

**DREAM**  
of the  
**DRAGON POOL**

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**A DAOIST QUEST**

**ALBERT A. DALIA**

PLEASURE BOAT STUDIO: A LITERARY PRESS

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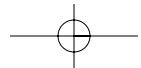
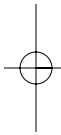
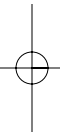
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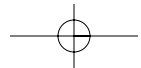
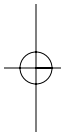
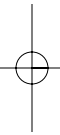


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*To My Parents for Their Boundless Support,  
To the Chinese People for Their Boundless Imagination.*

— — —

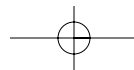
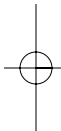
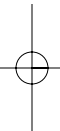


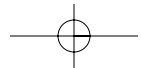
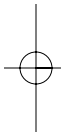
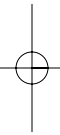




## AUTHOR'S STATEMENT

The adventure you are about to embark on is based upon an 8th-century Chinese understanding of reality. While many of the characters, incidents, and locations in the story appear in Chinese historical records, some are yet to be discovered, and others may never be. It is up to you to decide if any of this matters.

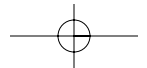
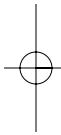
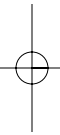




## MOUNTAIN DIALOGUE

*I've been asked the reason for dwelling in blue-green mountains.  
I laugh without answering, heart at ease.  
In the mountains, peach blossoms on flowing waters—  
mysteriously vanish.  
There is another Reality—not of the human realm.*

*Li Bo (701–762 C.E.)*



## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

*Li Bo* (pronounced, “lee bwo,” he is also known as Li Bai, 701–762 C.E.)—China’s most famous poet was said to be from its far distant Western Regions, possibly of Persian origins. A brilliant poet, wanderer, drinker, womanizer, and Daoist adept, his impulsiveness and reliance on the wine cup constantly complicated his life. Our story finds him in the mid-fifth decade of his life on the way to exile in the far southwestern region of the Chinese empire (present day southern border region of Yunnan province).

*Wang Ah Wu* (known as *Ah Wu*)—Li Bo’s closest companion is of Turkish origins. He was a frontier guard in the imperial army, a legendary crossbowman known as the “Steel Talon.” He is fiercely loyal to Li Bo.

*Old Zhou*—Li Bo’s boatman for the last ten years. His knowledge of the rivers and lakes of China opened an inspiring world for Li’s poetic gift.

*Luo Jhu-yun*—A young and powerful Chinese shamaness. She is Grand Shamaness to the Chinese Emperor Xuan-zong. After saving the emperor from an assassin, she has escaped the intrigues of the imperial court and now seeks the “purity” of Mount Wu’s solitudes and the service of its Rain Goddess.

*The Lady of the Purple Vault*—A powerful Daoist Immortal. She is the spirit contact to the Shamaness Luo and the servant of Mount Wu’s powerful Rain Goddess. Li Bo tends to refer to her as the “Purple Immortal.”

*Ma Ssu-ming*—A “wandering blade.” A young, expert swordsman who claims to be a musician and drinker by trade.

*Lao-huang*—A drunken monkey. Ma Ssu-ming's talented pet that he claims to be his teacher in the art of ghost catching.

*The Blood Dragon*—A creature of traditional Chinese legend along the Yangtze River, said to be the immature form of a dragon. Lacking a fully formed dragon's grace and beneficial spirit, it feeds on human blood and enslaves its victims as ghosts. In water, it has the appearance of an alligator. It is, however, on land among humans that it assumes its most horrific form.

*Chen Shao-lin*—An attractive golden-haired, green-eyed female ghost, originally from the Central Asian land of Sogdiana (present day Uzbekistan). Killed by the Blood Dragon and transformed into a ghost, she is used by the monster to lure men to their death and enslavement.

*The Albino Swordsman*—An assassin of unknown origins. A deadly and ruthless eunuch sent by the emperor's enemies to kill Grand Shamaness Luo. Using a magic Tibetan black pearl, he can will himself into his victims' dreams and kill them in their sleep.

*Su-lu*—the fierce *qaghan* (khan or chief) and one of the greatest early leaders of the Tügi confederation of Turks in Central Asia; also known to the Arabs as Abû Muzâhim ("Father of the Competition"). He was Ah Wu's frequent rival in the wars of that region; and was murdered by his own tribesmen in 738 C.E.

*Hsiang Goddess*—the mythical female ruler of the Hsiang River, Lake Dong-ting, and the central region of the Yangtze River. One of the greatest water goddesses of Chinese culture.

*Tang Dynasty*—618–907 C.E., considered one of China's greatest golden ages. Chinese power controlled or influenced most of East and Central Asia during this period.

*Chang'an*—present day Xian, once the grand imperial capital of the Tang Dynasty.

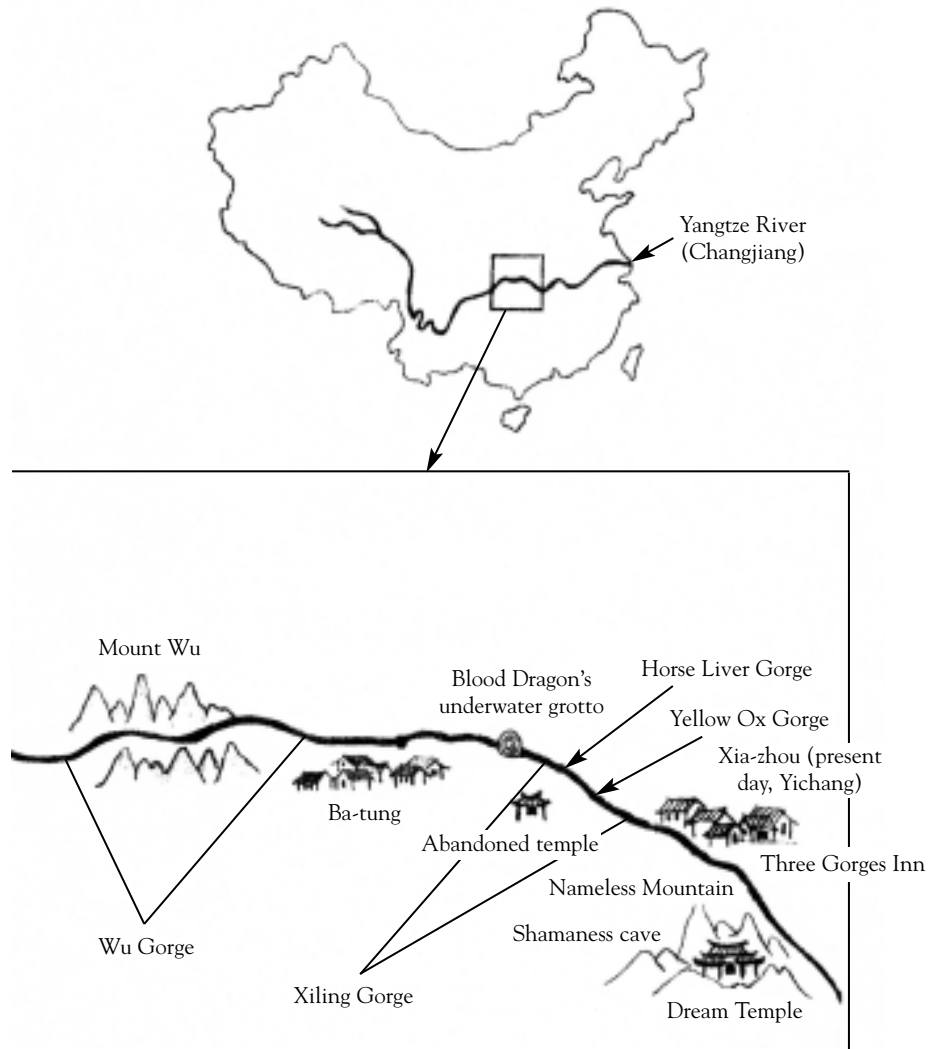
*Long River*—Changjiang or Yangtze River is the longest river in Asia and third longest in the world.

