

TALES OF FLEDGLING PHOENIXES

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This story is set in 12th century China, and is based on the events in my game. It is the third to be based on this game. The first two, 'Tales of Moonlight' and 'Tales of Sleeping Dragons', dealt with the arrival in Jinfang of the old merchant Zhao Yu, his battle with a sorcerer by the name of Black Hou, and his establishment of a secret society called 'The Haven of the Sleeping Dragon'.

Key to Major Characters

As Chinese names are written with the family name first, I will present the characters in alphabetical order based on family name and nickname.

Ascending Incense, *see* Gao

Bian Ke (Iron Bian)

Large, powerful former officer. Renounced his commission in disgust after his unit was sacrificed to allow a Western Xia general to save face during peace negotiations. Wears a black, metal eye patch and carries a large iron staff.

Gao Liu Ying (Ascending Incense)

A hulking son of a farmer from East Jingdong, became a monk at age 17. Promoted to a temple in Dengzhou, but left the clergy as a result of corruption.

Hui Bodong

Military inspector attached to the West Jingdong circuit staff. Ruthless and arrogant.

Iron Bian, *see* Bian

Lei Ma

Jinfang's finest fortune teller, and Pan Shou Shi's teacher.

Long

The elder of Song Fu Fei's apprentices. Probably the more adventurous and suspicious.

Pan Shou Shi (The Shadow)

Gentleman thief from Huainan, appointed by Zhao Yu to lead the caravan to the Northern Capital, and arrange for justice to be visited on the two assassins who killed Zhao Yu's retainer. Supremely self-confident. Unremarkable appearance.

Shadow, *see* Pan

Shen

One of Song Fu Fei's two apprentices. Regards his master as something of a slave-driver, which is by no means a fair assessment.

Song Fu Fei

Weaponsmith from Kaifeng prefecture. Visiting relatives in the Northern Capital along with two apprentices, several donkeys and bearers, and a hunting falcon, on which he dotes.

Sun Xi (Tiger Shark)

Apparently a former ship captain, if his Fujianese accent can be trusted. Handy with a sword, though perhaps a little rough-mannered for genteel company. Rumoured to have cannibalistic tendencies.

Tiger Shark, *see* Sun

Walking Mouth, *see* Wu Weng

Wang Lun (White-robed Scholar)

Leader of the bandit group of Mount Liang, a natural fortress amidst the marshes of a fairly wild part of West Jingdong.

White-face, *see* Zheng

Wu (巫) Dong

Short-tempered but elegant knife merchant from the Northern Capital. Sometimes referred to as 'Pretty Boy' for his effeminate nature and fancy clothing.

Wu (吳) Weng (The Walking Mouth)

Talisman seller and astrologer with a nimble brain and an eye for a free meal. Prone to flatulence and falling asleep at inconvenient moments.

Zhao Yu

67 year old merchant from Huainan and founder of the Haven of Sleeping Dragons. Runs a silk shop in Jinfang. Organised a caravan to the Northern Capital in order to scout out a new silk route, and visit justice on two assassins.

Zheng Tianshou (White-faced Gentleman)

A former silversmith from Suzhou, Zheng fancies himself something of a gallant, specialising in staves and spears. Becomes a good friend of Sun Xi.

Although I won't identify their characters, I will credit my players: Danius Barzdukas, David Gawron, Scott Irey, Keiko Kito, Kris and Tanya McGrane, and Mark Madison. This story also contained a guest appearance by Tim Harford as Smiling Feng.

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Sublime success through perseverance. As creative power permeates all heaven: by clouds and rain all beings attain form, so the great man sees, with great clarity, causes and effects. By persevering does he complete things in their due time.

乾

Lei Ma the Seer peered more closely at the reading. He'd learned from long experience that only focus and concentration allowed access to the true secrets; the true depths.

That the moving lines should mention a dragon, that was proof enough that he had made the right choice in consulting the Oracle. But the dragon concealed in its pool—what did that signify? Was it simply pointing to the involvement of Zhao Yu's secret society, the Haven of the Sleeping Dragon?

Lei Ma had attended the public lecture which represented the beginning of the society. He had listened to Scholar Zhang's discussion of the *Three Kingdoms* heroes, and clearly divined in the afterword by Zhao Yu what it was that Zhao Yu wished to be known. He was one of the few people in Jinfang who shared Zhao Yu's secret, for although he had not been present, he knew what had happened in the *yamen* that fateful day in late summer, when Black Hou had built his pyramid of skulls. In others, the memory had faded to no more than the last bad dream before daybreak. But for Zhao Yu, Gui Hua and Rui the Eagle, the desolate grey plain still remained in their memory with the sharpness of lived experience.

Now one of Zhao Yu's lieutenants in the secret society had become his pupil. Pan Shou Shi was a strange fellow, and Lei Ma had had to think long and hard before accepting him. It was good that Pan had gone to such lengths to impress him, even digging out from somewhere potsticker dumplings done the way he liked them. He had never thought he'd taste them again! But there was much more to the matter.

Pan Shou Shi was, to put it bluntly, a criminal. His family had contacts all over this area, stretching as far West as the Eastern Capital. They were a higher class of criminal than some, it was true, but there was no denying that their fortune had been built by depriving others. Pan, it seemed, sought enlightenment in the Tao, perhaps as the natural reaction of a virtuous soul to a life built on theft and deceit. Lei Ma could see there was still plenty of *yin* mixed in with his *yang*, darkness that would find expression in the months ahead. And now Pan had requested to be allowed to lead Zhao Yu's caravan to the Northern Capital, Daming.

Lei Ma sighed, and began to write a letter to his

younger brother Qing, who lived in the Northern capital.

晉

Shen turned to Long once more, opening his mouth to complain, but was interrupted by Song Fu Fei.

'You two! Stop dallying there! We've got a long way to go still, and we can't have you two holding us up. And keep your mouths shut, too. Senseless chatter wastes energy better spent on marching!'

It had been like this all the way from home, Shen reflected. Master Song kept up this tirade the whole way, with occasional interludes of incredulity whenever they asked to be allowed to enjoy some mild entertainment along the way. It was a hard life being an apprentice weaponsmith, that was for sure.

And now they were travelling with this bunch of cutthroats. Silk merchants? Pah! Shen might be only 15, but he knew a bunch of rogues and desperadoes when he saw them.

Their leader, Pan, seemed innocent enough at first glance, and Shen reflected that he probably wouldn't have given him a second if it hadn't been for the terrible lack of anything else to look at on this dismal journey. It was Long who pointed things out:

'Have you noticed, Younger Brother, the way he's always whispering to people? Never seems to be able to say anything straight. Always makes a secret of it.'

Shen hadn't noticed, actually, but as the journey wore on he kept his eyes open, and he did start to notice in Pan a certain furtive way of dealing with people. And his fellow travellers called him 'Shadow.' What more evidence did you need?

Then there had been all that business of splitting up and scouting ahead, or behind, or whatever they were doing. Honest merchants wouldn't do that, would they?

No, there was something very funny about this Mr Pan and his so called silk caravan. Shen wondered if the authorities would give him a reward for turning Pan in, then reflected that with things as bad as they were, the last thing he wanted was to be involved in a court case on top of it all.

He turned his attention to the other travellers, trying to work out which he was most afraid of.

There was Sun Xi, of course. He seemed the wildest, and it was sometimes difficult to know what he was saying because of his southern accent. People made funny comments about how much Sun liked eating pig, especially long pig, and then laughed in a strange way, which gave Shen a creepy feeling all the way up his spine. But Sun had once smiled at him and Long, so Shen didn't feel that he was necessarily the worst of the bunch.

Sun seemed to get along well with Zheng, the White-faced Gentleman. The two went off together on one of the scouting ahead or behind missions, and came back

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drunk and singing. White-face's manners didn't seem all that deeply ingrained, and there were some jokes that he laughed at that gave Shen the creepy feeling again.

Even White-face was a little friendlier than Wu Dong. Shen couldn't work out what it was about Wu Dong that gave him the creeps. It could have been the ridiculously fine silks the man wore, or the effeminate manners. Shen's father had once told him about men who prefer the company of other men, and Shen hadn't understood what he meant at the time. He'd since learned, and wondered whether Wu Dong was one of those, but he didn't *seem* to be so. Shen soon learned that Wu Dong carried knives hidden all over his body, and felt that that was excessive, even for a knife merchant.

Thinking it through, though, Shen decided that he was *most* afraid of his Master, Song Fu Fei. He sighed. Long glanced over and gave him a wry, conspirator's smile.

恆

The caravan made steady progress from Danzhou to Jizhou. It wasn't without event. Probably the most important test was the first brush with bandits. They'd been warned by a friendly farmer about a road which would cut a whole day off the journey, but which was bedevilled by bandits. Since part of the point of the journey was to find a safe route, Pan's policy was to deliberately spring any traps that might be waiting.

Sun and White-face were sent on ahead to check things out. They didn't really expect to be ambushed, since there were only two of them, with no goods, but as the road wended its way through some woods, there was a shout, and a *twang!* and a net yanked them up in the air. Sun, whose reactions were faster, managed to leap free of the net, but White-face, staff in hand, was soon dangling upside down over the road.

Bandits leapt out of the trees on either side. Their two leaders were obvious—one a scowling, bushy-eyebrowed fellow; the other a more calculating individual, with the martial style of a former soldier.

'Give up and we'll let you live!' called out the bushy-eyebrowed one.

Sun smiled a thin smile, and moved his sword to guard position. The bandits didn't wait for further social niceties, but closed in on him. He glanced round, noting a tree with a large enough trunk, and started wildly slashing to either side. As he suspected, the bandits parted, not realising what he was doing. Soon he had his back to the trunk, and his opponents could come at him no more than two at a time.

At first, only two bandits went over to 'tidy up' White-face. He had managed to stick his arms through holes in the net, and was now spinning his staff while dangling in mid-air. The first bandit to get a whack on the head realised their duck wasn't sitting, as they had first thought...

The bandit leaders grew impatient as the fight dragged on. While Sun was outnumbered, he also outclassed his opponents, and none of them had yet succeeded in penetrating his skilfully weaving sword defence. Unfortunately, he hadn't got the opportunity to inflict more than a couple of flesh wounds on the bandits, though that had been enough to send two of them backing off, and their replacements had moved in warily.

The bandits who were having trouble with White-face finally had the bright idea of releasing the rope supporting the net, so that he would drop to the ground, and they could rush in and do away with him while he was stunned. As they were untying the rope, there was a new development.

'Hoi!' came a huge voice, issuing from an equally huge fellow. Dark-complexioned, and hairy, the newcomer was gripping a huge iron-shod staff. One eye was covered by a patch improvised from a plate of metal. The stupider of the two bandit leaders immediately rushed over and started threatening the fellow, but was quickly batted aside by the staff. This left the former soldier to try flattery, but that seemed just as ineffective. At a judicious moment, he tried a surprise attack with his mace, calling for support from his underlings.

The fight didn't last very long, and none of the outlaw's underlings saw fit to assist their leader. Picking himself up on to his knees, the bandit made his last, pathetic attempt, this time at begging mercy. It was as doomed to failure as his previous attempts. The staff came crashing down on the man's skull with a sickening sound, and the bandit lay still. The remainder took to their heels and were off into the woods as if pursued by ten thousand angry ghosts.

Sun, disappointed, chased after them. Unfortunately their skill at fleeing exceeded their skill-at-arms.

This left White-face to untangle himself from the net and thank the newcomer for his timely intervention. Iron Bian, it turned out, was travelling north, and would be happy to accompany White-face and his party.

豫

Jizhou offered an opportunity for a rest, and bit of business. It had a fine public baths, of which the travellers took full advantage. It also had a street of silk merchants. Pan sent Sun and White-face off with a bolt of silk to see what sort of a price they could get in the market, while he headed for the silk shops to try negotiating with their owners. He was suspicious of the biggest. Despite its fancy exterior, it seemed to have relatively little silk within, and its clerk struck him as an unreliable sort. It would need careful handling.

