

The Legend of White Snake Inc.



Paul Cox

National Novel Writing Month 2005

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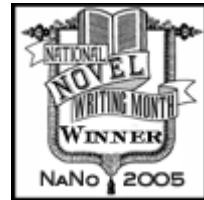
The Legend of White Snake Inc.

The Long Life of Rabbit, Book Two

By Paul Cox



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National Novel Writing Month 2005
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Part One
Comments on the Later History of the
Panda Race

Even among scholars of the deepest knowledge and broadest perspective there will always be differences of opinion; such is the complexity of Heaven and Earth. From the earliest times, however, there has almost always been an unusually large degree of consensus on the view that people are generally not as nice to each other as they could be. There are many exceptions, as with all matters, but the great deal of focus drawn by such instances and individuals should be evidence enough that they merely serve to prove the rule. There are even entire lengthy periods in the historical record when only a single individual out of all the hundreds of millions of people under Heaven is kind and selfless enough to warrant any mention. But if you are still unconvinced and remain swayed by such oft-repeated tales of Guanyin and Song Jiang and Leifeng, then I have little to gain in wearing my brush flat by trying to bring you up to a proper level of cynicism. Though, as I have stated, there is almost universal agreement among worthy scholars on the meanness and selfishness of humanity, this recognition is accompanied by an equally widespread insistence that this state of affairs is somehow for the best. My paltry thousand years of experience are not enough for a humble brush-and-scraper scribe such as myself to furnish an explanation for this.

At any rate, I mention such matters only by way of comparison with the main subject of this treatise: the Giant Panda. For as long as pandas roamed the forests and mountains, they were every bit as fond of their own race as humans are of theirs. The difference was, in their case this fondness was perfectly justified. The oral history of pandakind offers no tales of famous and heroic pandas (though in fact they also recounted stories of Guanyin and Song Jiang and Leifeng, albeit solely out of amusement at the thought of humans acting in such ways). They didn't have or require heroes of this sort because every panda acted with the selfless grace of a Bodhisattva every day of his or her life. This may be difficult to

believe, but stranger things exist among the races of animals; shrimp, for example, only remember every fifth thing that happens, which is why they seem so boring from our point of view.

While many consider it admirable that pandas lived lives of such unconditional selflessness, there have been two rather unfortunate side effects of this trait. The first was the eventual extinction of their species. The second was the lack of any real historical record whatsoever in their oral tradition. As they found acts of heroism mundane and there simply were no acts of cruelty to speak of, they had little use for history extending beyond two or three generations. Aside from a rather humdrum creation myth (predictably involving a mother goddess motif combined with lots and lots of bamboo imagery), there is next to nothing for the modern historian to go on. Now that pandakind has departed the mortal world once and for all, this state of affairs only stands to be exacerbated. The only available source of historical information on pandas is now from the outside perspective of human writers. This is obviously lamentable, as the human appraisal of pandakind is -- were it not for the aforementioned benevolent nature of pandas -- the stuff that inter-species warfare is made of. Thus I have deemed it necessary to record from firsthand melanoleucan sources at least one small but notable event in panda history for submission to the Historical Archives: the story of the last two pandas on Earth.

The fundamental difference between melanoleucan and human nature is most readily apparent in the two species' differing approaches to immortality. Humans, being the more competitive and generally proactive of the two, first discovered the means of achieving immortality thousands of years earlier on than pandas. The discovery had to be made and re-made, however, hundreds if not thousands of times thereafter. This was simply because every herb-boiling alchemist who stumbled upon the exact combination of ingredients for a successful elixir or philosopher's stone immediately ran off to the mountains to live in bliss without ever bothering to share his recipe with anyone else. At most, some thoughtful immortals revealed the secret to a close friend or a few worthy

acquaintances, but for the most part it was kept closely guarded or -- more often -- simply forgotten.

As pandas seldom bother with ancient history, nobody remembers when the first panda discovered the secret of immortality. My own inquiries into the question only turned up rumors that this venerable figure has since retired to a solitary life in the Kunlun Mountains and doesn't take visitors. But what this forefather did with his discovery should be obvious to anyone with an understanding of panda benevolence and a memory of the race's eventual fate. Knowledge of the precious elixir's preparation spread through the scattered panda populace as rapidly as the feet of pandakind could carry it (which is, truth be told, not particularly fast). By the start of the People's Republic, mortal panda populations had already plummeted. Not only were those pandas who had received the knowledge rapidly departing the worldly realm, but during the long process of cultivating their bodies and collecting rare ingredients they were ceasing to rear young. With an avenue of escape from the mortal world opened up, there was no need to propagate the species any further. While this was by all accounts a time of great celebration for all pandakind, some humans took great alarm at what they saw happening. They misinterpreted the rapid disappearance of the species as a case of mass extinction, for which they variously blamed either themselves for destroying the bamboo forests or the pandas for not being able to buck up and deal with it. In the post-Reform era of the People's Republic, the former view won out and it became a matter of national pride to save the endangered species from its perceived fate. Vast resources were put into keeping the remaining scattered populations alive and compelling them to reproduce in captivity.

Now, as most of the pandas taken from these remote regions had either failed to receive the knowledge of immortality or were still working on the process, it became a great noble cause among those remaining in the wild to aid the captives in liberating themselves from the well-intentioned but grievously misled humans. The wild pandas were by nature well suited to this compassionate endeavor, but oddly enough

little aid was given by those already in the realms of the immortals. It would seem that immortal pandas are at least akin to immortal humans in the general distance they prefer to keep from worldly affairs. So the loose network of widely-scattered wild pandas were alone in their efforts to rescue their captive brethren by smuggling to them the elixirs, in gathering the reagents for which they bravely forsook their own chances at immortality. This was a monumental task, considering the advanced state of human infrastructure in this period and the often distant locations of the captive breeding centers. The operatives even sought aid from other avian and mammalian allies, but only a precious few -- most notably certain orioles and a certain species of bamboo-dwelling spider -- shared enough of the compassionate nature of the pandas to devote themselves to the cause. This was, after all, a difficult time for most non-domestic species.

Hundreds of nameless panda operatives perished in the interest of saving this handful of captives, displaying the sort of self-sacrifice that made the species less than successful to begin with. Meanwhile, a few of the prisoners broke down under the pressure of relentless human propaganda and bore children, delighting the humans but carrying the problem on to a new generation. But nonetheless, through sheer heroic perseverance that anyone but a panda would find dazzling, the wild liberation network passed on one elixir after another until both captive and wild populations all but disappeared from the world. The humans, for their part, kept up apace with their efforts as they watched the species vanish. Panda preservation had become not only a matter of national pride but of financial concern as well, with tickets to the last breeding centers running into the hundreds of thousands per year, and wealthy animal-lovers giving enormous donations to be allowed to have their pictures taken embracing the animals. Thus, once captive pandas began to literally disappear it seemed obvious that highly organized criminal gangs were at work, and the breeding centers transformed into high-security installations.

It is worth noting that the first two individual pandas to appear by name in the historical record are also the last two members of the

species ever born. I record these two names now with the knowledge that, given the melanoleucan approach to history, they will probably be the only panda names ever recorded for posterity. Fittingly enough, these two figures are not heroes; they were the ones with nothing left to give. The last two pandas who ever lived on Earth were a female named Strange-Smelling-Fish-Leaping-In-The-Water and a male named Rockfall-Beyond-The-Hills-Last-Night-Did-You-Hear-It, though to the human world that held them captive they were known as Ding-ding and Cha-cha. Ding-ding and Cha-cha were both born in the late People's Republican era in Beijing Zoo, to two different sets of parents who had both succumbed to lingering reproductive demands. Whether their parents died in captivity or escaped to the realms of immortals is unknown. Ding-ding and Cha-cha were separated from them at birth, and thus grew up with no knowledge of what had become of their species. At the time when Ding-ding had almost reached maturity, she was visited in her outside exercise pen by an oriole who was an ally of the almost-vanished liberation front. The avian informed her that she was one of the last two captive pandas in the world and would soon be paired with the other one for breeding, but must under no circumstances produce offspring. He claimed that the liberators were about six months away from completing one last batch of an elixir that would allow the two of them to rejoin their brethren. Before disappearing, he taught her the breathing exercises necessary for cultivating the body's various energies in preparation for immortality.

Ding-ding was indeed paired with Cha-cha soon thereafter amid much accompanying public spectacle, but the elixir did not arrive within six months. Fortunately Ding-ding was able to convince Cha-cha early on of their imminent rescue, and of the importance of foregoing procreation. Even after the allotted six months had passed they continued to hold out hope. Their lives became a constant barrage of propaganda as the human caretakers tried to coax them into saving their species for another generation with endless loops of old video and audio recordings of long-dead pandas mating in the wild. These, along with hormonal treatments of increasing strength, sorely tested their resolve. The pair

became irritable to the point where even the photo-ops of the bears embracing global celebrities -- each hug now worth a large fortune -- had to be canceled.

Liberation arrived suddenly and unexpectedly. The pair's captors had begun to let them roam free in their outdoor exercise pen one night per month in the hope that the full moon might trigger some dormant mating instinct. Hearing a sound in one dark corner, they found a weak and bleeding female panda, her white fur dark and patchy. From her jaws she immediately dropped two stoppered bamboo vials. These, she told the captive pair, were the long-expected elixirs of immortality. Though she claimed with an admirable display of panda modesty that she had just happened to have the ingredients lying around back at home, it is known that at least half the reagents in such elixirs had for two centuries been considered impossible to find and probably mythical. There is no calculating how many pandas spent how many years seeking them out. The rescuer also claimed to be acting alone -- a typical panda ploy for saving others from the guilt of believing there has been too much inconvenience on their behalf. Despite this, Ding-ding and Cha-cha believe there must have been a large unseen force working together for a single individual to have made it into the high-security compound. Several armed guards, at least, must have been incapacitated. It seems likely, however, that all of the others had already perished along the way, for the others would never have allowed their wounded member to climb the last internal fence.

As soon as the rescuer revealed her mission, the three pandas engaged in the type of dire dispute unique to their species. Naturally, none of the three would drink either of the elixirs and force another to go without. The two captives argued politely yet fiercely that their wild visitor should drink one of the potions on virtue of being wounded and thus closer to death than either of them, but of course they couldn't agree on which of the pair was to go without. The rescuer claimed that Ding-ding and Cha-cha's parents were already in the realm of immortals and would be waiting for them (the truth of which has not been verified), but they retorted that a rescue mission should never have been

launched for two comfortable captives so long as there were wild pandas living in comparative squalor. Finally, when it became clear that none would relent, the dispute ended in the customary fashion: all three set out to commit honorable suicide first, and thus force the others into accepting his or her sacrifice. In this the wounded rescuer had an advantage. In what would be a legendary act of selflessness for any other race, she tore open the bloody gash on her chest with her bare claws and expired. Thus what may very well have been the last wild panda expired, and the last two captive pandas, finding themselves with nobody left to relinquish the honor to, were forced to tearfully drink the elixirs themselves and join the ranks of the immortals.

-- *Splinter-of-Jade, Grand Historian of Mount Penglai*
Laundry-Washing Terrace, South Slope

Part Two

An Account of the Mountain Abode of the Eight Immortals

The First Emperor of Qin, who united all under Heaven for the first time way back when, managed to do what he did precisely because he was such a big thinker. The famous first line of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* tells us that “The Empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus it has ever been.” But this view didn’t come about until a few dynasties had taken their turns. Since the First Emperor more or less started the whole mess, he lacked the proper perspective to fully appreciate the cyclical nature of history. Under the circumstances, he can be forgiven for believing that his dynasty was the last one the civilized world would ever need. But that wasn’t the end of it; his plans were even bigger. He didn’t merely intend to found a “dynasty to rule for ten thousand generations,” as later became the fashion. He wanted to do it all by himself. After all, the fabled Three August Sages and Five Emperors of the distant past had each ruled for thousands of years, by all accounts. It was obvious why no royal house had managed to

unite the world since, when every would-be Emperor had to rely on his offspring to carry things on after only a few decades, at most, on the throne. Immortality seemed to be the most basic qualification. Thus he never spoke of death nor allowed others to mention it, nor did he make any plans for a successor to rule after him.

Luckily, it seemed to him, if anyone was in a position to find the secret of immortality it was the man who ruled the known world. Indeed, it seemed like such a simple matter after subjugating every monarch in the world and uniting all under Heaven. And so he poured a large part of his incalculable resources into searching for the elixir. Expeditions were sent out from the Imperial Capital in the Land Between the Passes to every corner of the Empire and beyond. In particular, the Emperor sent dozens of sailing fleets out into the Eastern Sea in search of the mythical island mountain of Penglai, a paradise said to be the abode of many immortals. But of course, the island was never found, and so as the infamously cruel tyrant grew more and more dangerously impatient with the leaders of the expeditions they began to fabricate stories of having seen the glorious island rising up just on the horizon, only to have been pushed away at every approach by sudden mysterious winds or driven off by giant fish. It’s not known whether the Emperor believed these stories or not, but he generally had the crews put to death anyway. In the end, he took matters into his own hands and joined an expedition in the eleventh year of his reign. He himself took to sea with a giant crossbow in hand to drive away the monstrous fish, and kept a constant lookout for Mount Penglai, but to no avail. A short time after returning to shore to continue his search, it is said that some unknown individual gave him a potion claimed to have come from the fabled island in question. Unfortunately, all he got from this was a dose of mercury large enough to prove fatal. The Empire for which he had left behind no plans fell to pieces six years later, opening up a whole new can of worms.

The Emperor took a typically brute-force approach to searching for the elixir; seeking out those who have already become immortal and demanding that they let one in on the

secret is probably the laziest means of reaching this realm, and the most attractive for one with the resources and manpower of a great sovereign. Most other approaches involve a lifetime of personal cultivation, years of wandering around in the mountains with a wicker basket and a gardener's spade, and a lot of experimentation with drinking things that might kill you (as the First Emperor himself resorted to in the end). Still, one should expect a certain level of investment with an undertaking of this sort. I cannot recommend the First Emperor's approach even for those with the resources to pull it off properly. There are certain routes to immortality that exist only as a sort of cosmic joke; for instance, it is said that one who takes the stone pearl from the mouth of a stone lion at a temple gate without breaking the statue will instantly and unconditionally become immortal -- this is probably true, but there is no record of anyone ever having pulled this off. Gentlemen of immortality are just as good at not being found as stone lions are at not moving their jaws. If there were an island of the Feathered Ones located out in the Eastern Sea (of which I, for one, have no record), you can bet that it would indeed be guarded by magical winds and giant fish, and not even the Qianlong Emperor or Chairman Mao would be able to get within a mile of the place.

The historical record does not show who first started the rumor that Mount Penglai lies in the Eastern Sea. The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* doesn't seem to record its presence there, though I'll be damned if I can make heads or tails of that book. As human technology advanced and the body of water in question came to be fully mapped, it became clear that there wasn't so much as a single mysterious wind out there (though there were and still are a great number of very sizeable fish). Mortals eventually gave up on this particular avenue of release from the world. Nonetheless, the fabled mountain does exist, just not where the First Emperor went looking for it. The truth of the matter is, Mount Penglai is an island only in the most metaphorical sense; namely, you can't walk to it from, say, Shanghai. I won't even try to explain its exact geographical location -- it can be done, but the result makes about as much sense as a passage from the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*. One must simply accept the fact that when

Earth is square and Heaven is round, things don't always fit together neatly in between.

Fortunately, the increased perspective of the immortal brings with it a greater intuitive grasp of meta-geography, and so the Feathered Ones have made their way to Mount Penglai from time immemorial. Some of the residents of the more remote mountain slopes have probably resided here for millennia, though asking an immortal his age is like asking a mortal how many cycles of death and rebirth he has been through -- not a fruitful bit of research. There are many other realms on Earth, in Heaven, and in between favored by the Feathered Ones, but few who settle in this particular paradise ever choose to leave again for long. The heavenly fragrances wafting on the perpetual spring breeze are an elixir in themselves, as are the otherworldly colors of the flora and fauna. On Mount Penglai, the flowers come in hues mortals only experience fleetingly in dreams, and are pollinated by music. The bees, thus relieved of their duty, play chess with the ants. The birds recite poetry, the merest hatchlings among them making Li Bai and Su Shi look like babbling old maids. The streams run in calligraphy rather than straight lines; the mist is far beyond the finest Earthly wine in flavor and effect; and the squirrels, eschewing even the lofty treetops, leap from cloud to cloud. And as my ancient predecessor the Grand Historian Sima Qian so succinctly remarked, we do indeed grow jujubes the size of melons.

For the last thirteen hundred years or so, The most famous residents of this paradise have been the much-celebrated Eight Immortals, the supergroup of celebrity Taoists whose misadventures have been the subject of great attention in the mortal realm. Truth be told, there is little to distinguish this group of immortals aside from their rather flamboyant lifestyle and aptitude at self-promotion, but on these virtues alone they have become household names the world over. While they spend most of their time in leisure on the mountain terraces -- as is the wont of all Feathered Ones -- their occasional jaunts to the Earthly plane are the stuff of legend. As these tales, along with the personal histories of the individual members of the band, have been extensively documented elsewhere, I won't attempt to repeat them in this treatise. I

shall make brief exception, however, for one particularly recent affair that has yet to enter the popular canon.

Some time not long ago (messy time-keeping is the bane of the Penglai historian), seven of the Immortals conspired to throw a surprise party for the Immortal Woman He Xiang's one thousandth birthday. To keep her from discovering their intentions, the swordsman Lü Dongbin snuck down to the Underworld and borrowed a potion of amnesia from the Bureau of Processing Memories of Past Lives. The intention was simply for He Xiang to drink a bit of this smuggled into in her wine jug, and thus forget her birthday until preparations for the party were complete. Unfortunately, already convinced that her friends had forgotten the anniversary, the Immortal Woman drank herself to sleep on the eve of the big day and imbibed far too much of the amnesia essence. Her soul subsequently left her body and actually returned to the Great Wheel of Transmigration, after which she was reassigned by the Bureaus of Hell to be reborn in Zhejiang Province (the Chu State of former times) during the post-Reform years of the People's Republican era, common year 1982 A.D. Her memories lost forever, she lived the life of a commoner until her twenty-second year. At this time, in the common year 2004 A.D., the other seven immortals finally returned to reclaim her for her aid in the Battle of Six Harmonies Pagoda against Snow Feather and the nation of cranes over Prince Millet's cowrie shell. The details of these events -- to which this humble historian himself can bear witness -- shall not be covered here, though I plan to relate them in full in a separate record.

The important point to note, however, is that the Immortal Woman He is no longer a member of the Eight Immortals band. The worthy immortal who has taken her place possesses the same soul, to be sure, but her memories of life from He's birth in the early Tang Dynasty up to the post-Reform People's Republican era have been lost forever. She now goes by the name Tu Xiang, the Immortal Woman Rabbit, keeping the familiar title she acquired in her second life. Despite the obvious differences in her title, appearance, and mannerisms, it is my feeling

that the historians will be slow to catch on to this change, which is why I raise my brush to record it now.

Another development -- which I record only out of completeness and in no way to further my own fame -- was the addition of this humble brush-and-scraper scribe to the group as Tu Xiang's companion. My own legendary history and not inconsiderable contribution to the Battle of Six Harmonies Pagoda are hardly worth mentioning here, but for the sake of posterity I shall record a few scraps of information. I am a fighting cricket of the Hu clan, born outside the Imperial capital of Hangzhou during the Southern Song Dynasty. My familiar name is Splinter-of-Jade. I was raised and trained by the head of the Imperial kitchens, who fed me on powerful herbs, reagents and mineral substances borrowed from the Imperial pantries. This not only transformed me into the greatest champion the noble sport of cricket fighting has ever known, it also cultivated my immortality in the process. I continued on to be the fighting champion of the Southern Song, Liao, Jin, Ming and Qing dynasties (taking a break during the Yuan for personal reasons), right through the Republic, and well into the People's Republican era. It was then that I joined up with the Immortal Woman Rabbit and convinced her of her own immortality. Then, after helping to destroy the crane army at the Battle of Six Harmonies Pagoda and vanquishing their general Snow Feather in personal combat, I joined up with the Eight Immortals and returned with them to Mount Penglai, where I subsequently retired from fighting for a time and took up the duties of Grand Historian. But none of these tales of a humble warrior-scribe are of any interest, so I shall not elaborate further.

-- *Splinter-of-Jade, Grand Historian of Mount Penglai*
Laundry-Washing Terrace, South Slope

Part Three

A Personal Record of a Decisive Afternoon at the Laundry Washing Terrace

The job of Grand Historian is not one undertaken lightly, even among the immortals. Actually, that isn't entirely true -- in fact, immortals generally see the study and recording of history as more of a relaxing hobby than anything else, relegating it to the same category as drinking songs and finger painting. This is, to be sure, the proper way to treat the subject. No good can come of taking the events of the world too much to heart. No, it's not the history itself that presents problems -- the follies of Emperors and generals provide endless amusement, in the proper context (see drinking songs, for example). It's the rules and conventions of formal historiography that can really drag you down. The form is all good and well for worldly court historians with reputations to uphold, official positions to maintain, and daily quotas of documents to turn in, but it is from such burdens as these that we flee when we come to Mount Penglai. Besides, it must be admitted that the attitude of humble composure required of the refined historian does begin to wear on one of such glorious renown as myself. And so, on my fourth afternoon in the mountain abode of the immortals, my esteemed colleague the Philosopher Han Xiang convinced me to take a break from my scholarly records and try keeping some notes of a more informal and personal sort. These, he claimed, would be more in keeping with my new station beyond the mortal realm, and generally more enjoyable and less depressing. Han Xiang, the resident cultured literatus among the Eight Immortals and an esteemed patron of flautists and other musicians throughout the world, is certainly one to listen to on such matters, so I was inclined to accept his advice.

The actual exchange in question took place at the Laundry Washing Terrace on the south face of Mount Penglai (though it is an interesting and agreeable quirk of this mountain's unusual geography that every slope on the entire mountain faces south). The Laundry Washing Terrace bears no resemblance to the images its name evokes; it

is a naturally-formed rocky pavilion of the utmost beauty, surrounded by sweet ever-blossoming osmanthus trees which actually throw their petals at one when one walks nearby in their zeal to provide the best olfactory experience possible. The terrace is most often used for musical performances and pottery workshops; needless to say, nobody on the mountain ever has to do laundry. The unusual misnomer by which the location is known was the work of some ancient wag, who went around this part of the mountain giving mundane worldly names to all the most beautiful spots. Somehow the names stuck, so now we have the Laundry Washing Terrace and the Shovel Repairing Grotto and the Land Tax Calculating Pavilion, and so forth. At any rate, in my first four days on the mountain I had adopted this particular terrace as a writing spot, choosing it for its halcyon seclusion and its proximity to the Burned Rice Pot Scouring Grotto where our band had set up camp. I also chose this spot because it is relatively free of pandas; apparently they aren't too fond of being pelted with osmanthus blossoms. I may not have made this point perfectly clear before, but in the current day and age Mount Penglai, like many havens of immortals, is rather crowded with pandas.