*Xia-zhou*—pronounced “sha-joe,” is the main Long River port before entering the Three Gorges on the way into Sichuan province.

*Daoism/Dao*—the native Chinese religion/philosophy that is frequently spelled “Taoism,” as its central concept of the Way is frequently spelled “Tao,” but pronounced “dao.”

*The Dragon Pool Sword*—A mythical Chinese weapon reputed to possess awe-inspiring power. Its exact nature, however, is rightly the substance of conflicting legends.

# CHINA



## THE LONG RIVER JOURNEY OF LI BO

## PROLOGUE

Mountains (*shan*) in ancient China existed in various shades of mystery and awe. There were the verified homes of respectable spirits, like *Tai shan*, where the Sons of Heaven, the Emperors of China, worshipped the mysterious powers of the natural world. There were those where the spirits of China's great religions held forth, like *Emei shan* in the west, home of the great Buddhist Bodhisattva Amitabha, or the equally famous *Wu-Dang shan*, home to some of the Daoist pantheon.

Then there were the homes of the popular spirits, like the famous *Wu shan* with its twelve peaks in the middle of the famous Three Gorges in the western province of Sichuan. It was the abode of the legendary Rain Goddess. Her story dates back to early antiquity, when she is said to have seduced the King of Chu. She left him heartbroken, however, when she returned to her natural form as the dawn clouds and evening rain. The howl of the gibbon is said to be the king's eternal cry for his lost love.

Our story involves that glorious peak, but starts with an earlier adventure on a much lesser known mountain on the upper reaches of the Long River near the famed Three Gorges region. The local people refused to name this mountain because they feared it so much and felt it was better left anonymous. Normally, the mountain spirit would be displeased by such an obvious lack of respect, but since he was killed by a much more malevolent spirit it did not matter.

According to the earliest gazetteers, Blood Dragons were destructive by nature. Thus, it was not unusual that the one in residence at the foot of this nameless mountain killed the local mountain spirit. Nor was it unusual that this Blood Dragon also enjoyed feasting on the blood of the local inhabitants, for that

## PROLOGUE

behavior was the basis of their name. As immature Dragons, although such creatures were powerful, they were neither wise nor compassionate. They were opportunists, seizing whatever suited their advantage. Like politicians, they abused the weak and schemed to increase their power at the expense of others.

These creatures were difficult to thwart. According to ancient records, it took the combination of a heroic spirit with an invincible weapon to vanquish them. While finding a hero was difficult enough, even such status did not guarantee an easy time with an invincible weapon.

## — 1 —

“Run faster, run! They’re catching up!” said the boy running behind his younger brother along the forested path. The smaller boy, tripping over his shabby brown robe, landed on the dirt track and began crying aloud. “Don’t let them catch me, please!”

“Get up and run,” urged his brother. It was too late. The two men who had been chasing them, bracketed them, blocking access to either end of the trail. They smiled. Their pale thin hands drew their swords.

“Now, my noisy little pests, you will meet our leader, one way or the other,” said the taller one in a half-whisper, his eye twitching in anticipation of the kill.

The little boy, clinging to the arms of his brother, sobbed uncontrollably. “I want to go home; no more games, please take me home.”

“Calm down. I won’t let them hurt you,” said his older brother, drawing a short vegetable knife from inside his tunic.

“One step closer and . . .”

The gaunt swordsman smiled and made a killing thrust at the boy. The gleaming sword tip rushed toward his unprotected chest.

*Krack!* A crossbow bolt shattered the tip of the sword it in mid-attack. The rest of the sword flew out of the man’s bleeding hand. His partner, ready to strike at the children, wheeled around and received the second crossbow bolt through his forehead. His eyes widened. A colorless fluid gushed out of his head and ran down his nose. He vanished.

## DREAM OF THE DRAGON POOL: A DAOIST QUEST

The swordless swordsman turned and ran back down the path. A bolt ripped into his back, flinging him forward into some other realm, and he too disappeared.

“I didn’t realize you could reload that thing so fast,” said a thin man dressed in a faded blue robe. He had stepped out of a clump of flame-shaped junipers on the side of the dirt path. Above average height for a Chinese, but the roundish shape of his eyes and long red-tipped nose marked him as someone whose family origins were far to the west of the ancient centers of Chinese civilization. His unruly white hair was pulled to the back of his oblong skull and barely held in place by a lacquered wooden hairpin. It was carved in the shape of a dragon after the style of the Daoist sages. The slight breeze flowing up from the Long River animated the thin white strains of his goatee and moustache.

“Made some changes to the drawing mechanism just before we left Yangzhou,” said the large man. He was dressed in an ample black tunic trimmed in white, with loose white pants tucked into calf-high leather boots. His thick black hair was covered and restrained by a large black bandana. His great beak-like nose, flourishing bushy brown beard and eyebrows, round eyes, and foreign accent clearly indicated that his ancestors were also not from the Chinese heartland. The jagged pale scar that ran diagonally right to left across his face, like the Grand Canal across the heart of the Middle Kingdom, indicated he was a veteran warrior. His lack of a right ear was further testimony to the unpleasantness of such experience. He set two more bolts into his double-shot crossbow and pulled on the mechanism that set the two short double reflex bows. A large leather-sheathed broadsword dangled off his left hip.

“Are you two all right?” asked the blue-robed man blocking the path of the frightened boys.

They cringed together more tightly, the older boy still holding his pathetic vegetable-cutting blade high.

## PART ONE — THE SHORE

“Who are you? What do you want around here?”

“Oh don’t worry, he’s not as foreign as he looks,” said the bear-like crossbow man with a hearty laugh. He limped toward them.

“Please, get up. We’ll take you home. We need directions,” said the thin man.

The older boy stood up slowly. The thin man’s eyes seemed to have a hypnotic effect on him. The boy blinked vigorously and shook his head. “What do you want here? No one comes here.” He lowered his knife only enough to help his brother stand.

