and at that point we were overcome by a rapid sequence of startling events.

Mandarins and soldiers shrieked, acid sprayed the platform, and a roaring, howling, furious saint leaped up between writhing bodies. The Celestial Master was

quite out of his mind with fury. He ignored the great demon-deity as he charged Master Li with his stone club, smashing to jelly the head of a mandarin that got in the way. I dove for the Celestial Master's legs just as he tried to decapitate Master Li, and the three of us tumbled over the back edge of the platform and toppled down into the pool beneath the splashing waterfall.

Fortunately my fall had been slowed by water when my head hit a rock beneath the surface. I wasn't quite knocked unconscious, but I had no control of my body until the numbness went away, and I could only watch helplessly as the Celestial Master attacked Master Li. The saint had lost his club in the fall, but immensely powerful hands had closed around the sage's throat and I knew that Master Li had no chance at all. Incessantly lifting waterwheels kept pouring the contents of great buckets into the Golden River, and the water kept pouring and foaming down around us, and something bumped against my legs. It was the body of an officer with a broken back. Then a pair of hands emerged from the spray, reaching around me to grab the hands of the Celestial Master and slowly pry them from Master Li's neck.

"In Singapore the Merchants' Guild offers the remarkably named 'stone-nine dukes,' meaning baby groupers," the clotted gurgling voice of Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu said into my left ear. "It must be recorded that the groupers are steamed in a stew with parrot fish, yellow croakers, and pig-oil butter-cake fish, although certain authorities claim that eating too many stone-nine dukes will cause falling hair, blindness, and bone decay. That, I believe, is a misconception caused by the fact that the written character for the fish is very similar to that for 'apricot,' and apricots, of course, will do all those things if eaten to excess."

Master Li was able to breathe again, and with breath came the ability to free his knife, and he plunged it into the Celestial Master's chest and ripped a great slash. Then he withdrew the blade and repeated the blow, slashing diagonally across the first wound. There was no blood. Not a drop. Then as I gaped in horror I saw two small greenish paws reach out from the cavity and spread ribs apart, and a monkey's head thrust out from the saint's chest. Eyes of hate glared at us. It chattered and spat at Master Li, and then it climbed from the empty shell that was the Celestial Master and splashed through the water to the cliff, and in an instant it was gone, swinging up and away before I'd fully realized where I'd seen it before: a charming little gift monkey bowing to the Celestial Master and being led into the house by an enchanted old servant.

The sage was kneeling in the pool, cradling the body of his old friend and teacher, weeping. I looked up to see Li the Cat staring from the platform, and then the eunuch turned to beckon soldiers. I dove and grabbed the cage from Master Li and jerked the brush from the hole in the top.

"Goat, goat," I panted, "climb the wall…grab some grass to give your mother…

if she's not in field or stall…give it to your hungry brothers…one…two…three…four…five…six…seven…eight!"

I blinked in the flash and hastened to make the propitiating gesture, and above me Li the Cat and the soldiers screamed in terror and dove for safety. My eyes cleared and I was gazing at the terrible but somehow touching Wei Serpent, with its two human heads and its silly hats and its little purple jacket. It was huge, though, and fangs protruded from the mouths of the heads, and great coils slithered and glistened. A panting sound behind me was followed by the body of Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu, who painfully shoved himself toward the demon-deity with his arms outstretched. The hosteler's eyes were glazed in ecstasy, and his voice rang with reverence.

"O fabled Savory Serpent of Serendip, ye shall be bathed in wine and honey warmed by babies' breath! Ye shall be poached in the truffled milk of nursing sea serpents! Ye shall be basted in broth of pearls dissolved in unicorn tears! Ye shall be worshipped! Ye shall be adored!"

Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu spread his arms as wide as possible and wrapped them around the snake in a loving embrace, and the Wei Serpent's coils closed around the hosteler, and for a moment the two of them were still and rapt. Then a flash blinded me, and when my vision cleared a great white crane was skirting a whirlwind, flying away across the bloated surface of the blood-red sun. *

"Ox!"

I tore my eyes from a flying crane to see Master Li scrambling for another cage. I dropped the cage I was still clutching, squawked like a goose, dove back on top of it, and reached inside and pulled out the little two-pronged pitchfork. Then I leaped for another cage and found myself battling the last two mandarins and Li the Cat. The problem was they had three or four soldiers with them and I was pinned between two overturned thronelike chairs as I tried to fend them off with a pike I grabbed from a dead soldier.

The toadlike demon-deity was still spitting acid but it took care not to scorch friends, meaning those who made the proper gesture, so at least I had no problem there. As I tried to keep somebody's spear from becoming my second backbone I heard "…four…five…six…seven…eight!" This time I closed my eyes before the flash, and I opened them to make the propitiating gesture and see the only female sibling,

* Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu was never seen again. Three months later the magistrate in charge of digging up bodies in the hosteler's basement discovered the 214 notebooks of recipes, culinary comments, and aesthetic essays that were to form the backbone of the second-greatest cuisine the world has ever known. Within a year a powerful lobby had formed to press for proper recognition, and in record time all charges against a mad innkeeper disappeared from the ledgers. Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu was elevated to the pantheon, where his godly form is that of a prominent star in the Hyades asterism, and in many parts of China he is still worshipped as Tu K'ang, Patron of Chefs and Restaurateurs.

Nu Pa, who seemed to be a low cloud no more than two feet tall. Then endless arms of fog reached out, and out, and out, and immense hands made of swirling marsh mist opened and fingers touched howling soldiers and screeching eunuchs, and horrible black blisters spread over their faces and bodies and they ran around clawing at the spots, and then they fell and went into convulsions and died.

A black blistered eunuch had rolled screaming between the feet of the men surrounding me. That allowed me to snatch the brush from the last of the cages. "Goat, goat, jump the wall, grab some grass to give your mother, if she's not in field or stall, give it to your hungry brothers: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight!" I closed my eyes tightly, gestured, and opened them to see the end of Li the Cat.