I had spent the entire morning of my fourth day in Penglai here on the terrace composing my second historical treatise, a brief introduction to the mountain which the reader should find filed immediately preceding the current work, assuming the librarians and anthologists know how to read numbers properly. No sooner had the ink dried on the last of the bamboo strips than my good friend Han Xiang the Philosopher joined me on the terrace, twirling his jade flute like a fan and breathing deeply of the osmanthus scent as blossoms rained down on him, peppering his perfectly trimmed hair and beard with petals of radiant orange (as close as this miraculous color can be categorized in earthly terms; the true name actually consists of five stanzas of poetry in a forgotten Zhou Dynasty dialect). The Philosopher -- or Doc, as his friends like to call him -- closed his eyes in rapture for a good long moment as the fragrance enveloped him, until I called him over to my perch on the rocky outcrop.

"Hey Doc, that stuff'll rot your nose. Come on over here and have a seat before you're

buried under a pile of flowers and never heard from again.”

Han Xiang answered with a grin and, kicking aside the accumulation of blossoms heaped at the feather-trimmed hem of his robe, walked over to take a seat on a jagged rock beside me. The rocks on these outcrops, incidentally, are rugged enough to enhance the natural wild beauty of the place, but pliable enough to make comfortable seats, rather like sitting on an oddly carved head of cabbage. The immortal rested his flute on his knee and clasped his hands in greeting.

“Well met, Auspicious Sir. And what are you up to this afternoon?” he asked with his customary refinement. “Still pursuing your delusions of brush-and-scrapers grandeur?”

I bowed my antennae politely and gestured to the completed bamboo strips. “Just making some notes. If you’d care to have a look, your opinion would be greatly valued.”

Doc picked up the four thin strips gingerly and squinted at my writing. “You know, you’re lucky you’re not writing for one of the more stringent emperors. The First Emperor of Qin required his officials to provide him with two hundred kilograms of documents per day. It looks like you’ve managed to write an entire historical treatise on only four slips of bamboo. You realize most historians can only fit about eight words on one of these, and that’s only if they’re recording something simple like rainfall.”

“Well that’s their problem.” I raised my brush, which is tipped with a single hair from the ear of a baby albino cliff-dwelling monkey. “If you want bigger calligraphy I’ll be needing a bigger brush, and I don’t think that poor monkey is going to fall for the same trick twice. Go on, your old eyes can manage it.”

Indeed, the immortal’s eyes were well up to the task of reading the miniscule characters; the moist air and clean light on the mountaintop does wonders for the eyes, which explains why eagles are so renowned for their razor-sharp vision and so feared as copy editors. He scanned the bamboo slips as a mischievous breeze began to softly play the *Woodsmen’s Song* on the idle flute balanced on his knee.

“Not bad,” he appraised, grabbing the flute with a slight look of annoyance and silencing it in the folds of his robe. “I must admit I preferred the one about the pandas. Your commentary on the First Emperor makes for

an interesting introduction, but it’s nothing that hasn’t been written ten thousand times before. And I’m glad to see you’re trying to get our friend Rabbit into the history books, but I’m afraid your own biography at the end doesn’t quite meet the demands of scholarly modesty.”

“Really? So you don’t think the ‘humble brush-and-scrapers scribe’ bit was very convincing?”

“In no way whatsoever. But perhaps I just know you too well.”

“So as our resident literatus,” I asked, “What would you recommend?”

Han Xiang set down the stack of bamboo and rose to his feet. “A new hobby, perhaps? The best advice I can give is this: there are no two things more ill-matched than a depressing subject and a serious approach to it. I think you might find a slightly less formal literary style and less grave subject matter more to your liking. Dirty jokes, for example. Our friend Iron-Crutch Li has been doing some amazing things in that area, real groundbreaking work. You should ask him for some lessons.”

“Ah,” I sighed with little enthusiasm, “sounds fascinating.”

“Indeed. Old Li made a comment last night about the unified nature of the Primordial Chaos that I didn’t even realize was a dirty joke until this morning. Truly innovative.” The Philosopher shook his head in admiration and chuckled at the memory, casting his gaze out over the precipice. “And they say it’s a dead art,” he whispered, mostly to himself.

In the moment of silence that followed, a shower of orange in the surrounding trees announced the arrival of another visitor. This proved to be none other than the Immortal Woman Rabbit herself, sneezing and shaking blossoms from her tangled hair. She was wearing a clean white robe and cape of the simple but elegant design favored by many immortals; this one had once belonged to He Xiang in her previous life, and though it fit Rabbit reasonably well, she hadn’t yet gotten the hang of wearing it correctly. Even after a few days on the mountain, it was in continual danger of coming undone and kept slipping down at the shoulder. As she stepped out of the woods and adjusted the garment after her sneezing fit, I was surprised to notice a new growth of downy peach-colored feathers

running down both sides of her neck. Many immortals grow feathers, to be sure -- this is where they get their age-old nickname of the Feathered Ones -- the intention usually being to forego the worldly artifice of clothing in favor of a more natural sort of insulation. Still, I hadn't expected this from Rabbit. She seemed to be settling into mountain life quite well.

"What's this I see," I asked as she joined us on the cliff's edge, "our Rabbit turning into a chicken? So I take it we should expect to see you running around nekkid any day now?"

Rabbit clasped her hands in respect to the Philosopher, and waved my question away dismissively. "I just like the way it looks. I think I'll stick with the robe for the most part though. Lan Caihe inspired me with hi-- er.. feathers. Have you seen them?"

She stumbled over the pronoun referencing the Eight Immortals member Lan Caihe, which is a common enough problem; scholars have debated this individual's gender for centuries, which is surprising considering how many more important matters there are for scholars to devote themselves to. I don't care to weigh in on the debate, though whatever the case may be little Lan does certainly have a certain flair to his or her personal style.

"I think it suits you quite well," Han Xiang remarked, beating me to the mark. "Though a touch greater attention given to the hair would compliment it nicely." He half-gestured to the osmanthus-strewn hair on Rabbit's head, which she had by all appearances not combed since our arrival on Penglai, and raised an eyebrow hopefully.

"Wow, someone's a fashion expert today," she snapped back.

"Don't mind Doc, he just likes to give advice. Come join us, and you can give a second opinion on my latest manuscript. See if my depiction of you is flattering enough."

"Ooh, I'd love to! The last one about the pandas was great stuff! I think I might have cried at the end, but Iron-Crutch Li was reading over my shoulder and eating raw onions at the time so I can't be sure." She sat and Han Xiang passed her the bamboo slips, which she shuffled through, squinting. "Ding-ding and Cha-cha liked it too. You know, they stuck around after your interviews. They're staying in the panda camp just above our

grotto."

I didn't share Rabbit's enthusiasm for the pair, and conveyed this by flattening my antennae. The two pandas had an interesting story to tell, but if there was one thing we didn't need on this part of the south slope it was more giant black and white teddy bears bumbling around.

"Don't tell me! There's already at least two dozen of the things living back there. I'm glad there aren't any more on the way, our mountain must already look all monochrome from afar. They're going to eat us out of house and home, mark my word."

"Oh come on, you know you love the pandas," she chided, "they only eat the wind and drink the mist just like the rest of us, and they don't even touch the jujubes. Anyway, Ding-ding and Cha-cha are really quite an interesting pair. You should have asked them more about what's been going on in the mortal world these days, they're quite well informed."

"Oh really?" I felt my antennae perk back up of their own volition. I hadn't had much news from the world of men since I'd been on the mountain, and I was mildly curious about how things were going. "I figured being locked up in a high-security facility and all, they wouldn't be too abreast of current affairs."

"Well, they weren't exactly watching the evening news in there," she conceded, "but they had some interesting bits of information. They say that all the richest and most powerful people in China used to pay visits to the breeding center to have their pictures taken with them. Towards the end the going rate for a photo op was more than a million yuan! And still businessmen were lining up every week for the chance. Up until Cha-cha mauled one of them, that is."

"Oh, yeah, they told me about that. It was all in my record." I tried not to sound too disappointed, but I had been hoping for something a bit juicier. Rabbit sure seemed excited.

"Just think about that though," she continued, a wistful edge creeping into her voice, "a million yuan to hug a panda! There are some obscenely wealthy people down there."

"Yeah, what else is new?"

"I'd like to get rich."

In an instant, like reaching the edge of a precipice, I could see where this was headed, and I would have bet an Imperial treasury that

it was all going to end very, very badly.

“You want to go back down there?” I groaned, attempting to dissuade her through the sheer force of my pronunciation of the words “*down there*”.

“I’ve been, you know, thinking about it,” she mused with false innocence, idly picking an osmanthus blossom from her tangled hair and blowing it over the edge of the cliff.

I looked to Han Xiang for help, but he was lost in the view from the terrace and didn’t give any indication that he was even listening to the horror that was unfolding.

“But look at everything we have here on the mountain! We’re rich in... jujubes...” I trailed off feebly.

“Come on, we could live like kings down there!”

“Weren’t you thrilled to leave that place behind just a few days ago? We haven’t even been here a week! Why the sudden interest in big business?”

“Yeah, I thought old Hangzhou was pretty boring back then, but that was when I was just a plain old student and didn’t even consider the possibility of ever getting rich. The wealthy people belonged to another world. But with our powers as immortals, we can’t fail! I’d like to make a fortune, just a little one, just for the experience. Then we can come back to the mountain. We’ve got all the time in the world to hang out here.”

I turned to Han Xiang once again. “Tell her, Doc! Tell her how these things work. You’re a scholar, you’ve seen it all before. It’ll all end in tears.”

The Philosopher turned away from the view and gave his contribution. “You know your classics well, my friend. In the traditional course of events an immortal who returns to worldly affairs generally brings great trouble down on herself and others. It may not be an immutable law of the cosmos, but it’s a fairly reliable rule of thumb.”

“See? The Doc knows what he’s talking about. Come on, how about a game of chess instead?”

Han Xiang held up his right hand with the fingers of the thumb and forefinger touching, which according to Tang Dynasty rules of courtly etiquette is the most polite way possible of indicating that one has not yet finished speaking.

“And that is why,” he continued, “I think it’s a grand idea.” Rabbit cheered and tried to give

the immortal a high-five, but he didn’t know quite what to make of the gesture so she gave up. “Indeed, matters are more likely than not to go horribly awry, but where’s the fun in returning to the mortal world otherwise?” He pointed a chiding finger at me. “And you, my dear sir, are never going to make it as a historian if you don’t learn how to sniff out a good story.”

Suddenly I could see where he was going with this. A jaunt to the mortal world would certainly provide me with plenty of material.

“So,” I ventured cautiously, “I could go along on this venture to keep a traveler’s record of the current state of worldly affairs, purely in the interest of enriching the Penglai archives...”

“Yes...” Rabbit encouraged.

“And additionally I could report on the success...”

“Yes...”

“...or, ahem, otherwise, of the Immortal Woman’s business venture, and thereby increase our understanding of the modern financial landscape.”

“Great, let’s go say goodbye to the others!” Rabbit shouted, sweeping me up into her hand and rushing, robe flapping awkwardly around her, back into the forest and its renewed hail of orange blossoms.

And that, as they say, is that.



But perhaps I was too hasty in recording these events, being in a hurry as I was to put ink to bamboo before we depart on our expedition. I feel that I may have confused certain readers and future commentators by neglecting to mention a basic tenet of calendar science, thus making the chronology of events unclear. And so I return to my brush and ink for a brief moment. If Mount Penglai is so exceptional of a home, the commentators may ask, then why are this pair of newcomers so ready to return to the lower realms after a mere four days here? And what could have possibly changed down below in such a short time to warrant another visit? Many will know the answer to this, of course, and everyone ought to, but those who spend too much of their time in one realm or the other are prone to

overlooking the fundamentals of meta-temporality. For these commentators I repeat the fact that with the passing of one single day in the higher realms, ten years go by in the world of mortals; or conversely, a day on Earth is equal to only 23.6 seconds as measured in Heaven or in the realms of immortals -- if an immortal even bothers to keep track. Thus I should make it clear that when my companion and myself return to the lower world (assuming travel plans proceed on schedule), we should arrive sometime in the first half of the year 2044 of the Common Era, or the 94th year of the People's Republic, four Earthly decades after we last departed. I hope my omission of this fairly well-documented fact has caused no confusion or disputes among commentators. The reason for the anomaly is unknown; it may simply be yet another side effect of a square Earth and a round Heaven, but I have a feeling there's more to it than that.

-- *Splinter-of-Jade, Grand Historian of Mount Penglai*
Burned-Rice Pot Scouring Grotto, South Slope

Part Four

A Traveler's Account of the City of Hangzhou in 2044 A.D.

We arrived in the great city of Hangzhou late on an overcast autumn evening in the common year 2044 A.D., just slightly behind schedule. I personally had been aiming for an early summer arrival, when my ancient hometown is at its most picturesque, but there's something to be said for a Hangzhou autumn as well. One who has never watched an autumn moon rise over the serene waters of the West Lake to the sound of a lone zither has led a wretched life indeed. Some claim it was in the autumn that the barbarian explorer Marco Polo visited the city during the rule of the Khans and famously proclaimed it the grandest and most magnificent city in the world. Others, however, say the thrifty old fraud never bothered to travel this far south at all and simply wrote about the city from hearsay. If this latter theory is correct -- and I'm inclined to support it, having personally

crossed paths with the artful old merchant back in his day -- he certainly missed out on something worth writing home about. "Grandest and most magnificent city in the world" is hardly the half of it. If I may be permitted to indulge in a bit of partiality towards my home city, I do believe that Hangzhou and its West Lake compare favorably even with some of the lower foothills of fabled Mount Penglai. Certainly, it is as close as an earthbound mortal is ever likely to get. "Above there is Heaven," as the popular couplet goes, "and below there is Suzhou and Hangzhou" (I can only assume that wretched spit-and-sawdust slum Suzhou is included for the sole purpose of rounding out a complete eight-syllable couplet, but regarding the latter city the saying is spot on.)

Being such a certified devotee of Hangzhou's legendary aesthetic and cultural refinement, it was with bated breath that I approached the city after an absence of four decades. Indeed, the pace of the city's growth had already accelerated greatly in the years after the Reforms, and many of the most charming areas of earlier days had been rendered unrecognizable by new concrete behemoths and glass monoliths. But Hangzhou has never ceased changing and evolving from the day I emerged from my egg in the hills above the West Lake, and every era holds its own special charm. Even the most lamentable follies of modern and postmodern architecture somehow always take on an endearing character here. This is fortunate, because the Hangzhou of 2044 A.D. would have knocked old Marco Polo right off his camel.

Flying in low over the dark mountains to the west -- traditionally the site of famously superior tea cultivation, though on an overcast night like tonight there was no telling what they were currently being used for -- the changes were more than apparent. Across the inky expanse of the West Lake, the towers of the city center shone out as if aflame, glowing with wraith-like, shifting lights of a hundred different colors. The low cloud layer above reflected their lights back at them, intensifying the eerie brilliance. Even the sprawling outskirts of the city looked like a forest of burning embers spread out to the banks of the Qiantang River in the east and south, and off

as far as the eye could discern across the broad plains to the north. In fact, only the rugged hills over which we approached from the west and the lake itself were in darkness. Not only that, but everything looked to have grown upwards quite considerably since my last visit. At first I concluded, to my horror, that the mountains themselves had been quarried away to a much lower elevation, but I soon realized that I was merely disoriented by the relative height of the urban areas. The downtown district, in particular, almost seemed to rival the peaks in altitude. In the very center of the skyline, a single spire rose to even greater heights, towering over the lakeside in a rather ostentatious manner. Rainbow-hued lights danced up and down its entire length. The whole scene was just about enough to overload my poor compound eyes with its brilliance.

“Looks like the old hometown has done well for itself,” I commented from my perch on Rabbit’s shoulder as we sailed towards the spectacle on our own personal cloud. “It’s not what it used to be, but I think I could get used to this.”

“I’ll say! I can’t believe it’s even the same city. They must have done nothing but build for the last forty years.”

“Maybe you should have stayed in the architecture business after all,” I joked, referring to Rabbit’s days back at the University. “You’d already have made your fortune by now.”

“Yeah, maybe if I had ever paid attention in class. But there must be a lot easier ways to do that kind of thing now. Just look at this place, there must be a thousand millionaires down there! What a great place to be rich! I wonder how much it would cost to live at the top of that highest tower there.”

“More than our good word, I imagine, and that’s about all we have to offer right now,” I pointed out. “I hope you’ve been practicing your elemental skills well enough to make us some convincing cash for the night.”

My companion’s shoulders slumped just a bit under me. “Lan Caihe just taught me a couple of easy tricks with the wood element, and a bit of water control for making clouds and such. Metal is a lot harder. I could probably manage some paper bills, if they still use those now, but everyone probably has some kind of electronic cards or chips implanted in their brains or something.”

“Well, we’ll figure it all out when we get down there. I’m sure a couple of crafty immortals such as ourselves can bluff our way through one way or another. Or we can always go camp out in the hills. It’s not like we aren’t used to the outdoor life now.”

“Ha! Speak for yourself, bug.”

We coasted in over the water, which reflected a soothing orange from the illuminated clouds above. At least the old lake never changed a bit, I thought -- or almost. There was in fact a certain unidentifiable fragrance wafting up from the waters now, but not in an altogether unpleasant sense. In fact it was quite sweet-smelling, as if the waters had been somehow perfumed. Not bad, considering that in previous years the lake’s fragrance could most charitably be described as ‘bracing’. I nodded my antennae in silent admiration. They really tried hard to please, these modern humans. The lake was, however, apparently devoid of watercraft at this time of the night, so we saw no signs of actual human activity until we approached the lakeside promenade on the edge of downtown. The shore was as brightly lit as everything else east of the lake. A fairly thin scattering of people strolled up and down along the concrete embankment, though no less than one would expect late in the night. Their dress was odd and form-fitting, looking rather unseasonable in fact, but no stranger than a score of other fashions that I’ve watched come and go. And the drooping willow trees overhanging the water remained as they always had, as did the lines of fir trees and stands of bamboo blocking off the city behind. The sight brought a nostalgic warmth of familiarity to my tiny heart. Maybe the place hadn’t really changed so much after all, I told myself.

As we drew our miniature cloud closer, we both noticed that the people along the embankment weren’t all merely taking after-dinner strolls as we had assumed. Some of them seemed to be moving at a more deliberate pace, visiting specific points along the lakeside.

“What are those things everyone’s using, some kind of water fountains?” Rabbit asked. Indeed, her guess didn’t seem far off; I watched as an old lady walked up to one of the squat pagoda-shaped machines spaced regularly every fifty meters or so along the

bank and filled her plastic bottle from a faucet on its side, then waddled back towards the park exit.

“I do believe you’re correct, but we might as well check it out first thing.”

“Great, I could use a drink,” agreed Rabbit, and steered the cloud in closer. She pulled the vehicle up alongside the bank in a rather sloppy parking maneuver (driving clouds was never Rabbit’s strong suit) and hopped to land. Immediately she clapped her hands with a flourish of her robe sleeves and the cloud dispersed into a rapidly thinning layer of lake mist.

“The Immortal Woman Rabbit and the Cricket Champion Splinter-of-Jade have returned!” she announced, striking a dramatic pose. None of the late-night walkers were close enough to notice. She shrugged and walked over to the nearest water fountain to investigate.

“Yes, I’d say it’s a normal water fountain, just a bit decorative,” I evaluated, sizing up the faux-Song Dynasty machine. “They tend to build things a little tacky along the lake. You should have seen some of the trash cans they had out here in the nineties. Funny, I was expecting something a bit more sci-fi.”

Rabbit passed her hand under the infrared sensor below the spigot. As expected, a stream of water gurgled out, running through her fingers.

“Whoa!” she exclaimed, snatching her hand back and holding it up to the matching faux-Song Dynasty overhead lights. “It’s all fizzy. A public soda machine? I guess that’s a little more futuristic.”

“Soda?” I repeated, suddenly recognizing the distinctive pleasant aroma I could still just barely smell wafting off the lake. I leapt from Rabbit’s shoulder to the edge of the embankment in three hops and peered over the edge into the depths. Stirred by the gentle autumn night breeze, the dark water lapped lazily against the concrete wall half a meter below, fizzing to life with an audible hiss as each wavelet struck the bank.

“It’s... all soda!” I gasped, clinging to the concrete with all six sets of tarsi so as not to fall over the edge in shock. Rabbit calmly sank to her knees beside me, then lay flat and scooped up a handful of the liquid. It looked as dark in the cup of her palm as it did in the lake. She took an exploratory sip, swishing it around in her mouth with a thoughtful

expression.

“It’s some kind of cola. Real sweet, not quite like Coke, though it’s been a while since I’ve tasted that. Ah!” she exclaimed, sitting up. “It’s, what do you call it, that stuff they used to make here in town... Future Cola!”

I stared at my companion, who lay back down for another taste. “They certainly will do anything to please,” I said to myself.

Future Cola was a rather generic soft drink that came out of the enormous proliferation of prepared consumer snack food brands in the decades after the Reforms, a transparent attempt at cashing in on and competing with the runaway success of the imported Coca-Cola drink product. The nationally-marketed beverage made a good case for itself with a slightly more economical price, attractive bottle design, and a pair of stirring patriotic slogans reflecting the optimism of the times: “The Chinese People’s Own Cola!”, and “The Future Will Be Better!”. The drink itself, as with all the best-marketed products, was nothing to get excited about. What made it particularly successful were the aggressive efforts at market penetration carried out by the company behind the brand, the Hangzhou Wahaha Group Co. Ltd. This corporation was Hangzhou born and bred, starting out as a school-run enterprise dedicated to providing vitamin-enriched milk drinks to the students at a middle school in the city in 1987. But the man picked to run the program was a brilliant businessman by the name of Zong Qinghou, who within twenty years proceeded to build upon this humble foundation a bottled beverage empire that came to hold a unique position of power even in this city of financial titans. While still manufacturers of convenience goods on the outside -- with a disarming name taken from a children’s song, mimicking the sound of an infant laughing -- it later became rumored that the Zong family had begun to ally themselves and their company with the shadier side of the Hangzhou elite. Indeed, some claimed that the Wahaha Group had a hand in the larger part of all organized crime, smuggling, drugs, prostitution and movie piracy in the city by the year 2000. Rabbit and I ourselves had a run-in with the company on the day we left the city in 2004, at which time I can confirm that Mr. Zong was no longer at the helm, having apparently abdicated in favor of a

mysterious cross-dressing figure who called himself Mrs. Guan. Our encounter, however, marked the definitive end of Mrs. Guan's chairmanship; I cannot yet comment on the subsequent management of the group.

"So the West Lake is full of Future Cola now. I wonder what Chairman Mao have to say about that," Rabbit mused as we left the bank and ventured out through the rows of fir trees towards the city lights.

"I don't know, I'm still not convinced it's completely sanitary, but I must admit I'm quite impressed," I conceded. Indeed I was. "And I don't imagine the Chairman is turning in his glass casket. It doesn't look like any of the people are paying for all that refreshment, which means the government must be footing the bill. If they can afford something like this then the Party must not be in too bad of shape."