“But we are crazy,” said the big man. He continued to scan the forest that pressed in on both sides of the path.

“Enough, Ah Wu. Sorry, boys. We are seeking the Dream Temple and are in need of directions,” said the thin man. He pointed to the dark forested mass that towered before them.

“Dream Temple? Never heard of it,” said the older boy.

“Knew it,” said Ah Wu, not taking his eyes off the forest.

“I am Li Bo, a professional traveler. Please take us to your village elders.”

“No one knows this Dream Temple . . .,” said the older boy, but his brother blurted out, “It’s the Blood Dragon’s realm!”

“Quiet,” said the older boy. “That mountain is haunted. It is an evil place. Not a place for humans.”

Li looked at the boys intently. In an instant, his eyes flashed and the Persian dagger, sheathed under his left forearm, hidden by the sleeves of his robe, was free. The older boy gasped.

Li smiled, his round eyes softening. “Go, quickly.”

Just as the boys vanished, two crossbow bolts hissed into the beaten dirt of the path, exactly where they had been covering.

“Camel’s ass,” said Ah Wu. “You let them escape!”

Li Bo looked away down the path. He noticed how it rose up into the somber forest. “I saw my sixteen-year-old son in the elder.”

Ah Wu’s red scar changed to a softer white. He looked down at his spent crossbow; briefly the thought of his two sons, both

## DREAM OF THE DRAGON POOL: A DAOIST QUEST

lost in the Western Region wars, gave him pause. "This side trip, it's dangerous. We should get on with this exile and be patient. These political cases, they soon blow over. In no time, the Court will issue a reprieve, and you'll be back with your family. It happens all the time."

"I think the Dream Temple will give me a better chance of making something positive out of this . . . this wrongful judgment."

"Camel piss! A stupid idea! You heard what that kid . . . what that thing said. Even the ghosts of this region never heard of your precious Dream Temple."

"You believe a ghost?"

"Why not? Do you really believe that drunken dancing girl we met in the inn can tell your future? 'Find the Dream Temple,' she says, 'a place where dreams bring peace to troubled hearts.' Camel turds! One minute you're cursing the Court and all the spirits and the next . . . you're like some pious grandmother ready to burn incense and offer scented paper money to the mere hint of a spirit."

"The path back down to the boat and the river will only lead to my death in exile. They'll never call me back. But the Dream Temple . . . to dream . . . in dreams all things are possible. Dreams are opportunities. Maybe there's even a way to be reinstated to Court and to see my family again. I must try this path."

"The Court! That Court has ordered your death exile! Maybe you should become a Buddhist, since you seem intent on trying everything. Then you could be reborn as an aristocrat. It's the only way for people like us to get into that Chinese mausoleum of a Court. Of course, you've never been much help in keeping a position at Court either."

"What do you mean?"

"The 'old wine genius,' 'wine makes its own rules'? How many times can you use those lines and appear before the Emperor drunk? The first few times it's amusing, but then, no

## PART ONE — THE SHORE

matter how great your wit, your affair with the wine cup is bound to defeat you.”

Li smiled.

Ah Wu's scar reddened. “It's no longer a joke. This is not a dream. Look where we are!”

Li turned away from Ah Wu and looked up the path. The narrow dirt track moved up into a dense pine forest. Its twisted forms appeared as dark grotesque outlines in the gathering mist. Li picked up his bamboo frame backpack and untied his reed rain cape. The movement jarred out of the pack a small vermilion scroll tied with yellow imperial ribbons and seals; both men stared at it as if some rare and terrible creature had made a sudden appearance.

The Imperial order of Li's exile to far Ye-lang in Yunnan province was like a meteor ordered by Heaven to take direct aim on his life. It had destroyed his family, his career, and, most painfully, his poetic voice.

There was little doubt now that Li had misjudged the Prince of Yung's intentions when, having been forced out of his Court position, he joined the young man's voyage down the Long River. He was unaware of the Prince's intention to revolt and set up his own kingdom in the region south of the Long River delta. When the plans for the rebellion were discovered, the Prince executed, and all those associated with him sentenced to execution, Li Bo's friends came to his rescue. The initial death sentence was commuted to exile, but now, in his fifties, Li still thought of himself as dead—a man without his family, an immortal without his wine, a poet without his voice.

Li picked up the small scroll, which he called his “travel pass to hell,” and stuffed it back into his pack. He looked up at Ah Wu, who turned away and began to reload his crossbow. When Li was released from prison, Ah Wu retired from his duties as captain of the Imperial Guard. Only Ah Wu greeted Li at the prison

## DREAM OF THE DRAGON POOL: A DAOIST QUEST

gate and joined him on his trip into exile; there was no question of his loyalty. Yet, there were those at Court who questioned Ah Wu's loyalties to the Emperor when he requested retirement to join a "criminal" in exile. The Emperor, however, was not one of them as he was indebted to Ah Wu for saving his life.

The Emperor was also indebted to his Grand Shamaness Luo Jhu-yun for exposing the assassination plot in time to alert Ah Wu and his guard. She, however, was not granted her request to leave the Court for religious cultivation on distant Mount Wu. Ah Wu was of the opinion that while there was enough military skill to protect the Emperor, spiritual connections such as Shamaness Luo's were extremely rare. He also felt that the Emperor simply liked to surround himself with beauty. Although he had never met her, hidden away as she was in the recesses of the Imperial family quarters, Ah Wu had frequently heard of the shamaness's virginal beauty and of the Emperor's desire to partake of it. On their way up river, Li and Ah Wu heard stories claiming that the shamaness escaped from the capital. If the stories were true, it was common belief that only divine intervention could save her from the Emperor's reach.

This was now all history, thought Li Bo. Now, the long road into exile lay before them. Ah Wu was right, of course; his addiction to the wine cup had landed him in this situation. While wine had opened his heart to the grandest poetic inspirations, it had also clouded his judgment and loosened the constraints on his behavior. In a place like the Imperial Court, where jealousies abounded, his position as an outsider, a non-Chinese without aristocratic pedigree, made him a natural target. Adding wine to his uninhibited, impulsive nature only quickened the gathering of his enemies at Court. His brief interlude with the rebel Prince was all that they needed to strike and have him eliminated once and for all. Court politics was a deadly game that in the end filled his wine cup with tears of blood. Yet, and this frightened

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him, he could not let go of his dream to succeed at that game, to again experience the honor of the Imperial hand seasoning his soup as had once happened when the Emperor requested his presence at dinner.

Li's mind was filled with memories. He threw the reed rain cape over his shoulders. The thought of wine still made him thirsty, but he and Ah Wu carried only water to this nameless mountain. Perhaps the Dream Temple would be better stocked—yet, he secretly wondered if it really existed.

Ah Wu finished loading the two bolts into his crossbow. His scar was red, but not from the effort. He turned back to Li. "Dreams can also turn out to be nightmares!"