The next biggest shop offered possibilities, though its manager was out for the day. Pan met him in the evening, and a tentative agreement was reached.

Meanwhile Sun and White-face felt that they would lose face by hawking silk in the market, and so decided

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to engage in a little negotiation of their own. They too quickly found that the biggest shop was not simply a silk shop, but they decided to push a little further. The result was a conversation in which each side came out thinking that they had been talking about something different to what the other side thought they had. Perhaps there is a lesson to be learned here about the dangers of trying to negotiate silk deals at the same time as you're looking for opportunities on the other side of the law. Two wolves that fight over a deer they haven't killed yet may end up hungry.

In the three days spent in Jizhou, Pan arranged a meeting with a certain Feng, a cheery fellow who represented the interests behind the large silk shop. They were worried at the prospect of a bunch of rivers and lakes toughs moving in on their town. Feng's mission was to determine whether Pan and his caravan constituted a threat that would have to be dealt with.

Pan handled the situation with his accustomed self-assurance. He allowed himself to be manoeuvred into admitting that he was nervous about Sun and the White-faced Gentleman, and that the two were only involved because they happened to be travelling to the Northern Capital. He, like his employer Zhao Yu, was a legitimate businessman who wanted to establish honest business contacts. Smiling Feng returned to his masters to tell them that there was nothing to worry about.

There didn't seem any more that could be done in Jizhou, so as the rain had let up, the caravan headed off once more.

蹇

However you look at it, it was a mess. The girl was dressed in a blue floral dress, with silver pins in her hair. She had a handcart with tawdry cases on it. As Pan, Sun, White-face and Wu Dong came round the corner, she was struggling with a rogue. Soon weapons had been drawn, and a shouting match had developed.

To some it was a clear case. The girl Su Jian claimed to have lost both her husband and father in Yanzhou, and being destitute was on her way to relatives in the Northern Capital. The rogue, Luo Chan, was taking advantage of a lone woman on the road.

Others were suspicious. Pretty boy Wu Dong, in particular, took against the girl, demanding to know what she was doing all alone on the road. A fight broke out. Luo Chan ended up dead, but no one seemed very pleased by that, apart from Su Jian, who took off back down the road with her handcart.

There's no doubt that Luo Chan was a crook who deserved what he got, but what of Su Jian? She had pulled out a long, narrow blade when Luo Chan was being held by White-face, and tried to finish him herself. She had hissed at Wu Dong with evident hatred. Did she have

something in her handcart other than the meagre family effects she claimed?

It's only in the tales of inexperienced marketplace storytellers that being a hero is easy, and justice can be easily ascertained, and simply done. Real life often ends like this episode, with a poorly concealed corpse beside the road, a tea-thief hurrying down the road with her handcart, glad to be rid of her ill-mannered accomplice, and a bunch of heroes with a sour taste in their mouths.

第二回

*Grace means adornment, beauty of form.
Graceful form is right in small matters.*

賁

A fire, breaking out of the secret depths of the earth, blazing up and illuminating the mountains. Beauty of form: the light of Love and the firmness of Justice. Lei Ma realised right away that his reading of the Changes pointed in an unusual direction. By now, he felt, his pupil and the caravan he was leading must be north of Jizhou, and the land would be rising as they entered the foothills of the mountainous area of central Jingdong. The caravan would be skirting the edges, and would come nowhere near Taishan, the Holy Mountain, but Lei Ma knew that one mountain at least would be important in their story.

Love and Justice, the oracle said. Justice he could understand; it was something to do with the two 'burglars' who had killed one of Zhao Yu's retainers. They should have been executed, but a miscarriage of justice in the capital had commuted their sentences to exile. The two were now being escorted north, on their way to Shamen Isle, a route which happened to coincide with that of the caravan. The 'Haven of the Sleeping Dragons', Zhao Yu's secret society, was dedicated to justice for high and low alike.

Love? That was a trickier proposition.

The sixth line was moving: 'Nothing but grace in white'. The highest stage of spiritual development, the purest simplicity. The truth dawned at last. They were going to meet a Perfected One.

鼎

'How long to the next town?' Shen muttered to Long, conspiratorially. Long knew what Shen's half-smile referred to.

While in Jizhou they had managed to smuggle a jug of rice wine into the stables where they had been posted to keep an eye on the cart. Even with the cups they gave the stable boy to warm the wine and keep his mouth shut, they still had enough to get merrily soused. For a brief

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half hour, having exhausted the pleasures to be had from throwing straw at each other, they lolled around actually talking with relish of what a grand adventure they were having, and quite forgetting their tacit understanding that this journey was nothing but suffering, and Song Fu Fei a slave driver.

The day after, they had resumed with a vengeance their refrain that the journey was nothing but suffering. Hangovers and hot weather conspired to erase any pleasant memory of the previous night's ebullience, and even Song Fu Fei noticed their condition, and eased the pace slightly.

By the next day, however, they were starting to regain their eagerness to taste of life's forbidden fruits. Unfortunately, their sense of geography was hazy. They knew that there was at least one more town before they reached the Yellow River, but they couldn't remember what its name was. They were reluctant to ask their Master for fear of another scolding.

The weather was dry, and as the caravan made its way through a range of foothills, their throats became increasingly parched. The road led steadily upwards, winding its way around the hills like the sinuous coils of a river snake.

Ahead lay a pass, and they heard the chatter of a mountain stream splashing merrily on rocks. The cliffs on either side became steeper and steeper. Finally, the source of the stream came into sight, a gush of water emerging from rock. By it sat an old man apparently lost in thought.

As Sun approached, the old man looked up. 'Be kind enough to do me a favour if you would drink from this spring.'

Sun asked what favour the old man desired.

'I am hungry,' the old man said.

Sun smiled, and pulled out a couple of oil cakes from their travelling rations. The old man took them, and gestured him towards the spring. Sun cupped his hands and drank great mouthfuls of the spring water. Pan was next to approach the spring, and Shen noticed that he observed the old man intently.

The old man said: 'My clothes are old and worn.' It was true, and they were dirty too.

Pan was nonplussed for a moment, then took a small sample roll off the cart. Soon he, too, was enjoying the water.

Song Fu Fei didn't need hisses of 'Master! Master!' from his apprentices to spur him into action.

'I am poor!' said the old man.

'Well, I never...!' said Song Fu Fei, biting back the retort that someone who sat around next to a mountain spring all day could well expect to be poor. But Sun's behaviour had set the pattern. Song wasn't going to lose face by playing the game any less generously than his companions, though why they hadn't just ignored the old man and drunk the water anyway escaped him.

Rummaging in his sleeve he drew a handful of cash and held it out to the old man.

The fellow looked up at him and smiled. 'One will be sufficient, thank you!' he said, taking a single coin. Song didn't know whether to be pleased or offended, but in any case he was soon enjoying the cool waters of the spring, and Shen and Long got to slake their thirst too.

They were too busy splashing the ice cool water over each other to be able to hear the conversation Pan had with the old man, but Long did notice Pan nodding many times.



Patience, Pan knew, was the secret. It had been drummed into him all through his upbringing, with the reverence of a family tradition, passed down through the centuries. Unfortunately, though Pan had shown sufficient patience to acquire a wide range of the skills for which his family would have been famous had they not been so careful to keep themselves hidden, he had not acquired the deep patience that marked the true adept. In fact, if truth be told, though he could spend a whole night watching a house and carefully noting all activity, in matters of the spirit he was impatient. Impulsive, some might say. Thus he had found himself wandering, in search of something to fill the void within, until he had arrived at Jinfang, acquiring both a cause—the Haven of the Sleeping Dragons—and a Master—Lei Ma the Seer.

The trouble with Pan was that even though he knew the importance of patience, deep in his soul he didn't believe in it.

Matters weren't helped on this occasion. He had let his intellect guide him, and been careful to shadow the two assassins as they were escorted north. He had already obtained details about the escort from Inspector Tian in Danzhou. Tian was obviously outraged by the miscarriage of justice by which the two villains had escaped the death sentence. Pan half suspected that Tian guessed that someone was going to see justice done, and approved. He didn't think there would be much problem persuading the escorting guards to co-operate.

On one of his scouting missions ahead he had met up with the party, and struck up a friendly conversation with the two guards. A plan was forming, and because he was being patient, he knew it was going to work out just right.

Then, on the way down from the hills, disaster struck. It came slowly, from afar, trudging down the road towards them. Pan had ample time to guess the truth, doubt his senses, check again, doubt again and finally suffer a moment of private inner panic as all doubt fled and the two guards hailed him.

'What happened?' he enquired, trying to be as casual as he could. 'Weren't you supposed to be going all the way to Shamen Isle?'

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‘We were,’ said the guard with a grin, ‘but we had a stroke of luck. Ran into Hui Bodong, a military inspector with the circuit administration. He said there had been a change of plan, and the escort was to be upgraded to six of his cavalymen. Signed our papers and everything. Would have thought it a bit strange, but Inspector Tian said he thought something might turn up along the way. Still, have a good journey yourself!’

Pan watched the guards walk back the way they had come. Now what? How did this Hui Bodong fit into things? Pan didn’t like meddlers, and resolved to get even.

旅

The White-faced Gentleman and Tiger Shark Sun Xi had been employed as guards for a caravan, but from the very beginning they had realised that there was a little more to it. Their employer, Zhao Yu, had been curiously evasive about certain details. And the leader of the caravan, Pan the Shadow, once you spent a little time with him, proved to be rather more than his unassuming exterior suggested.

This didn’t bother the two bravos particularly. The White-faced Gentleman had originally been an silversmith in Suzhou, but from childhood he had been addicted to the practice of staves and spears, and somehow had drifted into the rivers and lakes fraternity without hardly noticing. Tiger Shark, on the other hand, had been involved in some nasty business on the coast of Fujian, in which he’d taken on the unscrupulous local representatives of the rice monopoly. Things had got a little hot for him, so rather than taking to sea, which would have been the most predictable, and therefore most dangerous, means of flight, he had become a landlubber. He travelled up through the Empire, doing occasional odd jobs where he could, and living rough when necessary.

So it wasn’t long before the two of them had worked out that Pan’s interest in the two convicts being escorted to Shamen Isle was something more than mere curiosity.

Iron Bian was different. It was good to have him along with the caravan, of course. Not only was he an ox of a fellow, and apparently handy with weapons other than his staff, but he was a former soldier, with experience both of border clashes and bandit hunting. You couldn’t hope for a more accomplished caravan guard. The problem was that ‘bandit hunting’ part of it made certain of the travellers a little nervous. The White-faced Gentleman was certainly very glad that he had been so polite in thanking Bian after his assistance with the bandits. As a result, Bian seemed well-disposed towards him, and their common interest in staves only served to fuel the friendship.

White-face and Sun both worried what would happen if Bian learned more of Pan’s mission. Although Bian claimed to be disgusted with the current state of the

Imperial Army, this didn’t necessarily mean that he would be sympathetic to the rivers and lakes fraternity.

They had occasion to find out pretty soon.

臨

‘We’re now approaching the area in which the bandits of Liangshan Po are active,’ announced Pan one day. ‘Since part of the point of this mission is to establish a safe route, we need to attract the bandits to the caravan. Thus from now on we’ll be travelling in two groups. Uncle Bian, and Brothers Zheng and Sun will accompany me, while the rest of you will act as bait. If the caravan is seen to be too well guarded, they won’t come.’

Iron Bian nodded sagely. ‘It’s a sound scheme. “Entice the tiger with a baby goat while the hunter hides” we used to call it at the front.’

‘Baby goat!’ spluttered Song Fu Fei. ‘I’ve been called many things in my time, but “baby goat!” I don’t mind at all travelling with you for protection, but to be used as a lure for bandits is not what I consider an honourable way of treating travelling companions.’