We fell silent for a minute or three after we reached the last screen of trees and passed through a wooden gate onto what used to be, and presumably still was, Nanshan Road. The road was well-lit, but empty of cars. The skyscrapers we had seen from afar rose up immediately opposite us, filling my field of vision with light. Every corner and edge of every building was outlined in strips of illumination that ran and flowed like streams of piped-in rainbows. The signs looming over the entrances to each store, restaurant and hotel were actually more akin to giant television screens, looping advertisements of such animated confusion that it was rather difficult to tell at first glance what each business actually sold. Most of them seemed to deal in shockingly small scraps of female clothing, as far as I could tell from the videos. And judging by the crowds filing in and out of the pools of light of every shop entrance, the market seemed to be strong. For a long while we took in the sight, until my attention started to drift beyond the lights and advertisements to the actual facades of the buildings. Here, I was intrigued to see, the concrete was cracked in places, the steel hadn't aged well, and some of the windows were even broken. Looking down, I noticed that the road itself was also in need of repair.

"That's strange, these buildings actually look fairly old," I remarked.

"Wha?" Rabbit half-replied. Her mammalian eyes still hadn't fully adjusted to the light.

"Evening, ma'am," a passing city-dweller called out. It was an old policeman walking his beat, with a badly crumpled uniform and a collection of stray whiskers that would have drawn envy from an alley cat. He looked too short to be a real policeman though, even shorter than Rabbit; maybe just a security guard then. The badge on his uniform certainly didn't look like the traditional police department seal. Rabbit offered a limp wave and a noncommittal smile.

"That's an odd coat you've got there. You a foreigner?" he asked, slowing down the question as though afraid this stranger might not understand his speech. Considering the thickness of his Hangzhou dialect it was a wise move.

Rabbit repeated the exact same smile. "Oh yes, I just arrived from... ah... Tibet," she improvised. "It gets cold up there." It was a good answer, but I hoped she wasn't raising his interest too much. Unfortunately the narrowing of his beady eyes indicated she was. "Tibet, huh. How did you manage to get into the country? Are you some kinda diplomat?" So Tibet wasn't part of the People's Republic anymore, I noted for future reference. That must have made some people happy.

"Ah, the Chinese government invited me here for..." The old man saved Rabbit from having to grope for a plausible answer with a geriatric laugh.

"China. Heehee. You *must* live way up in the mountains."

"Excuse me?"

"If you're looking for the PRC you must have got on the wrong train. Beijing is a long ways away." He gestured vaguely northward.

"So wait, you're saying Hangzhou isn't part of China any more?"

"No ma'am. You're in the grand old capital of Waha State now. I hope you have a visa from the Company." Rabbit held her breath, but after a few seconds of silence the man just cackled and wagged his finger. "You're a terrible spy! Take my advice and do some reading up. And you need to work on your disguise and your poker face. Have a good evening now!" The little old man winked and twirled around like a drunken goose, tottering off down the street in high spirits.

-- *Splinter-of-Jade, Grand Historian of Mount Penglai*

Hangzhou, November 5, 2044 A.D.

Part Five
**A First Experiment into the Hierarchy of
Business in Waha State**

The Empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus it has ever been. I know it's bad form, stealing a first line from the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, but it clearly applies here. I realize now I should have been a more diligent historian and not taken for granted the continued unified existence of the People's Republic. These things happen.



The weak light of the morning, after struggling to penetrate the thick clouds, found the Immortal Woman Rabbit and myself still on the lakeside. After our run-in with the old policeman we decided it best to make do with outdoor lodgings, seeing clearly that we were out of our depth. Rabbit climbed unseen into one of the larger fir trees, using her command of the Tao to bend the branches into a reasonably comfortable hammock. But she slept fitfully, and the crickets down below kept me awake half the night. I used the time to write a record of the day on a scrap of salvaged wind-blown paper. Quite a step down from my bamboo slips, but I didn't want to forget any of the details. Now that I have proper writing supplies I intend to go back and transcribe a more official copy, but I shall keep the text itself exactly as I wrote it.

With the arrival of morning Rabbit was only too happy to climb down out of the tree and start her mission afresh. She stretched and groaned by the lakeside, hardly glancing out over the dark brown waves. "Ow, my shoulder's killing me! These trees don't cooperate like the ones back on the mountain. If we don't find better lodgings by tonight we're going home."

"Ah, the long hard road to fortune," I chided from my perch on a willow root beside her. "You might as well start from rags if you're headed for riches."

"Rags indeed!" she snorted, smoothing out her robe as if to soothe its injured dignity. Indeed, the white silken fabric was still as pure and spotless as when we left the mountain.

Not that cleanliness alone was going to help Rabbit fit in around here, mind, not when her fashion was twelve hundred years out of date. The growing number of early morning strollers were already turning their heads as they passed. Holding up her long open sleeves for a look of appraisal, she was obviously following the same line of thought.

"You have a point though, the first step to dress for success," she concluded. "But I'm still not sure what's in style these days, and I don't think morning joggers have ever been a reliable standard. I guess I'll just go with what I know for now." She took a quick look around to make sure the coast was clear, then held her left hand flat over her head and began tracing Taoist talismans in the air with her left middle finger, closing her eyes in concentration. First her hair straightened out from its longstanding state of disarray, shortening into a clean businesslike style. The new growth of peach-colored feathers running across her shoulders disappeared again. Then her robe flowed and changed, shifting colors and shrinking around her to become a plain yellow button-down shirt and loose army-green pants, circa early 2000's. Her woven straw sandals also morphed into a pair of tennis shoes. I laughed; this was the exact outfit she had been wearing the day I first met her, back when she still thought she was a regular University student.

"Looks familiar! Fine, now people will just think you're retro rather than insane."

This proved to be the case when we exited the park again onto Nanshan Road; the throngs of people offered hardly a single glance. As for me, I concealed myself under the collar of Rabbit's yellow shirt, a familiar spot from long ago.

"I see what you were saying about the buildings about last night," she commented at the roadside. Now, in the murky morning light, the skyscrapers presented a much less inspiring edifice, robbed of their glittering lights and with nothing else to show but cracked cement and rusted steel. The road, too, looked potholed to the point of being unnavigable, and was still empty of cars. Only schools of regular-looking bicycles wove up and down the lanes on either side, and pedestrians filled the sidewalks, many of them pouring in and out of what seemed to be entrances to a subway. Seeing the absence of

traffic, Rabbit went ahead and walked across to the other side. As we crossed I noticed a pair of broad metal rails set into the concrete, too widely spaced for a train. Something must use this road though, I figured, because the bikes were staying out of the center strip -- odd behavior on an empty street, unless the habits of cyclists had really changed.

The nearest shop front on the other side looked to be some sort of bakery, popular with the morning crowd. Rabbit peered through the plate-glass window casually, probably trying to see how people were paying for their purchases. I personally couldn't see any sort of visible transaction going on. The customers just seemed to be walking up to the counter and receiving their goods. Some kind of rationing system? That seemed a bit too 1960s for the new Hangzhou. Before I could see any other possibilities, Rabbit turned back towards the road, cutting off my view through the window.

"Hey, it's a car! Sort of."

The vehicle approaching at quite a rapid speed looked like a car, only without the wheels. Oddly enough, nothing seemed to have replaced them. The machine just glided on thin air as if in denial that it was missing any important parts. As it passed by noiselessly, its occupants hidden behind well-tinted glass, I noticed that it was coasting directly over the path of the metal rail; that seemed to have something to do with it. In fact, it reminded me of the much-touted 'maglev' train in Shanghai that had been all the rage back in '01. Looks like the technology stuck around.

"I wonder where all the others are?" I asked. "They certainly don't seem overly popular."

Rabbit tapped her nose in thought. "I think you're on to something there. If there are lots of people riding bikes and walking, and only a few floating around in those things... then I'd say those things are the place to be!" With no further warning, she raised her right hand up high and started scribbling more talismans with her left. The people coming out of the bakery did their best to politely ignore her.

"I take it you have a plan?" I ventured, but got no response. Suddenly, the flow of the crowd changed; pedestrians sped up and headed for shelter in shop fronts and a nearby subway entrance. The lead-grey clouds looming overhead had begun to sprinkle the

city with rain.

"Well that's just what we need. Typical for the first day of a trip. I guess we'd better look for... Hey wait, you're doing this!" Rabbit just snorted at my accusation. The rain intensified into a shower, then a downpour, and finally a deluge that sent the last brave pedestrians scurrying into shop fronts, but Rabbit stayed put on the curb. Finally she lowered her hands.

"Quick, which bike here looks the most expensive?" She was pointing out the single dense rank of bicycles lined up in front of the bakery. She didn't wait for my input, however, she just ran over and grabbed a particularly shiny light blue model, raising up the locked rear wheel and rolling it out of line by the front. She wheeled the stolen vehicle out into the street and straight into a particularly healthy specimen of a pothole, already filled to the brim with muddy rain water. The hole abutted and partially undercut one of the metal rails, under which Rabbit wedged the back wheel of the bike with a vicious shove. Then she stood back, shin-deep in the puddle, and surveyed her work.

"Looking to carjack somebody?" I ventured.

"I'm hoping I won't have to," came her reply. She continued standing in silence with rain streaming through her hair for another two or three minutes, shielding her eyes with one hand so as to watch the road. "Come on..." she whispered to herself every few moments. Finally, a dark patch appeared through the sheets of rain. Jumping into position, she grabbed ahold of the bike's handlebars and made a great show of yanking and straining. At the last second I worried that the driver might not see us in time, but Rabbit seemed to have more faith than I. Either the driver or some internal electronic sensor brought the car to a noiseless halt right in front of us. The driver's window hummed down halfway and a hand extended out, beckoning Rabbit in urgently as the back door clicked open. Not wasting a second, she hopped out of the pothole and into the vehicle.

With my limited view from under Rabbit's collar, I was disoriented inside the car for a moment until I realized that the front seats actually faced back towards the rear ones, like in a train or limousine. I hoped that meant that the car was actually driving itself, because the sole front-seat occupant certainly wasn't in

any position to watch the road. He was a man on the younger side of middle-aged, a full head taller than Rabbit, with a powerful haircut and a suit that, despite its unfamiliar futuristic cut, left no doubts as to how much money went into tailoring it. It seemed that Rabbit's gamble was paying off; this man looked every inch the ambitious young business tycoon. I just crossed my antennae that he didn't work for Wahaha.

"Do you need a hand with your bicycle?" he asked politely.

Rabbit waved away the offer with a fine display of lordliness. "Oh don't bother, it's just a rental. Someone will clean it up. But thank you ever so much for letting me out of the rain! I hope I'm not ruining your seats."

"By no means, they're long overdue for a good reupholstering anyway," he replied, seeing that the gauntlet had been thrown down. "Where are you headed?"

"Actually..." She considered the question for a moment, apparently having reached the outer limit of her pre-planned scenario. "I'm just here to see the city, a tourist you know. I was following my map around but I lost it down in that puddle somewhere."

"Oh no," the businessman asked with concern that sounded more than just polite, "did you lose your netpad?"

"I'm afraid so." Rabbit didn't miss a beat. "No use digging around in the mud for it now."

"What a pain! I hope you backed up all the important stuff online."

"Oh, I hope so too."

The man reached behind him, opening a small compartment beside his seat and digging around for something. "Wait a second, I've got an extra one in here somewhere if you'd like to check and make sure." He pulled out a square device about the size of a book but only a few millimeters thick, blue aluminum with a plastic screen on one side. "You might as well keep it until you get a new one. It's just an old thirty-eight model, practically an antique." Rabbit accepted the offer with obvious trepidation, holding the pad close so her host couldn't see the screen and fiddling with it. "Judging by your dress though, I'm guessing you're a fan of antiques. Is that shirt an original or did you have it made?"

Rabbit brushed at her soaked collar tenderly. "Oh, nothing but the real thing for me. I love the classic fabrics."

The man nodded, duly impressed. Finally the question came. "So you're a tourist in Hangzhou, you say? Where from?"

Don't screw it up this time, I prayed to myself.

"Oh, not far... Just down in Shaoxing. Funny, it's less than an hour away but I've never had the chance to come up here before. It's very impressive."

Erring on the side of closeness seemed to pay off; apparently the town of Shaoxing, at least, was still within the borders of Waha State. The businessman slapped his knees.

"Well then, I guess the only hospitable thing for me to do is invite you to stay with my family. I'm on my way home now. I'm guessing you've discovered by now that the hotels in our fair city leave something to be desired."

Rabbit sat up a bit straighter. I wished I could see the look of victory on her face. "Oh, I couldn't possibly impose!"

-- *Splinter-of-Jade, Grand Historian of Mount Penglai*
Hangzhou, November 6, 2044 A.D.

Part Six **A Document of the Founding of White Snake Inc.**

The Waha State of the 2040s is indeed, as earlier evidence had suggested, a wholly corporate entity run by a whole range of companies but largely controlled by the majority shareholder, the Hangzhou Wahaha Group Co. Ltd. With such a complete reliance on business, it is not surprising that corporate culture has reached heights of sophistication rivaling the courtly culture of the Tang and Song Dynasties. Personal life and corporate life having become one and the same, it is the current custom for business owners, managers and employees to live, along with their families, in the workplace itself. Each of the lofty towers dominating the skyline of downtown Hangzhou is a corporate headquarters and residential community all in one, with the chief executive predictably living on the top level. The tallest tower in the city is, of course, the home of the top-level

management at Wahaha itself. Living and working quarters are not just in proximity but actually combined into single units; the only explicitly corporate areas are the meeting rooms and guest reception areas. This isn't to say that the businessmen and their families live among desks and filing cabinets, however. The trappings of clerical life as known in the twentieth century have almost all disappeared, as all important work is now done via netpad. This indispensable electronic device is the size of a book but much thinner, with a screen filling one side. Control is facilitated and text written directly on the screen with the index finger. It serves functions similar to the computers of the late twentieth century -- combined with those of cell phones and cameras -- but seems to have become much more a part of life's every facet. For instance, the netpad has done away with the need for physical money. When a modern Hangzhouite walks into a store or restaurant, he simply pulls out his pad and makes his purchasing decisions through the global network, paying for the goods electronically before picking them up at the counter. For all intents and purposes it seems impossible to function without one.

The device is so easy to use that I myself was quickly able to pick up on the process of writing and storing documents, and have thus been using Rabbit's borrowed pad to keep these records (if only old Han Xiang could see me now!) Beyond that, however, I am limited in my use of the device by the fact that Rabbit does not actually have an electronic identity of any sort, not to mention any purchasing power. Almost any use of the pad on the global network necessitates some small electronic charge, even if just a hundredth of a *yuan* (the currency seems to be of similar worth to the *renminbi* of the early 2000s, though it's actually called the *wahabi* now.) This is deeply unfortunate, for if I had only a small amount of funds at my disposal I could do enough research to fill a whole volume of records in a single afternoon. As matters stand, progress has been much slower.

For the past five days we have been guests at the Wang family residence, on the top two stories of one of the more modestly-sized corporate towers on the southern edge of downtown, approximately in what was

formerly the area of Hefang Lane at the foot of City God Hill. Our host, Wang Xian, is the founder and head of King Deer Enterprises, manufacturer of an international toothpaste brand of the same name. Still, he describes his company as small fry, one of many brands sold throughout former China, and possessing only a single manufacturing plant on the northwest side of the city. It's good to see that modesty is not yet dead. His wife, young daughter, and elderly parents all live in the spacious and rather elegant home at the top of the tower, but there is plenty of extra room for guests. Below are thirteen stories of residences and meeting areas for the rest of the management, his board members having whole floors to themselves, while the lower clerks live in more modest quarters, even dormitories by the sound of it.



While I have been eager to gather information on the structure of Waha State and the other fragments of the former People's Republic, Rabbit has had a hard enough time simply passing herself off as a contemporary citizen of the country and hasn't had the chance to ask too many pointed questions. Only her story of coming from a rather insular family in the countryside has saved her from too much suspicion. All I have gathered so far are a few passing remarks from Mr. Wang concerning the "terrible state of affairs in international relations" and the "current atmosphere of concern"; not much to go on, but intriguing. Rabbit, for her part, has been making her own plans. The taste of modest luxury she's been enjoying as a guest of Mr. Wang has her twice as determined to build such a lifestyle for herself -- or preferably an even better one. On the fifth day she finally hit upon an idea. I was in the guest bedroom, scribbling furiously on the borrowed netpad with both forelegs in a fruitless attempt to find any charitable online resource in the habit of giving out news and information free of charge. Rabbit walked out of the bathroom, studying the as-yet-unopened tube of King Deer toothpaste that had been sitting next to the sink since we arrived.

"What a terrible product," she appraised.
"Since when did you brush your teeth

anyway?”

“No, I haven’t tried it, I just mean it’s not very creative. Mr. Wang must really be a business genius to build a company on something like this. Seriously, King Deer? What kind of brand name is that?”

“Deer do have good teeth, I imagine. They’d have to.”

She ignored my comment. “And look at the ingredients list. It’s the most generic toothpaste I’ve ever seen. It doesn’t even have fluoride. I might as well just suck on some candy before I go to bed.”

I shrugged my antennae. “Well, Mr. Wang is selling enough of the stuff to live in this place. I think he knows what he’s doing.”

“But he doesn’t know how much he *could* be doing,” she insisted, a certain ominous light starting to appear in her eyes. She flipped the tube up in the air, grabbed it, did an about face, and returned to the bathroom. I sighed, returning to my frustrating search for information. Just a few minutes later she returned, holding the now half-empty tube of King Deer in one hand and a drinking glass in the other; the inside of the glass was slathered with toothpaste, the handle of a toothbrush sticking up out of the mixture.

“Uh oh, you were serious about that,” I groaned.

“I just made a little product improvement,” she beamed. “I’m going to go find Mr. Wang and see what he thinks.”

I leapt onto her shoulder, sending the netpad spinning across the desk, and crawled back under her collar. I wasn’t going to miss this for the world.

Mrs. Wang, who was reading something off her netpad in the corner of the spacious downstairs living room, pointed Rabbit in the direction of Mr. Wang’s main office room. “I think he’s reading reports right now, but I’m sure he’ll be happy to take a short break to talk to our guests,” she said with a warm smile. She was a small woman, but looked slightly older than her husband and had a rather timid manner. She dressed rather plainly and seemed to spend most of her day reading. Rabbit thanked the woman and walked into the open door of the indicated room. The CEO sat at a low tea table in front of a floor-length window with an overcast view of City God Hill. I noticed again the strange metallic panels covering much of the

steep south slope of the hill like scales on a silver carp; this was another oddity I hadn’t had an opportunity to look into yet. Mr. Wang looked up from his netpad with only the most fleeting frown of annoyance and greeted Rabbit politely.

“Ah, Miss Tu. I trust you are still comfortable? Have you been out to see the lake today?”

Rabbit gestured towards the grey view outside the window, giving the same excuse she had used for the past four days. “I’m still waiting to see if it clears up. It seems like a shame to waste the view on a day like this.”

Mr. Wang shook his head. “I keep telling you, you might be waiting a long time for that. It doesn’t clear up very often around here. Not since I was a young boy, anyway.” A shadow of nostalgia floated across his face, but he shook it off. Noticing the items in her hands, he leaned forwards.

“What’s this, did you come here to complain about my toothpaste? There are proper channels for that, you know,” he joked.

“Actually, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I’ve been doing a little experimenting.” She set the glass of toothpaste down on the tea table; he eyed it dubiously. “You know how I said I come from kind of an eccentric family, out in the countryside in Shaoxing County? We actually come from a long line of herbalists and pharmacists. My great-great-great grandfather even used to supply the Imperial physicians in the Ming Dynasty. Ah, Qing Dynasty, rather. So we’ve got a lot of secret family recipes.”

The CEO raised an eyebrow and glanced at the glass again. “How mysterious.”

“Yeah, well, I’m used to it. This here is a little ingredient my grandmother used to call ‘silver essence.’ I carry a good supply with me when I travel, to keep myself healthy. I mixed a bit in with the toothpaste. Have a taste.”

“Herbal toothpaste! Very... classical.” He pulled the toothbrush out of the mixture and held it up. The man certainly went to great lengths for politeness, I had to give him that. He shrugged and touched the tip of his tongue to the brush. His expression shifted around uncertainly for a moment, then settled into the look of a fisherman who has just been offered three wishes by a talking carp. He licked the back of the brush clean and swished the mixture around in his mouth. He looked at Rabbit again, sizing her up as if seeing her

for the first time. Then he leapt to his feet and hurried into the other room.

“Honey,” we heard him say, “try some of this, quickly!” There was a momentary silence. Rabbit walked back out after him.

“Oh! Quite good,” commented his wife, handing back the brush with a very pleased look on her face.

Mr. Wang turned back to Rabbit, leveling his voice. “Just what... exactly... is in this ‘silver essence’?”

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly give that away,” she answered with as much innocence as she could muster. “My great-great-great grandfather’s ghost would come back to haunt me for sure. All I know is, my grandma always used to say if you have a little every day it’ll add twenty years to your life. And old granny passed away just last year at one hundred and eighteen.” She sniffed convincingly at the memory.

The businessman chose his words carefully. “This is quite an extraordinary ingredient your family has. You had a great idea -- I think it could really make our toothpaste stand out. It’s most fortunate that we happened to meet, for both of us. On behalf of King Deer Enterprises I’m prepared to offer you a very large sum of money to be let in on the secret of this silver essence.”

“May I sit?” Rabbit sat. “Thank you. I have no doubt that this could make a stupendously popular toothpaste. That’s why I’m not going to sell it to you. You have one opportunity, and you can either take it or let the next guy have it. I’ll supply all the silver essence we need, but it’s not going into King Deer. King Deer is a second-rate toothpaste and always will be. I’m offering you the chance to join me as equal partners in a new venture, for which you can provide the initial investment and the factory and I’ll provide the secret ingredient. What do you say?”

Mr. Wang stood dumbstruck by his guest’s sudden change. But the astonishment only lasted a few seconds, after which he smiled and sat down on the couch next to his wife. “Forgive me. I have clearly misjudged you. I’m not trying to steal your secret, I just didn’t take you for a businesswoman. I can see now that you truly have a head on your shoulders. I would be honored to go into business with such an adroit and capable partner.”

“Glad to hear it. We can hammer out the details and draw up some paperwork later. But

for the first order of business, the most popular toothpaste of 2045 needs a proper name, something even little kids can really grab onto and remember.” She pulled the half-empty tube of King Deer out of her pocket and squeezed a thick winding strip of white toothpaste out onto the upholstered arm of the expensive couch, ending the line in an artistic spiral. “What do you think of ‘White Snake toothpaste?’ Nice and visual, if I may say so myself. Not to mention, snakes have great teeth.”

Returning to the guest room twenty minutes later, Rabbit threw herself down on the bed and descended into a fit of hysterical laughter. “Bwahahaha, silver essence! I kill me! Ahahaha, did you see the look on his face...heehhehe...”

I took up a perch back up on the desk, out of the way of my companion’s gleeful thrashing. “You, my friend, are a genius, and a terrible person. I can’t believe you’re going to get rich off selling your spit.”

She stopped rolling around and sat up, wiping tears of mirth from her eyes. “Aw, how did you guess? I was going to enjoy letting you wonder for a few days.”

“I guess I just know you too well.”

She spread her arms in defense. “Hey, it’s not like I’m being dishonest. It will add twenty years to people’s lives, or at least that’s what the other immortals tell me.”