Ch'i is one of the strangest of the demon-deities. Its odor is musty, its color is the grayish white of mourning, its sound is a faint sighing moan, and its form is the winding cloth of a corpse. The limp cloth slid over the platform like a snake and reached a pair of legs and began wrapping around them. Li the Cat stopped shrieking at me and looked down. He hacked with his sword and succeeded only in slicing his left thigh. He yelled and dropped the blade and grabbed with both hands. The cloth was unresisting. It fell away if pulled properly, but it began winding once more as soon as it was released. Now the other end was sliding up the eunuch's back, and a curl of gray-white, musty, moaning burial cloth wrapped around his chest, pinning his arms to his sides. The eunuch was screaming, one shriek after another, and his eyes were bulging in horror. The ends were wrapping faster now, climbing his knees, waist, chest, shoulders, and then they wound around Li the Cat's neck and up over his chin. The crystal vial containing the parts he'd had severed to advance his position in life was shoved up in front of his face, and the cloth wound around and around, and his screams stopped and his horrified eyes disappeared. Only his forehead, glistening with Protocol Soap, and the top of his head remained, and then they too vanished beneath burial cloth. A gray-white cocoon toppled over and wriggled on the platform, and the last I saw of the eunuch he was still wriggling, but slower.

I grabbed the last little pitchfork. Master Li had a running start and he landed high on my back and shouted in my ear, "The well! Get to the well!" I jumped down to the courtyard and vaulted over writhing bodies and jumped back up to the stone platform around the well, and Master Li slid from my back. Acid and marsh pestilence were still seeking victims, and the shrieks were so loud he had to lean close and yell.

"Ox, look down inside the well at the walls and tell me what you see!"

I dropped to my stomach and craned over the edge as far as I could, and my eyes spread even wider than they were already. I got back up and shouted, "The frogs! There's a pattern of frogs around the inside, just like in my dream!"

"We have to go down! Fast!" he yelled.

Unlike my dream, there was no windlass and bucket. I turned and saw that the guards had fled, but the lead chain linking the prisoners had been looped over a post and they couldn't move. The key ring lay upon the marble pavement, so I unlocked the prisoners and let them run for their lives and then I hauled the chains to the well, linked them together, and attached one end to an iron post that might at one time have held a windlass.

It was a lot harder than lowering a bucket, but in one sense it was a great improvement over my dreams. There wasn't any horrible stench of rotting flesh—although there would be when the sacrificial victims began to stink—and there wasn't any frightening growl from below.

"There!"

The light from above was just good enough for us to make out a circular spot on the wall. I started the chain swinging, wider and wider, kicking off from the back wall, and finally my foot found a toehold inside the hole. We made it over the edge into a small low tunnel, and I found a rock to wrap the end of the chain around in case we had to come back. Then we started down a narrow passageway that was partly illuminated by greenish phosphorescence.

A vibration was making small pebbles fall from the stone ceiling. It shook harder and harder, and then air rushed at us and hit like a physical blow. A great sound was forming, turning my bones to jelly, and it resolved itself into a musical note that quite literally hurled me against a wall. Even as I was being battered I recognized it. It was the mysterious sound that had announced the solstice ever since a great musical instrument had been built by Eight Skilled Gentlemen, and quite frankly I had completely forgotten that the solstice was today. I realized with horror that we must be actually *inside* the Yu. This tunnel was one of the pipes, and the sound so far had been merely warming up, a throat clearing, and what would happen if the full sound reached us when we were trapped in a tiny tunnel?

"It's Envy! He's installed the first yang key!" Master Li shouted. "Hurry, Ox, hurry!"

So I hurried with the old man on my back, even though I had no idea what lay in front. If a pit opened in the path we were dead. All I could do was run ahead as fast as I could, almost blindly, and when the second blast of sound came it spun me around like a top.

"There will be two more! Hurry! Hurry!" Master Li yelled.

The next two musical notes were worse because we were closer to the source, but my fear that my eardrums would burst was unfounded. I had been racing downhill, but now the path leveled. The phosphorescence grew brighter, which was a blessing because I was able to see and stop in time, and I panted to a halt at the edge of a cliff overlooking a cavern and there they were: great coiling shapes that weren't serpents

but pipes, connecting to smaller pipes and still smaller ones. I found steps and ran down, and at last we reached eight tiny pipes leading into eight small boxes in two rows, four on each side.

Master Li hopped down. "Left is yang, and all male boxes should be filled," he muttered. He tried to open the lids on the left but they had virtually melded with the grooves. "Yin waits," he said, and he reached to the right and the first lid opened easily.

Inside was a little rack like in my dreams, and I could also see a hole in the bottom leading down through solid rock, probably to the wind-chest below. Master Li had taken out his two little pitchfork things and I gave him my two.

"Some kind of tuning forks, but designed to do something very unusual with sound waves," he said. "One would like to be able to talk to the Eight Skilled Gentlemen and ask a few questions."

He placed the first tuning fork in the rack, where it fit perfectly, and closed the lid, which sealed itself tightly in place. The old man repeated the performance with the remaining three forks and boxes, and then turned and walked rapidly into the shadows. When I trotted up beside him I saw the gates. There were two pairs of immense iron gates side by side. The ones on the left stood open and the ones on the right were closed, and Master Li walked to the closed gates on the female side. A great vibration was beginning, and then the first of the yin notes blasted against us. I held Master Li to keep him from being blown away, and as the sound faded the great gates swung slowly open.

We walked through, and then I stopped in my tracks and stared. We were walking on a path of stone between two wide channels. The channel to the left was filled with water, but what water! It seemed to be made of vibrating translucent air with rainbow colors woven through it, and Master Li exclaimed in delight as he saw it.

"Remember Hosteler Tu, Ox? The Yu was built by the Eight Skilled Gentlemen to make music that turned into water. Well, here it is, and here comes some more."

The channel on the right had been dry, but now the vibrations of the Yu seemed to be coalescing into visible form, and a shining rainbow path of water appeared.