‘Don’t worry,’ Pan said, with what might have been an attempt at charm. ‘You’ll have Wu Dong to protect you.’

Song glanced over to where the overdressed knife merchant was lounging and shot Pan a sharp look.

It took a while to overcome Song’s protestations, but eventually the caravan split in two. A couple of days later, as the land around became wetter and flatter, they reached a site that Pan deemed perfect—so perfect, in fact, that he took the risk of slipping back to instruct the caravan to stop.

The road made its way round a low rise, and Pan had spotted a slight hollowed area on its flank which offered slight shelter from the elements—and which was also vulnerable to ambush. This latter point he didn’t see fit to tell Song, instead pointing out that a good rest in a sheltered spot would do them all good. Song argued, as usual, but was finally swayed when his apprentices, Shen and Long, joined in on Pan’s side.

Night fell, and Wu Dong got the apprentices to light a fire, while further down the road, at a place rather less vulnerable to ambush, the others huddled and swapped stories. The White-faced Gentleman and Sun continued to probe Iron Bian. He was halfway through a story of a patrol that went wrong when he stopped, and gripped his staff. Pan, Sun noted, had already shrunk into the darkness, and had one hand in his jerkin, where he kept a knife.

Figures were approaching in the darkness. It was hard to make them out clearly, but soon one of them called out: ‘Brothers!’

‘What do you want?’ growled Iron Bian. A grizzled figure stepped closer. Although the hilts of two swords could be seen on his back, he carried no weapon, and his hands were clasped in polite greeting. It was too dark to

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make out his features clearly, but his unkempt beard drew attention.

‘Please excuse me for disturbing you,’ he replied. ‘We are a group of... ah... travellers, like yourselves.’ As he spoke his eyes scanned the area, sizing up those he saw. Less obvious was that Pan was doing exactly the same, though the newcomer’s companions were holding back.

Iron Bian stood up quickly. The newcomer started slightly, but didn’t reach for his weapons. Bian smiled. ‘Come and join us!’ he called jovially, in a voice loud enough to carry to all those in the shadows.

With the minimum of polite ceremony the newcomer, whose name turned out to be Hua, sat down. When his compatriots were also invited, Hua became evasive. No one pressed the point.

A conversation ensued, like the opening rounds of a fencing match between masters. The obvious truth—that Hua was leading a group of bandits—was never spoken. Instead the names of several prominent figures of the rivers and lakes fraternity were mentioned, like the notes that merchants write for one another: symbols of trust and belonging.

Sun and White-face Zheng were relieved to note that Bian knew his fair share of names, and seemed relaxed in the company of Hua, though whether this wasn’t simply the composure of an experienced warrior they couldn’t be sure.

Beneath the surface of the discussion, the real purpose started to emerge. Hua and his group were not interested in attacking. To pick on four obviously tough opponents with little sign of wealth would be as financially fruitless as it would be dangerous. And to attack someone who had invited you to join them would be beneath the honour of all but the most treacherous of bandits. What Hua was fishing for, however was some sign as to whether the four would ‘mind’ his group swooping on that group of merchants and their cart and pack animals, camped a little way down the road.

Here he received no clear answers. Of course, he couldn’t ask directly, but only in hints and generalities. The responses he received suggested that no, the four were not particularly sympathetic to merchants and yes, they all had cause to dislike the authorities for one reason for another. Unable to get an answer as clear as he would have liked, Hua made his excuses and left, rejoining his shadowy comrades.

They say that decisions of this sort are the true test of leadership, but Hua wasn’t to know that he was already disadvantaged—he thought he was the hunter rather than the hunted.



For Shen and Long it was a nightmare far worse than those with which their imaginations had been supplying them during the journey. One of them, Shen,

or possibly Long, was supposed to stay awake on watch, but what with the boredom and the tiredness, whichever of them it was soon drifted off into a fitful doze.

He was woken by a yell. Dark shapes milled around in the firelight. Off to one side Song Fu Fei was drawing one of his own blades and swinging at one of the dark shapes. Wu Dong, sword in hand, was being driven back by two opponents. He had just enough time to take this in before a face loomed up before him, and the hilt of a sword smacked down on his head.

Things might have turned out better if Song Fu Fei hadn’t drawn his sword, but then who is to say? And who is to blame poor old Song Fu Fei, startled out of his sleep by bandit attack.

Hua no doubt thought that the sudden appearance of a dozen bandits in the firelight would quickly quash resistance, but he was wrong. Song, after all, was not a silk merchant but a swordsmith, and you can’t be a swordsmith without knowing a little about how to use the things. He took one bandit by surprise, but his early success proved his undoing, and he was soon pinned by two canny bandits.

Meanwhile, Wu Dong had quickly been consumed by one of his black moods. Perhaps the bandits discounted him, fooled by the foppish silks into thinking that he was a pushover. A well-aimed knife and a drawn sword soon dispelled that impression, and his two opponents discovered that Wu was more powerfully built than he looked.

Even so, things looked bad when help arrived. As Song Fu Fei was to point out later (at regular intervals), it arrived a little late, but nevertheless it arrived in spectacular fashion. For hurtling out of the air, down into the firelight, came Sun the Tiger Shark. As he descended, he braced his glinting sword and a single mighty blow cleaved a bandit from head to hip. Two of the bandits were unfortunate enough to see Sun’s face as he pulled his sword free and turned to look around. It wasn’t a pretty sight, even for a bandit’s eyes.

As Sun’s dramatic entrance claimed attention, another two bandits toppled forward, each with a knife in his back. Somewhere in the darkness beyond, a shadow shifted position, and readied another knife.

And then charging down from the top of the hill came two figures swinging staves, one a huge man with a fuzzy beard and an eye-patch, the other pale-faced and grinning.

The fight didn’t last long after that, but it lasted just long enough for Song Fu Fei to gasp and black out as steel sliced his shoulder. Hua, and the surviving bandits, were captured. Pan emerged from the shadows and favoured the captives with a thin smile. ‘Our calling card to Liangshan Po,’ he mused to himself.

第三回

*As a lake below enriches a mountain above;
As decrease below gives increase above;
Thus does the wise man curb his passions*

損

The sage, as everyone knows, controls his anger and suppresses his desire. This is because of the nature of change. We live always on the cusp of change, and we perceive change as motion. The Tao, however, is unchanging and unmoving. Anger and desire are the products of an incomplete perception of the universe, a perception founded on the illusion of motion. One who has attuned himself to the Tao appreciates this illusion, and curbs his base instincts accordingly.

In a time of decrease, there is an advantage in every move made towards a destination, no matter how strong the feeling of loss.

Lei Ma the Seer knew that his student Pan was proceeding towards a destination. Pan thought his destination was the Northern Capital, but Lei Ma knew better. Pan's destination was an act. The Seer wasn't yet sure what the act would be, but he could feel it looming up ahead, like the stout pole at the centre of a tent, invisible from the outside yet holding up the roof. Whatever this act was, Lei Ma knew that it concerned him, and that it was the act which would define the whole of the rest of Pan's life. He experienced a shiver, and he knew that when Pan returned, he would bring with him bad joss. It would be best to be well prepared.

蒙

It was an uncomfortable meal. Hanging in the air was a threat, no weaker for being unspoken. The caravan members knew that their wellbeing rested on Wang Lun's concern for his own reputation, and it was becoming steadily more obvious that his concern was far from bottomless.

Pan, Iron Bian, Wu Dong, Song Fu Fei and his apprentices had ascended the mountain at Liangshan Po to sit as guests in the hall of the bandit leader, Wang Lun. Such an invitation should have been a guarantee of their safety, but Wang Lun had already started blustering threats twice this evening, only to be restrained by his closest confidantes, Song Wan and Du Qian.

Pan had felt that it was wisest not to tempt fate by tempting bandits, and so the silk had proceeded up the road to the next village in the tender care of Tiger Shark Sun and Zheng the White-faced Gentleman. The guests had got in the boats provided by their Liangshan Po escorts, and headed off into the mazy waterways of

the marsh that surrounded Mount Liang. They were blindfolded for a part of the journey, but the blindfold was removed as they arrived at Golden Sands beach, from which they ascended into the stronghold.

At dinner, the hard bargaining started. Pan was determined to come away with a guarantee of safe passage for Zhao Yu's silk caravans. Wang Lun, it seemed, was determined to come away with an annual tribute fit for the potentate of a small southern kingdom.

Over the course of the discussion, it became painfully obvious how deep a rift there was between Wang Lun and the bandits he commanded. They all acknowledged him as chief, and treated him with the proper deference, it was true, but there were unmistakable signs of frustration at his attitude. He had opened the discussion with an entirely unnecessary speech about how he would love to welcome the guests as members of the outlaw band, but that there simply weren't enough provisions to feed them. Pan pointed out as tactfully as he could that they had not come to join up, but to do a deal. From then on Wang Lun started to haggle like a common trinket-seller in the market, to the obvious embarrassment of his underlings.

There was also the matter of Hua, the leader of the foolish attack on the caravan. It had actually been Wu Dong who had found himself matching swords with Hua, and who had spared Hua's life, and for this reason he was concerned for the bandit's safety. Hua had lost face from his band's defeat by the caravan during the night raid. It had been he who had arranged for an invitation to be issued to the caravan, and for 'his' guests to be treated so shabbily by Wang Lun could only add to the shame he already felt. Wu Dong almost exhausted his diplomacy in deflecting Wang Lun's comments, and protecting both Hua's face, and his own.

Did this bunch of cutthroats really have a future?

As the evening wore on, and more rice wine was consumed, it became a matter of stamina. Pan employed his customary sleight of hand to appear to be drinking more than he did. Even so it was tough going. Iron Bian, on the other hand, seemed to be able to consume whole flasks of wine without apparent effect, and although he declared himself uninvolved in the silk business, there's no doubt his presence helped immensely in obtaining an assurance of safe passage for Zhao Yu's caravans.

The deal offered plenty of advantages. Clearly, a regular caravan route could only attract more travellers, and those not carrying Zhao Yu's mark would be fair game for the bandits. Both sides stood to gain from the arrangement.

Meanwhile Song Fu Fei was dwelling at length on the pain his shoulder wound was giving him. Perhaps to dull the pain, he consumed far more rice wine than might have been wise in such surroundings, and surprised his fellow travellers later in the evening by suggesting that as Liangshan Po was short of weaponsmiths he could leave one of his apprentices behind with the bandits.

'Oh, he may be an apprentice, but he'll knock up

鳳雛傳

perfectly serviceable swords for you,' boasted Song, expansively, taking another slurp of wine. 'Not up to my standards of course...'

解

The next morning a group of badly hung-over heroes made their way down to the Golden Sands. There was no sign of Wang Lun. Long and Shen moved as carefully as they could, keeping out of Song Fu Fei's field of vision—thanks to the rice wine, mercifully narrow on this sharp autumnal morning—and hiding wherever possible behind the bulk of Iron Bian.

Neither of the apprentices had been present at the banquet the previous night. They had been 'entertained' elsewhere in the stronghold, in the company of other menials. Yet somehow word of Song Fu Fei's rash promise had reached them, the way disadvantageous news always seems to find its way to the sharp ears of the anxious.

For Shen and Long, the whole world was holding its breath on the journey. There was a muffled quiet hanging over everything, it seemed, and each was painfully aware of every slight noise made as feet scuffed shale. The part they dreaded most was climbing in to the boat. Here, if nowhere else, Song Fu Fei was bound to notice them, and issue the words that would seal the fate of one or other. A sentence of exile in this godforsaken place, among these vicious murderers, thieves and renegades from Imperial justice.

Adventures were all very well, Long mused sadly, but much better when they happened to other people.

At the boat, the sense of comradeship which had, up to then, united the two apprentices in the face of the unthinkable, broke down. With imminent disaster looming, selfishness won out. Shen stuck out a foot to trip Long. Long staggered, recovered, and rounded on Shen, giving him a vicious shove. An unceremonious scuffle ensued.