I turned back to the desk to try out the netpad some more. “Fine, but you’ll never convince me it’s sanitary.”

-- *Splinter-of-Jade, Grand Historian of Mount Penglai*

Hangzhou, November 11, 2044 A.D.

Part Seven
**The Toothpaste Revolution of 2045: Notes
and Context**

White Snake toothpaste hit the shelves in Hangzhou hardly a month later. The factory was already up and running, so Mr. Wang simply shut down King Deer Associates and “sold” the plant to the new jointly founded White Snake Inc. The two entrepreneurs didn’t even change the basic recipe, beyond the addition of fluoride at Rabbit’s insistence, and of course the new secret ingredient. After this it was a simple matter of printing up new packaging, featuring a lovable cartoon toothpaste-snake peeking out of its uncapped burrow. Throughout the transition not a single voice of dissent was heard from the former corporation’s other board members, at least after the CEO passed a sample of the new product around a board meeting. All six members immediately got on board with the new venture.

The brand was launched in five States amid an advertising blitz which cost Mr. Wang the larger part of his remaining capital. For weeks, the global net was crawling with animated, interactive clones of the cartoon snake, voiced by a popular comedian. Returns on the investment were immediate and drastic. First-time buyers quickly returned to the stores for more of the miraculous product, and so did their friends and neighbors. The overwhelming feeling of well-being and immediate health benefits felt by consumers of Rabbit’s special mixture were unlike anything the rather stagnant toothpaste market had ever seen. By the approach of the Spring Festival at the end of January, Mr. Wang was already looking to buy land for a second factory with four times the production capacity.

Just two weeks after forming her partnership with the businessman, while the first plans were still being drawn up, Rabbit talked Mr. Wang into setting her up with a bank account and a modest Co-Director’s salary. Without tarnishing her image of a comfortable upbringing too badly, she hinted that she would need an immediate source of income if she wasn’t going to continue relying on the

hospitality of the Wang family. In addition, her new partner also offered her the General Manager’s residence on the floor just below his own. Since she didn’t need to spend money on food (immortals eat only for recreation), most of her salary went into re-furnishing this apartment, an undertaking she took on with enthusiasm. Once the toothpaste hit the shelves and her means looked set to improve, she also started saving up for a car.

As for myself, I took great delight in my companion’s new financial independence for a different reason: with the very first deposit of electronic funds, the global net opened up to me. I launched into my research with the relish of a caged tiger set free in the forest. Rabbit soon invested in the latest model of netpad for her own use, so I had Mr. Wang’s forgotten old loaner to myself; day and night I pored over the screen in Rabbit’s apartment, catching up on forty years’ worth of history, news, culture and politics -- at least, those areas I was allowed to access from within Waha State. I couldn’t bear to take up my brush again (how odd that expression sounds now!) until I had fully enlightened myself on the modern world. The more I learned, the more naive and inexpert my first records from our arrival looked, though I still believe they are perfectly suitable for the purposes of providing a record of the Immortal Woman Rabbit’s undertaking. Nonetheless, not until now have I deemed myself competent to return to my recording duties. Unfortunately, though I long to write it, a full historical and geographic description of all under Heaven in the current day and age is far outside the scope of the current work; I plan to make a proper record in the future, but that will have to wait. As it is, if one wishes to follow up on any details, the global network provides a wealth of information that a scholar of old could only dream of finding if he died an honorable death and was reassigned to librarian duties in the Grand Heavenly Archives.



Having other duties and priorities, the Immortal Woman has not devoted as much time as I to research, so she lacks a great deal

of perspective in certain situations. Social situations, in particular, are generally to be avoided. She hasn't minded being reclusive so far, but I've been trying my best to educate her. Just this morning, we were sitting together on the roof terrace of the newly renamed White Snake Tower, enjoying the view of the metropolis under the perpetually gunmetal-grey sky (I've only counted three or four clear days since our arrival). Rabbit was nursing a bottle of Future Cola and complaining about the difficulties of breaking into the social scene.

"Mr. Wang had another big mahjong game last night with the president of Tonlion Sporting Equipment and his wife. He tried to get me to join in again but who knows what they were talking about. Mr. Wang already thinks I was brought up in a dark cave."

"Forget about it, you don't even like mahjong. Immortals have too much luck in the hands, you win every time whether you want to or not."

She leaned back and tapped her plastic bottle against the side of her deck chair. "It's not like that, it just seems like there's no point to this getting rich business if nobody but the Wangs even knows I'm rich."

"Patience," I chided. "You're still on your way. Once you're well and truly loaded, you can go to those parties and act however you like. Everyone knows there's no such thing as a crazy rich person, only rich eccentrics."

"That's true, I'd rather start at the top anyway," she conceded. I could tell she wasn't really worried, just indulging in a morning sulk. "No use going to the second-rate parties when my stock is doubling its value every two weeks."

"I wouldn't worry, you'll make quite a splash when you finally hit the scene. You know, you're already all over the gossip netboards. Apparently word has gotten out that there's a mysterious lady behind this amazing new toothpaste."

"Don't tell me!" she cried out in mock horror. "I have a bad feeling I'm going to need to do a lot more shopping for clothes." Rabbit was not at all a fan of the current fashion trends of the 2040s, but that hadn't stopped her from building up a fairly extensive wardrobe in search of something that suited her. This morning, she was just wearing her usual pants and yellow shirt.

"Why bother with that? Mr. Wang and the

other board members seem to think your retro look is great."

"Hah," she scoffed, "so says the little guy with the exoskeleton. You have to understand, it's not about the clothes, it's about how much you paid for them. There's no fooling people, you just wear clothes in a different way when you've spent a couple thousand *kuai* on them. That's one thing my transforming robe can't fake."

"Well then I guess it's too bad for you, living in a time when the expensive clothes all look like pastel superhero outfits."

She laughed at the comparison. "No kidding, have you seen some of these people? What really gets me is all the plastic clothes. You'd think someone had to go off into the jungle and hunt down the rare plastic antelope, the way they charge for the stuff. And it all looks like something you'd force a really messy little kid to wear."

"Ah well, you know how they are about plastic."

Rabbit took a long pull from her Future Cola bottle and regarded the horizon. "Why is that, anyway? Plastic had been around for ages even when I was young. Why don't they use it for anything here?"

I realized I had been negligent in my educational efforts in this area. "Well you know what plastic is made from, right?"

"It's *not* plastic antelope hides?" She shrugged. "Worse than that, it's made from petroleum. And you know how expensive *that* is now."

"You've mentioned it."

"Right. Ever since the oil crash of 2019, the remaining reserves have become more and more difficult to extract, particularly with the decay of the global economy. And the phasing out of the national government as a trading entity leading up to the Corporate Independence Movement of 2021 didn't help anything. What little oil is still left in the Corporate States is terribly expensive to get at, and Waha State doesn't have the best of trading relations with Sinopec State where most of the remaining reserves are. Here they pretty much just use plastic for the most important stuff, like netpad screens and designer clothes."

Rabbit held up her Future Cola bottle, swishing around the dregs. "And drink containers?" she asked incredulously.

"Ah well, that's old Wahaha for you. They actually use recycled plastic for the bottles, but

it can only go through four or five cycles before it gives up. I suspect they put a lot of money into those bottles, and I'm betting it's a pride thing."

She reflexively craned her neck up to look at the top of the Wahaha Tower, rising high above the other buildings in the center of town. "It's kind of amazing, really, how much they've managed to do around here without oil. It sure was a big deal back in the old days."

We were moving into territory I was certain we had covered at least twice before, but I went ahead and indulged Rabbit again. "Yeah, they've done alright, but it hasn't been easy. Coal, solar power and wind turbines have had to take up the slack. Some of the States dabbled in nuclear power for a while, but after depopulating a few areas for the next century they gave up and went back to just making bombs with the stuff. Coal is a lot safer, it's just given us this lovely sky." I spread my forelegs to the thick cloud layer above. "Coal, solar and wind power have come a long ways, but they still pretty much just make electricity. There's a lot you just can't do without oil. Like make asphalt to build roads, or run cars to drive on them."

"And is that why the buildings are all falling apart?"

"Yeah, these things were mostly built before oil got too outrageously expensive, back in the first enthusiastic years of Corporate freedom. I doubt they can manage anything like this nowadays. All they can do to make up for it is cover them with lights. With the new sun and wind farm in the hills to the west of the lake, electricity at least is almost free."

"And Future Cola too, I guess," she added with another swig from her nearly empty bottle.

"Again, that's a Wahaha thing. The least they can do is buy a round for everyone. I can't believe you're actually drinking it though."

"Hey, I've just got to get my juices flowing. I have another jar of silver essence to top up by this evening."

At this point our conversation was cut short by a chime from the elevator. Mr. Wang walked out onto the terrace with his wife at his side, both of them dressed in expensive track suits featuring plastic mesh.

"Is that a bug on the tea table?" he asked, leaning to one side to look past Rabbit. She

turned around with supreme nonchalance as I made like a cockroach.

"What? Oh, I think it was a dragonfly. It's gone now."

He shook his head at the unpleasantness. He was clearly not a great lover of the arthropodic form. "Yeeuch, a real monster."

"So what brings you up to the terrace?" Rabbit questioned, changing the subject.

"Ah well, my wife and I were just wanting to take in some fresh air and exercise this morning." He gestured towards the low bars and other pieces of fitness equipment bolted to the pitted concrete on the far corner of the roof. "I see you had the same idea."

"More or less, minus the exercise."

He noticed the almost-empty bottle in her hand. "Look at this, you must be a real dedicated Wahaha customer! Drinking Future Cola first thing in the morning! You know, if you're out of real food you can always drop by our place for breakfast."

"Oh, it's not so bad. It's actually starting to grow on me."

He cracked up at the comment. "You are a strange one! Well, I guess you'll do just fine at least if our company goes bust. You can always live down by the lake and become a cola girl. Personally I haven't tasted the stuff in years and I intend to keep it that way."

"Are there really cola girls and cola boys who live on nothing but Future Cola from the lake? I still don't believe it."

He nodded, his face darkening a bit. "You'd better. Most of the people in this city actually rely on the cola for their everyday meals. Wahaha fortifies it with all the necessary nutritional bits and pieces, so you could get by with eating or drinking nothing else if necessary. Too many people do just that." He softened the last statement with a thin smile.

"But at least they have this. Nobody goes hungry here."

Rabbit eyed the contents of her bottle again, holding it up to the light. "Maybe not, but if that's the case they're really going to need our toothpaste."

-- *Splinter-of-Jade, Grand Historian of Mount Penglai*

Hangzhou, January 29th, First Quarter, Fiscal Year 2045

Part Eight
Celebrating the Ascendancy of White Snake Inc. on the Dragon Boat Festival

The first two Quarters of Fiscal Year 2005 brought nothing but greater and greater success for White Snake toothpaste and its creators. The growth of the company exceeded all of Wang Xian's expectations (though Rabbit didn't seem surprised at all.) The extraordinary toothpaste became more or less a necessity of life for satisfied customers all over the five Corporate States in which it was sold. Recently, Mr. Wang and his board were even hammering out trade negotiations with several other corporate regions, ones having less comfortable relations with Waha State. To meet the runaway demand, four new factories had been set up consecutively in the countryside in the southeast corner of the State. Poor Rabbit now had to supply two and a half liters of her miraculous saliva -- a.k.a. 'silver essence' -- at the start of every week. She delivered the substance to a company driver every Monday morning in plain, unlabeled glass jars; she never tried to explain where she was finding this limitless supply, and none of the board members -- least of all Mr. Wang himself -- ventured to ask. It was generally assumed that someone back in her village was sending her the mystery herb.

By August, Rabbit had settled into her life of luxury with ease. Her personal income had grown along with her company to a figure that few in the city would not have envied. She had quickly given up on her thirteenth-story apartment and taken to spending a great deal of her time on the roof terrace, until Mr. Wang had finally gotten the message and suggested that she consider the roof as part of her own private quarters. Wasting no time, She immediately had a spacious cottage built in the northeast corner underneath the existing bank of solar collectors and started creating a classically-inspired garden of exotic plants and bonsai trees, imported rock formations, and a goldfish pond, just in time for spring. She neglected her original residence three floors below for so long that she eventually just offered to let the General Manager move back in. Inside she filled her new cottage with a rotating collection of

purchases, changing everything around whenever she found herself able to afford something more impressive. Her netscreen grew until it filled the largest wall in the house from floor to ceiling, though she almost never watched it. She changed the collection of antique watercolor paintings hanging on the remaining walls twice a month to match the current seasonal conditions; for this she hired an expert from the Hangzhou Art Academy to scour the auction houses on her behalf and pay whatever was required. The museum-quality antique furniture with which she filled the cottage was primarily purchased on the criterion of its vintage, meaning all but the sturdiest items had to be replaced frequently. The biggest challenge for her was coming up with a bath of satisfactory ostentatiousness, a feature she considered particularly essential. Finally she hit on the idea of building a second glass pool in the middle of the goldfish pond, so she could bathe out in her garden surrounded by the rare breeds of multi-hued fish. This of course necessitated the installation of a second netscreen filling the side wall of the cottage, though she rarely watched this one either. She spent more time on her telescope-equipped viewing pavilion, looking out over the city and the lake, or else browsing the shops on her netpad (which Baidu Net Technologies Inc. upgraded on a weekly basis by permanent contract). Her most recent hobby was the simple pleasure of buying large, expensive items -- a maglev cycle, a tank of sharks, an antique Chairman Mao statue -- and tipping them off the roof into the empty lot sixteen stories below the rear of the garden.

Clearly, Rabbit was becoming a bit of a shut-in. Though she longed to flaunt her new wealth all over the city, she feared getting out of her depth in social situations and revealing her ignorance of the modern world. I tried explaining to her that such ignorance is fully expected of the rich, but she just called me a dirty Marxist and lobbied me to teach her everything my research had turned up. Thus I began my career as tutor, leading my companion through a crash course in modern history and -- more importantly -- modern social customs and hierarchies. By the middle of the third Financial Quarter, I deemed the mysterious Co-Director of White Snake Inc. sufficiently wealthy, knowledgeable, and

notorious to make her first appearance on the Hangzhou social circuit. The perfect opportunity came in June, on the day of the Dragon Boat Festival. This year, riding on the wave of his newfound fame as co-founder of Waha State's fastest-growing company in the last two Quarters, Wang Xian had been graced with an invitation to one of the city's more high-status celebrations. This small but exclusive gathering took place every year on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month in the pavilion on top of City-God Hill, considered since the Song Dynasty to be the most desirable spot in town for watching the dragon boats race on the lake. The hosts rotated in their duties; this year, the venerable president of the even more venerable Zhongxiaoquan Scissor Company was playing host. It was the perfect venue for the much-discussed woman behind the toothpaste to make herself known.

Mr. Wang was surprised but delighted when his reclusive partner asked to accompany him and his wife to the dragon boat viewing party. It was a simple matter for him to fix Rabbit up with an invitation; the host had heard all the rumors and was only too happy to put the mysterious Miss Tu on the guest list. Rabbit spent the next few days ordering outfits via netpad and discarding them one by one. The night before the big event she finally settled on a plain white gown of thick silk that looked suspiciously like a twenty-first century version of her old robe. Fortunately, the garment also had a bit of a collar, so I retained my accustomed spot for tagging along. Having settled this matter, she spent the rest of the night shortening and lengthening her hair in a search for the perfect style to match the outfit. She ended up with a long, curly style that made her look quite a bit older than her perpetual twenty-two years.



The party began soon after noon. The pavilion perched atop City-God Hill was a four-story relic from the nineties, a red-painted wooden antique standing out above the sleek tessellation of triangular solar energy collectors covering the south, east and west slopes of the hill like silver armor. Today, the

fading walls of the structure were hung with banners and electric lanterns for the boat-viewing event, and a large contingent of uniformed caterers were running around like worker bees preparing the venue when we arrived on the scene. The maglev rails didn't extend all the way to the top of the hill, so Rabbit and Wang Xian had to climb the last fifteen minutes by foot after passing their two tall stacks of gifts off to a group of retainers. Most of the chairs at the two banquet tables on the top floor of the pavilion were already filled. The floor-length windows on the lakeward side of the room were open to the view; the day was a particularly clear one for modern Hangzhou, meaning one could actually see the boat crews preparing far below reasonably well. The three other walls were decorated with netscreens playing animated watercolors, an art form that is quickly surpassing its static progenitor in popularity. In the corner, a trio of live musicians on electric *erhu*, theremon-zither and bells had begun to carry a modern interpretation of *Autumn Moon over the Han Palace* into daring improvisational realms with true musical abandon. The lighthearted chatter of conversation, however, was the same as it had always been at such events, right back to the day the ancient Yu the Great celebrated the taming of the floods with a grand gathering not far from here. That legendary event could hardly have been more impressive than this.

"Mister Wang Xian, Madam Wang Yuntai, and Miss Tu Xiangu", announced the retainer at the door; every head in the hall turned our way. Even the musicians momentarily switched their instruments to auto-play, from the sound of it. A man in a blue silk suit who looked as old as Confucius rose from his seat of honor facing the open windows and turned around, beckoning the newcomers to him. "Ah, my old friend Wang! You've arrived at last! Come, I've saved your seats at our table." The speaker was the host, Zhou Qianshi of Zhongxiaoquan Scissors, and I knew for a fact that the old faker had never even met Mr. Wang before. I bet myself this wasn't the only new old friend Rabbit's partner was set to acquire today. Our group of three accepted the empty seats to his right side and began a round of introductions politely disguised as reacquaintances.

“You know Mister Zhu, of course, from Butterfly Textiles. And Mister Wu has just been keeping us all spellbound with stories of what his Dragon Well Tea Consortium is up to these days. Our old friend Mr. Ho took the train down for the night from Nanjing just to be here. He’s looking to buy up three more hospitals for his collection. And of course, I know our guest of honor today needs no introduction,” the old businessman continued, nodding deferentially to the bald-headed mountain of a man filling the suit to Rabbit’s right. “Mr. Qiu has honored us all with his presence, representing the Wahaha Group in his new position of Director of Bottling Operations.” The guest in question bowed his head politely in return and sipped his wine, distracted by something out over the lake.

Lunch was already in full swing, the tables laden with delicacies from all corners of the Corporate States. Mr. Wang and his wife were forced by the host to eat a few morsels, while Rabbit needed no such urging. She may not need to eat, but she enjoys it as much as anyone when the food is good and expensive. Her plate was soon piled with duck’s tongues, squirrel-tailed fish, miniature sea cucumber and eight treasures shark’s fin, but only after a double helping of bird’s nest soup. Mr. Wu had furnished the gathering with an ample supply of this season’s finest third-growth Dragon Well tea, the aroma of which penetrated that of even the most fragrant food. In addition, Mr. Tian of Pagoda Wine had donated an even larger supply of premium yellow realgar wine, the traditional beverage of this particular festival. Amid general toasts and feasting, those seated nearest our group forgot the untalkative Wahaha executive who was the nominal guest of honor and wasted no time in not-so-subtly prying Rabbit for information. She followed to the letter the story we had planned out in elaborate detail over the previous weeks. The guests learned of Miss Tu’s eccentric family of traditional herbalists, their secluded ancestral home deep in the mountains of Shaoxing County, her arrival in Hangzhou, and the chance encounter with Mr. Wang that had led to their unlikely but successful partnership. As we had long expected, she soon became the highlight of the party, drawing so many eyes that I had to retreat far under her collar to avoid any chance of discovery. My view soon

shrank to only the heaped plate in front of Rabbit. I could tell well enough from the sounds, however, that Rabbit was a hit. Somehow, we never even got around to watching the boat race.

The toasts soon began to flow fast and thick, and Rabbit, needless to say, was the object of the largest number. The substantial physical presence of the reserved guest of honor to her left blocked that avenue of attack, and the Wangs dutifully protected her right flank, but from the front and rear she was hopelessly unguarded. She held out for an admirable length of time -- almost three hours, by my estimate -- but with her newfound popularity it was an impossible situation. The merciless guests were soon pouring strong realgar wine into her like a bucket brigade. As well as fulfilling the eternal duty of banquet-goers the world over, they clearly thought this strategy would get them even more information out of this mysterious newcomer. I was relieved to see that Rabbit retained enough of her faculties to stick to her guns and not slip up on her story. Not surprised, though. Immortals tend to be heavy drinkers, to put it mildly; liquoring one up is like trying to put out a forest fire with a wine cup.

The toasts, however, soon reached quantities that would indeed have extinguished a good-sized forest fire -- or turned it into a blazing inferno, considering the strength of the wine. Rabbit eventually settled on singing as the most effective means of putting an end to the questioning. This served to endear her all the more to the socialites; late twentieth century Chinese pop music is currently in the midst of an utterly bewildering resurgence in popularity, and Rabbit’s repertoire was unrivalled. After she finally exhausted it, she moved on to magic tricks. These were even more popular, but I began to worry a bit as her feats started to stretch credibility as simple sleight-of-hand. By the time she got as far as resurrecting a roast duck, I was silently begging Mr. Wang to drag his partner home.

Fortunately he did just this a moment later. Abruptly, in the middle of Rabbit trying to coax a pair of chopsticks to perform a Beijing Opera duet, he announced that Miss Tu, his wife and himself needed to depart at once. They very much wished to stay the entire

Part Nine A Talk Between Partners

night, but regretfully there was a board meeting with representatives from another State scheduled first thing in the morning that could not be put off. Amid thundering protestations -- not least of which from Rabbit herself, who loudly reminded Mr. Wang that she never went to board meetings anyway -- he grabbed his ward's arm and bodily dragged her out to the stairs as quickly as etiquette would allow. He didn't look back until they had reached the darkness of the hilltop outside, his wife hurrying a few steps behind. Rabbit stopped him in a pool of light underneath the first of the decorative electric lanterns lining the path down to street level.

"Whassa big idea? I was making all kinds of friends in there! 'Snot even past nine yet!"

"You're lucky I was the only one in there sober enough to notice," he hissed, anger and fear present in equal measure in his voice. "Look at your feet!"

As that was the precise direction I had been looking all evening, I was shocked that I hadn't noticed it before. Now that I looked closer, I realized that the pitted concrete path directly below looked about three to five inches further away than it should have. Mrs. Wang restrained a gasp. It took my besotted friend a few seconds longer to realize the significance of what she was looking at. When she did, she yelped and levitated a foot higher in shock.

"I... I... just... Aw, crap."

Before I knew what was happening we were flying away from the Wangs, off the hilltop and over the low buildings below towards the illuminated upper reaches of the White Snake Tower. Over the wind, I couldn't tell whether my companion was sobbing or cursing at herself.

-- *Splinter-of-Jade, Grand Historian of Mount Penglai*

Hangzhou, June 9th, Second Quarter, Fiscal Year 2045

Rabbit slept far into the morning of the next day, whether through the effects of the realgar wine or through sheer force of will I cannot guess. She finally stirred close to lunchtime. I was browsing my netpad on the desk in her room, reading up on any contemporary anti-gravity technology that might help my friend construct a halfway-decent explanation for last night. Unfortunately for her, it looked like the scientists had made little progress in this particular field. Rabbit's sizeable antique Shaanxi-style bed creaked, and she peeked her head out between the canopy curtains. Her hair looked as bad as it had up on Mount Penglai. I swiped the screen to switch off my netpad and greeted her with a soft chirp.