"Hurry."

We ran forward to a second pair of gates, open on the left, closed on the right ("Locks?" I wondered. "Like in a very strange canal?"), and the sound from the second tuning key caused great gates to swing open, and music-water formed on the right to match that on the left. Gates opened twice more, and water formed in front of us, and the fourth and last shining path of water reached ahead to a dock that matched the dock on the left, and there waited two great Dragon Boats, different only in that the yang symbol marked the one on the left and the yin symbol marked the one on the right.

They were each at least a hundred and fifty feet long, but so slim that only a narrow passageway ran between seats for single oarsmen on each side. On the

platforms in the center waited drum and clapping boards, and lying on the high prows were the green-and-white scarves used to send commands. Each immense steering oar was forty feet long, and I noticed that the prow of each boat had the traditional dragon-head shape, but with a long tapering horn thrusting straight out from the center of the forehead.

The crews were waiting on the docks, standing at attention, eighty-eight oarsmen per boat, and I could distinguish the red bandannas around the foreheads of the "brothers," the lead oarsmen. I saw other figures I couldn't identify, and then as we came close a gentleman in a simple white robe stepped forward and bowed. In this setting the blue cheeks and crimson nose and silver forehead and yellow chin seemed entirely appropriate, and his voice was clear and resonant.

"Believe it or not, Li Kao, I prayed that you would perform the impossible and come to honor the solstice with me today," said Envy.

Despite the claims of my critics I am not a total idiot. I was not surprised—saddened, yes, even agonized at certain implications—but not at all surprised that the voice of Envy was the voice of a puppeteer.

24

Master Li regarded Yen Shih with ironic eyes, and bowed with almost equal grace.

"And I am honored to greet the most talented as well as most dangerous of cavaliers," he said. "It was inexcusable of me not to have seen the face behind the mask from the very first, or nearly."

Envy shrugged. "Inexcusable? Surely human nature is excuse enough." He lifted a piece of the disguise he had discarded and pressed it to the left side of his face, like malleable flesh-colored clay, and again I saw the terrible ravages of smallpox. "No one looks closely at deformity," he said gently.

"It was a brave disguise for a cavalier to choose," Master Li said with ungrudging respect. "It was also brave to travel the world as a puppeteer whose formal social status would be as low as that of a prostitute or an actor. You could have chosen to be the empire's greatest fencing master, or the most accomplished of imperial advisers. But then, cavaliers are naturally drawn to crafts involving the pulling of strings, and I speak with the authority of having been one of the puppets," Master Li said with another bow.

"For a time, Li Kao, for a time," Envy said. He flicked a wrist in a casual gesture of dismissing a trifle I couldn't imitate with a thousand years of practice, and the sunrise smile I had seen illuminate a landscape of pock-marks now lit the grotesquely painted face a goddess had given him. "You would have needed supernatural powers to guess at the beginning who I was and what I was after, and when I consider the array of marvels and monsters coming at you from all sides I am awestruck that you could untangle it at all, much less get here in time. An extraordinary performance, and you will forgive me if I begin to wonder who is the manipulator and who is the mannequin."

Yen Shih stepped toward Master Li, and smiled when I jumped protectively to the old man's side.

"Don't worry, Ox. If murder were on my mind I would have killed both of you the moment Master Li found the remaining mandarins, which meant he had found

the remaining cages that my peculiar siblings still occupied as guardians. Master Li has earned the right to challenge, and I would be a poor cavalier if I did not accept the challenge eagerly. We shall race, he and I," he said. "The boats await as they awaited three thousand years ago, as do the crews, and it is time to meet them."

The figures we walked toward were indistinct in mist that floated low over the twin channels of water and in the smoke from rows of torches. As we grew closer I began to realize that it wasn't only mist and smoke that blurred the forms and features of the crews. They themselves were like wax dolls placed too close to a stove, partially melted, twisted and squashed down as had been the ancient statues of dying deities around the upper cavern of the Yu. They still carried an aura of awesome strength but they smelled of abandoned tombs, desiccated and dusty, crumbling with age, and I wondered how much longer they could keep their vigil beside antique Dragon Boats.

Sixteen stepped forward and bowed, eight from each boat, the ones wearing the red bandannas of lead oarsmen.

"Allow me to introduce those who will set the stroke for the yang boat," said Envy. "These eight on my left are the four Roving Lights, *Yu-kuang*, and the four Junior Brothers of the Wasteland, *Yeh-cbung*, who are wrongfully accused in innumerable ancient accounts of spreading pestilence. They do no such thing. All they do is row, and if pestilence follows their victories it is no concern of theirs."

The eight oarsmen bowed again and stepped back into the ranks. Envy waved toward eight figures on the right, who lifted their heads one after another.

"Your lead strokes, *Pa-ling*, 'Eight Ghostly Powers,' and very great oarsmen of yin are they," said Envy, who was using the intonation of a chant. "From left to right they are First Doer, Lungs and Stomach, Ancestral Intelligence, Rising and Soaring, Seizer of All, Sharpener and Amputator, Husky Lusty One, and, finally, Extreme and Extraordinary One, who has been accorded the honor of a brief description in *Classic of Mountains and Seas.* 'On Shensi mountain dwells a creature that has the shape of a bull, the bristles of a porcupine, and the sound of a howling dog. It eats people.'"

The oarsmen bowed and stepped back into the ranks. Four other creatures, two from each boat, stepped forward.

"The wielders of drum and clapping board, who receive the commands of the scarves and transmit them through their instruments to the rest of the crews," said Envy. "Beating for yang: Male Elder on the left and Elder Extraordinary One on the right. Beating for yin: Bounding and Rushing on the left and Gliding Sliding One on the right."

The four bowed and stepped back. A slim slight figure stepped forward, and my heart did strange things. For a long moment I was sure it was Yu Lan, but then I realized the girl had a slightly blurred face, like all the others, and her eyes were deep

and cold and frightening, and where she walked a puddle formed. The awesome man-ape that was Envy, and who I still loved as Yen Shih, turned to me.