Miracle of miracles, Song Fu Fei had already got into the boat, and didn't notice what was happening. He was too busy finding himself a comfortable seat near the middle of the boat to worry about those vague noises that penetrated the wine-sodden wool which seemed to envelop his head.

Without saying a word, Iron Bian picked up an apprentice in each hand and dumped them unceremoniously in the back of the boat. The two immediately ceased their spat, staring at each other in a mixture of fear, hope and confusion.

The boat set off.

In the end they were halfway to the next village before Song Fu Fei blearily noticed his apprentices.

'Hey, wasn't one of you supposed to stay at Liangshan Po?' he asked, temporarily forgetting to wince at the pain from his injured shoulder, perhaps because the pain in his head had a prior claim.

'No one told us anything about that, Master,' lied Long with experience born of constant practice. 'Of course I would have loved to become an outlaw, but it's too late to go back now, isn't it?'

By way of an answer, Song Fu Fei only grunted, missing the sighs of relief that escaped the lips of both Long and Shen.

井

Pan was glad to get away from the caravan for a while. At heart, he preferred to work alone anyway, and Song Fu Fei's continuing snide comments about the bandit attack were starting to grate. Perhaps it was because there was some truth in them. Song *had* suffered a nasty sword wound in the shoulder. Since Song was not actually employed by Zhao Yu, head of the Haven of Sleeping Dragons, but merely a fellow traveller, he did perhaps have a legitimate complaint about being used as bait.

Anyway, Pan had left the caravan with strict instructions to continue north up the road, while he took a little diversion. He had business in the town of Dongping.

He was after the two prisoners who were being escorted up the road to the high security prison on Shamen Isle. A military inspector by the name of Hui Bodong had relieved the escorts of their charges. Of course, they could have gone in any direction, but Pan had a hunch that, since the region was threatened by the bandits of Liangshan Po, Hui Bodong wouldn't hang around in the wilds, but would make straight for the biggest military camp in the area... which just happened to be at the town of Dongping.

He hoped he was in time. He wished he'd brought along that horse that was stabled at the Seven Lotuses in Jinfang. But he couldn't really do that without damaging the useful fiction that it belonged to someone else. So he had to rely on hurrying on foot.

When Pan arrived in Dongping, he didn't waste time, but made straight for the tea house nearest the main market. It was here that he could pick up the most recent town gossip, and get the clearest idea of where to go to refine his search. It took him less than an hour to find what he needed, allowing him to relax a little and get a proper bite to eat. He needed to husband his strength for the night's activity. For he had learned that Hui Bodong, six cavalymen, and two prisoners were in Dongping's military compound, and had been there a couple of days.

That night, he crept close to the perimeter fence and sized up the encampment. A number of wooden buildings were arrayed within, showing that it was no temporary camp. There was a guard on duty, but Pan quickly found a dead spot at the perimeter, and scaled the fence. He slipped, like the shadow after which he was named, across the ground to a building and scaled the wall. Perhaps it was practical, perhaps it was psychological, but Pan always

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preferred to view things from above. This had the added advantage that it provided an improved hiding place.

He tried to find a chink in the roof tiles through which he would be able to view the building's interior, but it was in better repair than he had hoped. That meant the eaves. He cat-footed his way down to the edge of the roof and peered over.

At this moment fate intervened. The loose tile for which Pan had been searching chose this moment to make its presence known. Unfortunately it was under Pan's foot. His arms whirled in space as he lost his balance, instinctively clutching out. A moment later he was dangling off the edge of the roof, praying that he had a firm enough grip. All he had to do was swing himself up into the eaves and...

Liu An wrote that: 'Good swimmers often drown and good horse-riders often fall. It is their strong points that bring them disaster.' If Pan hadn't been a master of stealth he would not have been in the situation he was now, and things wouldn't have gone from bad to worse.

For in the eaves before him there was movement, a hiss, and a pair of inhuman eyes regarding him with absolute malice.

Pan had chosen to fall above the precise spot in which a snake had made its nest. And the snake was clearly angered at the unwarranted intrusion of this human who now dangled before it.

The snake struck as Pan tried to grab it with one hand and failed. It sank its teeth into his bare forearm, and a stifled scream escaped his lips. He held on for a moment, but the snake pulled back and seemed ready to strike again, so he let go.

He landed on the ground with a thump just as the door of the building opened and out wandered a soldier.

'Who goes there?' the man demanded.

'S-snake bite...!' gasped Pan. He had realised that the snake was poisonous.

The soldier quickly examined him and treated the bite with remarkable efficiency.

'We'll have to do something about that snake some time,' he commented laconically.

By now, more soldiers had emerged from the building, drawn by the conversation. So it was that Pan, still woozy from the effects of the encounter with the snake, found himself dragged in front of the military commander of the area, Dong Ping. The soldiers had been thoughtful enough to introduce their commander before Pan met him. He was known as the Two Spears General for his ability to fight with a spear in each hand. Although an upright and chivalrous man, he had a temper to match his martial ability.

'So—what have we here?' bellowed Commander Dong, eyeing Pan distastefully.

'I was chased by a tiger!' Pan improvised hastily. 'When I reached the compound I didn't think about what was inside it—I just climbed as fast as I could...'

'And got bitten by a snake for your trouble,' said Dong Ping. 'Well, it's not your lucky night is it? We should make a proverb out of this night's events: "Chased by a tiger, bitten by a snake"—that sounds rather good.'

He paused as an officer who had been standing to his right leaned over and whispered in his ear. His brow creased with irritation, but finally he nodded and turned back to Pan.

'Very well. Rather than go through the rigmarole of a trial, the Inspector here has pointed out that he needs the assistance of someone with your qualities...'

'My qualities?' asked Pan.

'You aren't from round here, are you?' enquired the officer who had spoken to Commander Dong.

A different pair of soldiers grabbed Pan, more roughly than before, and he was frogmarched to another of the buildings in the encampment. He quickly realised that it was a military prison. In one of the cells sat an unfortunate with the tattoo marks of a prisoner adorning his face. He looked up mournfully as Pan was flung into the next cell.

The officer had followed Pan across, and now stepped into his cell.

'I don't know what your business was in the camp,' he said with a sneer, 'But your timing was impeccable. You'll leave in the morning. Tattooist! Give this one the same as you gave the other!'

He strode out of the cell. In came a wiry old man carrying a box of needles and ink, and a hulking assistant.

'Chased by a tiger, bitten by a snake,' Dong Ping had said. He didn't know how truly he had spoken.

The snakebite carried no more than the threat of death. Pan wasn't afraid of death—or at least no more afraid than anyone who prowls the dark streets at night. But to have his face disfigured with a convict's tattoo—there could be little worse than that.

It started with the shame, of course. With tattoos, he could never face his father or any other member of his family. For generations, the Pan family had made a comfortable living from crime, executed with dignity and care. Like skilled fishermen, they took care not to deplete the stocks. In their own way, they even contributed to the community. And in that time, not one of them had acquired convict's tattoos.

As if the shame wasn't enough, there was worse behind it. For most of Pan's skill rested on his nondescript looks. People just didn't notice him particularly, he was so normal. Tattooed cheeks would change all that...

So Pan looked up into the eyes of the tattooist with more than the usual measure of horror and hatred. His whole body tensed for action... but was anticipated by the tattooist's assistant, who grabbed his arm and put him in a lock. It was the arm with the snakebite, and it hurt.

The tattooist leaned close and hissed into his face: 'Don't try anything or you'll just mess it up for all of us. I know this business is illegal, and I don't want to be held responsible, but that bastard isn't giving me much choice.'

鳳雛傳

So just lie still, and I'll give you the shallowest tattoo I can. I just hope it's enough to convince the inspector.'

Next morning Pan and the other prisoner, with cangues set about their necks, were led out into the morning sunlight. Dong Ping was there, with a squad of infantry, and the officer was there too, mounted, with some other cavalymen in attendance. Dong Ping picked out two men from his squad, ordered them over to the officer, and then stumped off, apparently annoyed at something.

The two picked soldiers were given documents by the officer, who then rode out of the compound with eight other men on horses. Two of them were not wearing the uniforms of soldiers. Though their faces could not be seen, Pan had a shrewd suspicion who they were.

'Who was that officer, then?' asked Pan, as the two soldiers shouldered packs and prodded him and the other prisoner to start walking.

'Shut up, you!' one soldier replied, half-heartedly.

After a pause, the other said: 'That was Inspector Hui Bodong.'

'He's a dead man,' muttered Pan under his breath.

第四回

*When danger is doubled be true and sincere;
He that is so, has success in his heart*

坎

The abyss is the dark place that everyone visits sooner or later. It is the moment of utmost danger, or the realisation of the human fate as a soul trapped within a physical form.

Pan the Shadow was descending into the Abyss. Lei Ma of Jinfang, expert seer, was aware that his pupil was in physical danger, and worse, was enmeshed in the coils of a spiritual trial. The oracle had shown the clear sign of a convicted man, so Pan must have been seized. But there was far more. It was obvious that Pan would escape, and the unmistakable message Lei discerned was one of revenge. The great sages of antiquity have written much about revenge, and it is clear that it is the source of great evil. Yet who can truly say that they have not felt the temptation? Who, when cheated or wronged by another, can honestly say that they do not wish for more than the penalty decreed by justice?

Bad fortune brings wisdom, so the sages say. Pan had certainly suffered bad fortune, but would he gain wisdom from it, Lei Ma pondered? There were great shadows looming up in the future, and the seer shook his head, and grimly resigned himself to the fact that it was unlikely.

革

What on earth was going on, Shen wondered. Since Pan, supposedly the leader of the caravan, had disappeared off on his own business, the caravan had dawdled on up the road. Song Fu Fei found Pan's replacement as leader, Tiger Shark Sun, a most unsatisfactory arguing partner. Sun would respond to Song's complaints with an embarrassed smile and a shrug of his shoulders, or, if he was in a bad mood, a surly growl. So Song Fu Fei's ire was increasingly turned upon his longsuffering apprentices.

Things weren't helped by the departure of Iron Bian. He was not headed for the Northern Capital, which by now was to the northwest of the caravan, but further into East Jingdong. Everyone was sorry to see him go, and they shared a meal to cement their friendship. Sun even urged on him some travelling money, but Bian politely refused, pointing out that as they were all travellers together it would not be appropriate for him to accept the gift, however much he appreciated the thought.

Shen and Long were particularly sad to see Bian go. They felt they owed him a favour for rescuing them from the outlaws of Liangshan Po. In their young imaginations, the story had escalated into a full-scale battle, with Bian defeating single-handed an army of bandits intent on capturing the two apprentices and condemning them to a life of slavery. That Bian might simply have been impatient and annoyed by their squabbling when he hoisted them into the boat never crossed their minds.

Things didn't improve when they met up with Pan again. The first sign of trouble was some furtive gesturing from one of several large bushes by the side of the road, which Sun went to investigate, after telling the caravan to continue. Shen and Long kept on peering over to see what was happening behind the bush, and every time they did so, Song Fu Fei would slap one of them across the back of the head and tell him to look where he was going, before turning to look himself.

Whatever went on behind those bushes was never revealed to Shen and Long. All they knew was that during the night at the next stop Pan rejoined the caravan, accompanied by a frightened-looking fellow whose name they never caught. Both Pan and his comrade had horrible red welts across their cheeks. Shen tried to get a closer look at them, as the scars seemed to have unusual shapes—almost as if they were some form of writing. But Pan was very careful to keep his scarred face in the shadows, and well away from the prying eyes of curious apprentices. The caravan continued in an even more ridiculous fashion than before, with its 'leader' riding on the cart and concealing himself as much as possible.

Pan's mysterious companion, who shared his misfortune in having scarred cheeks, soon went his own way. The pattern on his cheeks was clearer than Pan's and it was from him that Shen managed to confirm that it was indeed the tattoo of a convict.