"That was quite a show you put on last night, girl! You're definitely going to be getting a lot of invitations from now on. I hate to think what will happen when the Mid-Autumn Festival arrives."

She just groaned and retreated behind the curtain. A moment later she re-emerged feet first, sliding on her sandals and standing with a wobbly, half-hearted stretch. Her party gown was crumpled beyond repair, the left shoulder sticking up at an odd angle almost to her ear.

"Wow, I don't even remember coming back here last night. Did I fly all the way home or did Mr. Wang drag my carcass back? I can't decide which would be worse."

"You made it on your own, though you just about crashed into the side of the fourteenth floor. I take it you remember what happened before that, then?"

She pulled off a sandal and brandished it in my direction. "Perfectly. Mention it again and I'll flatten you." She stalked out of the room, left sandal flapping on the hardwood floor.

I gave her a moment before following. She was already making a beeline for the front door of the cottage clutching a bath towel, clearly headed for her tub in the middle of the goldfish pond. When she stepped out, however, she found Wang Xian sitting on a bench in the garden.

"I love what you've done with the miniature willows," he remarked casually, waving a hand

at the verdant surroundings of the garden. "Planting them on the wall above the phoenix-tail bamboo was a brilliant idea, they really sway in the breeze up there. I should really take more time to come up and enjoy your garden. So busy these days."

Rabbit took a few cautious steps closer. "I'm... I'm hoping to attract some orioles. When I was young, the willows were always full of singing orioles. It's their favorite tree. No luck yet though."

Mr. Wang shook his head. "I'm not surprised. Birds don't like to come near the city at all, not even down by the lake. It's not like where you grew up in Shaoxing." He shrugged. "Or, you know, wherever you did grow up."

"Right. About last night, I can..."

He cut her short with a raised palm which he didn't lower until he had finished his piece. "Don't bother. Do you really think I've ever been under the illusion that you were just a normal young country woman since the day I took you in from the rain? A businessman in this town has to be smarter than that, or he'll end up collecting Future Cola bottles off the road for the rest of his life. That's why I agreed to risk everything to go into business with you. I don't know who or what you are or where you come from, and I don't need to know. All I do know is, you've made me the financial success story of the decade, and I am forever in your debt for that. And I know that you're my partner, which is all that really matters. We're in this together."

Rabbit smiled sheepishly. "Thanks, I needed to hear that. You're not a bad partner yourself, pardner." She snickered and brightened up a bit. In the time I've known her, I've seen no evidence to suggest that Rabbit is even capable of sustaining bad spirits for more than ten minutes at a stretch. "Sorry I scared you last night. I promise to be more careful at future parties. I'm just glad that realgar wine only comes around once a year, it's wicked stuff. I hope Mrs. Wang is okay?"

"Oh, my wife is just fine. She has a way of taking the stranger things in life all in stride. That's what I love about her. You know what her only comment last night was? 'I hope she's safe, flying after all those drinks!'" The two partners laughed together.

"So we're good then?" he ventured.

"Sure."

"Great," he said, sitting up straighter on the

bench, "because I picked up some worrying news last night. I think White Snake might have a problem on its hands."

I knew Rabbit well enough to have no doubt that the following momentary pause meant she was about to crack a joke about snakes not having hands, but thought the better of it as she absorbed the gravity in Mr. Wang's voice.

"What sort of problem?" she almost whispered.

"Oh, it's just politics as usual. Politics is behind the death of every great company, never doubt that. I just hope that doesn't prove the case for us."

"Politics, like what?"

He sighed. "After you... made your own way home last night, my wife and I returned to the party for a little while. I just wanted to be sure and excuse your departure well enough, and make certain that nobody's suspicions had been raised. Fortunately, once you were no longer around to monopolize all the wine pitchers, the gathering quickly devolved to a state where nobody was fit to believe anything they saw or heard. That big Wahaha manager was the only one at our table to retain any of his faculties whatsoever. Those government execs have to watch their backs so much, I'm surprised they don't splice on an extra pair of eyes back there. They can't cut loose if their lives depend on it. The other guests were loading him up with as much wine as they could lay their hands, but I swear he must have had some kind of bio-implant breaking down the alcohol. Actually, that wouldn't surprise me at all."

"Eventually, he ducked out for some fresh air. This meant I was next in line for toasts, so I had to make a quick retreat too, as soon as I could sneak away. I headed upstairs to the roof of the pavilion -- there's a balcony just behind the eaves there where the view is even better than inside. Wouldn't you know it, the government man was already up there. He came walking out of the shadows and said he'd been waiting to have a word with me. I can't say I was surprised -- every company director worth his netpad gets visits from the Wahaha brass now and then. I got the idea this setup was a bit different, though. And I was right. He started out congratulating me on White Snake's success, telling me how much

our company was contributing to the economy of Waha State and so on. The Wahaha Group, he said, was honored to have us on their side. He said these are dangerous years in the Corporate States, and Wahaha was committed to helping and protecting all of their partner groups. I asked him, 'dangerous how so?' He said that was just the thing we needed to discuss."

Wang Xian lowered his voice and beckoned Rabbit closer; I had to listen carefully from my perch in the bamboo to hear what was said.

"I'm fairly certain now that Mr. Qiu is more than just a Director of Bottling Operations. Wahaha has always been particularly fond of industrial espionage -- but who isn't, these days. He didn't try to explain how he knew what he did, he just warned me that Tongyi State is on the move. There's going to be a border clash soon -- probably before the end of the Quarter -- and Tongyi intends to take the new development zone south of the Ao River by force. The forecasts show it's set to become one of the most attractive new pieces of real estate on the East Coast, you know."

Rabbit dropped her towel to the ground in astonishment. "Of course I know!" she cried. "That's why we built all four of our new factories down there!"

"Exactly," her partner hissed, beckoning her to keep her voice low. "But it gets worse. Mr. Qiu said that Wahaha doesn't have the resources available at the moment to deal with the threat, so they're just going to cut their losses and give up the land."

"Easy for them to say, the bastards!" she fumed, thoroughly appalled. "I'll bet *they* don't have any factories down there."

"Not so much as a bottle cap plant. They have more security resources than they know what to do with, of course, but they're all staying put on the border with Liu State. Mr. Qiu made it clear that the Ao River zone is on its own."

"So why did the scumbag even bother telling you?"

"Hah, that's easy. The big guys don't lift a finger if they can get someone else with more on the line to do the dirty work for them. If the smaller companies put up a valiant defense, Wahaha gets to keep their land without spending a *kuai*. If the little guys get swept away, fine, Wahaha already wrote off

the loss anyway. For White Snake I'm afraid it's going to be the latter case."

"Not if we *do* fight back!"

"With what? We just make toothpaste. Tongyi is a ruling power, with at least as many resources as Wahaha, and a lot more of them invested in security forces. The only other companies with a presence at Ao River are just now starting to build their plants, so I doubt they'll find it worth investing in a suicide mission."

"But... but if we lose those factories we'll be back at square one!"

Mr. Wang bowed his head. "Square one will look mighty attractive from where we'll be. I'm afraid the losses will send us so far into the red we'll forget what black ever looked like."

"Can we strike a deal ourselves with Tongyi? We could move down there and keep the factories!"

He considered this. "No, never. The Tongyi Group is *the* direct competitor with Wahaha. We aren't even allowed to have trade relations with anyone in their State. Not to mention one of *our* biggest competitors, the Black Man Company, is headquartered down in Xiamen. I doubt they have room for more than one toothpaste manufacturer over there. Come to think of it, I wonder if Black Man didn't play some part in this."

Rabbit stared at her fallen towel on the cobblestones, racking her brains for another solution. After a minute or two of this, she looked up and shrugged. "So that's it then, White Snake is sunk."

Her partner offered nothing more than a return shrug. "There's always a chance Mr. Qiu might be mistaken, but I'm afraid you're right. I just thought you should know -- of course there's nothing you can do about it, but it's your company too."

Rabbit didn't show any reaction to the significant look that accompanied this last remark, but I have no doubt she caught it; I could see the glint in the businessman's eye clear as the North Star from halfway across the garden. Then it was gone, and Mr. Wang rose to his feet.

"I'd better get downstairs for lunch. Thank you for letting me rest for a while in your magnificent garden."

"Any time," Rabbit mumbled. Her partner strolled up the winding path to the waiting

elevator and was gone.

“You hear that, bug?” she shouted, spinning around and looking straight to my position in the foliage. “We’re off to war!” Her expression conveyed nothing short of relish at the prospect. “Let’s give ‘em hell!”

I hopped out of my hiding place onto the path. “Oh, by all means! Hell it is! Shall we depart now or do you want to go ahead and take your bath first?”

Rabbit glanced at her fallen towel and tugged at a curl of her tangled hair appraisingly. “No, no time for that. Let’s just get our things and go.”

“You’re the boss,” I replied, hopping back towards the cottage.

-- *Splinter-of-Jade, Grand Historian of Mount Penglai*

Hangzhou, June 10th, Second Quarter, Fiscal Year 2045

Part Ten

Preparing the Defense of Phoenix Pool

The Tongyi Enterprise Corporation is a company with a long and enigmatic history which began outside of mainland China, on the island of Taiwan. This was in the middle years of the People’s Republic, when the PRC government was in the habit of longingly referring to Taiwan as a province, while most Taiwanese simply referred to their island as *the* Republic of China and pretended that the mainland was just some cheap imitation. A handful of visionary Taiwanese entrepreneurs, however, foresaw a sea change far in advance, and began weaving the first few strands of cross-straits economic relations. Tongyi, a manufacturer of bottled drinks and packaged instant noodles, was in this group from day one; the name Tongyi itself meant Reunification, making the company’s views and goals quite explicit to anyone who so much as picked up a bottle of green tea. Many saw this as traitorous behavior, but the company’s business practices were sound and they quickly cornered a large share of the market despite the questionable patriotism of their ambitions. Tongyi became a pillar of the

Taiwanese food products industry, but it was many years before the post-Reforms Communist Party slackened state control in the PRC far enough for the company to finally gain a foothold across the straits. Their first subsidiary factory on the mainland was not opened until 1995, and this was in the far Western frontier region of Xinjiang, as far remote from the centers of government power as one could hope to get. But in a mere matter of years, Tongyi was doing more business on the mainland than on its home island.

The irony of the matter is, Taiwan itself never achieved reunification with the mainland, but the Tongyi Enterprise Corporation eventually did. Like its counterparts across the straits, the corporation was in the right place at the right time when the oil crash hit and rode it out well enough to pick up the pieces afterwards. Tongyi took over administration of public services from the bankrupt democratic government just one year after the Wahaha Group consolidated its own control over the former Zhejiang, southern Anhui, and northern Jiangnan Provinces. What’s more, Fujian Province -- the southern coastal province immediately across the straits from Taiwan, and just below the new Waha State -- and the southern regions of Jiangxi were left in a power vacuum that could only be filled by Fuzhou Tongyi, the corporation’s largest mainland subsidiary. Thus it came to pass that Taiwan finally achieved peaceful reunification with at least this one corner of the Chinese mainland, and Tongyi State was born.

This led to a situation where two States sharing an extensive border were run by rival corporations with a great deal of market overlap in bottled drinks and snack foods; needless to say, this was the cause of much concern. For a time the border was heavily defended, disputed and assaulted, until the two companies got together for a conference in Xiamen in 2038 and decided they could coexist. Since then, there has only been the occasional land grab from one side or the other, the sort of give-and-take that’s as well as expected in the Corporate States. Both Waha and Tongyi States are urban-corporatist entities with quite similar management styles, which at least does not put them at ideological odds; today the Wahaha executives generally

lose more sleep over the agro-corporatist State of Liu to the northwest.



This current state of non-antagonism between the neighbors offered little comfort to Rabbit as she stole off across the sky, southwards over the mighty Qiantang River. Rising higher to just below the underside of the looming grey clouds, she summoned up a much smaller and healthy-looking pinkish cloud to rest on for the remainder of her journey. The forest of towers on the far side of the Qiantang quickly thinned out and shortened to two- or three-story buildings looking much the worse for wear, ending abruptly at the old ring road which was now a broken, unused stretch of crumbling asphalt. Beyond this boundary we were in the agricultural zone, a patchy expanse of browns and greens. The few large structures that remained here were in various stages of being dismantled, the concrete broken off in blocks for building walls and low, squat farm dwellings. The scene of rural decay was only broken up by a single thread of silver miles to the east, flanked by a series of large boxy factories -- this I assumed to be the Hangzhou-Fuzhou coastal maglev rail. From a distance shipping traffic looked heavy as usual, but I knew that most of this was only goods being moved between Hangzhou, Shaoxing, Wenzhou, and the Ao River zone, not across the border between the rival States.

“Just follow the rails from here, they go straight to your factories,” I advised Rabbit. She shushed me loud enough to hear over the wind. “Quiet down, I know where I’m going.” She pulled out her netpad and had a look at the map database, however, just to double check. Below the chessboard of tiny farms rolled on and on, occasionally piling up into low terraced hills.

“I don’t know, it doesn’t look so much more futuristic out here from the old days,” she commented with a glance over the edge of the cloud. Rabbit herself was born in the small city of Suichang in a rather rural corner of the old Zhejiang Province. “Actually, compared with the countryside where I grew up, it looks positively medieval!”

“Not far off,” I agreed. “Remember what I told you about urban-corporatist States versus agro-corporatist ones? Waha specializes in manufacturing, so they’re not big on investing in rural development here. The countryside pretty much goes back to the way it’s always been since the day Prince Millet invented farming.”

“That’s awful! I’d hate to see what my town looks like now.”

“Awful, but necessary. If there were too much improvement out here it would probably ruin the economy completely. The countryside is just one big cheap labor pool, see?”

Rabbit was incredulous, just as she had been the first three times I’d explained this to her over the past months. “But who grows the food for the people in Hangzhou, then?”

“Well, real food like you were stuffing yourself on at the banquet last night mostly comes from the agro-corporatist States. Their comparative advantage is in food production, so the agros sell their surplus and buy up our factory junk. All that toothpaste you export to Laogan State is mostly paid for in rice, pork and spice profits. In general, though, that sort of food is still a luxury in our State. That’s why the people of Hangzhou are fortunate to have Wahaha pumping vitamin-enriched Future Cola into their homes.”

“Ah!” Rabbit raised two fingers in a rhetorical flourish, detecting a flaw in my reasoning. “But how does that work out? If food is so expensive, then what *is* all that Future Cola made out of?”

I shook my head. I’d heard that question from her a few times before, too. “We don’t ask, and they don’t tell us. That’s how it works out.”



The River Ao, named after a gargantuan turtle of ancient myth, doesn’t quite live up to the image evoked. It’s really just a muddy little channel draining the hilly areas west of the coast between the sailing port of Ruian and the southern border. But its intersection with the coastal maglev rail makes the area around it ripe for manufacturing development. The rail is a link to the cities up north, and the river is a conduit leading straight to the middle of nowhere -- namely, to some of the most

economically depressed rural areas in the State. Flimsy watercraft float downstream by the day, sometimes falling to pieces just as they offload their passengers alongside the new shantytowns skirting the skeletons of factories under construction. This is the potential workforce that makes the Ao River Development Zone such an attractive investment opportunity, both for Waha State companies like White Snake Inc. and foreign powers like Tongyi. Of course, plenty of other eastward-flowing rivers pass beneath the coastal maglev, but the more factories are built the more competition for workers inflates costs. When this happens, it's time to move outwards, and the Ao River -- being within spitting distance of the border -- is as far out as one can get.

The zone was only opened up by Wahaha decree in 2043, so most of the workers are currently employed in constructing simple factory buildings by hand out of shipped-in materials. Some of these are only awaiting the arrival of manufacturing equipment to install, but the only large complexes actually up and running in the region are the four plants set up by White Snake Inc. These are spaced at various points along the rails, the newest, largest and southernmost being the #5 Phoenix Pool Manufacturing Facility near what was, decades ago, a town of that name. The plant proved to be a huge rectangular shell constructed of recycled steel sheets, only a single storey tall but half as wide as a city block. It stood behind tall electrified barriers only half a kilometer from the main tracks, a new set of added-on rails connecting the thoroughfare with the loading bays in the rear of the factory.

As soon as we approached within a hundred meters of the frayed, flapping banners marking the front gates, a lanky, decidedly non-threatening security guard came out to investigate. Rabbit had changed back to her traveling clothes for the expedition -- the Immortal Woman's robe disguised as a yellow shirt and faded green pants -- and must have cut a fascinating figure walking towards the remote factory in the grey afternoon light. She tried to disarm the guard with a cordial wave. "Good afternoon, sir! Looking smart there. I'm Tu Xiang, the Co-Director of White Snake, and I need to have a word with the

plant manager... Mr. Gu, is it?"

The man in uniform retreated inside like a startled hare. Two minutes of silence later, a short, stocky man in a brown pinstripe suit stepped out into the path.

"*Aiya!* Mantis wasn't lying! What's the occasion, Miss Tu?" He shook Rabbit's hand energetically. His manner was so familiar that I thought for a moment the two must have met before, but as he went on to introduce himself I realized he was just a habitually jovial man.

"Come in, I'll show you around the plant!" he offered after swapping brief formalities, attempting to bodily drag Rabbit through the gates. "Come come come!"

Seeing she had little choice, Rabbit allowed the manager to lead her into the main building, a daunting maze of long counters and stacked crates. There was precious little machinery visible in the hall, just hundreds of workers. They ran back and forth down the narrow alleys like ants in their tunnels, pushing hand carts, tossing boxes and shouting to each other in humorous tones. The accumulated sound was deafening. At the benches running the length of the hall from front to rear, middle-aged women and young boys crowded in side by side, filling toothpaste tubes with hand pumps and operating manual label presses. The far side of the hall was closed off by a sanitary barrier; this was obviously the kitchen area, where the product itself was mixed up.

"This is my factory!" announced Manager Gu, standing at the head of it all with hands on hips, looking for all the world like a dashing naval admiral surveying his fleet. "Isn't that right, Auntie Mei?" he added, bowing to one of the more elderly ladies sitting at the closest end of the assembly line. She waved away the question with a gap-toothed smile and returned to folding boxes. "Now if you'll follow me to the kitchens, we can follow the entire process from raw mineral compounds to beautiful finished tube of toothpaste, ready for the bathroom washstand..."

Rabbit stopped him before he could drag her off again. "Mr. Gu! I'm honored by your hospitality, but I've come with something important to tell you, and I don't know how long we have. Tongyi are on their way here."

Trying to get the urgency of the situation through to the eager manager, she said the last

part louder than she meant to. The nearest lines of workers fell silent for a few seconds, then urgent whispers began to spread through the space like a swarm of cicadas in a summer forest. The manager grabbed her arm again and dragged her back out the way they had come, into the empty courtyard fronting the factory entrance. He was no longer smiling.

“Tongyi, you say? That’s bad. From your tone I take it Wahaha isn’t sending out the cavalry?”

“Not a chance.”

“Damn.” He kicked a stone out of the unpaved path. “I thought we were set for life. White Snake has done good things for the folks around here. The jobs aren’t amazing, but they’re better than what a lot of other companies would offer. If Tongyi moves in, they’re going to ship us all out and start from scratch. That’s how they always do it, just to make sure everyone’s good an’ desperate -- the new bosses always have to show they mean business so people won’t go around expecting too much. I should know, it happened to me when I was a young worker.” He sighed the sigh of a much older man. “If the factory were to be shut down, those people in there wouldn’t have anywhere to go. Especially the young ones. They’ve all left their farms and villages, the dormitories here are their only homes. Farming is just about impossible now with the black rains and the bugs, and even if it were good there’s just too many people out there doing it.”

Rabbit listened patiently to the manager’s monologue before getting to the point. “Right. It would be bad for you, it would be bad for the poor little kiddies at the other three factories up the road, and it would sure as Hell be a tragedy for me and Mr. Wang. That’s why I need your help to stop them.”

The man cocked an eyebrow. “*Stop* them? I don’t think I heard you right just then.”

Rabbit shrugged. “I’m not asking you to understand what you’re about to see, just trust your Director. The first thing I need from you is a blanket.”

He nodded, every inch the faithful employee. “Quilt or thermal blend?”

“Something warm, the sun’s getting low.”

Mr. Gu attempted something like a salute and ran back to the building.

“So you *do* have a plan,” I said from under her collar. “I’m impressed.”

“Hah, not only that, it’s a great one!” she boasted. “I know because all my best plans are the ones I make up as I go along.”

“Ah.”

“By the way, you might want to get out from under there. Take your netpad and go out in front if you want a good view.”

I hopped to the ground; she took my recording netpad from her pocket and handed it to me. I’m fully strong enough to carry the thing around on my own, and plenty more besides, though I tend to bang it on the ground a lot. I headed for the gates, trying to keep the device raised above my head as I hopped. “I can’t wait.” Outside, I took up a spot under a low piece of brush beside the path. Rabbit walked out with Manager Gu a few seconds later, a bundled thermal blanket under one arm.

“This,” I heard her say to him, “is the part you don’t have to understand.” She kept walking forward, but the next step she took wasn’t on solid ground. Mr. Gu, for his part, stopped in his tracks and watched his company president soar off into the evening sky, arcing around towards the south.

As she sped away, her robe flowed outwards and returned to its original snow-white form. When she’d reached a point about a kilometer or two distant -- I’m sure the manager couldn’t see her at that distance in the haze, but my compound eyes are as sharp as diamonds and twice as clear -- she shed the magical garment. It fell like a crane pierced by an arrow, flapping and twisting in the wind. As it fell, the robe began to billow outwards, expanding to colossal size. When the cloth finally settled to earth it draped across a whole range of low hills, several kilometers across. Then it began to melt into the earth itself, rising up as its white turned to browns and greys until it had become a ridge of high mountains. The ground beneath us trembled; Mr. Gu sat down on the path and stared. The ridge line stretched and expanded, finally lifting up the maglev line above it and splintering the rails like twigs under an ax. Twenty seconds later, it was all over and the earth fell silent. As soon as peace returned, the brand new mountainsides began to prickle with bamboo shoots rocketing up like a flight of arrows fired by an underground army. By the time Rabbit returned, the mountains were a wind-rippled sea of verdant green, looking

ten thousand years old in the last rays of the setting sun. The Immortal Woman alighted back on the path exactly where she had lifted off, wrapped in the thermal blanket, looking mighty pleased with herself.

-- *Splinter-of-Jade, Grand Historian of Mount Penglai*

Phoenix Pool, June 10th, Second Quarter, Fiscal Year 2045

Part Eleven The Battle of Flowing Silk Mountain: Transcripts

[Note: The following is the full text of a secure-channel communications exchange on a network node belonging to the Tongyi State Security Subsidiary Group; the record was copied from the backup databank of a TS3G-issued netcomm found on the mangled body of an employee of that group by a team of White Snake security personnel scouting the northern base of Flowing Silk Mountain on June twentieth, the day after the communications took place. While several other netcomms -- and many other bodies -- were found, this was the only one that had been set to record a transcript of communications. Being a silent security operation, the exchanges were carried out textually through commgloves and, in some cases, subvocal autoscryption. As nobody in Phoenix Pool was even aware that these events had taken place until the following day, this crude bit of evidence will have to serve as our only record of what became of the Tongyi State expeditionary force on Flowing Silk Mountain.]