"Number Ten Ox, pay the closest attention," he said quietly. "In the ancient White Marsh Diagrams is a charmingly innocent entry: 'The essence of old wells takes the form of a beautiful girl called Kuan, and it likes to sit on rocks and blow a flute, and if you call it by name it will go away.' This is indeed Kuan, Essence of Old Wells, and you must know two things. The first is that her strength has never been measured and probably can't be, because wells draw power from earth and water alike. The second is that she has been my faithful companion during my exile on earth. As such she shall use her great strength at the steering oar of the yang boat, and you, as companion of Master Li, shall steer the yin boat, and the role of the one they call goat is a hard and dangerous one. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," I whispered.

Master Li and Envy walked forward together to the yang boat on the left, and as I helped them light the purifying fire on top of the platform in the center I was struck by the wording of their ancient solstice chant: "The sparks of the suns are burning the sky! The fire of the earth is burning the Five Regions! Flames destroy all that is not auspicious!" Then we crossed a gangplank to the yin boat and repeated the purifying ritual. There were other ceremonies and chants I didn't recognize and couldn't understand, and finally Envy returned by himself to the yang boat. The gangplank was pulled in. Master Li was totally relaxed now that the issue was clear-cut, and he regarded his counterpart with speculative eyes.

"As a matter of purely academic interest, am I correct in assuming that the appearance of that vampire ghoul was no more than a weird coincidence?" he asked.

"I sincerely hope so since I prefer not to wander into the morass of metaphysical speculation," Envy replied with equal nonchalance. "I assume the creature fell into a load of earth that was being carried to Hortensia Island, and Ma Tuan Lin accidentally moved the bead on the cage in the proper sequence not long afterward and released the first of my brothers. Monsters worship demon-deities. The ch'ih-mei crawled from the pile and was too late to greet my brother, but at least he found a meal."

"And your original involvement?" Master Li asked.

"I was as ignorant as the ch'ih-mei," said Envy. "I had no idea the cages had survived until I heard the *'Pi-fang!'* cry and saw the crane cross the moon. It was a marvelous moment. If one brother survived, and surely that meant the cage he guarded also survived, why not the others? Once long ago, I had nearly accomplished an extraordinary feat, only to be denied by incredibly persistent shamans, and now if I could get my hands on those cages I might use their own tools to complete the job. But how could I get my hands on the cages?"

"Enter a puppet," Master Li said sourly.

"You were a godsend. The great Master Li tracking down mandarins and cages for me!" Envy exclaimed delightedly, without the slightest trace of sarcasm or irony. "I was sure you would discover the mechanisms that enabled puppets to operate with minimum help from Yu Lan while I myself roamed free, but I was also sure you would discover it too late."

Master Li had walked up to the captain's post on the high prow and was arranging his scarves, and on the left I saw Envy doing the same, and with a lump in my throat that nearly choked me I made my way astern to the raised platform and the long handle of the huge steering oar. It was beautifully balanced. So much so that I could lift it easily from the water with downward pressure from my body, but lowering it gently was far more difficult, and when the boat rocked very slightly as the hawser was cast away I was almost knocked off my feet. Sideways movements of the oar were murder, and I hated to think what would happen with up-and-down movements if the boat hit hard waves.

The twin boats were moving, floating side by side in the two channels, picking up speed even though no rower had touched an oar, and now I could see far enough through the mist to make out a perfectly straight streak of light ahead of us, cutting across our path like the edge of a knife.

"Like a starting line," I thought, and as I thought it I felt a powerful series of vibrations: one…two…three…four…five…six…seven…eight….

The eight tuning forks, yin and yang, were allowing the Yu to perform a song unheard in three thousand years. Great rumbling notes—soft for all their force—were blurring the water and the air as though blending elements together, and then a long, slow, steady throbbing note seemed to evolve and take over. It was perfectly steady, quiet but with unimaginable power. This was the full song of the Yu, weaving music into water that stretched out from the horizontal line perpendicular to the boats and blended both channels into a river fit for a race, and Master Li turned to the puppeteer with wonder in his eyes.

"Can those remarkable men have created a racing path that also measures the solstice they sought to preserve?" he asked.

"The course is permanently set as though it was the shadow of a giant gnomon, yes," Envy said. "I haven't the slightest idea how they managed it, although I once read that a similar phenomenon was produced by a barbarian called Oenopides of Chios. Needless to say, the gnomon is correct to the precise second of the solstice."

Master Li heaved a melancholy sigh.

"What a pity. The one man in the empire who could have explained it to us, on his better days, can't be here," he said. "I can forgive much, but cannot forgive the fate of the Celestial Master."

"Li Kao, he was dying! His mind was nearly gone," Envy protested. "I had to find some way to infuriate Heaven with mankind. Your discovery of a smuggling and counterfeiting ring gave me the idea of using aristocratic greed to resurrect the ghost scheme, but in itself it wouldn't be enough. However, the August Personage of Jade is hot-tempered, as we all know. I was certain he would remove his protection from earth before the matter had been fully investigated if the Celestial Master were to insult Heaven with human sacrifice in the name of righteousness and religion, which could be done if Malice took over the Celestial Master's body. As it turned out, my miserable son almost ruined the whole thing."

For the first time Envy showed strong emotion, and the garish colors of his face received an additional flush of rage.

"That idiot boy and his pathetic plot to kill you in the greenhouse," he said with venom dripping from his voice. "Kill you? You hadn't yet tracked down the remaining mandarins and their cages! And then he had a little maid murdered because she let a dog die, he said, but the real reason was that he wanted to exult in the power that went with the new body he occupied, and murdering someone was the best use of power he could link of. On top of that he had to amuse himself by playing tag with you around half the Forbidden City, and the most persuasive argument for celibacy I know of is my son Malice!"

"Yet that would deny you a daughter," Master Li said quietly. "She is surely compensation enough."