A thin, tired smile crossed Li's pale face. So can memories, thought Li. He moved off up the trail and Ah Wu stood there for a moment watching him. He knew there was no way to change Li's mind. No matter, thought Au Wu, I will be at his side. After all, I would not be standing here if not for the lightning wit of Li's poetic powers. Yet it was a wit, once more powerful than the Imperial Guard, that had now fallen silent. Ah Wu limped on behind his friend. He wondered if the loss of a poet's inspiration was like the loss of a warrior's fighting spirit.

\*\*\*

The sun was on the downside of its arc before the two men spoke again. The nameless mountain wasn't high, but the western slope followed a long, gradual rise to its summit. It was a thickly forested mountain, mostly scraggly pine, blue-berried juniper, and scattered clumps of blue-green bamboo. Even in broad sunlight, it would have been a gloomy trip. However, a heavy fog settled over the mountain and the light gave way to deep gray shadows. As the sun continued on the downside of its arc, grays turned to charcoal, then toward a starless night.

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The narrow dirt file path above the river turned inward and disappeared into a formless rust-colored pine needle bed. Ah Wu studied the land before them: rocks and boulders broke the soft pine floor as if haplessly tossed by forest spirits at play. Here and there, clumps of thick bamboo sprouted. Ah Wu could see no path through the dense, fragrant pine forest that populated the mountain's gentle flank.

Li Bo had stopped. Ah Wu limped along next to him and said, "There's no path from this side, and the other sides can't be reached from the river. Old Zhou will have to move the boat off shore when the tide goes out. That could strand us here."

"Then we have till tomorrow morning. Old Zhou will manage," said Li, thinking, another good friend that I am blessed with. Old Zhou, his boatman, had been with them for the last ten years. His skill with sail and tiller matched Li's with brush and verse. They had sailed the Long River, its tributaries and lakes, together. Old Zhou had been his guide to the wonders of the great waterway. In turn, Li's verse had given expression to Old Zhou's love for the river. Li was fond of singing his poems aloud, and after Old Zhou had heard a few he refused to take money from Li. He told Li that he could never take pay from the River Spirit, to which the poet must certainly be related. And even though Old Zhou was illiterate, the two were like brothers—Old Zhou provided the inspiration and Li the voice. And now, Li thought, even though the voice is silenced, Old Zhou has continued to offer inspiration in hope of rekindling the poetry.

The mist, flowing around Li's feet, distracted his thoughts. It passed them, streamed toward a large boulder, and disappeared. Li ran over to the smooth-faced dark stone. He turned to Ah Wu, smiled, and waved him over.

Catching up to Li, Ah Wu saw behind the boulder an opening that led to a path worn along the pine needle floor.

"How's your foot?" asked Li.

## PART ONE — THE SHORE

“It’s aching. We shouldn’t be here.”

Li led the way. They followed the mist and were able to weave in and out, around and through stands of pine, bamboo, and scattered boulders the size of a man. The mist seemed to guide them.

But where were they being led? thought Ah Wu. Could it be a trap? Hadn’t one of the boys said something about a Blood Dragon’s realm? He froze. *Thump, thump*, a dull but clear sound shook the forest. Something was pounding along the pine needle bed—*thud, thud, thud*—it hopped, as if on one leg, toward them.

Li noticed Ah Wu had gone motionless. “What?”

“Listen.”

Li could hear it bound toward them. “What is it?”

Ah Wu raised his crossbow. “A single legged being . . . a mountain spirit.”

A crisp frenzied laugh broke the stillness of the mountain forest.

Ah Wu tried to track the movement. “A mountain spirit has spotted us. They laugh when they sight humans. Arm yourself and strike for its throat, if you can find it. Its lips will cover its head just before it strikes.”

Li pulled out his dagger and listened. The dull “*thud, thud, thud*” somewhere out in the forest was moving away.

Ah Wu lowered his crossbow. “Probably going to get its friends, share the catch.”

Li looked at him. “Hope they choke on my bones, for that’s all they’ll get from me.”

The wind suddenly gusted from below. The pines briefly sang and the bamboos knocked. It was as if something had passed by them, higher up in the tree and bamboo tops.

“That’s not wind,” said Ah Wu.

“Perhaps they’ve come to guide us . . .”

Ah Wu watched the tree tops. “. . . to hell.”

## DREAM OF THE DRAGON POOL: A DAOIST QUEST

The flowing mist that had guided them over the forest floor stopped, as if blocked directly ahead.

"I know how to deal with this," said Ah Wu. He stepped in front of Li, leveled his crossbow and fired a two-shot volley.

There was a shout, "Ahee!" The wind grew agitated and dissipated. The mist resumed its flow upward along the forest floor.

"That'll give them something to think about," said Ah Wu. He reloaded quickly.

"Was that the one-legged mountain spirit?"

Ah Wu looked around at the pine trees that seemed to press in from all sides. "No, only a ghost. We'll hear that one-legged imp when he returns with his friends."

Li Bo watched the mist moving along the forest floor. "I only need one night in the Dream Temple, one night in that place. It could be true . . . no ordinary dreams . . . not in the Dream Temple. No, I'm sure the dream will at least be a portent, a clue, some direction, allow me to see clear the meaning of all this . . . show me the way to reclaim my poetry, my family, my life. If this is granted, I'll stay close to my family, no more of this wandering life. I swear!" Li looked up through the green pines at the overcast sky.

"I pray Heaven will grant you that dream, but this path . . . I don't know," said Ah Wu. He watched the mist flow up ahead, twisting and turning in between the pines and the boulders. And he wondered if it was Heaven or the gates of Hell drawing the mist through the forest.

Li moved ahead, speaking to himself. "That woman was telling the truth; there was something about her." The relaxing scent of damp pine permeated the air. Li Bo breathed in the mist-laden mountain fragrances that he loved so dearly. He was transported to another realm.

"Bah! You were so drunk," Ah Wu broke the spell. "Amazing you can even remember that night. Up comes this dancing girl

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with green eyes and golden hair and there go your brains. The story of your life—lost in dreams. Where has it gotten you? I know you. You still want to be accepted by the Court. We're outsiders. We can fight their wars and entertain them, but we'll never be accepted as one of them." Ah Wu's large callused hand brushed the mist out of his dark beard. His right hand lifted the crossbow. He made use of its weight to lend a rhythm to his movement.

But Li Bo would not leave his dream so easily. "If I find the right patron, I can get a position. It doesn't have to be at Court; a small post. At least, there would be a steady income. Then, maybe, with time, the poetry would come back."

"Ha! With your drinking, you'd either run out of money or be thrown out of office."

Li stopped and looked at the ground mist for a long time. His deep eyes lacked the flash of his youth and reflected the surrounding gloom. "What else can I do?"

Ah Wu's dark round eyes brightened, "We'll double back, rescue your family, then just melt away in the distant areas of the Western Regions. I was raised there, have friends there."

"And be hunted down like the Grand Shamaness, if she really was foolish enough to try an escape?"

"Even if we find this temple and you have a dream, will you be able to interpret it correctly?" asked Ah Wu. He scanned the area around them. Dusk was beginning to fall, and the fog that had brooded in the treetops all day began to filter farther down through the pines. The last thing Ah Wu wanted was to camp out in this forest at night. Darkness favored whatever creatures lurked on this mountain, and his old foot wound was never wrong.