Authentication certificate verified.
Logged in to secure communications node TS3G-0761.
2045-06-19, 06:32:20
Active connections: 8
Your random handle for this session is Goshawk.

Vulture: Here.

Falcon: Here.

Bustard: Here. You guys got all the good names again.

[Goshawk:] *Here.*

Crane: Here.

Osprey: That's everyone linked up. Be sure you know who's who before we split up. I don't want to have to go sending clues again.

Crane: Just mention that birthmark of yours and we'll know.

Bustard: Nice one!

Osprey: Just for that I'm electing you to lead your squad around the long way, Crane.

Crane: It'll be a pleasure. ;)

Crane: I'd say that's worth a 500 kuai risk bonus, at least.

Osprey: Tell it to the boss. I don't think a longer walk really counts as a risk.

Crane: But the farther I walk the more likely I am to fall and break a leg!

Owl: We can only hope.

Received Message (1) from Aviary: Depart immediately for reconnaissance of the mountain. You may choose your routes.

Osprey: Someone please let HQ know we're already on our way. No chance of a map, it looks like.

Owl: Can't blame HQ for that, the thing wasn't here a month ago.

[Goshawk:] *Did anyone ask about remote imaging?*

Owl: I tried last night, but they said Shanghai Station is asking a fortune to take pictures. Damn trade disputes.

Crane: Nice to know we're not worth it.

Osprey: Hey now, I can't complain if they want to spend the money on giving us risk bonuses instead. We're going home 8k richer thanks to this mountain, and that's just for today.

Owl: Doesn't look that bad to me, but don't tell HQ I said that.

Crane: Let's tell them we had to fight off tigers all day. Get it bumped up to 10k tomorrow.

Osprey: In this place I'd believe anything.

Osprey: Status, Falcon?

Bustard: lol Crane

Falcon: We're still following the rails, but it's getting hard for my men to climb.

Falcon: It really does look like the thing just grew up underneath the tracks.

Owl: If this really is a volcano I hope it's finished.

Crane: It sure doesn't look like one to me. How fast does bamboo grow anyway?

Osprey: Pretty damn fast. I've seen some grow almost this tall in two weeks in the park in Taipei.

Crane: Well I'm not buying it.

Crane: I still think this is some kind of new weapon Wahaha is trying out.

Bustard: Damn! That would suck.

Received Message (2) from Aviary: Submit 30 minute status reports.

[Sent message (1) to Aviary:] *Squad hiking up stream bed between peaks two and three. Bamboo very thick. Ridge top still far away. No signs of recent volcanic or seismic activity.*

Falcon: I'm having my squad take a break. Trying to climb with one hand and write status reports with the other is rough. I should have bought a subvocal set for this mission.

Crane: I'm doing the same. Funny, for some reason I didn't think I'd be climbing mountains on this trip.

Osprey: Give it a few years. You'll come to expect this kind of shit from the TS3G. When they tell you to go to the border and knock down some factories, of course they don't mention there's a brand new geologic formation in the way.

Crane: Haven't they ever heard of going around??

Nighthawk: I for one am glad Tissy wanted us to check it out. It's amazing up here. It's like something out of one of those old kung fu movies, and we're probably the first people to ever see it.

Bustard: Hey Crane, how far are you from the top?

Crane: Not too far to race you. ;)

Bustard: You're on! Winner gets to sleep in the transport.

Osprey: We left all the transports on the other side of the mountain, dumbass.

Bustard: Yeah I know, just testing.

Vulture: Listen to this. One of the guys in my squad used to be a botanist for Xiamen Bamboo. He says this is a really rare species, almost extinct.

Bustard: Weeeeeeeird.

Osprey: Huh.

Nighthawk: Wow!

Nighthawk: Anyone else notice how the folds of the mountain look so smooth from up here, like a blanket? It's beautiful. I'm getting some great shots with my netcomm's camera.

Received Message (3) from Aviary: Submit 30 minute status reports.

[Sent message (2) to Aviary:] Squad left stream bed, approaching the ridge top. Slope leveling out. Bamboo cover unbroken. Nothing further to report.

Nighthawk: Any other poets here? I'm feeling inspired.

Osprey: Shouldn't you be writing a status report instead? Don't tell me you're sending HQ poetry!

Bustard: lol Osprey

Crane: And...

Crane: I'm at the top! Eat it, Bustard!

Nighthawk: Verdant peaks beneath oceans of swaying leaves...

Bustard: Dammit, you picked the lowest part. I'm heading right for the peak.

Crane: That's your own fault.

Osprey: Hey Falcon, how are the rails looking?

Falcon: We've reached the end of them, I think. I can't even see the concrete bed or any of the solar pylons up here. Everything slid downhill.

Osprey: Oh well, it's not like anyone used this stretch of track anyway. Poor guys at the border post will probably be out of a job now.

Nighthawk: We ascend the rippling waves of green silk...

Vulture: Hey everyone, listen to this!

Crane: ?

Nighthawk: The folds of earth rise up to Heaven...

Osprey: What is it, Vulture?

Vulture: We just spotted a panda!

Crane: !

Bustard: !!

Vulture: My squad are trying to sneak up on it, get into range for a shot.

Osprey: Hot damn.

Nighthawk: Shouldn't you try to capture it alive?

Vulture: They got it!

Crane: Nice!

Vulture: Oh, wait, it's running away...
Vulture: I guess our guy missed.
Vulture: Those things can really move!
Osprey: Ooh, tough luck. That would have been worth a fortune stuffed.
Osprey: I'll have to have my men keep their eyes peeled too.
Bustard: Isn't the last one supposed to have died like ten years ago?
Osprey: That's what they say.

Receiving Private Message (1) from Bustard via proxy 23.777H.566.DFD Message is 2400-Mbit geometrically encrypted.

Authentication key: *****
Unencrypting.....Done.

I trust you're recording all of this in your databank. Mr. Liu will be extremely interested to hear of a panda sighting.

[Sending Private Message (1) to Bustard via random proxy from proxylist.dic] [Using 2400-Mbit geometric encryption.] [Set authentication key: ***]**

Of course. I'd like to think our people wouldn't just shoot at them like these Tongyi thugs. Nice acting job in the open channel, by the way. You're still the master. Meet you at the bottom.

[Encrypting.....Done.]

Nighthawk: I'll bet there are more of them out there. This forest is perfect habitat for them.

Owl: Wonder where they've been all these years.

Nighthawk: Wherever this mountain has been, I guess.

Received Message (4) from Aviary: Submit 30 minute status reports.

[Sent message (3) to Aviary:] *Following west along ridge. Planning to descend diagonally and meet up with Bustard at north side.*

Goshawk: Hey Bustard, head a little east and I'll meet you at the bottom.

Bustard: Sounds like fun ;)

Vulture: Hey...

Vulture: Wait up...

Vulture: It's coming back!

Owl: What, the panda?

Vulture: Yes, right towards us!

Crane: !!

Crane: Dumb animals, I can see why they went extinct!

Vulture: 2!

Osprey: 2 of them?

Vulture: No, 3!

Crane: Are you shooting them?

Vulture: It's like a whole family

Crane: Better shoot them all at once or the others will run away.

Vulture: More!

Vulture: 6, 8!

Osprey: Damn!

Crane: You gotta bag at least 1.

Vulture: They

Vulture: !

Vulture: fukc

Osprey: ?

Nighthawk: what?

Owl: What's up Vulture?

Osprey: You still there?

Vulture: fighting back

Osprey: ?

Vulture: guns dontwork

Vulture: stayaway from th pandas

Osprey: ?!

Osprey: Tell us what's going on!

Vulture:

Vulture:

User Vulture disconnected from node.

Auto-disconnect: User input device detached from netcomm.

Owl: No way.

Osprey: Who's closest to his position?

Nighthawk: Where is he, around peak 5?

Owl: West side I think. Must be almost at the top.

Nighthawk: We're close.

Falcon: We're on the other side, but we'll head there too.

Osprey: I'm right behind you Nighthawk.

Crane: crap

Crane: Hey Bustard, can you come my way? I'm seeing something out here. Might be more pandas.

Bustard: I'll try.

Crane: it's them!

Osprey: Careful Crane, leave them alone.

Crane: theyre coming!

Owl: Get out of there!

Owl: wha...

Owl: We've got pandas too!

Owl: Can't get a bead on the things... Too fast...

Crane: no
Owl: Got him!
Crane: nononoon
Osprey: Bustard, get over there!
Owl: It's not down... Guns don't work.
Crane: h&

**Connection lost with user Crane.
Netcomm switched off or out of range.**

Owl: Fucking pandas!
Owl: I

**User Owl disconnected from node. Auto-
disconnect: subvocal autoscription stream
lost.**

Osprey: This is bad! Nighthawk, where are
you at?
Nighthawk: Below the rock outcrop, the
one that looks like a turtle.
Falcon: I see it ahead.
Osprey: Me too.
Osprey: I think Vulture might have been
around the north side a bit more. I just got
HQ to send me his last progress report.
Falcon: Meet you there.
Nighthawk: How are we supposed to find
anything in all this bamboo?
Osprey: Bustard! Who else... Goshawk! What
the hell are you two doing?
Bustard: Coming.
Falcon: We've found something... Oh
Heaven...
Osprey: What? Is it Vulture's group?
Falcon: Oh Buddha on a stick...
Nighthawk: Doesn't sound good.
Falcon: You guys need to get over here.
They're all dead.
Osprey: Where, the north side?
Nighthawk: Where are you? I'm shouting,
can you hear me?
Falcon: Stop shouting!
Nighthawk: I'm shaking the bamboo, which
side is it on?
Falcon: Stop shaking it you idiot! I see you.
Nighthawk: Osprey, I've found Falcon's
squad.
Osprey: On the north side?
Osprey: The north side?
Osprey: Nighthawk, Falcon?
Osprey: Nighthawk, Falcon?
Osprey: Bustard?
Osprey: Goshawk?
Osprey: Anyone?

**[Sending Private Message (2) to Bustard
via random proxy from proxylist.dic]
[Using 2400-Mbit geometric encryption.]
[Reusing previous authentication key.]**
*I've abandoned my squad. The pandas came at us
from behind. I don't think they saw me get away. I'll
meet you at the bottom, between these two peaks. Mr.
Liu needs to hear about this.*
[Encrypting.....Done.]

Osprey: I'm getting out of here. If anyone is
still seeing this, you need to do the same as
fast as you can.

**Receiving Private Message (2) from
Bustard via proxy 23.777H.566.DFD
Message is 2400-Mbit geometrically
encrypted.**

**Retrying previous authentication
key.....Successful.**

Unencrypting.....Done.

I'm waiting for you at the base of the
mountain; I also was forced to abandon my
squad. The pandas hadn't found them yet but
at the pace those city boys were moving they
were never going to get out of there in time.
Besides, we have other priorities now.
Mountains full of killer pandas don't just
appear at random; someone in Waha State is
responsible for this, and it's vital that Liu
State find out who. If they're using this
caliber of weapon against Tongyi they're sure
as Hell willing to use it against us. Mr. Liu
knew what he was doing when he sent his
company's two best spies on this mission. I
really wish I knew sometimes just how much
he does know. (of course, I expect you to
erase that last comment from the record
when you turn in your report.) I'm going to
wait here for one hour, and if you don't show
up I'm going to go investigate on my own.
I'm already searching our espionage records
over the net, and turning up some interesting
connections concerning the successful new
toothpaste company that's operating the only
factories down here. I pray you are safe and
can join me to search deeper into the matter.

Received Message (5) from Aviary: Submit
30 minute status reports.

Received Message (6) from Aviary: Submit
30 minute status reports.

Received Message (7) from Aviary: Submit 30 minute status reports.

Received Message (8) from Aviary: Submit 30 minute status reports.

Secure communications node TS3G-0761 terminated.

-- Transcribed by Splinter-of-Jade, Grand Historian of Mount Penglai

With thanks to Digital Technician Dai Fengyu of White Snake #5 Manufacturing Facility

Hangzhou, June 22nd, Second Quarter, Fiscal Year 2045

Part Twelve The Fall of White Snake Inc.

The sudden growth of a mountain on the southern border of the State was big news and the subject of much speculation on the net boards for a while, but after a few weeks it got tiring and all but the most dedicated armchair pseudoscientists moved on. For most people, “stranger things have happened” is sufficient explanation for almost anything. Several Waha State corporations sent research and prospecting teams onto Flowing Silk Mountain (as it came to be called), but no clues as to the geologic nature of the formation were uncovered. Wahaha immediately zoned the area for development and sold the mountain to West Lake Bamboo Products Inc. The pandas were never seen again, nor mentioned for that matter; if anyone at Tongyi State Security had read the ill-fated expeditionary force’s reports, they were keeping quiet about it.

Rabbit wasn’t surprised that the pandas had disappeared. She was of the opinion that after their bloody encounter with the Tongyi interlopers the bears had decided that Flowing Silk Mountain, numinous and covered in delicious bamboo though it was, was more trouble than it was worth, and had returned to more remote immortal realms. I am inclined to agree with this theory. I am less convinced, however, by her assertion that this had been

part of her plan all along. I give her full credit for luring the pandas down to Earth, but I would be very surprised if she thought any further ahead than that. It is fortunate that the situation quickly resolved itself in such a peaceful manner.

Wang Xian, for his part, showed no more than the requisite wonder when news of the mountain hit the net. He never again mentioned the threat of attack from Tongyi State, sensing that the matter had somehow been taken care of. He didn’t even ask Rabbit where she had disappeared off to for the two days after their last talk.



After receiving the salvaged netcomm device by courier from one of Rabbit’s new confidants at the Phoenix Pool Manufacturing Facility, and carefully transcribing the contents of the databank to my own pad, an outline of events began to emerge. It seemed that Rabbit’s scheme had played out masterfully. I still kick myself for not having been down there to record a firsthand account (and yes, perhaps join in the fun) but the timing was too uncertain to have known when the trap would be sprung. At least some record survived.

In the weeks that followed, I have actually been much more concerned with the encrypted messages that appear at two points in the transcript. It is obvious enough that there were two corporate espionage professionals infiltrating the expeditionary force during the ill-fated mission, one of whom was the owner of the salvaged netcomm. The record also makes it clear that the agents were working for a company in Liu State, most likely the reigning Hope Group itself, the primary business interest of the Liu family. As the agro-corporatist Liu State is on very delicate terms with both Waha and Tongyi, it’s not surprising that agents were sent to monitor an attack by one on the other. What worried me greatly was the surviving agent’s promise to “search deeper in to the matter”, and his suspicion that White Snake Inc. was involved. No good can come of drawing attention from spies.



With the inevitability of an approaching storm on the grasslands, Mr. Wang received a letter from an anonymous temporary net address one morning in the middle of August. Being the man of admirable honesty that he is, he didn't think twice before riding the elevator up to Rabbit's garden to show her the message. Rabbit was sitting on the grass beside the fish pond, basking in the midsummer sun. On several mornings during the past week the beautiful weather had emboldened her to take a risk and push back the smog cover for an hour or two at a time. The morning sun was already growing fairly intense through the clear skies, but Rabbit was soaking it up like a vitamin-D-deficient reptile on the first day of spring. She was wearing a yellow shirt, but not her usual one -- her wardrobe had necessarily expanded a bit since she had sacrificed her transforming robe. She was still working on getting a suitable replica of her old-fashioned clothes tailored.

"A splendid morning! I haven't seen it this clear in ages." Mr. Wang joined his partner on the grass, marveling at the blue sky. She opened her eyes and smiled.

"So this is what it takes to get you up to the garden? Freak weather conditions?"

He held out his hands defensively. "My apologies. These third-quarter planning meetings have been like working my way through the ten bureaus of Hell."

"Apologies accepted. I'm just glad you come up here at all when it's not just to report some terrible news."

"Actually..." The businessman reached for his netpad; Rabbit's face fell. "I just got this letter this morning."

Rabbit took the offered pad like she was training for the bomb squad. The message read thus:

Mr. Wang,

I regret having to upset the triumphant mood of a man who is enjoying such success by informing him of unpleasant and even dire matters, but a man of conscience cannot hold back from warning those

in danger, be they close friends or be they strangers. You and I are indeed strangers, but I know you to be a worthy man and I wish you no ill.

Recently, I have by chance stumbled upon some alarming information concerning your partner in your latest business venture, the much-discussed Miss Tu Xiang. Like everyone who keeps an eye on the Hangzhou news nodes, I have heard of your chance meeting with Miss Tu and your discovery of her supposed family herbs. Further investigation has led me to suspect, however, that Miss Tu is not who we believe her to be. I promise you that research will turn up no esteemed medical family by the name of Tu in Shaoxing County, or anywhere in the State for that matter. So who is this woman, if she is deceiving you? The shocking truth of the matter is, Miss Tu is a sorceress of great power and possibly ancient age. I know this claim is hard to believe, to say the least, but I am a long-time expert in the study and combat of thaumaturgy and I assure you that such people are not restricted to the days of old, and continue to use their dark arts to corrupt or gain advantage in the mundane world. I have no dearth of evidence for the fact that your partner is one of these adepts. I know of the party on the Dragon Boat Festival, and of the feats of impossible stage magic Miss Tu performed there. I have also heard reliable reports that she was seen levitating above the floor on that night. Much more alarmingly, I have turned up solid evidence that Miss Tu was in the area of what is now Flowing Silk Mountain on the night that famous mountain mysteriously appeared not far from one of your factories. This is not to mention the preternatural effects of her supposed family medicine, which I'm sure you have experienced for yourself.

Now that I have given you fair warning, I will not attempt to convince you of my statements. You may settle the matter on your own; I simply trust you will treat it with the

necessary gravity. No good can come of allying oneself with dark forces. Whatever manner of occultist your partner may be, it is hardly likely that she inveigled herself and her dark arts into your business life for your own benefit. Such manipulation has been the downfall of many an honest man since ancient times. I need not even mention the risk of marketing a product with an active ingredient that is untested, experimental, and even paranormal, and which has been provided on nothing but good faith by a stranger with unknown vested interests.

Thank you for listening to my warning. My conscience can now be at ease.

Good luck, and be careful.
-- An Enemy of Evil

Rabbit laughed loud and hard, tossing the pad onto the grass at Mr. Wang's side and flopping back to look heavenwards. She had already discreetly forwarded the message to herself while reading through it.

"*Aiya!* Sure has a dramatic style, doesn't he? Hah, I bet he hangs out in bars ranting about wizards to strangers all night! I'd hate to be on whatever conspiracy-nut netboards he posts this stuff to. Heehee!"

"I hope you're right," Mr. Wang said with considerably less humor, pocketing the pad. "He could just as easily be more dangerous than that. Conspiracy nuts can be found at all levels of power. Some even say there are more the higher up you go. Besides, conspiracy theories are infinitely more dangerous when they're true."



The words, it turned out, were as prophetic as they sounded. Just three weeks after Mr. Wang replied to the anonymous letter with a curt but diplomatic response, I turned on my netpad in the morning to find warning messages vying for attention. My automatic notification agent had been triggered in a big way by increased net traffic relating to the

terms "White Snake Inc." and "Tu Xiangu". The former had reached a level I hadn't seen even during the company's initial advertising blitz. I ran a search for news, adding one more exchange to the statistics.

"White Snake Toothpaste Investigated for Illegal Additives"

My pad had automatically collated and cross-referenced the story from news corporations in twelve States, so I had no choice but to believe my eyes. Rabbit's company, the sources claimed, was the subject of "intense scrutiny" today after questions had been raised concerning the contents of the herbal recipe. Initial laboratory tests showed conclusively that the product contained organic compounds with molecular structures far outside the bounds of permitted additives for dental hygiene products. Wahaha corporate lawyers were carrying out the investigation "in the interest of public health and safety." The head of the legal team was quoted as saying, "we don't yet know what's in this stuff, but we think the public, at least, has a right to."

I kicked the pad aside and called for Rabbit. "The public, my tails!" I shouted, as if she would know what I was talking about. "That conspiracy nut is behind this, and if he isn't that same spy from the mountain I'll be pinned by a caterpillar!"

She strolled in from outside, tying up her bath robe. "I still don't get your cricket fighting expressions, so don't bother. What's all this?" "Bad news again. Worse news. I think Mr. Wang was right about our little pen pal."

Rabbit picked my pad up off the ground and sat on the corner of her antique Hong Kong opium couch. I didn't hear her breathe again until she had read through the whole article. When she finally emptied her lungs, it was with a string of profanities which I can only guess she must have learned from one of the other immortals, because I didn't even understand a third of them. Either that, or she just made them up on the spot. In any case, they must have been powerful words indeed; thunder cracked outside.

"That son of a drunken pangolin!" (I can't be sure about the last word; it sounded like an archaic form, but this was no time to ask for a clarification.) "I'm gonna exenterate his hypophysis with a rusty wok!" She split for the elevator, sending my poor pad ricocheting

around the floor. It was all I could do to bound after her and jump in between the closing doors.

Rabbit burst into Wang Xian's fourteenth-floor living room in her bath robe, the look of wrath on her face daring the trio of Wahaha lawyers inside to continue existing. To her annoyance, they didn't disappear in a puff of smoke but simply cast nervous glances her way over Mr. Wang's shoulder. Her partner turned around too, his expression pure apology. He was also dressed in his bath robe. "Miss Tu Xiangu?" asked one of the lawyers, extending a hand with bravery befitting a great general.

"Mister you'd better get lost before I stab you in the eye with a civet?" she replied. "And don't think I don't have one," she added, wagging a finger at all three of the men in black suits.

The one on the left stepped around Mr. Wang and tried his luck. "Miss Tu, if you'll just cooperate with us we can get this little regulatory issue out of the way that much quicker."

"We don't have anything against your company," the first lawyer picked up. "You know, I use your toothpaste myself..."

"Not after I'm through with you you won't," Rabbit threatened, holding up a fist to drive the point home.

The second lawyer sighed. "Miss Tu, you must understand our concern. Your toothpaste contains molecules our scientists have never even theorized. And what's unknown to science is unknown to the consumer health department."

"Well, figure it out. Everyone who's ever used White Snake knows the health benefits." She looked to the first lawyer for support, but he just shook his head.

"Whatever is in there has already reduced three of our mass spectrometers to smouldering heaps of metal. We feed it to our lab rats, and they bust out of their cages and run away every time. It turns our litmus strips *gold*. We can't have something like that being sold to the general public for daily use."

The third lawyer ventured out from his hiding place behind Mr. Wang, seeing that Rabbit was starting to listen. "Maybe if you could provide us with an unprocessed sample of the herbal ingredient?" he suggested hopefully. Rabbit spit on his shoe.

"Please..." Mr. Wang pleaded with his partner, his eyes as empty as those of a toppled statue. "There really isn't anything we can do. Wahaha takes health codes very seriously. We're going to have to suspend production for a while until they sort this out." Rabbit fell silent, and stayed that way. Her partner turned back to the lawyers, sagging like a fighting cricket defeated by a housefly.