"Yes," Envy said, very softly. "Yes, no man has ever had a lovelier and more dutiful daughter, though few daughters have been born bearing such a curse."

The garish face turned in my direction, and I still think I wasn't wrong to feel honored to receive a nod of his head.

"I would say that my daughter chose a most inopportune time to seek love, if I didn't know that such things are not a matter of choice," he said. "My heart went out to her, poor girl. Fleeing to fragmented passion in the world of dreams—the only medium in which Madness moves more freely than can her mother, and one does not disobey her mother—but even in dreams metamorphosis was sure to seek her out. She wept long and hard, and although she never told what happened I knew she could no longer approach Number Ten Ox in sleep lest her fangs sink into his brain and her claws clasp his heart. Godhood cannot be refused," Envy said, and his grimace and wry tone of voice suggested he was talking not about Yu Lan when he added, "but it need not be sought."

Master Li looked silently at Envy for a long moment.

"You have known grandeur and debasement to degrees far beyond human comprehension, which leads one to wonder what you hope to gain by tricking Heaven into allowing mass destruction on earth. The gods, you know, will simply

blame it on Destiny and go about the delightful business of rebuilding," Master Li said. "As for the earthly massacre, would you stoop to the level of the legendary king who summoned all the world's elephants to trample an ant who bit his royal toe?"

Envy looked at him with a faint smile. The shining straight line was much closer now, and the boats were traveling faster, and the lead oars were spitting on their hands and rewrapping their bandannas. Water slapped the boat, and the handle of the steering oar smacked my ribs.

"Li Kao, you already know that I act as I do because I must," Envy said.

His eyes turned to me, and in them was a strange light I couldn't decipher, almost, but not quite, like the moon-glow eyes of Kuan, who stood across from me at the handle of her steering oar, riding easily with the movement of the boat, thinking the slow deep thoughts of wells.

"Number Ten Ox," Envy said quietly, "once there was a great king who gazed down from a tall tower upon a gardener who sang as he worked, and the king cried, 'Ah, to have a life of no cares! If only I could be that gardener.' And the voice of the August Personage of Jade reached out from Heaven and said, 'It shall be so,' and lo, the king was a gardener singing in the sun. In time the sun grew hot and the gardener stopped singing, and a fine dark cloud brought coolness and then drifted away, and it was hot again and much work remained, and the gardener cried, 'Ah, to carry coolness wherever I go and have no cares! If only I could be that cloud.' And the voice of the August Personage reached out from Heaven and said, 'It shall be so,' and lo, the gardener was a cloud drifting across the sky. And the wind blew and the sky grew cold, and the cloud would have liked to go behind the shelter of a hill, but it could only go where the wind took it, and no matter how hard it tried to go this way the wind took it that way, and above the cloud was the bright sun. 'Ah, to fly through wind and be warm and have no cares! If only I could be the sun,' cried the cloud, and the voice of the August Personage of Jade reached out from Heaven and said, 'It shall be so,' and lo, he was the sun. It was very grand to be the sun, and he delighted in the work of sending down rays to warm some things and burn others, but it was like wearing a suit made of fire and he began to bake like bread. Above him the cool stars that were gods were sparkling in safety and serenity and the sun cried, 'Ah, to be divine and free from care! If only I could be a god.' And the voice of the August Personage of Jade reached out from Heaven and said, 'It shall be so,' and lo, he was a god, and he was beginning his third century of combat with the Stone Monkey, which had just transformed itself into a monster a hundred thousand feet tall and was wielding a trident made from the triple peaks of Mount Hua, and when he wasn't dodging blows he could see the peaceful green earth down below him, and the god cried, 'Ah, if only I could be a man who was safe and secure and had no cares!' And the voice of the August Personage of Jade reached out from Heaven and said, 'It shall

be so.' And lo, he was a king who was gazing down from a tall tower upon a gardener who sang as he worked."

Envy lifted one shoulder in a slight shrug and turned away, but not before I realized there was no amusement in his parable. The light in his eyes did not carry the clean coldness of deep water, like the eyes of Kuan, but the cruel coldness of hatred, because Envy could never rest, never relax, never enjoy, never gain what he wished and never cease wishing, never satisfy the terrible hunger that wracked his mind and body. He was a great nobleman condemned to envy not only clouds, the sun, and the gods but even mindless gardeners as humble as Number Ten Ox, and for that insult the Number Ten Ox's of the world were going to die.

25

The starting line was very close. Master Li lifted his left hand and the white tip of the green silk scarf snapped back, and the great twisted figure of Bounding and Rushing extended his cloth-wrapped sticks over the taut surface of the huge tympan atop the center platform and began a quiet steady drumroll. Across the rainbow water Male Elder was doing the same in the yang boat. One hundred and seventy-six oars slid out on the four sides of the two boats and hovered above the surface. A dark straight shadow touched the tips of the horns that extended straight out from the dragon-head prows, and slid backward to touch the pilot posts against which the captains braced themselves, and Envy and Master Li flicked out their right scarves. Gliding Sliding One raised his clapping boards and made a sharp crashing noise, as did Elder Extraordinary One across from us, and each team of eighty-eight oars dipped into the water with long, smooth strokes. The boat seemed to jump forward beneath my feet. The clapping boards and drums worked steadily and unhurriedly as they set the beat: crash, rat-tat-tat, crash, rat-tat-tat, crash….

Steering oars as big as the ones on racing boats produce a terrible drag once they hit the water, like brakes on wagon wheels, and the steersman spends half his time sailing through the air with his body stretched out over the handle, trying to keep the huge key-shaped blade just above the surface of the water but not touching it. When the scarves signal a turn, or a drift must be corrected, the goat earns his pay. Down, shove, up! The tiniest extension of steering time means that much extra drag. Fractions of a second at the start can add up to an equal number of feet at the end, and the strange supernatural girl across from me was controlling her great oar with a touch of a finger. I was already fighting mine, and I knew there was no chance of matching a well spirit who lived in complete harmony with immortal cavaliers and ancient demigods and water woven from music. I could only do my best and trust in Master Li.