鳳雛傳

Pan had been busy! To be caught, sentenced and tattooed, all in the space of a few days, took a special sort of bad luck. Shen had been looking forward to getting out of West Jingdong, crossing the Yellow River, and approaching what he assumed to be the civilised (and exciting!) precincts of the Northern Capital. But now a bad feeling stole over him. Every time he came anywhere near Pan, he became aware of an almost palpable anger, hanging in the air like the dark cloud over Song Fu Fei's smithy. And he sensed that, as with the smithy, a sharp blade was being forged within...

良

Tiger Shark Sun really didn't know what to make of Pan's most recent escapade—and escapade it was, quite literally. Pan was characteristically tight-lipped about what had gone on, but Sun had established that it involved a military inspector by the name of Hui Bodong, whom Pan now intended to kill.

'Tell me where he is and I'll go and do him for you,' Sun offered in an attempt to cheer up his travelling companion, but this did nothing to lift Pan's spirits.

'I have to do it *myself*,' he replied.

Hints and a lot of guesswork by Sun pieced together some of the story: Pan had obviously been captured by Hui Bodong, tattooed and sent off to the maximum security prison on Shamen Isle. The other fellow with the tattooed face who had been with Pan when he rejoined the caravan had shared his fate: he was apparently a poor merchant from down south who had come north to visit relatives and found them gone. His enquiries had led him eventually to the desk of Hui Bodong, who had asked a lot of strange questions before seizing him and tattooing his cheeks.

Try as he might, Sun couldn't persuade Pan to tell him exactly how he had escaped from the escort. He did learn, however, that the soldiers who had escorted the two were not Hui's men, but had been requisitioned from the local garrison, and so Pan had 'spared them'.

'But I have a nasty suspicion Hui Bodong won't be so generous if he catches up to them,' he added.

The main anxiety now was the prospect of being followed. Pan insisted that he had concealed the cangues well enough to prevent them being found for many days, if at all, but there was always the possibility that the two soldiers would be apprehended. He had recommended that they go and join the bandits of Liangshan Po, he now revealed, but wasn't sure they would do so.

未濟

The little fox will wet its tail before it successfully crosses the ice.

They were nearing the Yellow River. The road beneath their feet was the same dull yellowish colour as all the

earth in this region, covered by the loess that brought both fertility and the constant threat of floods.

Long was the first to spot the horsemen approaching from the rear. Pan quickly concealed himself beneath the silk in the cart.

Sure enough, the two horsemen were soldiers, and by the looks of it soldiers attached to a patrolling inspector. They hailed Song Fu Fei, apparently taking him to be the leader of the caravan.

'Have you seen two convicts, or their cangues?'

'What are you talking about?' replied Song Fu Fei. 'And what do you think you are doing, pestering honest merchants without even introducing yourselves first? For all I know, you're a couple of bandits from Liangshan Po!'

The second horseman bridled at this and seemed about to reach for his weapon, but the first restrained him. 'We are responsible directly to the patrolling inspector of this region, Hui Bodong, and we are looking for two dangerous escaped convicts.'

'Hui Bodong?' replied Song Fu Fei. 'Never heard of him. Is he *really* the patrolling inspector of this area?'

The soldier was taken aback. 'Of course he is! He is responsible for the whole of West Jingdong circuit! Now answer my questions before I arrest you!'

'I suppose I'd better, since you're obviously not bandits,' said Song Fu Fei. He continued in a lower tone, 'Bandits have better manners.' Before the message could sink in, he raised his head and fairly bawled at the soldier, 'No we haven't seen any convicts and we haven't seen any cangues. Thank you and good-bye!'

The two soldiers flinched, but turned their horses and started to ride on.

'Only way to deal with these meddling officious parasites,' said Song Fu Fei with obvious satisfaction.

But it wasn't over that easily. After a mere ten minutes the two horsemen returned down the road at a canter. Song Fu Fei sighed loudly, and planted his hands on his hips as they approached and reined in. 'What do you want this time?'

'We're going to search your cart!'

The words were barely out of his mouth than Sun the Tiger Shark grabbed the hilt of a sword concealed in the cart and with the speed and ferocity of the fish after which he was named, swung such a mighty blow at the soldier that the sword passed through his body and brought down the horse too.

His companion had quick reactions. Before Sun, or the White-faced Gentleman, who was hurrying round the cart, could get to him, he spurred his mount into action and was off down the road at a gallop.

Sun looked down at the horse he'd just fatally injured, and cursed. But Pretty Boy Wu Dong was ready with his knives, and as the first flew at the retreating figure, Pan burst out of the silks and drew a knife too.

Wu Dong's aim was true, and his knife was enough

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to unseat the soldier. The man tumbled from horseback and was dragged along a little way until his feet untangled from the stirrup.

Even though he lay still, Pan ran up to him and plunged a knife several times into his body. When he had finished his orgy of violence, he looked up to see Sun scratching his cheek and squinting into the distance.

‘Perhaps it would have been better to devote your attention to one that got away,’ Sun observed, pointing to the riderless horse, now disappearing into the distance.

Pan scowled. ‘Revenge is more important?’

師

After the bodies were hidden as well as could be done in a few minutes, the caravan hurried on. Long and Shen were in shock, perhaps even worse than after the bandit attack. It was one thing to visit bandit strongholds, it was quite another to murder officers of the law.

It had taken some persuading to prevent Sun from carving great chunks out of the horse and carrying the meat with them for extra rations. The White-faced Gentleman had to repeatedly point out the consequences of concrete evidence like that. He started to say, ‘That will get you tattoos like...’ but a glance at Pan’s thunderous expression made him continue, lamely, ‘nothing else.’

After this Shen noticed the curious way that Sun seemed to look at the soldier’s corpse, and the similarity between this and the way Sun had looked at the horse made him feel distinctly queasy.

They were approaching a ford over a stream that ran into the Yellow River a couple of hours later, when Shen and Long spotted more riders. After the last incident, the two had been keeping a continuous watch on the rear. When they saw the riders they yelped so loudly that Song Fu Fei had to tell them to shut up and calm down. But Song Fu Fei himself didn’t seem to be all that calm.

‘What’s going to happen now? You can’t take on an army,’ he said in the direction of Pan, or Sun, or anyone who would listen.

Pan replied. ‘Try me?’

They trundled the cart down the slope and across the ford. There was a slight slope up the other side, and Pan told Song Fu Fei and the noncombatants to take the cart to the highest point and wait there.

‘Oh, and let me have one of your swords,’ he said, in a voice that brooked no dissent.

He stuck the sword into the ground near the top of the slope, drew some knives and got ready. Sun had his sword out, and was waiting halfway up the slope. Near him stood White-face Zheng, grinning nervously over at his friend, and twirling his staff.

‘I’m not going anywhere near that water!’ insisted Wu Dong, who had ridden across on the cart, and now stood at the top of the slope. ‘It does terrible things to good silk.’

‘It’s only a foot deep!’ mocked Zheng.

By now the riders were in clear view. There were seven of them, riding large, powerful horses, like those of the two soldiers. As they neared the ford, though, a difference became obvious. These seven cavalymen were armoured. Fifty yards from the ford they drew to a halt, and the leader rode a little closer, sizing up the situation.

Pan shaded his eyes with his hand and said almost beneath his breath, ‘Hui Bodong...’

The officer turned to his men, holding up four fingers, then made a quick gesture forward. The seven cantered towards the ford.

Pan heard an aggrieved voice raised behind him.

‘How dare he ignore me!’

He looked round, and saw Song Fu Fei with sword drawn, waiting in front of the cart. He also saw a figure a little way further down the road, a figure he hadn’t noticed earlier, an old man—vaguely familiar—but he had no time to look closer, for the cavalry were almost in the ford.

The riders didn’t hear it, but those on the other bank, as they stood waiting, heard a rumbling sound, which quickly grew into a roar. And as the first horseman plunged into the stream, Sun saw the wave bearing down from his left.

The horsemen tried to charge across the stream, but the water was just deep enough to slow them. Pan and Wu Dong flung knives at them, although they realised the armour probably made it pointless. But as the first horseman emerged from the stream, the flood water struck.

Their plan had obviously been to strike as a single unit, and for those at the front to ride on through and then wheel for a second attack, to trap the caravan and attack from two sides. It might have worked, had it not been for the rush of water that knocked two of the horses off balance and forced the remainder to abort their charge and devote all their efforts to retaining control of their horses.

The first horseman slashed at Sun on the way up the slope, but was parried expertly. He careered on up the slope past Pan and headed for the cart.

Before he could turn round, Song Fu Fei jumped up on the cart and started swinging his sword, while Wu Dong came round from behind.

Meanwhile Sun, seeing the horsemen struggling to control their mounts, and Zheng engaging the other one who had made the bank, joined Pan in hurling knives. They all found their mark, and one found a chink in the armour, for another soldier fell from his horse and was washed away by the swirling waters.

Now there were four horsemen left, one trading blows at the top of the slope with Song Fu Fei and Wu Dong, one fighting Zheng, and the remaining two struggling from the water.

One of these was Hui Bodong. His eyes met Pan’s,

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and his lips curled into a sneer as he dug his spurs into his horse's flanks and charged up the slope.

'Look out for the wolf and the tiger will kill you' they say, and one can only assume it was the evil in his heart that made Hui Bodong forget this. As his horse charged Pan, Sun the Tiger Shark slashed once more with his sword, aiming this time not at the man but at his mount.

His horse crashed to the ground, but Hui Bodong managed to leap aside as it fell. Now he was facing Pan at the same level, but he still had his armour and his sword.

Down at the water's edge, Zheng was prevailing against his opponent. Though he couldn't injure him, he was keeping him in the stream, and the flooding waters were making the horse twist and turn unpredictably. Finally, executing the move 'Stealing Eggs from the Sparrow's Nest' he launched the full length of the staff at his opponent, knocking him off the horse and into the river.

Sun hadn't paused after attacking Hui Bodong's horse, but had quickly engaged the remaining soldier. Evading the horseman's slashes, he once again directed his attack at the horse itself, which, already frightened by the flooding waters, soon reared up, tipping its rider into the river. Both Sun and Zheng plunged into the stream to finish off their enemies.

At the top of the slope Song Fu Fei had managed to ward off the horseman, giving Wu Dong a chance to launch a mighty blow from behind. The soldier didn't stand a chance.

That left Pan and Hui Bodong. The officer had metal armour, his sword, and years of military training. Pan had cunning, a borrowed sword, and a passionate desire for revenge.

Unfortunately, whatever the market storytellers may like to tell you, revenge can only compensate for one disadvantage, and Pan was facing two. It was all he could do to ward off Hui's swings, while backing off towards the cart. He stumbled, and his defence wavered.

Rescue came from the unlikeliest direction. Shen and Long, disobeying the express instructions of their master, had grabbed a sword each from the cart and now charged in against the officer. It bought Pan just enough time to recover his balance, and even though Hui Bodong looked confident enough to take on all three, he hadn't reckoned on a certain murderous Shark coming up on him from behind.

Under the combined swords of his attackers, Hui Bodong fell. Long after he was dead Pan continued to plunge his blade into the corpse.

'Now for the family,' he muttered after he was finished. And a taint of red stained the Yellow River.

第五回

Water over fire: a time of perfect order;

But order leads to disorder.

The sage considers misfortune and takes precautions.

既濟

The art of fortune telling lies in the ability to distinguish portents from everyday occurrences. The untrained and superstitious grasp at anything which presents itself to their senses. While it is true that everything is connected, and all reflect the changing nature of the Tao, nothing can be learned without sifting through the immense variety of physical phenomena to extract what is significant. Thus the sixty-four hexagrams of the *Book of Changes* reflect, on a higher plane of abstraction, the incalculable complexity of life in the realm of Man. By considering the changes only at such a rarefied level, it is possible for a single sage to comprehend their import. In the same way, the changes of everyday life can be correctly understood by those with sufficient training and insight.