-- *Splinter-of-Jade, Grand Historian of Mount Penglai*

Hangzhou, September 18th, Third Quarter, Fiscal Year 2045

Part Thirteen Business Strategies of Last Resort

Our mysterious adversary knew just what he was doing; the effects of the treachery were immediate and devastating. The factories between Flowing Silk Mountain and the River Ao fell silent, the workers left to their own devices for the foreseeable future. The remaining stocks of White Snake toothpaste continued to sit untouched on store shelves for the rest of the week until one by one the apostate managers callously replaced them with other brands and packed the boxes away in the dark corners of their stock rooms. The masses of customers who had until recently sworn by White Snake -- to the point of setting up several high-traffic fan clubs and discussion boards on the net -- now decided discretion was the better part of dental hygiene and kept their distance, waiting for the verdict from the Wahaha consumer health department. The investigations, however, did not look likely to wrap up anytime soon. Wahaha Labs made no headway in identifying the active compounds in Rabbit's secret ingredient. Rumor had it that three senior scientists had already handed in their resignations and left to join a monastery. White Snake Inc. couldn't operate without the lab's seal of approval, which at this rate could be years away if it ever came at all; in the meantime, debts piled up like soil on a funeral mound. The tangle of red tape might as well have been woven by a master fisherman.

Of course, a word in any ear above the

twentieth floor of the Wahaha Tower would have set the whole matter to rest, but Wang Xian was too new to the game to have any connections of such caliber. An optimistic letter to the Mr. Qiu from whom the businessman had received aid on the night of the Dragon Boat Festival garnered a full four pages of courteous words, but no actual help. Turning to Mr. Qiu was Wang Xian's final shot at salvation; when that failed, he saw no choice but to make peace with his fate. Eight days after the investigation was announced, he gave up trying to save the company.



Rabbit found him shut up in his office on that afternoon, his netpad cast aside, a mournful theremon-zither longform recording of the *Butterfly Lovers Concerto* turned up loud on his speaker system. She had been checking in every day for the latest news, but today she could tell her partner had reached the end of his rope. She sank into the chair opposite his.

"No dice with Mr. Qiu?"

He shook his head, a motion that seemed to use up all the energy he had left.

"Typical." She sank deeper into the cushions. "The rat seemed concerned enough when it was Waha State's territory on the line, but now that it's just our necks it's a different story. I guess our 'valuable contribution to the economy' only gets us so far in this town."

"I should have worked harder at my networking," he lamented. "I should have foreseen something like this. Making connections has always been my weak point."

"Oh, don't let that two-faced weasel get you down. If that's the kind of slime they hire at Wahaha, you're better off without them. I wouldn't be surprised if he turned out to be our anonymous conspiracy nut, too."

"You're probably right about that," Mr. Wang sighed, rubbing his eyes, "but it doesn't matter now who did this to us. It's been done. I'm sorry, but we're going to have to liquidate within the month. Just keeping our building open is costing a fortune every day, and the rent for the factory land is almost as bad. The board all want out as soon as possible. If you've got any more tricks up your sleeve, this is the time to pull them out."

"I'll think about it," Rabbit offered with little

to no confidence, climbing out of her chair. "I'm not promising anything though." She left her partner to his music and headed back up towards the roof.

In the elevator, she sighed and banged her head against the flock of tropical birds fluttering across the netscreened wall. "I'm one of the Eight Immortals, dammit! There must be something I can do to save this company."

"I'm afraid your powers aren't so useful in this situation," I consoled her from inside her shirt pocket. "Pulling strings requires a different sort of power entirely. It's a whole other *Dao* out there."

"Yeah, tell me about it. Laozi would throw a fit. If only..." It took her only a second longer to ride this train of thought to the end of the line. "Aha!" Her exclamation coincided exactly with the *ding* of the elevator doors opening. She rushed out across the garden, buoyed by the impetus of her forming idea, stopping short only when she realized she didn't have anywhere in particular to go. She sat on the low-slung limb of a peach tree.

"Remember our big battle with the cranes at Six Harmonies Pagoda, back on the day we first met?"

"Remember it?!" I laughed. "That was only one of the highlights of my entire thousand-year life!"

"Remember what we were fighting over?" she continued.

"That cowrie shell..." Enlightenment struck. "You're going to go get Prince Millet's cowrie, aren't you? Hah! Of course you are! That is *so* unfair."

"Hey," she defended, suddenly in high spirits, "we're already using illegal additives. We might as well throw some unfair competitive practices in the mix."

"You don't have to convince me! The day you stop playing dirty is the day I stop being your historian."



Prince Millet's cowrie shell is an extremely ancient relic, so ridiculously antediluvian, in fact, that I had never even heard of the thing before the day I fought a battle over it. Obscure it certainly is, but it is also one of the

most powerful and historically significant items on the Earthly plane. The shell was the very first token of currency to appear in mythic times. It was given by an immortal crane named Snow Feather to Prince Millet, the inventor of agriculture, in a trade for a basket of sorghum from his field. Snow Feather convinced the gullible old rustic of the useless shell's inherent worth, meaning it simply as a prank; in the process, however, he unwittingly established the basis for all future human financial systems.

Simply put, this progenitor of all financial instruments now holds dominion over the flow of wealth. To say that dynasties have risen and fallen at its whim is merely to state historical fact. On and off for centuries at a stretch, all manner of secret societies conspired to safeguard the relic from those in power, sensing its unholy thrall over the world of men; these were the good times. In other ages, the cowie did indeed fall into the hands of Emperors and tyrants; these were, generally speaking, the bad times. To hear Lü Dongbin of the Eight Immortals tell it, the economic rise of the PRC's East Coast in the decades after the Reforms was in truth a manifestation of this power -- the shell was then hidden in the roof of Hangzhou's Six Harmonies Pagoda, extending its magnetic influence over the entire region. This was where the cranes, fearing for the future of their species, rallied to reclaim the relic for themselves under the leadership of the patriarch Snow Feather himself. After the battle, the Eight Immortals took the artifact away to relocate it yet again in the economically enfeebled Western interior. They knew that the shell could be just as much a curse as a blessing. For a business tycoon in dire straits it could also, just maybe, be the sort of *deus ex machina* that only a true immortal would even try to employ.



Rabbit scrawled out a short message to Mr. Wang on her pad and fired it off over the net. "Hold down the fort for a month or two," it said, "I've got a plan. Good luck." By the time she hit 'Send' she was already inside the grey smog cover high above the White Snake Tower. Breaking through to the sky above,

she summoned her pink cloud and cranked the speed up to full throttle.

"I hope he can keep the company together long enough," she shouted over the wind. "Curse these time differences! If that sneaky bastard Lü Dongbin had just told me where he hid the cowie out West, we wouldn't have to mess around in the immortal realms. We'll be sunk for sure if we have to spend more than an hour up on the mountain."

She steered her cloud on a course towards Mount Penglai, flying off along a route that would have made any Earthly mathematician throw away his modeling software.



Lü Dongbin was never the official leader of the Eight Immortals -- that title belonged to his elder mentor, General Zhongli Quan -- but history didn't make the distinction. He had always been the most popular member of the group, and tended to take charge in most situations. Fortunately, Zhongli Quan didn't seem to mind letting him do the hard work. He was definitely suited to the role of figurehead, with his charismatic demeanor and magic Dragon Sword -- which he wielded with such deadly skill, he had become the patron deity not merely of warriors, but of barbers. Dongbin was the one who had led the Immortal Lady He out of her mortal life and into the group, though the exact story behind this was muddled and inconsistent; most versions had the distinctive mark of historians of polite sensibility. Dongbin certainly wasn't telling. In more recent times, he was also the one who brought about He's accidental end with the disastrous birthday prank. He still felt bad about this, and hadn't quite worked out how he should act towards her new incarnation. Rabbit had made it abundantly clear that their former relationship belonged to a different lifetime.

The swordsman was still sitting on the rocky ledge outside the Burned Rice Pot Scouring Grotto where we had left him the previous autumn, finishing up the last moves of a game of chess with the Philosopher Han Xiang. From the mountain-dwellers' perspective, less than four hours had passed since our departure. Before the pair noticed our cloud

approaching from above, I hopped overboard to land light as a butterfly on Han Xiang's shoulder.

"Piece of cake. Send your remaining cannon behind your left horse and you've got it all wrapped up. That's what they call 'Seizing the Granaries Before the Capital'."

Lü Dongbin slapped his forehead in horror. "No, that's what they call 'Receiving Advice from the Cricket Who Wrote the Book'! We made a clear rule against that a long time ago. I demand a rematch!"

The swordsman was right; I was, indeed, an uncredited contributing author to the Chess Classic back in the day. By popular consensus, I was barred from coming within sight of any chess game on the mountain.

"Ah, you'd lost anyway Lü my friend. You call that a defensive line?" I chided.

Rabbit put an end to the dispute by dropping down onto an empty rock beside the table.

"Hey guys. Nice to see you again. Can I have a quick word with you, Dongbin?"

The immortal nodded, his face acquiring a hint of the nervous pallor it tended to show in the presence of his former lady friend's reincarnation. "Of course. How are things down on the ground going?"

Rabbit had no time for niceties. "I need to ask you something very important, so think hard about this. Where did you put Price Millet's cowrie?"

"Prince... Ah, yes, that old thing," he recalled, tapping the hilt of his Dragon Sword thoughtfully. "Well, I took it after the big scrap at Six Harmonies, I remember that much."

Rabbit leaned in over the chessboard, her hands clenching into fists. "And then where did you put it?"

"Let's see, that was a while ago..." He gazed up into space, either straining to remember or at least trying to look like he was.

"Didn't you say something at the time about taking it out West?" Han Xiang suggested. "I remember you going on about all the people in the interior who would love to have the thing around. Balance and all that."

"Ah, yes, I believe I did say something to that effect. I thought it would only be sporting to spread the wealth around a bit. I don't think I ever had any reason to go out that way, though. I don't know if you've ever been but it's dreadfully boring." He fiddled with his sword, scraping at the side of the stone table

and mumbling to himself. "Let's see... it was sitting on my bedstand for a while, then Cao Guojiu borrowed it to stick on his hat for that opera performance he staged, but it kept falling off so he gave it back... Oh! It's coming to me now. I ran into a kitchen god who stopped over on the mountain for a drink of water a few days ago, little scrappy fellow. He was on his way up to Heaven to report to Cai Sheng. Apparently the old God of Wealth is in charge of receiving the hearth people these days. Anyhow, I once ran across Cai Sheng at one of the Queen Mother's feasts, ages ago, and he was personable enough for a big-shot deity. Gave me some nice stock tips, if I recall. So I thought it would only be civil to send my regards along with the messenger. I convinced the little guy to stick around while I wrote up a nice letter, but it seemed rude not to send a gift along too. I thought, being the God of Money and all, he might be pleased with the cowrie shell."

Rabbit rubbed her eyes. "Fine."

Dongbin shifted uncomfortably. "Sorry, did you need it for something?"

"Never mind," she sighed, "I need to get going. Where can I find Cai Sheng?"

The swordsman just shrugged and pointed straight up. Rabbit beckoned me back into her pocket and took off, leaving the two immortals with nothing to do but wave goodbye.

Before she rose too far above the mountain I called to her to slow down for a moment. When she did so -- rather reluctantly -- I checked the internal timekeeper on my netpad. The new, modern jacket Rabbit had taken to wearing since the loss of her robe featured pockets large enough for me to use my pad and even write in, which allowed me to keep up my records as events happened, and also came in quite handy at times like this. Right now the clock on the screen was a blur, the device being of Earthly nature. Days were coming and going twice a minute; Rabbit had every right to be in a hurry. If we stayed in the upper realms for just a day, White Snake Inc. would be a whole ten years dead and buried. I saw that we had been away more than an Earthly month already -- the mortals had just passed the end of October.

"Do you by any chance have a plan for getting into Heaven, entering the palace of a major deity and stealing a precious relic from his

vaults?” I asked rather rhetorically.
“No!” came her vexed reply.
“Well, are you likely to come up with one within the next thirty minutes?”
“Shit, no. This is going to take longer than I thought.” She sounded close to despair.
“Then you might as well use mine. Head for the main strip between Earth and Heaven, and wait for... let’s see... about twenty-seven minutes. By that time it’ll almost be the New Year Festival down below. The kitchen gods will head up to make their reports, and with an elephant-load of luck you might be able to sneak in with them.”
“I guess that will have to do,” my companion sighed.

-- *Splinter-of-Jade, Grand Historian of Mount Penglai*
Somewhere between Earth and Heaven

Part Fourteen **In the Palace of the God of Wealth**

Since ancient times, the kitchen gods have done their best to serve an important function in the bureaucracy of Heavenly administration; certain well-known character flaws, however, have made these poor clerks famously ineffective and subject to much ridicule from deities and mortals alike. The office of a kitchen god is to sit around the hearth of a mortal household for an entire year, collecting kitchen gossip and generally keeping an eye on the deeds and affairs of the family. On a particular day about a week before the New Year, the family sets offerings before the god’s image and subsequently burns it. The god follows the rising smoke out of his image and makes his way up to Heaven to report to the Jade Emperor, his eyewitness testimony theoretically influencing the fate and fortunes of the household in the coming year. But humans, not being ones to behave themselves when given any alternative, quickly found ways to take advantage of the hearth dwellers’ simple nature. The public at large took to smearing the kitchen god image’s mouth with honey or piling the offering plate with exceptionally sticky rice cakes before sending the god on its way. Many claimed that

they were only hoping to sweeten the deity’s words to the Jade Emperor -- the sort of mild bribery that mortal-deity relations are founded on -- but the truth was more insidious than that: the sticky sweets glued shut the kitchen god’s mouth, preventing him from reporting news of any sort. Granted this was a knavish trick, but it can only reflect on the kitchen gods themselves that they continued gobbling down the sticky offerings year after year.



Rabbit rested uneasily on her cloud, scanning the main thoroughfare between the upper and lower realms. Luminous mists and elusive, wandering avian forms played about us as far as the eye could discern. My companion asked me what day it was for the tenth time in as many minutes.

“January fifth,” I dutifully reported. I had just finished bringing my records up to date, my netpad resting on the cloud beside her. “Just a few days to go.”

Rabbit just about held her breath until I finally said, “It’s the tenth. They’re on their way.” We both looked down, quickly spotting the host of messengers ascending upwards right on cue. Rabbit stuffed my pad and myself in her pocket and steered her cloud around into their path. She untied a calabash of Mount Penglai jujube wine from her belt and set it conspicuously beside her, lounging back in as relaxed a slouch as she could manage with one foot dangling over the edge. The half-hour wait had given her plenty of time to run back and borrow the beverage from Iron-Crutch Li’s private stash; in fact, she’d taken two gourds, and finished off the first one to calm her nerves while lying in wait.

“Happy New Year!” she called out to the first ranks of passing kitchen gods. “Anyone up for a little wine to celebrate?” Some of the hearth folk smiled and waved politely, but there were no takers. “Come on, you’re all in the lead. What’s the rush?” Finally, a group of three spirits took the bait and floated over to join her. She commanded her cloud to flatten out and make room for the guests.

“A haffy new year to you too, mith Immorthal!” the first deity greeted cordially but with a thick mumble; as usual, he’d been

hitting the honey. The trio were short, their slight builds hidden under trailing robes. They had identical long beards, the greeter's sticky with the dripping remnants of sweet offerings. "You sound like you could use a drink to wash that down," Rabbit offered. "Here, have a swig of this."

The first spirit took a long draught from the gourd with relish before passing it on to his companions. The drink did little for his speaking faculties. "Fank you kinely! What bringth a lofely lady like yourthelf oud here on thuch an authpishuth night?"

Rabbit tried hard not to laugh at his impediment. "Oh, you know, I was around and thought it would be nice to see you all off and maybe hear some news from down below. How's it going?"

"Thame old thame old."

The second hearth-dweller spoke up; his mouth was quite a bit clearer, but his face was long. "It's been slow lately, to tell the truth." He took another pull of wine. "Not many people even have kitchens anymore, or use them if they do. The boss is actually thinking about hiring the toilet gods to take over our duties -- nobody's gotten rid of those yet." His two companions shook their heads mournfully at the thought. "Not to mention," he added, "even people who do have kitchens forget to leave out cakes for us anymore. I've gotten nothing for the past few years."

"That's too bad," Rabbit consoled. "But I hear you're reporting to Cai Sheng now -- how's that going?"

"Oh, not bad. The Jade Emperor had him take over about thirty years ago, when he realized that nobody was asking to be rewarded for good reports with anything but wealth. He's got plenty to handle without having to listen to all of us, so he delegated the job to Cai Sheng. The new boss isn't too demanding, but he only wants to know about business gossip and infractions. We don't get to go into all the juicy stuff. Heck, the head of my household has been sleeping with pretty much everybody, and the son has taken up armed robbery, but mark my words -- Cai Sheng is only going to want to hear about whether or not they cheated on their taxes."

The third deity added his own forceful complaint, but his mouth was sealed shut so tight he was incomprehensible. He pulled at his jaw in vexation. Rabbit saw her chance.

"Looks like your friend isn't going to be

reporting much of anything," she casually remarked.

"Yeah, he's a neighbor of mine at Xianya Tower in Nanjing. His family never misses a beat." He slapped his mute friend on the back cheerfully. "And they'd better! I'm only on the other side of the wall -- I know the Shangs keep busy." He laughed conspiratorially.

"That's just not fair!" Rabbit fumed. "If they're that bad they shouldn't get away with it so easily. Someone needs to tell Cai Sheng!"

The mute hearth-dweller shrugged and made a sound that could have been "maybe next year." Rabbit jumped to her feet and pulled out my netpad, tapping closed the window in which I was busy taking notes. "That's it, I'm gonna do it for you. In the name of justice!" The spirit glanced to his two companions uncertainly, but Rabbit forced the pad into one of his hands and the calabash of wine into the other. "Just write down all the dirt and you can hang out here with my wine for the rest of the night." The gluttonous little god nodded decisively and jotted down a few notes on the pad, then handed it back to Rabbit and uncorked the gourd. His companions looked on enviously.

"Right then, I just need to borrow your robe and we'll go have a word with Cai Shen. These crooks are going down."

Two minutes later, Rabbit was speeding Heavenwards, making tracks to lose the two other gods in the crowd. She wove between the hearth folk as fast as she could fly, higher and higher, until the gates of Cai Sheng's palace appeared above. She slowed down to join the mass procession filing through the intimidating portal. Her gaudy new robe blended in perfectly with the rest of the group, though she had to stoop a bit not to stand out too much. She had even shortened her hair and tied it up in the hopelessly old-fashioned official's cap. I was glad I couldn't see much of her from my vantage point in the lining of her wide sleeve; I would have been hard pressed not to laugh out loud.

The procession moved along quickly through the outlying palace gardens, which, being Heavenly in nature, cannot of course be described in any Earthly language. One look was enough to confirm my suspicions that the poets who have tried would have been better off sticking to dirty limericks. Suffice to say, a

single blossom was enough to make Mount Penglai look like a weedy ditch by the railroad tracks. We followed the queue through several more gates of equal grandeur, into the main edifice of the audience hall. At the front of the grand chamber, the God of Wealth himself sat on an ornate golden throne, the gargantuan black tiger that serves as his mount crouched at his feet, protecting its master. A sooty black face and a thick forest of a mustache gazed down from under Cai Shen's iron helmet, which must have weighed as much as the Cauldrons of Zhou. He was a stern and fearsome deity, looking much closer to his most ancient Han Dynasty representations than to later, more urbane images. This was not the God of Wealth whom small-time businessmen placed in the corner of their offices behind electric candles and invited into their homes with ingot-shaped dumplings on the Spring Festival; this was the invisible hand of bloody capitalism personified, with a heart as merciless and impartial as a market ticker. This was the creator and destroyer of empires, the hand that turned the millstone of history into which men threw themselves so desperately. This was a deity to be whispered of by economists alone, not by civilized men.

Rabbit was understandably overawed by the sight, and would have stood rooted in the door for who knows how long if the line of kitchen gods had not continued bodily pushing her forward. The queue ran up a staircase to a narrow ledge running along the back wall of the audience hall, just behind the Money God's throne. This put the hearth folk right at eye level as they filed past, leaning forward to report directly into the deity's mammoth ear. Each god had only a matter of seconds to deliver his news for the year before being pushed along; Cai Shen showed not the slightest reaction to any of the reports. Before Rabbit knew it, the line was pushing her up the stairs and along the ledge.

"Wait!" she whispered into her sleeve urgently, "What was I supposed to tell him?" My netpad was hanging from the sash of her inner robe, too well-concealed for either of us to get to in time. "Oops, I guess you'll have to improvise," I apologized, failing to conceal a slight snicker.

She didn't even have time to curse -- she was already at the Godly ear. "The Shangs at Xianya Tower in Nanjing... ah..." she began,

pushing back to hold her place for a second longer. "...sell human organs on the black market!" she blurted out a bit too loudly. The kitchen gods in front of her turned around in curiosity, but the line pushed them all onwards.



Just to keep the record straight, I feel I should point out that the note the kitchen god wrote on my netpad actually indicated that the Shang family in question were actually quite exemplary businesspeople. Their only infraction this year had been to raise the cost of the fruit juice they sold by a third of a *kuai*, at a time when inputs were cheap and profits already sufficient. This they had done to illegally raise money for the construction of an orphanage.

-- *Splinter-of-Jade, Grand Historian of Mount Penglai*
Palace of Cai Shen

Part Fifteen Thieves in Heaven

Ignoring the unbearable celestial beauty of the palace gardens, Rabbit rushed from one building to the next, her ceremonial robes swishing around her. She'd been lucky to sneak out of line through the bushes on the way out of the audience hall, but that was the hard part; the rear of the palace was mercifully deserted. Nonetheless, she tried to subdue her heavy breathing as she dashed between the halls and pavilions, checking the calligraphic inscriptions for a likely candidate.

"Gold and Silver Pavilion... Hall of Eternal Success... No, no... How the hell am I supposed to find a cowrie shell in all this?"

"Take your time, I'm just about caught up on my recording," I answered, my writing tarsi a blur over my netpad screen in the depths of her sleeve. I may still be an amateur historian, but lately I'm really becoming ungodly fast at writing in the field, if I do say so myself. One must not wait around to write when there's so

much going on. "Alright, good enough for a first draft," I announced and climbed to the hem of her sleeve to survey her progress.

Betrayed by the deserted feel of the gardens, she almost ran straight into a pair of patrolling guards in elaborate gold armor right in the middle of a spacious open square; at the last second, she dodged into the doorway of a tall pagoda standing alone in the center. She pressed herself back behind the door, holding her breath. When the clank of armor on stone faded, she gasped and sank to the floor.

"Don't look now, but I think you've found the master's private collection," I reported. Golden calligraphy on the wall spelled it out: Tower of Ancient Currencies. Rabbit jumped to her feet, all signs of fatigue vanishing like a bad mood.

"Jackpot! If it's not in here I'll eat my ridiculous hat."