Bounding and Rushing continued the stroke beat with his drum, but Gliding Sliding One was giving a different sound with the clapping boards. At first I couldn't

make it out. Then I saw the long flowing end of Master Li's left scarf flick up and down, and at almost the same time the oar bucked up against me, and I realized the clapping boards from now on would transmit warnings and commands. This was no placid pool we were riding on. The clapping boards were describing waves, and we lifted high and swooped down, and as we lifted again the drumbeats on both boats stepped up a notch, and the oar strokes quickened.

I saw the right scarf wave an instant before the clapping boards repeated the command. Wait…wait…now! I dropped the blade into the water and leaned left: one…two…three…up! Getting it up smoothly wasn't so easy, but I managed with nothing more serious than a bloody nose when the handle kicked me in the face. Wait…wait…down! Lean right. One…two…three…up! It wasn't pretty, but we'd made a turn and were back on course again. I stared at the great black rock that both boats had veered around, thrusting through rainbow waves. It had sun and moon symbols engraved on it, yang and yin, and I wondered if it had something to do with the gnomon nature of the course, like a measuring mark.

Master Li signaled and the clapping boards repeated the command and the smooth, powerful strokes of the lead oarsmen stretched out a notch: boom, rat-tat-tat, boom, rat-tat-tat, boom, rat-tat-tat. Across from us Envy had given the same command at precisely the same time, and the boats were dead even.

The captain is the most important member, of course. The goat is so far back he can't possibly see the hazards ahead, and the world of rowers begins and ends with their oars, and the drummer's job is to inspire, regulate, and transmit, not to originate. The captain must serve as eyes and brain from his pilot's post in the prow, and one wrong message from a flapping scarf can mean the end of the race. My faith in Master Li is limitless, but I had to admit that his situation was something like mine. Across from him was a cavalier who had dared to love and betray the most powerful and dangerous of all goddesses, and who had once run this very race against Eight Skilled Gentlemen, and who had even driven a team of plunging dragons along a path between the stars—or something almost as dramatic, if one allows for poetic exaggeration. The puppeteer didn't seem to have a care in the world as he easily shifted his body with the movements of the boat, not bothering to brace against his pilot's post.

Boom, rat-tat-tat, boom, rat-tat-tat, boom, rat-tat-tat. Now the boats were fighting the waves, bucking up and down, and I was learning the first reason for the goat's name. On a rough course the steersman must swing his oar to provide the best balance for the boat, using wind drag to correct drift as much as possible without resorting to the much greater water drag of conventional steering. Half the time I was flying through the air, butting everything in sight as I wrestled with that huge heavy thing, and when I looked through the spray to my left I could see Kuan controlling

her oar with no more than a shove and a tug. How could she do it? Strength wasn't entirely the answer. Somehow she was anticipating each wave and chop of water, each plunge and bounce of the boat, and was already in position when the instant for correction came. All around us the vibrations of the Yu music were growing stronger and stronger. The cavern seemed to have disappeared. The sky (was it really a sky?) had grown very dark, and the rainbows woven through the waves were shimmering like fire. I thought I saw banks on both sides, with trees and tangled shrubs, and then I saw people on the right bank and great terrible creatures on the left.

The scarves signaled and the drums quickened and the eight lead oars on each boat picked up the pace. The boats were shooting ahead like skimming arrows, spray flying up as prows smacked short choppy waves. The clapping boards called urgently. Wait…wait…down, shove, up…wait…wait…down, shove, up! We safely veered around a second jutting solstice-marked stone, but this time I was a fraction too late in lifting. I doubt that anyone else would have noticed the tiny jump ahead that the yang boat took when Kuan managed the turn perfectly, but I did. She was several inches in front of me now, and if those thrusting rocks were gnomon measures there should be four more of them, half a year, and I didn't want to think how far she'd be leading when we passed the last one. Scarves flicked and clapping boards urged and drums picked up the pace, oars flashed faster and faster: boom, rat-tat-tat, boom, rat-tat-tat, but I was having a terrible time concentrating on my oar. On my left I could see a bank where huge horrible creatures roared and fought and killed, and flames and lava poured from volcanoes, and terrible cracks appeared in the earth as the ground heaved and shook. On my right I could see men and women crouched and fearful, dressed in furs, and priests wearing bearskins with four gold eyes sewn on them who raised arms to Heaven and prayed, and a girl was thrust forward and a stone ax lifted, and just as I had seen with the Celestial Master the ax fell and a soul was offered to the gods.

Wait…wait…down, shove, up…wait…wait…down, shove, up!

The yang boat was leading by a foot now. The jutting rock flashed past, and as it did I saw people staring up in fear at a tiny pale sun like a fading candle, and they shoved children out from the shelter of caves and had them run around and play with special caps on their heads, just as we still did in my village during the first moon: bright-colored caps shaped like flowers and grasshoppers, vivid against white snow to catch the eyes of gods looking down. Fires were put out to save all heat for the sun. Hard-cooked eggs dyed as bright and cheerful as the flowers of spring were brought out beneath the dark cold sky, and the shells were ceremoniously cracked and the round yellow yolks removed and held up high.

Faster, the scarves and clapping boards signaled, and faster flashed the oars, and the boats bounced over waves with teeth-jarring impact, one right after another, and

the sterns swung around as the slim hulls tried to go sideways. I flipped like a rag doll tied to the handle of the steering oar, trying to use air drag as much as possible and water drag as little, but still Kuan was always ahead of me, always anticipating, always balanced and calm and sure. The yang boat's lead was more than a yard now.

Through sheets of spray I could see blurred images on the banks. There was a village very much like my own, and with a pang in my heart I saw the beautiful girls wearing their brightest clothes being pushed in swings by the young men, higher and higher, lovely flowers reaching to the sky, and the older women in equally bright dress holding bright ribbons as they danced like petals around a stalklike pole. Fathers urged sons to keep the shuttlecocks in the air longer and longer, and each shuttlecock was painted bright yellow like the sun. The last ice was ceremoniously cracked, and the graves were swept, and the spirits of the dead were invited to join the festival of the first bath in the stream, where wine in buoyant cups floated from hand to hand.