Some changes, however, are so significant that even the untrained recognise that they portend some great event. So it is with the sightings of dragons and *qilin* which reveal the state of affairs of the Imperial House. So too with earthquakes, which even the lowly farmer knows signify a change in the dynasty, and are to be feared as much for that reason as for the direct damage and suffering they cause.

Pan the Shadow and his travelling companions were on their way to the Northern Capital. They had successfully defended themselves against Hui Bodong and his men. Hui no doubt deserved the fate which had befallen him. He had attempted to free the two assassins who were on their way to exile on Shamen Isle. Worse, he had captured Pan (who, unbeknown to Hui, was attempting to see justice done and the assassins executed) and substituted him for one of the prisoners, tattooing his face in the process.

In the fight at the ford, a sudden surge in the river had deprived Hui's men of the impact of their charge, and swept two of them away down the river. The remainder had been killed by Pan's companions, Sun the Tiger Shark, Pretty Boy Wu Dong, White-faced Gentleman Zheng and the sword merchant Song Fu Fei. Pan himself had finished off Hui Bodong.

After the battle, they had noticed the old man. It was the hermit of the spring, whom they had met many days' journey to the south. They paid their respects to him.

Among the bodies of the slain were those of the two assassins. Order had been restored; Pan's task was completed. But the sages spoke truly when they said

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that it is at the point of equilibrium that events are most susceptible to change.

What, then, are we to make of a mighty river changing its course?

益

The last obstacle facing the caravan was the Yellow River itself. But Rui the Eagle, a hero now convalescing back in Jinfang, had provided Pan with important contacts. His former boss, Tong the Carpet Merchant, ran a business up and down the Yellow River, and the more unscrupulous of the boatmen worked for him. The right password would guarantee a safe river crossing in cases where the lack of it might mean at best the loss of all property, and at worst a face-to-face interview with the River God.

With the right words, the caravan crossed the great river, and set off across the flatter, more settled lands towards Daming, the Northern Capital. A week later, after no more than minor arguments with officious gate guards at intervening towns, the caravan finally rumbled through the mighty South Gate of Daming.

All, with the exception of Pan, expressed their gladness to have arrived. For Wu Dong, it was a return home, and an opportunity to take advantage of his family's resources. For Sun and Zheng, it was a big city, with a myriad inns, restaurants and flower gardens to be explored.

Shen and Long were also happy to be in a large town, free from the depredations of bandits and patrolling soldiers alike, and with who knew what pleasures to be tasted. Their inquisitive glances all about them spoke all too fluently of their intentions, but for once Song Fu Fei paid them no heed. For him, too, arriving at Daming was obviously a relief. Now he could disentangle himself from the dangerous company he had been keeping, and retreat to the more civilised atmosphere of Uncle Jiang's house.

否

Song Fu Fei knocked on the door of the house. He had considered sending someone on ahead to announce his presence, but felt in the circumstances it wasn't really necessary.

The door opened a crack and a young man's head peered through at him.

'What d'ye want?'

Song was taken aback. This was not how he expected to be greeted by family. 'I am Song Fu Fei, from Gongzhou. The mistress of the house is my aunt. I am expected,' he replied, in the ringing tones of a chanting Buddhist.

'Not here, you're not,' snapped the youth impertinently, and slammed the door.

Song stood outside the house for a full minute before he felt that he was sufficiently in control of himself to move. He didn't need to check that he had the right

house—he had visited before, two years ago, and was well acquainted with the place.

Long and Shen, wisely, remained silent.

Song scratched his head, and then did the only thing he could think off. He knocked on the door again.

This time the youth didn't even bother to open it. 'What is it?' he called from beyond the gate.

'There seems to be some mistake,' Song said, in his most diplomatic tone. 'I understood this to be the house of Jiang Lu An, the smith.'

'Never heard of him,' came the reply. 'This house belongs to Ban the Younger, and if you don't have any business with him, I suggest you scarper.'

Song had no intention of 'scarpering', but there was little he could do against a locked door.

He turned and addressed the only audience that was to hand.

'I didn't come all this way, crossing rivers and scaling mountains, fighting off bandits and defeating corrupt officials, to be turned away from my family's house by some cheeky good-for-nothing. You mark my words, I'll sort this business out, and then that impertinent scoundrel will be on his knees, begging my forgiveness for his rudeness!'

Shen and Long muttered 'Yes, Master' while down the street a stray dog peered at Song curiously.

比

They had invited Song Fu Fei to visit them for a meal, but they hadn't really expected him to turn up. As soon as he had passed through the gates of Daming it was evident to Zhao Yu's men that Song Fu Fei was eager to be rid of them, to cleanse himself of more than just the dust of travel.

Yet there he was. Worse still, it was immediately evident that he was angry—angrier than they had seen him on the journey, and that was saying something.

The story came out heavily seasoned with Song Fu Fei's expostulations of outrage and disgust. His aunt and uncle's house, it transpired, was now occupied by a gang of gamblers.

'It is a crime of the most despicable nature! If there is any justice in this Empire then those culpable will have the flesh sliced from their body with my finest blade, over a period of several weeks!'

None of the assembled felt up to pointing out to Song Fu Fei that the penalty of slicing was almost never employed nowadays, and certainly not in cases of mere larceny.

Song's tidings of woe rather put a damper on the party's spirits for the evening. In a spirit of comradeship they promised Song that they'd help him find his aunt and uncle and correct the injustice that had befallen them. Wu Dong, a native of Daming, assured Song that he'd put the word out, and that he'd soon be reunited with his family.

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‘The thought of my poor aunt,’ sobbed Song, ‘kidnapped by ne’er-do-wells and forced to eat nothing but raw millet—it makes my blood boil, I can tell you. She has always hated millet.’

The next day, they all went their separate ways. Wu Dong went home, cheerfully putting up with the usual complaints from his father about his continued bachelor status. He was glad to be reunited with his wardrobe, and even remembered to ask his brother to try to find something out about the missing Jiang family.

Sun decided he was running low on funds, and managed to find himself a labourer’s job, shifting stones with a team of others in the garden of some nabob or other. The White-faced Gentleman eschewed such physical exertions, instead looking after the silk consignment. Since Pan had no wish to draw attention to his marked face, on which the scars were still noticeable, he was needed. Although Pan was responsible for the silk of the caravan, he had business of his own to attend to.

Pan’s family was an old one, and although its influence was greatest in Huainan, it had people in major cities such as Bianliang and Daming, people whose job it was to look after family members in trouble, especially those who needed to disappear. Pan found his contact easily enough, and the horrified expression at the sight of his cheeks did nothing to mollify his mood.

Pan wanted not only a safe house to stay in, but much more besides. The blood of Hui Bodong had stained his hands, but that wasn’t enough. For the honour of the clan, he insisted, the family of Hui Bodong must also pay the ultimate penalty for its member’s crimes. All he had to do was persuade his family contact that he really meant what he said—a task of no great difficulty, given the cast of his face and the tone of his voice—and the message would be passed along. Favours would be called in, and the family Hui would be culled.

As winter descended on the Northern Capital, the fateful message went out. With that task out of the way, Pan could turn his attention to the problem of selling silk, finding buyers who might be interested in a regular supply. He obtained occasional help from Sun Xi with this task, though the latter’s labouring activities prevented him being as useful as he might have been. More distracting was the problem of Song Fu Fei’s relatives. They had fully intended to part company with Song Fu Fei on arriving at the Northern Capital, and knew full well that the feeling was mutual. And yet the disappearance of his aunt and uncle tugged at feelings of comradeship they didn’t even know they possessed.

After several days of investigation amid the descending chill, discoveries started to tumble out of the sky like snowflakes. The most important was that of Song’s aunt and uncle living in a hovel 3 *li* south of the city. In this hovel there was no forge, and there were no servants. Jiang Lu An was forced to eke out a living offering the simplest of services to local farmers and travellers. Despite

the reunion, and the fact that Song Fu Fei’s fears about kidnapping and millet had not come to pass, the discovery did little to improve Song’s temper.

Having heard from his uncle a story that more or less confirmed other discoveries made within the city, Song stood up:

‘You are not staying in this shack a moment longer! We’ll make arrangements to have all your possessions transported. You are returning to the city, and we’ll have you back in your house in a jiffy!’

Jiang Lu An and Mrs Song rolled their eyes, but they were in no position to argue with a furious Song Fu Fei. The next day they were back within the walls of Daming, staying at an inn with their nephew.

坤

The problem was not one for which Song Fu Fei was really prepared. No matter how many sources he heard the story from, he still refused to believe it.

‘But my uncle’s not that sort of person!’ he would wail, to anyone within earshot. For Jiang Lu An had lost his house in a wager with a gang of gamblers.

How could such an upstanding man fall so spectacularly? It’s a sad story, to be sure which stretched back into the past, even beyond the time that Song Fu Fei had last met his relatives.

Jiang Lu An was introduced to the gamblers by a detachment of soldiers. These soldiers were stationed just up the road from him as a firefighting squad. As he was the nearest smith, and was licensed by the military, they would often visit his shop for repairs. He became reasonably friendly with the soldiers, and learned that, like many soldiers, they were engaged in a number of side enterprises designed to keep them active, and lessen their burden on the State (at least, that was the way they put it to him). In short, they were running a moneylending business.

The soldiers suggested that Jiang might consider putting up some capital for their business, as they could guarantee a good return. Jiang was none too keen initially. However the soldiers introduced him to Ban Zhou, a wealthy real estate broker. Ban Zhou already provided the soldiers with some money. Rather than this being a loan of funds for a specified interest rate, the arrangement was based on profit sharing, and it was this that persuaded Jiang to invest.

All this happened over a year ago. After his introduction, Jiang started investing funds in the soldiers’ operation, and making a reasonable return. His wife, Mrs Song, happy with the increase in income, spent more extravagantly, attempting to cultivate a higher social circle.

Unfortunately, it all went wrong a couple of months ago. The soldiers made a large loan to a fellow who wanted to buy some land, with Ban handling the

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brokering. Unfortunately the fellow promptly went bust. According to the terms of the loan the land defaulted to the principal supplier of capital: Jiang.

Having obtained a parcel of land south of the city, Jiang was then shocked to be hit by a large tax bill. Not having invested any funds with a tax broker, this was a disaster; he simply didn't have liquid funds. How could he face the ignominy of being unable to pay a tax demand? He couldn't sell the land, as no buyer could be found. Ban Zhou wasn't prepared to loan him the money. The shock led to him, uncharacteristically, drinking heavily.

It was when drunk that the sympathetic soldiers introduced him to Ban's son. Ban was a good for nothing, living mainly off his father's wealth, but was canny enough to have got together with a gang of gamblers. The soldiers didn't mention to Jiang at the time that this was Ban's son. They introduced Ban, who invited Jiang to play with them. Despairing, he did so, and in one evening won enough money to pay off his tax bill. Ban managed to persuade him to come again, which he did, for his wife had just arranged a banquet to which would be invited the wife of the famous magnate Lu Junyi, amongst other celebrities.

This time, not surprisingly, he lost heavily. The end result was that Ban Junior got the house. When Mrs Song stopped railing at him, they realised that all they had left was the land they had obtained through the loan default. The land was quite extensive, but the soil was terrible and little grew there. They dismissed their servants, and moved in to the shack which had been built for work on the fine mansion its original purchaser wanted to build there. A little way from the shack lay the foundations of the mansion, all that had so far been completed.

As far as could be determined, nothing about the loss of Jiang's house had been illegal. The officer to whom Song Fu Fei persistently complained got tired of pointing this out, and started being 'unavailable' whenever Song turned up at his office.

Deprived of his target for complaint among the authorities, Song instead vented his frustration among his former travelling companions, on those occasions when they met. Since attempts to find a buyer for the silk had revealed that the silk wholesale market in Daming was controlled by an extremely rich magnate, this frustration fell on fruitful ground. Out of the general anger was born a determination to see justice done. But what kind of justice? The same kind that was being meted out to the family of Hui Bodong?