Li remained silent.

"Take it from someone older than you: Life doesn't amount to anything, so why be concerned? Ha! Once you're dead, you'll never know life didn't have any meaning. Kick 'em in the teeth

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and don't look back," said Ah Wu. He grasped his crossbow as if he was about to shoot some beast.

"I've been kicking all my life, Ah Wu, but they kick back . . . harder," said Li.

Ah Wu saw that his friend looked tired and worn. And then he noticed the bamboo clump beside him. "Ahh! Look!"

Li Bo moved over and saw the small white cuts in the green bamboo shaft. They were characters, someone's name and a date. Each shoot had a name and date engraved upon it.

Ah Wu stepped back and raised his crossbow. "They're grave markers."

Li Bo recognized them—markers for the unburied dead.

Now they heard the "*thump, thump, thump*" of what Ah Wu had identified as a mountain spirit—reputed to be a one-legged creature with the heel turned backward, three toed with three fingers on each hand and long, sharp teeth.

Looking at the marked bamboo, Ah Wu said, "It's the souls of the unburied dead that are the source of such specters."

Li pulled his dagger from his sleeve. "We don't have time to find them and give them a proper burial, so let's see if we can give our host some serious indigestion."

Ah Wu frowned. Although he always enjoyed a fight where the odds were against him, creatures of the *Yin* realm made him uneasy.

"Who knows?" Li continued. "The temple might serve some great wine, and that's really the answer. Three cups to fathom the Great Principle. One gallon to flow with Nature's Way! Right, old friend?" He gave Ah Wu a slap on the back.

"You're crazy. We don't even know if your temple exists. Even the ghosts warned us away from here. And to make matters more interesting, I believe we are as lost as a sand flea in a Gobi sandstorm."

"But the dancing girl . . .," protested Li.

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“The man’s got donkey fever.” Ah Wu threw up his free hand as if to ask Heaven to come to his aid and enlighten his friend—or, perhaps, just to get him out of there. He searched the forest for further signs of the mountain spirit, but there was no longer a sound, not even a bird or insect. That was always a sign of trouble.

“All right, we are lost. So going back is just as good as going up,” Li argued, then realized that Ah Wu had left the conversation and was listening to something. The ghosts, remembered Li; then he too noticed how quiet the forest had become. “It’s gone,” he whispered. “Trust me, old friend, if there is wine on this mountain, I’ll find it. With wine, there is no fear!”

“Could use a drink, a whole jug,” muttered Ah Wu. He continued to look out into the forest. The view was the same: pine, rock, and some bamboo; but now the shadows had drawn longer. He limped on with Li Bo.

Li laughed. The mist was on the move again, and Li followed, skirting the boulders, rocks, fallen trees, and other assorted objects that an ancient forest deposits in the course of its life. He didn’t know where they were in relation to where they had left the river. Yet he sensed that the mist was not random, that it was following a definite course and that it would lead to his goal—the Dream Temple, where dreams gave visitors the answers to their deepest questions.

At least, that’s what the dancing girl at the inn last night had told him. Li Bo, unlike Ah Wu, believed that life was purposeful, that so-called “chance” meetings were not in the least coincidence, that there was meaning to everything that happened in life. That the Great Dao was not some chaotic, blind, whirling mass. Rather that life was the purposeful, working out of the Way’s mysterious path, a path that the Immortals and the Perfected Ones had found and that humans, once versed in the ways of the Immortals, could share and understand.

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It made perfect sense to Li Bo, that the dancing girl was part of the path. That she appeared in his time of need to place him on the right track. That once he reached the Dream Temple, his dream there would guide him toward a fuller understanding of the Way. And with that, he could restore order to this chaotic period in his life. However, he did not speak of his feelings to Ah Wu, for he knew that his friend doubted that even the Immortals could deal with the disorder of Li's life.

Ah Wu shifted the weight of the crossbow in his right hand; he had a bad feeling about this place. The mist, the light, his throbbing foot—everything here was a warning. Darkness was coming on too fast, almost as if a trap was being drawn about them. They had seen no birds, no animals, only the trees and this thick mist flowing along the forest floor.

Li pointed. "An opening in the tree line, the only one. That is the path. The mist is the Way, it guides us . . . and without even a drink. Ahh, this is truly an amazing place!" He headed toward the dim break up ahead.

Ah Wu only shook his head. He took another look around, but couldn't see much beyond the spot where they were standing. Anyone or anything could be within sword strike, not to mention bow or spear shot of them, and they would never see it coming.

They moved ahead, always upward—though there were some moments when Ah Wu wasn't even sure they were moving up. Boulders sometimes loomed out of the gloom; at other times twisted tree limbs seemed to threaten. Ah Wu raised his crossbow again—the safety catches were off both triggers. He needed to focus on his hearing. Sight was an almost useless defense here. There were no sounds, not even as they moved. The ground was covered with a soft, thick bed of pine needles—moistened by the mist, they did not snap when stepped upon, so their footsteps were as silent as the rest of this shrouded world. There was only the pine scent. Not even a breeze. He wondered how the mist

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could move without a breeze. Nothing made sense here, thought Ah Wu.

He felt defenseless and turned to his energy skill, focusing his inner vital force (*chi*) down to its center—the *dan-tien* or “fields of cinnabar” as the Daoists refer to it—directing his *chi* to his senses. He was able “to hear what is not heard, see what cannot be seen, feel what is beyond touch”—and it was here, in that mysterious tactile sense, that he refined the feelings that his old wound had first sensed. An unseen presence was hovering just outside their perceptions, watching them. He felt it.

Ah Wu refocused his energy. Where was this presence—in front, behind, to the side, or perhaps, as the nomads in the forest regions out west had once done to his troops, hiding above in the trees? He stopped and peered above him: nothing but the darkening gloom. The stars would be out soon but there would be no way to read them down here. They were lost.

The wind picked up for a moment and swirled the mist around the two men—almost as if the wind was reacting to Ah Wu’s sensing. Wait, thought Ah Wu, it is not the wind swirling around us. It’s a ghost. How to deal with it? He stopped moving and watched the pines around them, trying to find a pattern, some repetition of movement that he could follow and shoot. He saw it among the bamboos, which seemed to swirl round and round in one spot. He shot. The bolt tore into the bamboo stand.

“Aow!” It sounded like a child. The bamboos stopped moving. The wind was gone. Ah Wu ran forward, ready with a second shot.

“What happened?” shouted Li. He rushed over to Ah Wu, his knife already unsheathed.

“A visitor gone home with a memento,” smiled Ah Wu. Then they saw it. At their feet, a pool of clear thick liquid was evaporating on the rocky ground. The two friends looked at each other. For a moment, both had the sense that, like the bamboo

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and rocks around them, they seemed to be mere illusions in an illusive frosty white world. The pines behind the bamboos moaned slightly and knocked as a gentle breeze passed over them.