I had lost track of gnomon markers. The Yu vibrations were tremendously strong, and suddenly I realized how the spirit of old wells could anticipate every command. Kuan wasn't watching the water, she was listening to the sounds that formed it, and I discovered that if I stopped thinking and let my body react to the music of the Yu I was already in place when the scarf and clapping boards reached me. But it was too late. Already the gap had spread to ten feet and it was going to get worse unless Envy gave a bad command. I could only see his back now, far ahead, glimpsed momentarily through spray, and even at that distance he exuded the calm control of a gentleman out for a holiday paddle on a pool.

Master Li was doing the only thing he could, which was to pray. I could see him straight ahead on the high raised prow with his head lifted to the sky, and scattered words drifted back on the wind: "Lady of Mysteries…Guide of Lost Souls…Blender of the Hot and the Cold, the Wet and the Dry, the Done and the Undone…." The right hand lifted and the long scarf flicked out a command. But I had already heard something in the vibrating music, something ahead, and I was ready now: down, shove up, wait…wait…down, shove, up! I could have wept in frustration. This time Kuan didn't gain on me and we made the turn around the rock in unison, but too late, too late. Still the ten-foot gap remained.

"Lady of Highest Prime…Guardian of the Greatest Sacrifice…Solace of All That Sickens and Dies…"

We had flashed past a rock into searing sunlight that made the sky appear to be on fire. Black-funneled waterspouts lifted from frothy rainbow waves, and I saw a dragon rear up through the surface, one of the terrible ones, a *kiao lung* as opposed to the beneficial water dragons. Horrible creatures had claimed the left bank. On the right bank an unrelenting Yellow Wind was ripping cottages apart, and sand covered everything, and all the crops were burned and withered.

"Lady Who Grieves…Lady Who Comforts…Lady Who Guards All Living Things," chanted Master Li.

Screams overhead made me look up to see the most terrifying of all creatures, the three winged servants of the Patron of Pestilence who had once allowed a cavalier to love her, the Queen Mother Goddess of the West. Those who know the lady would say that her claws had touched the cavalier but lightly. Now from the Mountain of the Three Dangers had come the Great Pelican bearing upon its back the Pestilential Hag, Yu Hua-lung, and the Small Pelican that carried Tou-shen Niang Niang, the Plague Queen, and the Green Bird that carried Ma Shen, Patron of Pustules and Pockmarks. The three Death Birds swooped low, screeching, and for one heart-stopping moment I thought I saw an immense tiger claw rip through the sky from horizon to horizon, but then I realized it was a claw of Yellow Wind.

The scarf was signaling and the clapping boards sounded. Down, shove, up… wait…wait…down, shove, up, and both boats made the turn evenly, with the yang boat still leading by ten feet, and my liver turned cold. That last rock was marked with yang symbols from one end to the other. It was the last gnomon marker, half a year, and the strength of yang must now give way to yin if the earth wasn't to burn and plague and pestilence run rampant. As our boat had swung wide I'd been able to look ahead. I'd seen a white streak of sunlight cutting straight across the path of the music water, and the course narrowed as it approached the finish line, and squarely in the center, suspended in air, hung a shimmering ring. It was *pi*, symbol of the harmony of Heaven, seamless continual circle of yang and yin, and the tips of the two long slim dragon horns thrusting from the prows began to glow with the same shimmering light. Master Li and Envy flung both scarves wide, and drums and clapping boards pounded like giant heartbeats, and the rowers made great gasping sounds as they put every ounce of strength into their strokes.

"Lady of Solace, Lady of Purging—"

Whatever goddess Master Li had in mind had better hurry, I thought, because the rowers on the yang boat were equally strong and the gap was getting no shorter. I was flying around trying to achieve perfect balance with the oar as the boat bucked and bounced and skidded over great waves, and when the water boiled between our boat and Envy's and something lifted from the depths I was too busy to really see it at first. Then I did see it, and in a flash I understood that Master Li had not been praying to a goddess at all. Right from the start he had been invoking a priestess, a healer, a shamanka, and lifting through the rainbow water was the head of Yu Lan.

The puppeteer's beautiful daughter looked at me for a long moment. Her lips parted and I saw the glitter of fangs, and one of her claws lifted through spray and fell back. Two of the drops that trickled slowly down her face weren't music-water. Then she dove. Yu Lan disappeared beneath the waves and I was never to see her face again,

but I did see something else. Ahead of us and to the left the water boiled in front of the yang boat, and then a great shining fish tail lifted into the air. Harsh sunlight blazed on the scales, and it whipped around with tremendous force and smacked squarely against the prow.

For an instant the yang boat paused as though tied to a leash that somebody had jerked, and when it moved forward again the gap had gone. We were dead even, or perhaps we even had a bit of an edge in that the smooth strokes of our oarsmen hadn't been disrupted, and Master Li began to roar like a volcano.

"On, First Doer! On, Ancestral Intelligence! On, Lungs and Stomach! *Hao! Hao!* Rising and Soaring, Seizer of All, Sharpener and Amputator! On, Husky Lusty One! On, Extreme and Extraordinary One! *Hao! Hao! Hao!*"

Bounding and Rushing pounded his drum with all the force he had, and Gliding Sliding One smashed his clapping boards, and the rowers strained to match the strokes of the lead oars. Master Li's right hand was out and I waited for the scarf to uncoil and shoot back. It came. Down, shove, hold steady, aim, lift just above the surface and wait for the scarf…. Down, hard left, up…. Down, soft right, up….