第六回

*Pay heed to nourishing what is right
And in what one seeks to nourish oneself.
As heaven and earth nourish all beings,
So a holy sage nourishes men of worth;
And thereby reaches the whole people.*

頃

Gao Liu Ying had been working as a labourer in the Northern Capital. He supposed he must be quite lucky, as he had found a job soon after arriving. Some important person was building a mansion and a garden, and a large team was required to shift rocks around and generally heave and lift.

Gao found the city quite strange, but then he had expected to. Of course he was amazed at its size, and the number of people. He had thought Dengzhou, the coastal town he used to live in, was large, but compared to Daming it was no more than a pebble on the beach. The people here were strange. The other labourers on the site had been unfriendly, and Gao couldn't work out why. He had been particularly surprised at the way they had mocked the sparse growth of hair on his head—not enough to fit a topknot on. 'Bald Donkey!' they had said. 'Donkey monk!' they had called him.

Gao found it particularly strange that people should make fun of him for looking like a monk. What was wrong with being a monk?

Actually, Gao Liu was a monk. It was just that at the moment the Buddha seemed to have arranged things in such a way that he wasn't needed.

His mother had always been a devout woman, and had been so happy when his father had bought an ordination certificate. At the age of 17, Gao had shaved his head, taken the Buddha's own family name of Shi, and the holy name of Ascending Incense. He had joined a temple, left the material world behind, and started learning the sutras.

He was good at being a monk. Soon he was promoted, sent to the Birdwing Mountain Temple as a pagoda keeper. But the monks there were bad. They even ate meat and some of them fraternised with women. They didn't like their new pagoda keeper. Gao made friends with a fellow from the town by the name of Duan, who ran a restaurant in the harbour.

One day, Gao heard in the town about a young girl who had gone missing. She reminded him of a girl he had seen at the temple, so he went and told the *yamen* officials. A few days later the Abbot summoned him, accused him of immoral practices, confiscated his certificate, and expelled him from the clergy. Straight away, he was arrested by constables, and brought before the magistrate. He was accused of doing terrible things, but he didn't confess,

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even when they tortured him, because, after all, he hadn't done them, had he? Finally, with Duan testifying on his behalf, he was released. Duan advised him that he would be best advised to flee before the Abbot cooked up any more evil. So he did. He abandoned his monk's robes and his religious name, and headed for the Northern Capital.

The labouring job wasn't bad. Gao was a strong man, and he wasn't afraid of a bit of physical exertion. And he had made one friend, at least.

The southern sailor hadn't exactly defended him, but the 'Donkey monk!' mockery stopped very soon after the two started chatting with one another. Gao found he had something in common with Sun, as he had often talked with sailors in Duan's restaurant. But this Sun was no ordinary sailor. For one thing, he was from somewhere far away, and he spoke very strangely. Sometimes Gao laughed at the way that Sun spoke: he liked the odd sounds of the words.

There was much more to Sun than a funny accent, though. He almost seemed to do his work as if it were a game. He didn't complain the same way the other labourers did. And Gao noticed that the foreman was careful not to get angry at him. Sometimes one of the labourers would say something slightly insulting to Sun. It looked like Sun enjoyed this, as his eyes would light up, and he would go up to the man who insulted him and stare him very hard in the eyes. He always got an apology, and sometimes this seemed to disappoint him.

Gao learned that Sun's nickname was Tiger Shark, and though he knew what a tiger was, he'd never heard of sharks.

'They're big fish,' said Sun, happily, 'with *very* sharp teeth!'

謙

Sun invited Gao to help him with a problem. Someone Sun knew—Gao didn't quite follow who—had managed to have their house stolen. Sun was determined to help get it back. He had already visited the house with his dapper friend Zheng, the White-faced Gentleman. Assuring Song Fu Fei that it was important to reconnoitre if the house was to be retrieved, he had managed to obtain quite a large sum of cash. The two had then spent an evening enjoying themselves in a dingy tavern, coincidentally obtaining an invitation to the gambling den that Song Fu Fei's uncle's house had now become.

The next evening, the two heroes had managed to spend even more money at Ban's Gambling Den. Sun managed to get so drunk that Ban allowed him to spend the night in the house. Who could blame the drunken Sun for waking up in the early morning and staggering around the inner courtyard, trying to find a cess pit?

Song Fu Fei was not very happy at the results of the pair's reconnaissance, especially when Sun boasted that he now knew the internal layout of the house.

'Well, if you needed to know that, you could simply have asked my uncle to tell you,' he sniffled.

'There's a big difference between being told something, and seeing it with your own eyes,' riposted the Tiger Shark.

Song Fu Fei harrumphed. He couldn't afford to say what he really felt. Sun, after all, was trying to help him and his uncle. It was just that Sun's methods seemed to be rather ill-suited to a decent street in a civilised city. Granted, Song Fu Fei was starting to feel that the local officials had been recruited from the land of cloth-eared mumbblers, whose inhabitants persistently attempt to disguise their own deafness by nodding their heads all the time, and mumbling vague blandishments. Nevertheless, Sun's plan was just too much, it just couldn't work. Could it?

Gao was recruited to help with the plan for a number of reasons. Sun had quickly realised that the big baldy was a former monk, which could come in useful. But he wasn't the usual whimpering type. He had an endearing knack at getting himself into trouble, as his visit to the main Daming temple had demonstrated—a visit which ended with a posse of angry pursuing priests tripping and falling into a pile at the base of the temple steps, while Gao made his escape by way of one of the shops in the precincts. The most important thing about a knack for getting into trouble is that you should also have a knack for getting out of it. Gao's luck with the tripping priests, and then his choice of a shop whose owner was happy to show him into a rear room, demonstrated that, whether by karma or design, he could extricate himself from problems.

'Mind you,' he told Sun, 'the pictures the fellow had in that back room were quite extraordinary. They seemed to be religious, for there were monks in them, but there were women too, which didn't seem to be right at all, and I couldn't quite work out what they were doing. Perhaps they were medical treatments? But that sort of thing really should be done by nuns...'

Sun refrained from enlightening him on the true nature of the backroom pictures. He did, however, persuade Gao that he should revert to monk's robes, despite his lack of a monk's certificate.

'Don't you worry about that,' he insisted, when Gao demurred. 'Those certificates are just for the country. You don't need one in a big city like this.'

Gao was dubious, but he didn't argue further.

履

Sun's plan was relatively simple, and, remarkably for him, it didn't involve wanton murder. It did, however, involve him crawling through a sewer. Several of the others tried to talk him out of it, but he was adamant.

Pan, who had been spending a lot of time on his own business, whatever that was, also insisted on being involved in the plan, and was probably responsible for

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the eventual complexity. Sun often grumbled about Pan's intervention, but there was no doubt that without Pan's distinctive skills, it wouldn't have been possible to obtain the actor's costumes that were used. And realistically speaking, Sun's plan amounted to a break-in, and that was an area that Pan knew all about.

An ordinary break-in it most certain wasn't, however. With Wu Dong keeping lookout in the alley, a three-pronged assault was launched. Sun, through the sewers, went in first. He set up the small incense burners with the herb which Wu Dong had obtained from a noted herbalist to the north of the city, and retreated to the cess pit as the fumes wafted through the house. After giving them time to work, he put on his costume: the ox-demon's head. Pan, ever the fussy one, had refused to wear the horsehead, and made his way into the house over the wall and on to the roof. White-face Gentleman Zheng, in the apparel of the Judge of the Dead, was let in through the front gate by a dripping Sun.

'You'd better hold a wet cloth to your mouth,' hissed Sun. 'The smoke's still pretty acrid.'

'That's going to look good, isn't it,' replied Zheng in a low voice. 'A Lord of Hell covering his mouth with a handkerchief!'

'Just do it until we get to the bedroom!'

Luckily this exchange didn't attract the attention of anyone in the house, and the two managed to make their way to the bedroom without being challenged. They were still muttering at each other when they arrived at the door, and burst in.

Zheng was truly a horrific sight. The judge's costume was bad enough, but the lurid face paint seemed almost to glow with a light of its own. Sun, perhaps, was even worse—not only for the ox-head, but for the stench that surrounded him, and dripped from him.

Both were annoyed, however, to note that Pan had beaten them to it. He could never resist stealing someone else's thunder. He had stuck a knife into the wall just above Ban junior's head, had lit a candle on the table, and was now dangling from a roof-beam by his legs. Ban chose that moment to wake up. His wide, woozy eyes moved from the knife to the apparition from hell.

'You will be judged!' boomed Zheng's voice, and he just managed to suppress a cough at the end of it.

Wide-eyed Ban simply panicked. He leaped out of bed and started running for the window, then stopped as he saw the strange shadow hanging from the ceiling, turned, and made for the door.

Sun grabbed him and threw him into the wall. With a loud crunch, he bounced off it, leaving a large dent, fell to the ground and was still.

'You weren't supposed to kill him! Look what you've done now!' said Pan.

'What was I supposed to do,' said Sun, 'stand aside and wave him through the door?'

Zheng was examining the unmoving form. 'It's all right. He's still breathing.'

It wasn't the best result, but there wasn't much they could do apart from make their way out with all the evidence of their visit they could recover, and rendezvous with Wu Dong in the alley. Wu seemed more concerned with ensuring that Sun didn't drip on his clothes, than with the fruit of the night's adventure. As they finally dispersed into the night, Wu reflected: 'Song Fu Fei had the right idea, to stay well away from this sort of thing...'

恆

The next part of the plan involved Gao. Everyone had to admit that he did look very convincing dressed as a monk. He chanted a few sutras at them, and they knew they had the right man.

'You have to go and tell these people that there is a curse on their house, because a crime has been committed,' Sun explained.

Gao was a little worried about this, until Sun explained that it was absolutely true that there was a curse on the place, as he was going to lose his temper and go and murder the inhabitants if they didn't hurry up and get out of there.

'So the curse of the house is to drive an innocent man to murder!'

Gao couldn't argue with that reasoning, so he turned up at the Ban house. It took a while for him to raise anyone, and then it was a youth, who seemed to be a gatekeeper. Gao chanted the sutras at him a bit, and waved an incense stick. Finally he asked if the master of the house was in.

'No! He's gone to his father's!' came the reply.

Gao hadn't been prepared for this eventuality, and wasn't sure what to do. The gatekeeper agreed that there had been a supernatural visitation, and asked for help.

'Eat garlic!' suggested Gao. 'It will help protect you from the bad karma!'

Warming to his theme, he continued. 'Eat lots of garlic every day, and rub the walls of the house with it! Oh, and right any wrongs that happen to have been done in the recent past. I'll come back again tomorrow and talk to the master of the house.'

Come back he did, but Ban junior was nowhere to be found. Obviously the midnight visitation had scared him, but this had simply sent him back to his family home. The servants left at Uncle Jiang's place had no authority, and all Gao could do on his subsequent visits was to frighten them even more, and increase the local garlic sales.

Something else had to be done, and the means to achieve it turned up very conveniently at around this time. It turned up in the shape of the Walking Mouth, a fellow by the name of Wu Weng, who had been searching the Northern Capital for Gao for the last couple of weeks. He brought a message from Duan. It turned out that the

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body of the girl Gao had seen had been found, and Gao was now wanted for murder, his flight being taken as *prima facie* evidence of his guilt.

Sun commiserated. 'Don't worry, lad, you'll be safe with us. We're members of a secret society.'

'Shh!' said Pan.

Wu Weng was a travelling seller of talismans. Now everyone knew that if you sell talismans that work, you stay in one place, and let your customers beat a path to your door... or almost everyone, for Wu Weng nevertheless seemed to be successful at his trade, despite the disadvantages of frequent flatulence and occasionally falling asleep in the midst of a conversation.

But the efficacy of his talismans was not important to the plotters. Overtures were made to Wu Weng, and the next phase of the plan began.