“More company?” Li said, not taking his eyes off the pine trees surrounding them. The fog had moved halfway down the trees.

“Camel piss, they’re everywhere”

“Quick, hurry before night falls and we are left out here in this gloom.”

“Hurry? Where? Don’t you understand? Without the stars, we are lost. This is not your beloved Chang’an with its broad boulevards clearly marked. This is some strange forest . . . on some strange mountain . . . and we are lost. This is not a good place to be lost in.”

“You sensed that we were being followed?” asked Li with a wry smile.

“You sensed it, too?”

“No, of course not, my martial skills have long gone the way of the wine jar.”

“We are not alone.” Ah Wu pointed to his left foot as he continued to search among the fog-draped bamboo and pine for anything that moved. The “wind” was no longer air in movement, but nothing stirred, not a slender branch, not a leaf.

Li Bo smiled. “I didn’t expect we would be, after that mess we left down below. The Blood Dragon should be quite unhappy with its new visitors.”

Ah Wu returned his smile. He thought, that perhaps time in prison hadn’t broken Li after all. He hoped so—Li Bo used to be the most irreverent of all those at Court. How many times had he shown up drunk in the presence of the Son of Heaven? It made even Ah Wu shudder. Each time when the eunuchs, those dickless bastards, thought they could embarrass Li, he was able to evade certain defeat, possibly even death, by scratching out a brilliant verse or two. Some at Court began to believe Li’s line

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that he was a fallen Immortal, condemned to roam the earth spouting off inspired, otherworldly verse.

Then the failed rebellion, another one of Li Bo's "dreams" gone wrong . . . and prison, thought Ah Wu. He had seen what prison could do to a man. He and his men had been captured and imprisoned while fighting in the Western Regions. Warriors with far greater strength and experience than Li Bo, a poet, broke.

He remembered the day they released Li. Ah Wu had traveled from the Court to greet his old friend. That day, a ghost left that cell, a ghost of the former brilliance that had been Li Bo. He looked well beyond his age of fifty-odd springs and autumns; the hair on his head had turned white.

That was six months ago. The trip revitalized Li and he seemed, at moments, more like his old self. However, the poetry had stopped. Ah Wu hadn't dared ask why, but he was worried. It was like a seasoned warrior who no longer knew how to wield his weapons. Ah Wu had seen this too, and it usually led into the darkness of the Yin realm. He wondered if this mountain was not the entrance to that realm.

They continued to walk, threading past the rocks and the twisted pine limbs. Always upward, always managing to find a break in the pines or the bamboo stands that seemed to suddenly loom and then melt away as they drew closer.

They had one bamboo torch, but unless they could find dry kindling, they would have to pass the night in darkness. That didn't matter much, thought Ah Wu. He feared nothing that possessed a beating heart; rather he worried about certain heartless beings that fed on the blood of beating hearts. The air was growing cooler. They continued their ascent and night began to close in.

"Exile is no dream, but it doesn't have to be the end of your life. You could still write . . ." Ah Wu stopped. He refocused his energy and projected it out around them—nothing. Whatever it was had left with that last gust of wind.

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“Here, here it is. Look!” Li Bo stood pointing to the ground.

Ah Wu searched in front of him and, at first, saw nothing but the matted pine needle bed of the forest floor. Then he noticed that the ground in front of Li was darker. It wasn't ground, but stone, stone cut into the form of a step. They had come to a sharp rise in the forest floor, a hill or mound of some sort. He pulled the torch out of his knapsack and struck the stones that sparked the torch to life. Steps cut out of the mountain rock led upward into the fog, which had descended all around them.

“We must be careful. This is an excellent spot for an ambush,” said Ah Wu. He passed the torch to Li and took up his crossbow with both hands. He reached back over his shoulder to see if the other crossbow bolts on the leather back strap were in easy reach. He began to mount the stairs.

“Who would want to kill a poet, or what is left of a poet?” said Li. He took the torch and climbed upward with Ah Wu by his side. They moved slowly, not so much out of caution as out of necessity. It had been a long climb and Li Bo was obviously tired. Ah Wu let his friend set the pace.

“My enemies at Court prefer to see me die a slow death. It is like them to send someone to protect me and make sure I reach the tropical malarial mists of Yunnan in one piece. That way the scorpions, centipedes, and vipers can take little poisonous pieces out of me as I lie dying of some horrid fever,” said Li.

Ah Wu smirked. “That's a relief. Unless your courtly friends really aren't human, it wasn't them that I sensed back there.”

“Ghosts. Perhaps that's better than humans. But just wait until we are farther up the Long River near, say perhaps, the Three Gorges home of the legendary Rain Goddess. Now that's a place to find creatures from the other realms. This place is second rate.”

“I have bolts for them, too,” said Ah Wu, swinging his crossbow upward, watching the forest on either side of them.

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The wind moved up from below and stirred the bushes and trees on either side of the steps. The mist swirled around them and the torch flickered wildly. Li tried to shield it from the brunt of the wind's force. He turned and twisted away from its direction. The wind seemed to respond, trying to put out the flame, and for a moment, it looked as if Li was dancing. Ah Wu couldn't help but laugh out loud. The wind stopped. Ah Wu sensed movement. He swiveled around and tried to bring his crossbow to bear on that which was not there.

He gestured with his weapon. "There, up ahead."

Li looked up and saw a warm glow in the mist. "It must be from the temple gate—quick!"

The two friends hurried up the remaining stone steps. Soon they smelled a fragrance unlike that of the forest.

Li Bo stopped.

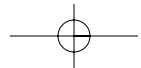
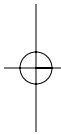
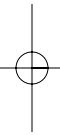
"Smell that? We must be near the temple."

"Incense. Seems familiar."

"Frankincense, brought from the Western Regions, perhaps India. The temple must have a wealthy benefactor."

The aroma grew strong. It overwhelmed the earth's scent and flooded Li Bo's mind with memories. He inhaled slowly and deeply:

*The dimly lit altar room in our family home back in Shu; that scent was the same. My father called the room, "the realm of remembrance." Our family's ancestor tablets were there, written in that mystical language. The foolish Chinese called it a "barbarian" tongue, stupid. What is not their own is "barbarian." My family's roots extend far across time and space. Perhaps it is true that we reach back to the distant lands of Persia—no one knows. But, like this fragrance, I am not of this land and perhaps it is for this difference that I am climbing these steps. Why does Heaven no longer favor me? Why has the poetry left me? And of my son who has hardly known his wandering father.*



## - 2 -

The steps ended at a level area of earth. The two friends stood before a main gate that was part of a wooden-walled enclosure. Two large oblong lanterns hung on either side of the gate. Li Bo read aloud the single character on each, "*Dream*," "*Realm*," and then the signboard over the gate, "*Dream Realm Terrace*."

Li Bo smiled. "We made it . . . on the pathless path no less, and with no wine. I could use a drink."

Ah Wu's smile was more one of relief than of delight. At least the temple exists, he thought, but his fingers remained on the triggers of his crossbow. He surveyed the temple and its surroundings. "We were out on patrol in the Western Regions. Found a place like this. It was a trap. Lost many fine friends that day."