We had a slight lead and had cut across the path of the yang boat, oars were scraping oars, wood was screeching against wood, the long, slim, glowing horn from the prow of our boat was reaching out—and then it plunged through, and the shimmering pi ring was snugly around the tip. In an instant the finish line had vanished, and the banks had vanished, and the rowers leaned back and hauled in their oars, and two great Dragon Boats floated side by side in a soft mist.

Master Li turned slowly to the puppeteer. Envy turned at the same time and they examined each other for a moment, and then—at a cost beyond my comprehension—the glorious sunrise smile lit up the garish ape face.

"Poetic justice is a bit too neat for my taste, but I have to admire its effectiveness," Envy said. I realized that his boat was turning transparent, and so was the crew, fading into the mist. Only the puppeteer remained as before, and he bent down and came up with the last cage he had taken. "There's a way to get the key without releasing the creature inside, you now," he said matter-of-factly. "It's time for you to meet the last of my brothers, but have no fear. It would be a poor cavalier who accepted a challenge and resorted to murder when he lost."

He did something with his left hand and there was a bright flash, and then I could see I was looking at the last demon-deity. The God of Sacks was surely the final creation of a dying race, Master Li later told me, surely the clearest statement of what it means to lose an entire civilization. It's a shapeless bag, that's all. Its father was Chaos and its mother was Nothingness, and it has no reason for existence, no beginning, no end. The Great cavalier I had known as Yen Shih reached out tenderly and embraced his brother, and the bag opened for him, and then they lifted into the

air and fluttered like a blind moth, flapping this way and that, Envy and Anarchy, aimless and inseparable, flying away to find nothing in nowhere.

The yang boat and crew had vanished. The yin boat I stood on seemed to be becoming translucent, but somehow I wasn't afraid of melting away. I left the oar and walked past the resting rowers to Master Li.

"Look, Ox," he said softly.

The mist ahead of us was breaking up, and we were floating gently forward and then nudging to a stop at a long gray dock, and the ghosts were waiting for us.

❁ ❁ ❁

The dead were in a festive mood as they climbed on board. They seemed to take up no space, no matter how many walked up the gangplank that Gliding Sliding One and Bounding and Rushing slid out, and I somehow understood that my job was done, and so was Master Li's, and from now on the experienced crew would take over. The dock finally emptied. The lead oarsmen shoved off, and the boat began moving forward again into mist. I was standing with Master Li on the high prow and I could look back over the stern, past my steering oar, and see ghosts leaning out over the water, beckoning and calling. I turned to Master Li with questions in my eyes.

"The dead are trying to coax lung dragons to follow the boat and bring rain," he said quietly. "You see, Ox, it's a pact made long ago. At the Festival of Graves we bring summer clothes and food and wine to the dead, and clean the graves and make them comfortable. At the Hungry Ghosts Festival we feed spirits too unfortunate to have family to care for them, and we pray for their souls. At the Festival of All Souls we bring the dead paper money so they can redeem their winter clothes from the pawnshops of the Land of Shadows, and we bring new clothes when necessary and supplies of everything they might need for the winter. In return the ghosts help bring rain, and fight disease and illness, which no longer have any power over them."

We had passed through the mist and were gliding out on North Lake. Fear had kept the crowds from the banks, but the old woman called Niao-t'ung, "Chamber Pot," and the old man called Yeh-lai Hsiang, "Incense Which Comes by Night," meaning the smell when he removed his sandals, were not going to be denied a ritual they'd performed since they were children, and they painfully hobbled to the water's edge. Puzzlement was apparent in their gestures as they shaded their eyes and looked at us, and then right through us. The authorities had said there would be no boat race this year, but instinct told the two tottering wrecks that there was indeed a boat race, and they nodded firmly to each other and placed their little paper *sung wen* boats in

the water. The boats carried the diseases their families might encounter during the next six months, and Incense Which Comes by Night tossed a pocketful of tiny dogs made of clay as well. The dogs would bite any diseases that slipped out of the paper boats and keep them from swimming back on shore.

Paper boats are drawn in the wake of racing ones, and the ghosts were calling and beckoning, and the little bobbing things drifted out and turned obediently to follow the gentle rippling trail behind us.

The boat was vibrating like a tuning fork. On the shore I saw buildings shake and loose tiles fall. The great Yu was sounding the final notes to announce the precise second of the solstice, and a gauzy graceful waterspout was lifting into the air on the port side, higher and higher, spreading dragon wings, forming a cloud. Another dragon followed, and another, and they turned on the dirty fingers of Yellow Wind and began chasing them back into Mongolia. Clouds were spreading across half the sky, just in time to catch the light of the setting sun, and rain began to fall, and a cool fresh breeze washed the city, and people began pouring out, running to the water carrying their families' paper boats.

"Ox!"

I turned and cried out as two ghosts came through the crowd of the dead. My mother embraced me, and my father smiled and twisted his hands together awkwardly.

Hundreds of ghosts were greeting Master Li. A huge flotilla of disease boats was following us now, bobbing up and down over gentle waves, glowing in the sunset, and when I looked up from my parents I saw some kind of dark barrier like a wall of low fog, with a shining open archway in the center, and the water that led into it was woven from the colors of the sky.

"But, Mother, Peking really isn't all that much different from the village," I said. "You shouldn't believe all the alarming things you hear…."

The ghosts around Master Li had stepped back, bowing to the deck, and the sage was walking forward with a big smile of greeting on his face, and eight hooded gentlemen closed around him, and I could see hands lift and gesture in an animated conversation.

I laughed and pointed. "Look, that's Master Li," I said. "How could I possibly get into trouble working for a sweet little old man like that?"

The boat glided silently through the glittering arch. Ahead was the great looming shape of the Jo tree, where the goddess Kan-shui would catch the sun and bathe it and send it down the underground stream to the other side of the world, so it could climb branches of the Fu-sang tree and again reach the sky. The flowers of the Jo tree were beginning to open and form the first stars of night, and the water around us was gloriously woven from the glow of sunset.

"Ox!" cried Master Li. "Bring your esteemed parents and come say hello to some friends of ours!"

"Yes, sir," I said.