第六回

*You are sincere but are obstructed,
A cautious halt halfway brings favour;
Going through to the end brings disfavour.*

訟

Walking Mouth Wu Weng lifted his sheriff's hat and scratched the top of his head reflectively. It was another one of those days. Paperwork coming out of his ears, and a steady succession of clerks, constables, jailers and runners pestering him just as he was getting into the swing of whatever it was he had been doing when interrupted. At times like these he pined for the old days, the days when he was a free spirit, travelling the northern circuits peddling talismans and anything else that his nimble wits could contrive. Granted, sometimes his nimble wits were not up to the task of earning him enough cash to keep him in the luxurious style he preferred or, come to that, in the sort of style any self-respecting person would hope for. But he had always had the freedom to walk away from any unseemly entanglements that threatened to deprive him of his cherished freedom.

He supposed that the beginning of the end was when he met up with Zhao Yu's secret society in the Northern Capital, Daming.

He was actually doing a favour for Duan, a friend of his who ran a restaurant in Dengzhou. Duan was under pressure because of the stink made by a local monastery. It was obvious that they'd been molesting local girls, and had managed to kill one. They'd tried to pin it on another friend of Duan's, a naïve but good-natured monk by the name of Ascending Incense, who had braved out the torture and been released. Ascending Incense renounced the monastic life and went off to the Northern Capital. But the lascivious monks and the magistrate with whom

they were in cahoots weren't satisfied, and Duan started receiving threats. It was evident the villains still wanted their scapegoat, so Duan asked Wu Weng, who was on his way to Daming, to let Ascending Incense know that he should not return.

It was an easy job for Wu Weng. Daming may have been a considerable metropolis, but a smart man with a disarming manner who knew the right questions could find his quarry soon enough. So it was with Ascending Incense—now going by his former name of Gao Liu Ying—a suspiciously bald labourer.

And that was how Wu Weng met the motley representatives of Zhao Yu's secret society. For Gao Liu Ying had struck up a friendship with a fellow labourer by the name of Sun Xi, a southerner who claimed to be a former ship's captain. And Sun then introduced Wu Weng to his compatriots Zheng Tianshou, Wu Dong and Pan Shou Shi. And very soon he was embroiled in their scheme to restore a stolen house to the uncle of Song Fu Fei, a weaponsmith. Song was apparently no more than a travelling companion of the others, but they had braved such dangers en route, Wu was told, that bonds of loyalty had been formed, and they had felt compelled to intervene. Wu noted that these bonds of loyalty did not, apparently, seem to prevent the company bad-mouthing Song Fu Fei when he was not around. Nor, come to that, did the intervention appear to coincide with the strategy of Song himself, who had taken to pestering the local police—which, in a capital, meant the local army officer.

What appeared to have happened was that Song Fu Fei's uncle, a normally fastidious man, had been betrayed by circumstance into the hands of a disreputable set of gamblers, who had cheated him out of his family home. Song had found him and his wife, without servants, living on a shack on a plot of land outside the city, amid the foundations of the previous owner's never-built mansion.

The leader of the gamblers, a wastrel by the name of Ban, had been persuaded by a bizarre night-time raid that his ill-gotten gains were haunted by evil spirits. Gao Liu Ying, donning monk's robes once more, had persuaded the house's servants to daub garlic all around. Ban had fled the house, but still showed no sign of giving it up. This was where the Walking Mouth came in.

Tracing the ne'er-do-well gambler had taken some doing. Not, it turned out, because he had gone to ground in one of the seedier parts of the city, but because he had fled to his father's, and his father was Ban Zhou, a respected real estate broker.

This was where Wu came in. Gao Liu Ying had already assured Ban Jr's retainers that the house would have to be exorcised, and that protective talismans were necessary. Wu now had to gain entry to Ban Sr's residence.

In the event it was remarkably easy, for Ban's servants were already snooping around the market looking for talismans and their sellers, and Wu had only to convince them of the importance of making a special talisman for

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the specific circumstances. This required an interview with the purchaser.

So Wu Weng found himself being let into a high-walled compound not all that far away from the house that was causing the problems. For a city dwelling, Ban Zhou's home was large—as you'd expect of a real estate broker—but more than that, it was set in a truly remarkable garden. The full glory of it was not clearly visible, thanks to the thin covering of snow, the first that winter. But even under such demure clothing, there were plenty of hints at its naked beauty. Wu Weng was impressed, as no doubt he was meant to be.

He was led into a reception room, in which three wicker chairs had been arranged. He hoped the three chairs meant he would be meeting the wastrel son, but his hopes were dashed when Ban Zhou breezed in, accompanied by an old fellow with an impressive array of facial hair. His garb made his profession evident immediately: he was a Taoist, most probably a fortune teller. Another affectation of wealth on the part of Ban, no doubt—to have one's own private seer—but something that would make Wu Weng's job more difficult.

Ban Zhou introduced his aged retainer as Hua, before launching into a brief explanation of the problem. Wu noted without surprise that there was no reference to Ban Jr obtaining his house by dubious means.

'Did your son obtain the property recently?' he asked.

'Yes,' the father replied. 'I do not have time to supervise his affairs personally, but I am aware of the neighbourhood, and it seemed a wise investment.'

Wu flicked a glance at Hua. 'You didn't investigate the, er, spiritual side of things first?'

Hua returned his gaze unperturbed. It was Ban Zhou who replied. 'As I said, my son conducted matters himself.'

When the explanation was over, Wu wrinkled his brows and pronounced. 'It seems that the house is suffused to its very timbers with bad joss, and will require powerful measures to cleanse it. Fortunately, I am one of the few experts adept at the scribing of the Great Calming Talisman of the Golden Bird...'

Hua's brows creased slightly, but the Walking Mouth pressed on.

'It is a little known ward, requiring considerable ritual, and some little expense in its preparation, but I believe in this case, if my instructions are followed carefully, it will be fully effective.'

After a little more professional flim-flammy, Ban Zhou was persuaded, and with the sordid matter of expenses settled, the Walking Mouth headed off with a Ban retainer to make the various purchases necessary for the construction of the talisman.

無妄

At last, the time had arrived. Lei Ma had known it was coming for some time, but even so his face was ashen when the oracle told him of the changes. He sighed, checked the reading again—even opened the pages of the book itself, as if it might reveal that his memory were mistaken—but found his reading confirmed.

Instinctive actions, in the absence of innocence, would bring misfortune. There was murder afoot tonight.

既濟

The talisman was done, in accordance with Wu Weng's instructions it had been placed in the centre of the courtyard, with candles surrounding it. Now it had to be left for three days. Ban had asked how many people should look after it and Wu had told him that to minimise interference with the charm's effect, there should be only one person in the house.

When Pan and Sun scaled the walls late that night, Pan from the east and Sun from the west, they were quickly aware of the brazier burning in the courtyard. There had been another snowfall during the day and the temperature had dropped further. They had not expected anyone to be out in the courtyard, but there, sitting on a small stool near the brazier, was a well-shrouded figure.

Sun knew that Pan would have got up on to the top of the wall much faster than he; he also knew it would be pointless trying to spot Pan across the courtyard on a dark night. As he peered down at the hooded figure he was startled by a sharp sound. A small stone had hit the roof on which he crouched, and rattled down the slope. The stone must have been thrown from the wall opposite!

Sun wasn't one for contemplation in the face of danger. He knew the noise had attracted the attention of the figure in the courtyard, a certainty confirmed when the figure's head jerked up. But by that time Sun had his sword out and was in mid-air.

His target was no amateur. A rapidly furled overrobe was stretched out to meet Sun's descending sword. But luck, or the fates, was on Sun's side. Though the robe deflected the sword, its wielder got his arm tangled up in it, and the sword bit deep. He staggered back with a gasp, giving Sun a chance to see that he had attacked an old man with a long grey beard. Sun swung again, but the man deftly dodged the blade. There was an inconclusive flurry of blows, then Sun's blade hit home again.

As Sun moved in, the oldster toppled over by the brazier. Was he finished? Luckily Sun was a canny fighter, and edged in just slowly enough to avoid the brazier which swung towards him. The old man had grasped a leg with his good hand, and was now using it to protect himself.

Sun stepped back to reconsider. He hadn't wanted to attack the man in the first place, but for some reason Pan

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had provoked this fight. And that dark shape dropping to the snow over by the wall, wasn't that Pan? This man was old, and didn't seem to be carrying a weapon, but his *gongfu* was good.

The old boxer got warily to his feet, keeping the brazier between him and Sun. And then two things happened at the same time. Sun moved in to kick the brazier over, and a dark shape appeared behind the old man and plunged a dagger into his lower back.

As the man fell amid glowing coals, Sun stepped in to finish him off. There was a pause. Then Pan started to speak. But Sun, speechless with rage, ignored him, saying nothing. He dragged the body over to the large square talisman in the middle of the courtyard, and started hacking.

It was foul, butcher's work. It was driven by Sun's fury, but Pan joined in as soon as he realised how this must look. If a watchman is found stabbed, then the presumption is murder. If, on the other hand, he is found in a house said to be haunted, hacked to pieces, with his internal organs spread over the talisman which was supposed to drive out the evil spirits, then perhaps, just perhaps, it will be attributed to supernatural agents. That, at any rate, seemed to be Pan's rationalisation.

Once the dirty work was done, the two washed themselves with snow, and then flung it on the brazier. It was an imperfect job. A flutter of snowflakes announced another snowfall, which would disguise their tracks. Well before a faint red-tinged light started to spread over the horizon, the two killers had made their careful way to one of Pan's hiding places.

巽

It was without a doubt the most horrible murder Zhou Jin had seen. As an officer in the Imperial Army, he was no stranger to blood, but what had been done to that body in the house belonging to the son of Ban Zhou made him sick to his stomach. In fact, the whole business was highly questionable. But Zhou Jin was an honest officer, eager to justify his recent promotion with genuine achievement, and so he investigated diligently, despite the obstruction placed in his way by the younger Ban.

One would have thought that someone in whose house a horrific murder had been committed would be more co-operative, but no, the young rake was no help at all. Information soon turned up suggesting that Ban had obtained the house by underhand means, which perhaps explained his behaviour. It also supplied some potential suspects. The former owner of the house was one Jiang Lu An, a swordsmith. He was registered as living on a plot of land out of the city, but he was finally traced to an inn, where he was living with a relative, recently arrived in the city. The relative had been pressing local authorities to take action against Ban Jr over what he regarded as the fraud involved in the house transfer.

The case thickened as Zhou discovered that the plot of land which Jiang Lu An now owned had been obtained as a default in a loan operation, and that Ban Zhou was the broker of the land in question.

But what made it truly impenetrable was all the supernatural nonsense. Ban Jr had babbled about the house being haunted. His father was more coherent, but didn't seem to know much. In any case, there was talk of a mysterious monk who had recommended garlic, and an itinerant talisman seller who had provided the large talisman upon which the body parts were found. When soldiers had descended upon the inn at which the talisman seller was staying, they were told that that very morning he had been called away on 'urgent business'.

Zhou Jin was not a superstitious man, so he did his best with the investigation. His men were soon scouring the city.

剥

Everything fell apart after the murder of Taoist Hua. Slowly, stealthily, the members of Zhao Yu's Haven of the Sleeping Dragons, and those they had incriminated—with the exception of Song Fu Fei—slipped out of the city. No silk deal was made.

Before he left the city, Pan kept his promise to pay a visit to Lei Qing, his master's younger brother. He found him in mourning. Taoist Hua, it transpired, had studied under the same master as Lei Ma. Lei Qing uttered some dire curses upon the hand of his murderer. Pan made his excuses and left.

Travelling in winter is not for the faint-hearted. The story of how Zhao Yu's men made their way back to Jinfang through snow and hail, across frozen streams and against biting winds, might be stirring if told on its own. But when it follows hard on such folly, it can only be skipped over. The story of what happened back in Jinfang, on the other hand, is an entirely different matter. And an entirely different tale.