Something had tracked them up the mountain. Ah Wu was sure of that, but it was peaceful here. Maybe what had followed them was waiting, watching their next move; perhaps it was scared of what was inside the temple. Perhaps they should be too.

Li laughed. "Ah Wu, we are safe! This is the Dream Temple. As for the source of our information, singing girls can be trusted if they are drunk enough."

"My foot needs no drink."

"But I do!" Li's eyes were sparkling.

Li, however, knew that what was to come next would be no laughing matter. What would he do if his dream turned out to be a nightmare, as his life had become? Perhaps he was just an old fool for coming here, but what was his alternative? If he did not go through with the banishment, his family would be executed. He missed them, especially his son. And if the snakes, insects,

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and fevers of distant Yunnan attacked him—how would he die, as a poet or as a man already dead, unrecognized by the Court?

“In we go,” urged Ah Wu, who knew that his friend was already immersed in the doubts that now seemed the only certainty of his life.

“Yes, yes, of course,” Li Bo laughed and pulled off his reed rain cape. He pushed the dark wooden gate open. It was old and weathered, but moved as if it were gliding on air. He found himself in a small narrow courtyard. In front was the main entrance to a covered walkway that ran the width of the enclosure. Beyond the entrance was the only building, a simple single-story wooden structure.

Li Bo crossed the courtyard and entered the small reception hall. There was an altar against the wall. In front of the altar, two cushions were drawn up to a low lacquer table. The narrow ends of its rectangular shape sloping down to the ground formed its exquisitely carved supports. Two sticks of fresh incense smoldered on the altar. In front of it, the table’s dark lacquered luster reflected a meal for two. A large iron tripod cauldron with a magnificent meat *geng* (stew) sent clouds of steam toward the visitors. Li’s mouth watered.

Ah Wu ignored the meal and kept his crossbow at the ready. He turned ‘round in circles “feeling” into the shadowy recesses of the room.

Li moved closer to the table. There were two large elegant porcelain gray-blue wine cups and a fat brown ceramic wine pot, a white glass plate of steaming rice, a light-green jade bowl of red fruit—they looked like litchi—and a silver plate of sliced roasted meat that smelled like venison. Li’s stomach was screaming for him to sit. Ah Wu eyed him and just shook his head. They moved back out to the courtyard.

Li called out. “Hello, is anyone around? We are travelers seeking the wisdom of your dreams. Anyone here?” He moved around the courtyard, breaking the quiet spell that seemed to

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have been cast at the main gate. But there wasn't much more to the enclosure, and obviously the kitchens weren't in it, nor were there any other people. As they returned to the reception hall, they noticed that the wooden front portion of the building ended in a great wall of stone.

"The front of the building is only an edifice built into this stone wall," said Li.

Ah Wu gestured with his crossbow. "There are two rooms to either side of the altar." His large hand slid over the smooth surface. "They are cut into the rock."

"Yes, cut into the mountain," said Li. He examined each one. The rooms, not in plain sight, were simply furnished: a low bamboo-framed sleeping pallet with a peculiar stone pillow, an amber colored lamp, a water clock, incense sticks and holder, a metal water pot with one white cup, a yellow ceramic chamber pot, and a white candle that gave off a soft golden glow. The difference was that only one room had a painting hanging over the sleeping pallet. It was an ink-on-paper sketch of a mountain scene. Li looked closer; the mountain seemed to have many peaks. Most peculiar were the murals that decorated the arched ceilings.

Li pointed to the artwork on the ceiling. "These paintings are done in an ancient style. See the entwining snakes and dragons. And over there the two tigers and two black-headed horses."

Au Wu gawked upward at the patterns that ran all over the arched ceiling.

"I've seen most of the horses in the Middle Kingdom. None were black-headed, but I did hear some fairy stories about such animals," mused Ah Wu, who was carried away by the sight of the horses.

"Don't like it," he continued. "Not a proper sleeping chamber . . . that shade of purple that everything is covered in . . . would keep me up all night . . . at least, with fleas you can kill 'em."

"Yes, this is a bit odd." Li stroked his white chin whiskers.

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"I'll take the room with the painting; I enjoy mountains." He threw his reed raincoat next to the pallet, opened the leather flap of the waterproof bag held in the bamboo frame of his backpack, and began digging through it.

"I'm going to dress for dinner. I'll be with you in a moment," said Li.

Ah Wu rolled his eyes up toward Heaven and left. As he walked out, he shot back. "Are you sure the food is safe?"

There was no answer and Ah Wu limped over to the low lacquered dinner table. Li Bo emerged from the sleeping chamber transformed by the magnificent court robes that he had donned. The long-flowing blue silk outer robe had sleeves cut in the courtly fashion that almost touched the wooden floor when Li Bo's hands were folded at his chest—the respectful posture of humility in the presence of the Son of Heaven. The inner robe was cut from light brown, earth-colored silk. Both robes were finely trimmed in a red-and-gold embroidered flower pattern. Li's fashion status was out of sorts with his haggard, disheveled appearance.

"Not again," said Ah Wu, wondering if his friend's despair was becoming tinged with madness.

"Granted it did look a bit silly sailing up the Long River the last few days, but in this region only the fish noticed that. For all we know there could be noble spirits of the Dao in this temple. We must show some sense of respect."

"Bah! More aristocratic nonsense."

"They are as real as that ghost wind out there waiting for us."

Ah Wu looked around and noticed how tranquil the world had become.

Li moved over to the end of the low lacquered table where the host would normally sit.

"Ah Wu, what do I have to lose? I am banished to the most dreaded part of the empire. At my age, how could I survive? However, dying here with a delicious meal, good wine, and a

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trusted friend . . . .” He held up the wine pot and noticed the purple sun and moon symbols that made up the pot’s design motif. He stopped speaking for a moment.

Ah Wu noticed his friend’s sudden interest. “What?”

Li was still studying the wine pot. “Interesting, isn’t it?”

“The robes are making you light headed. At your age . . . . Bah! Nonsense, I’m older than you and no exile is going to stop me. It’ll take a stout crossbow bolt, or two, for that!”

The wine pot, however, still engaged Li Bo’s attention. “This pot and those sleeping chambers all have the same ancient motif—they all represent the heavenly afterworld.”

His remarks jolted Ah Wu back to the dinner table. “What! What kind of decoration is that for a bedroom?”

“Ah Wu, this is, after all, a temple,”

“Yes, but isn’t the Dream Temple supposed to be concerned with the future, not the afterlife?”

“Exactly! All of us will eventually experience the future in our afterlife. Ha! Sit, my friend, and drink. Certainly passing on through this gateway to the afterlife would be better than in Yunnan from the bite of some poisonous viper or insect.”

Li Bo dropped down on the seating cushion before the table without the customary arranging of robes before seating. Picking up his chopsticks, he smiled. Several strands of white hair tumbled into his face and he blew them away.

“Now show me what good company you can be. Let’s eat! I have much dreaming to do.”

Ah Wu, hesitated and moved closer to the table. “Strange, the food is hot . . . .”

“And delicious, here try some *geng*.” Li ladled the perfectly cut squares of beef and sections of scallions into Ah Wu’s black-and-tan lacquered bowl.

Ah Wu found himself a reluctant guest at a strange table on

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a strange mountain. "Thank you. Let me serve." He poured wine into Li's cup and tried to act as if this meal was like any other in their ten-year friendship, but he could not convince himself. "There is no one around, no kitchen. Where did the food come from? How did they know to set the table for two?"

Li Bo smiled. "Ah Wu, don't spoil an excellent meal with details. I have no answer except that this wine is truly marvelous. Your favorite, grape wine from the Western Regions. Marvelous! Drink up, and if you must worry, worry about what we will do when the wine runs out."

Li Bo closed his eyes and concentrated on his sense of taste, thereby heightening the wonderful sensations on his tongue.

"Now all we need is the moon," said Li. He got up and wobbled over to the door, pushed it open, and peered up at the mist-shrouded heavens—a gray-black void stared back. "Ahh, it doesn't matter. There's still a moon in my heart, somewhere, and a moon or two on this wine pot. That will have to do for tonight."

And probably for a long time to come, he thought. He staggered back to his place at the table and reflected that since his last month in prison, he had been unable to compose a coherent line about that moon—something that he used to do as easily as breathing, especially when intoxicated. The poetry had stopped and he didn't know how to bring it back. He hoped the Dream Temple would offer a clue. Without his divine poetry skill, he would have nothing to offer the Court.

Sitting in his official robes, he remembered the three years he spent at Court. Well, as much as he could remember, since he had to admit he was drunk most of the time. He did remember the delicious wines and the wonderful times at the taverns in the capital with his group of poet friends. All night long, they wildly made verse after verse, sampling the various wines and the exotic female bouquets of the capital's singsong girls. And he remembered the Emperor's hand reaching over and gracefully shaking

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salt into his soup. The Emperor had attended him . . . .

He had convinced himself that the Dream Temple was his last hope of a return to Court. He would drink deeply tonight to insure a sound sleep, and with it dreams.

He looked up at Ah Wu. "You are right . . . as usual. I drink too much. Once upon a time, it was my way to accord with the poetry, the Way. Now . . . I follow a lost path. I drink, but no longer pass into the realm of poetry . . . . Rather, I pass into oblivion, as does my life . . . ." Tears were rolling down Li Bo's thin cheeks.

Ah Wu felt his friend's pain. He felt a deep bitterness toward Heaven for visiting this suffering on Li Bo. He wished his bolts could reach Heaven, to sting it into realizing that it had silenced one of its greatest champions. The Way of Heaven is as stupid as the Way of men, reflected Ah Wu. He wondered if Li would regain his poetic voice. For the last six months, ever since his release from prison, Li had been trying to compose, but failed every time. How often had he been drunk, trying to recapture the almost unearthly brilliance of his rhyme? Ah Wu believed it was the prison experience. Sometimes men were able to come back from such humiliations, but the odds were against it. He looked up at his old friend and smiled. Of course, Li Bo was no ordinary man.

Ah Wu pushed aside the porcelain wine cup and pulled out his cup, made of rhinoceros horn to counteract poison. He filled it with the grape wine and drank. Sometimes, he thought, wine was really the only Way. Memories flooded his mind, of the good times with his troops in the Western Regions when they traveled far beyond the web spun by officials and their politics. But this could be a trick. Were evil spirits using those memories to distract him? There were also many bad memories, very bad memories. His fingers brushed the right side of his head where his ear once hung. So what? The wine would deal with these.

After several more cups, he began, like Li Bo, to enjoy the

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meal, for they began to forget. So subtly did the wine work its way that they were unaware that toast-by-toast, swallow-by-swallow, their memories were fading.

Li smoothed his whiskers. "That was a wonderful meal. Though the *geng* was peculiar in that it seemed to lack flavor, almost as if it was prepared as an offering. Yet, if this was my last meal, it was a delicious way to end it all."

"I'm not afraid to face him before I go. I'd . . .," roared Ah Wu, his face and its jagged scar reddened by the grape wine.

"But the strangest dish of all," Li continued to himself, "was the litchi. We are quite a distance from their source in the South—beyond the one-day range of any earthly horse—and yet they were so fresh, as if picked today. Truly delicious, and yet so mysterious—in all a great *mea*. I wish I could personally thank our host." Li smiled a drowsy smile and raised his cup in toast to whatever unseen host might be present.

A scream cut through the quiet forest, then another. Ah Wu's crossbow was at the ready. If not for the safeties being set, he would have let loose a volley in the room.

"How do you do it? With all that wine your *chi* still has not settled down!" thundered Li Bo. "It's only a gibbon. Certainly the man who defeated five nomad swordsmen at once, bare-handed no less, can't be afraid of a poor lonely gibbon."

Ah Wu let his weapon sink to the ground. His hand involuntarily groped for his missing ear. "In other places, it might just be a gibbon, but here . . . I don't like this mountain. You sleep. I'll stand watch. For me, there are no problems that need dreams. Death's face has been my constant companion . . . even a source of comfort."

The wine and growing anger showed in Ah Wu's face; the scar glowed like the desert sun of the Western Regions. He stood up, his left foot aching. "Come old Su-lu, I'm ready! Come from wherever your kind hides. Let's make it to the death, for I'm still

## PART ONE — THE SHORE

standing here cursing you, you camel-turd bastard Turk!”

“He’s dead, a Turk killed by his own tribesman! Why raise the dead? Have it your way, a warrior to the end, but I *am* in need of the dreams,” said Li Bo trying to wave down Ah Wu, who was staggering around the altar room after his invisible nemesis, the Tügis *qughan* Su-lu—the Turkish leader who disfigured him.

“I’ll take the room with the painting,” Li Bo mumbled. “I like mountains; they bring you closer to Heaven and farther from the world of men . . .” As sleep overtook him, he stumbled into the bedroom and flopped onto the bed mat, lost in his courtly attire.

“Perhaps a warrior to the end, an old warrior who is weary, but this whole mountain has become his hiding place . . . the mist, the forest, this incense, the meal, crying gibbons, or whatever they were . . . I know you’re here . . .” Ah Wu sat and stared out into the night with his back to the altar, facing the entrance. He placed the crossbow on his lap and unsheathed his broadsword.

The rest of the night was quiet—no gibbons, no wind, and no lights beyond those that burnt on the altar. The candles flickered in the stillness, but gave a constant light. Ah Wu was now only aware of light; he no longer remembered its source . . . and from that forgetting a dream arose and through it a face and memories of war in a distant place . . . a war that scarred his spirit and his flesh.

Swathed in a yellow and red turban, a dark face—Turkish—eyes ablaze with anger arose before Ah Wu. The lips parted in a smile. White teeth flashed against a black beard. The man’s hand rose to his mouth and, when it lowered, a bloody ear was left clenched in those white teeth.