Rabbit closed the impressive wooden doors behind her cautiously. Inside, the walls were lined with display cases holding hoards of obsolete currencies from bygone ages. The display began on the first floor with, oddly enough, a collection of paper bills and coins stretching from the first privately issued banknotes and silver of the late Qing Dynasty, through the People's Currency of the PRC, up to the last corporate notes issued before the complete switch to electronic transactions. A spiral staircase in the center of the tower led upwards; apparently the collection was in reverse chronologic order. The second floor held stacks of boat-shaped ingots and miles of strung-together copper coins from the later dynasties. But my companion had no great interest in numismatic history; realizing the general pattern, she made straight for the top floor. We passed over the *banliang* coins of Emperor Wen, the most successful currency in history, skipped over the white deerskin bills that bankrupted many a feudal lord in the Han dynasty, and breezed past the knife- and ax-shaped money of the Warring States Period. From the iron spades, bronze cowries, and tortoise shells of Shang and Zhou, Rabbit climbed a ladder to the top floor.

The small top level of the pagoda was dedicated entirely to the first form of currency ever used: the cowrie shell. Shells were inset into every inch of the golden dome and

supporting arches, forming spiraling patters like the branches of a windblown willow tree. The floor was open to a view over the palace grounds on all sides, the roof held up by elegant arches. In the center stood a pedestal, and on the pedestal rested a crystal case, and inside the case sat a single polished cowrie shell, and on top of the case perched a pure white crane. Rabbit froze. The crane was taller than a man, standing on one foot with its head tucked under its wing in sleep.

"You don't think that's..." she whispered. The crane lifted its head like a cobra rearing, piercing her with a stare as sharp as its lethal beak. It lowered its other foot to the top of the case slowly.

"Yes it is," I verified. "Looks like Snow Feather got his cowrie back after all."

"I thought you killed him," she whispered, not daring to take a step back down the ladder.

"Cut me some slack, he's a thousand times my size and just as immortal!"

"Do you think you can do a better job the second time around?" she breathed. The crane patriarch tensed his muscles imperceptibly; we learned exactly how a fish felt in the instant before becoming a heron's dinner.

"I'd really rather not have to." Indeed, I don't mind admitting that my last fight with the crane patriarch had been the bout of a lifetime for me, and that was before I retired from the ring to become a simple historian. Still, something needed to be done. Without warning, I hopped out of Rabbit's sleeve, launched myself off the floor with a mighty kick, and smashed bodily through the crystal case under Snow Feather's feet. The shattering of his perch sent him sprawling and thrashing awkwardly to the floor. I jumped back up on the pedestal and grabbed the shell in my middle set of legs, and was back clinging to Rabbit's robe before the crane even knew what hit him. She started to climb up and make for the windows, but I stopped her with a shout. "Go down!" She pushed off of the ladder and dropped back to the floor below, whooping in excitement. She descended through the centuries of numismatic history in record time, the crane clambering down the spiral staircase just behind her with some difficulty. We heard the bird stumble and fall twice, unable to use his wings for balance on the narrow stairs. Reaching the ground floor and rushing into the entrance foyer, she slammed straight into

the unyielding wooden doors. The portal had been locked. There was nothing she could do but turn around and face the approaching *clack* of talons on polished wood.

Snow Feather walked into the foyer with a jerking gait, side by side with an old man who was scratching the feathers on the top of the crane's lowered head. The immortal bird swung his beak back and forth in voiceless pleasure, suddenly pacified. Rabbit and I both knew at once whose presence we were in; the old man was, in fact, one of the most easily recognizable figures in all of Heaven. He carried a knotted wooden staff in his free hand, his white eyebrows trailed down to his waist, and his bald head was the shape of a giant eggplant. Rabbit gasped at the looming forehead that confronted her.

"Shou Xing!" she laughed nervously, recognizing the Immortal of the South Pole, popular God of Longevity. The improbability of running into this kindly old man instead of facing down dismemberment at the tip of an iron beak was, indeed, worthy of a good laugh.

"Good evening, young one! How are you doing this fine day, wandering around an important Heavenly Official's palace in the costume of a kitchen god?"

"Oh, not bad at all," she answered cool as ice. Her aptitude for improv was catching up with her at last. "And you?"

"Fine, fine. I was just dropping by to visit my old disciple, Snow Feather. He's actually a lot older than me, you know. Sometimes I have trouble remembering who is the disciple and who is the master." The ancient god laughed, and Snow Feather clacked his beak along with him. "I saw someone had shut the door and decided they must have forgotten to lock it, so I went ahead and turned the key they keep under the mat. I didn't know my friend had other guests." He bobbed his giant forehead in respect.

"Ah, well I guess you could say that. We're old acquaintances at least."

The crane reached out, prodding his beak insistently towards Rabbit's robe.

"My disciple seems to think you have something of his," Shou Xing chuckled, raising the top of a trailing eyebrow.

Rabbit shrugged helplessly. The game was up. "Yeah, I'm borrowing Prince Millet's cowrie shell. It's needed down below."

The god knocked his staff to his forehead in mock dismay. "Don't tell me you're messing around down there!"

"Maybe just a little."

"Fine, fine." He patted the crane patriarch's back to quiet him down. "I'll be glad to see the thing go. Snow Feather has been much too wrapped up in that thing lately. Like an old mother hen sitting on an egg, haha. I've been having to come all the way up here just to visit him because he refuses to leave it alone, and these stairs are too much for an old man like me."

"Thank you so very much, honored sir," Rabbit beamed, stepping aside and tilting her head pointedly towards the golden padlock on the closed door.

"Wait a minute," the god asked with a suspicious squint of his beady eyes as he reached for the ornate golden key in his belt, "You're not a *commie*, are you? Trying to grab a piece of Heaven for the proletariat from under Cai Shen's nose? I can't stand those bleeding heart types."

Rabbit shook her head vigorously. "Oh no sir, I'm just running a business down there and we've run into some trouble. I wouldn't think of messing with the will of Heaven."

He nodded sagely, then opened the door at last and led her out into the garden. He held out his staff before she could run off, however -- clearly he wasn't done with her yet. "Let me escort you to the gate so the guards don't give you any trouble." He started leading the way at an excruciating pace, Snow Feather bobbing slowly along beside him.

"Oh no, really that's not..."

"I think I've got you figured out," he started up, ignoring her plea. "I can see you don't work up here, your fancy clothes don't fool me for a second. So you must be an ordinary immortal."

"Yeah," she admitted, "I'm not any sort of deity. Just your average mountain-dweller."

"And of course with no official post to keep you busy, you got bored and decided to go down to Earth."

"More or less," she shrugged.

"And now you're learning your lesson."

"Oh, no! we've just run into some bad luck," she maintained.

"Right," the old man chuckled. "Same old story. Any time mortals and immortals mix, 'bad luck' is never far away."

“Why is it that way, Shou Xing?” Rabbit lamented, sick of hearing the same old words of caution. “I had it going perfectly for the first half a year. Is it really doomed every time?”

The Immortal of the South Pole spread his arms wide. “There are reasons ground-dwellers and celestials keep their distance. We’re completely different creatures. Mortals, trapped in the cycle of history and burdened with the knowledge of death, quickly go through a strange sort of transformation. It’s called growing up. They hate doing it, but if they don’t they die. It’s the only way any of them survive. The adults take care of the young so they may grow up in turn, and the old so they may rest. It’s a terrible existence though, and everyone wants out.”

“And so they try to become immortal,” Rabbit picked up.

“Yes they do, and some of them succeed. Then they can forget all about responsibility and let the mountains and the *Dao* take care of them. Immortals are just a bunch of little kids, really, and us gods are just little kids who play big games. That’s why we shouldn’t go down below.”

“But that’s the problem!” Rabbit lamented. “The ones with the power don’t even care what’s going on down there. Who put a bunch of kids in charge, anyway?”

“I *knew* you were a commie!” The god wagged a bony finger. “You’re forgetting your Lao Tzu, young comrade. Don’t make me drag you over to his palace to have a lecture from the old man himself. Earth is *yin*, Heaven *yang*. Our roles are assigned by the universal *Dao*. Indifferent action belongs to one side, responsible reaction to the other. The gods behave irresponsibly and bring disasters, so people have to learn to help each other. The gods grant and repeal Heavenly mandate on a whim, so empires rise and fall and the wheels of history keep turning. If the immortals ever grew up, the *people* would all become children. And if there was somebody with a personal stake in history running the whole show, they would be another First Emperor of Qin or Chairman Mao, only much worse! Only those who are above history should be allowed to administrate it, and only those at the mercy of history should take part in it. This is what we call harmony.”

“Huh” was all Rabbit could say. She kicked at jewels embedded in the garden path, utterly

crestfallen. Every one of the Longevity God’s words seemed to have cut her to the bone. “I... I guess you have a point. For a Taoist I have a terrible sense of universal balance.” Her voice dripped with genuine regret, something I *very* seldom hear from my friend. She halted and fished Prince Millet’s cowrie out of her sleeve, stared at it for a moment, and sighed. “I guess I really ought to give this thing back. I’ve been taking this all pretty seriously, but I can see you’re right. Anything I can do will just screw things up worse. I definitely shouldn’t be allowed to have something *this* powerful... I’m bad enough on my own.”

The old man nodded sagely. Snow Feather stepped forward and lovingly plucked the shell out of Rabbit’s hand, doing a hopping little victory dance. “Now you’re starting to understand. Don’t worry, a lot of immortals go through this phase at some point, wanting to go back and be a part of things again. Now that you’re past that phase, maybe you’ll have the makings of a great deity yourself some day.”

“Yeah, you never know. I think I’ll just stick to the mountain for a while.” She bowed her head. “I just feel sorry for dear Mr. Wang, he was such a kind man.”

“Eh? Who’s that you say?” the old man cupped his ear, uncertainty creeping into his voice.

“Oh, nobody, just my business partner. I really threw him for a loop.”

“*Business partner?*!” crowed the god, serpentine eyebrows climbing up his forehead. “You dragged a *business partner* into all this?”

“I... yeah, but he’s just a mortal,” Rabbit defended. “I thought we weren’t supposed to let that kind of thing get to us. *Yin* and *yang*, and all that?”

Shou Xing knocked his staff against his forehead, harder this time. “That goes for the great unwashed masses, not some poor honorable man you dragged into your little game on your own! We may be children, but even children have some sense of honor! You need to get down there and fix this Mr. Wang’s life back up. Who knows what might be happening to him while you’re dawdling up here? Go!” He shooed her away with his staff. Rabbit was looking twice as miserable as before. “But I need the cowrie...”

“Blast it, haven’t you been listening to

anything?! You're not going back into business, you just need to get down there and make sure you haven't destroyed a good man's life. Surely even a little commie slip of an immortal like you has got enough power in you to save one lousy man, at least?"

"But..."

"Go!"

The command sent her scrambling as fast as she could fly across the gardens, over the heads of the throng of kitchen gods, and out the gates of the palace into empty sky.

-- *Splinter-of-Jade, Grand Historian of Mount Penglai*

Somewhere between Heaven and Earth

Part Sixteen The Fate of Wang Xian

Rabbit didn't so much fly down to Earth as simply fall headfirst. She used her Taoist powers to form the air around her into a smooth cone, inching the threshold of terminal velocity higher and higher. Inside the frictionless shield, it was eerily calm. The only sounds were Rabbit's ragged breathing and the scratching of my hurried notekeeping inside her sleeve.

"Please, please don't tell me what month it is down there," she pleaded.

"My mandibles are sealed. Just don't forget to slow down when we reach Hangzhou. You'll make a crater a mile wide at this speed!"

"I can't believe I've been so stupid," she berated herself for the tenth time. "Screwing up poor Mr. Wang's life like that just for fun. He was doing just fine before I came along! If his whole family is living out on the street now I'll never forgive myself. And Manager Gu and all his workers down at the factory... I'm horrible!"

"Don't let it get you down," I consoled, "we all go through this sometime. We're not so different from mortals, really -- they have to realize they're growing up, we have to realize we never will."

"What about you?" she asked somewhat accusingly.

"Oh, I had my moment back in the Yuan Dynasty. I realized all the other crickets

actually cared about becoming fighting champions and I didn't, but I was taking from them the only chance they had in their miserable nine-month lives. I tried to give up the sport."

"But you went back to it?"

"Yeah, I eventually had an owner who still kept faith in me no matter how long I refused to fight, and he desperately needed a champion. He faced execution in the marketplace if he couldn't win the next fight. So I went back into the ring for him, and after that I remembered how much fun it was."

Rabbit finally put on the brakes over Hangzhou. My netpad indicated it was the night of July twenty-second, 2046; we had been away almost a full year. The device connected with the local network and started running through backup, update and news-net retrieval routines. A notice popped up from Baidu Net Technologies reminding me that it was time to upgrade to a newer model. I ignored this and started a search for information. The news corporations offered not a single reference to White Snake Inc. from the past six months. Before I had a chance to extend the search, we were on solid ground, and Rabbit was silent. I climbed out to the opening of her sleeve; we were on the moonlit roof of White Snake Tower. Her cottage stood dark and empty, the windows and doors missing from their hinges. Her garden was dead; the sculptures and more valuable plants were simply gone. Desiccated grey leaves swirled around the path in the warm summer breeze.

"At least it's still here," I observed with weak optimism. Rabbit simply headed for the elevator.

The fourteenth floor looked like it had been picked clean by giant ants; the once elegant front room now held only a flimsy aluminum folding picnic table and a pile of discarded boxes. But the lights were on. Alerted by the *ding* of the arriving elevator, Mrs. Wang cautiously peeked around the corner from the next room, wearing a loose sweatsuit. It looked like she was holding a metal pipe.

"Miss Tu!" she exclaimed, her face brightening a little as she set the pipe against the wall. "Come in, come in!" She beckoned Rabbit back through the remnants of the rear living room into the master bedroom. From

the looks of it, all of the Wang family's remaining possessions had been collected here, and it was hardly enough to fill even this one room. Mr. Wang's elderly parents sat together on the bed; his eight-year-old daughter Xiao Ming lay stretched out on the floor, happily coloring a picture and singing to herself. "Miss Tu has returned!" Mrs. Wang announced. The elderly couple smiled excitedly and greeted their son's former partner.

"At last!" rejoiced the old lady. "Have you found our son?"

"Have I... Found him?" Rabbit's apprehensive tone brought misery back to the faces in the room. "Where did he go?"

"*Aiya!* They took him away!" the grandmother wailed.

"Right before the New Year," her husband explained. "A man in a suit came to meet with him in his office one afternoon when our daughter-in-law was out with Xiao Ming, and when we came down to check on them an hour later they were gone!"

"Oh no! That's... Oh no! Is that when the company closed down?"

"Yes, our son kept it going for so long, he even went back to selling his old brand again to keep the factory open. But after they took him away the board eventually had to shut down your company and sell the building to a laundry soap business. They've been trying for months to make us move out of our home. You have to find our son!"

"I'll do my best," Rabbit promised impotently.

She walked out of the suffocating little room and sat heavily at the creaking folding table in the front room, almost collapsing the flimsy contraption. "A man in a suit took him away. That's not a hell of a lot to go on."

"You've got mail!" I chirped. Understanding instantly, she pulled my netpad out of her sleeve and stared at the screen. I had taken the liberty of logging into her account and checking for anything important in her eleven-month backlog. It had proved a fruitful idea.

"Mr. Wang!" she cheered. There was, indeed, a message from her partner sent on the twenty-third of January. She scoured the letter as if it were a holy text.

Dear Miss Tu,

I have been trying my hardest

to keep White Snake alive all these months. I believe you wholeheartedly when you say you will return with a solution for our company. In October I reopened our #5 manufacturing plant at Phoenix Pool which you held in such high regard, and have started selling my old King Deer toothpaste again in this State. The profits are paltry compared with the old days, but it's enough to keep afloat while I wait for your return.

These last few weeks, however, I have been worried for the future, and I hope you will return sooner rather than later. I've been getting more letters from the anonymous person who wrote to me before the investigation began -- the one who signs his messages 'An Enemy of Evil'. He keeps telling me that I have brought destruction on myself by ignoring his warning and consorting with dark forces. He urges me to come and join him in his research, so he may teach me how to combat your occult power and protect myself from harm. Needless to say I intend to do no such thing, but he would not relent. In a moment of weakness I told him you were gone from my business and my life, and I had no dealings with you now. I just wanted him to leave our company alone; I'm convinced he was the one behind the investigation in the first place. But he didn't stop. On the contrary, his most recent letter was more threatening; he said that if I continued to resist his aid and put myself and my family in danger he would have no choice but to take a more active stance in the matter. Again he demanded that I come to his protection immediately. He said I could find him at the Chengdu Biological Research Center in Liu State, which he claims is a front for counter-thaumaturgical studies. Supposedly he has already arranged a visa for me at the border.

I hope this deranged man turns out to be a harmless mental case with delusions of grandeur, and I and the company will still be here when

you return someday soon with a characteristically impressive solution to the difficulties he has created. If this is not the case, at least you will know where to look for me. Good luck wherever your journey takes you,

- Wang Xian

“Yama’s balls!” Rabbit cursed. “Not that nutcase again! Just wait, I’ll bury him in a stinky tofu pit and shove a durian up his nose! Let’s go.” She leapt to her feet with all the energy she could muster, grabbing the table for support.

“Right, forget that you haven’t slept in eleven months. I’d say you’re good to stroll into enemy territory.”

“Oh, I’ll rest up on the cloud. That and a hearty Chengdu breakfast, and I’ll be in fine shape to kick some paranoid-schizophrenic butt.”



Rabbit’s cloud floated lazily over the hills of Western Waha State and across the heavily patrolled border into Liu State. The vehicle was set on automatic pilot to follow a course straight to Chengdu on the far western end of the State, at a modest speed that would get us there around morning. Rabbit slept like the dead under the gibbous moon, waking with the first rays of dawn. I even caught a good six hours of sleep after straightening up my records, which is more than I usually require by half. It did wonders for both of us.

“Looks like they’ve got the pollution just as bad out here,” Rabbit observed, watching the light of the half-risen midsummer sun filter across an ocean of subtle hues. She stretched and adjusted her crumpled kitchen god’s robe. “Hard to say really, the Sichuan Basin has always had a reputation for this sort of weather. They say it’s the low sky that makes the people short, but I think short people just settled here because they like it that way. I guess we’d better go down below and see where we are.”

We dropped through the clouds -- which did indeed look a bit more natural than the grey coal smog enshrouding Hangzhou -- and got

our first look at the countryside of the Basin. It couldn’t have looked any more different from the patchy, dilapidated landscape surrounding Hangzhou. Instead of a patchwork of muddy colors quilted by an artisan of poor taste and shaky hands, the undulating hills were dressed in enormous swathes of emerald green that might have been painted on with a roller. The sea of green was only punctuated by small, solar collector-roofed buildings marking a grid through the fields -- residences, or equipment sheds -- and silver threads of maglev rails delineating boundaries between crops.

“It’s beautiful!” proclaimed Rabbit.

“Yeah, if you’re into industrial monoculture cropping,” I conceded. “The grains look nice, at least. Just hold your nose and look away when we fly over the pig lots.”

“How do they manage all this over here when our State can’t even grow its own food?” she asked. We looked to be a ways from Chengdu yet; I decided this was as good a time as any to share what little I knew of Liu State.



It’s hard to get reliable, unbiased information about Liu State through net nodes accessible from a Waha State-encoded netpad; news about the agro-corporatist powers is tightly regulated. The agricultural regions along most of the length of the Yangtze River, from the Sichuan Basin clear across to the north banks facing Waha State, is owned and administrated by the Chengdu-founded Hope Group, an agricultural corporation started up by four enterprising brothers of the Liu family in the early 1980s (an ancestor of theirs, the illustrious Liu Bei, ruled the region of Sichuan back in the Three Kingdoms period, but that’s another story). The original purpose of the company, and a business it still dominates, is the production of pig feed. As the Hope Group rode the wave of agricultural modernization in the late People’s Republic and came to wield considerable power over the affairs of Sichuan Province, the Liu brothers continued to stand firm as champions of the countryside. The urban markets of the East Coast drew focus and finances to the cities as the Corporate Independence Movement of 2021 drew

closer, but in Western regions like Sichuan the Hope Group and its like strove to protect agriculture from falling by the wayside. This proved critical when the newly independent Corporate States of the East began casting about for trading partners. It was agricultural products they were looking for, and companies like the Hope Group were only too willing to provide. Pigs began pouring out of Sichuan, feed began pouring into pigs, and money poured just as torrentially into the bank accounts of the Liu family. Thus the takeover of the East by urban-centered companies brought the farming interests to the fore in the West, and the Agro-Corporate States came into being.

The Lius were the most expansionist of these companies, aggressively broadening their land base -- and thus agricultural output -- eastward along the length of the fertile Yangtze River, through the former Chongqing Municipality (aside from the urban center itself, which remains a beleaguered city-state), Hubei Province, and Anhui north of the river, right up to the northwest edge of Waha State. The only land they lost along the way was the much less productive mountain region west of the Sichuan Basin, which optimistically elected to join the Free Tibetan State back when that tourism-driven entity was in the midst of its early economic boom (the Western Sichuanese would soon come to regret this decision when the oil crash brought an end to air travel and international tourism). Despite this minor loss, their State became the largest in terms of area, cutting a wide band across the map of the Corporate States. They are also probably the most powerful of the agrarian entities; only trade sanctions from nervous neighbors such as Waha State kept them from further expansion after a few years. But by all accounts, the backlash didn't dismay the Hope Group management one bit; they seem content for now to trade with more distant urban partners and carry on re-engineering the territory they've won into prime agricultural land with a series of earthworks, hydroelectric projects, and irrigation schemes that would have made old Yu the Great throw away his shovel. It isn't even known anymore which member of the Liu family really runs the Hope Group, but whoever it is, they are the undisputed ruler of both wealth and nature in their domain.

The end of cheap oil, however, made matters just as difficult for the agrarian corporations as it did for their urban counterparts, and their solutions were similar. In its early decades, the industrialization of farming had largely concentrated on oil inputs in the form of fertilizer and machinery. As these became too costly, the corporations took a step backwards and decided that good old-fashioned elbow grease really was the next best thing. Although Liu State continues to hold a death grip on the largest trading contracts with the petroleum-extracting Sinopec State, this expensive resource was mostly diverted to large-scale engineering projects; when it came to running the farms, they too felt the strain. Fortunately, the rural labor pool under the Hope Group's control was even more formidable than that of the Eastern States. Indeed, the Sichuan Basin and Yangtze River had been some of the most densely inhabited agricultural regions on Earth for thousands of years; conditions couldn't have been better. The masses were hired to work on the sprawling corporate mega-farms, in an odd capitalist mirror to Chairman Mao's agricultural collectivization drive -- albeit one that proved much more long-lived. This incalculable human workforce was backed up by the latest in bio-engineering; the finest agricultural research labs in the Corporate States sliced, diced and spliced every crop to the point where its twentieth-century progenitors wouldn't even have recognized it as a plant. The labs also worked year after year to refine the dark arts of pesticidal alchemy, until today the Basin itself is such a teeming sea of exotic molecules that I wouldn't go within a hundred miles of it if I were any normal cricket.



Coming within sight of the ancient city of Chengdu, we were given a visual lesson in the effects this agrarian domination had wrought on the urban world. The grand capital at the confluence of the Nan and Fu Rivers is probably the oldest continuously-inhabited city under Heaven; the city of the present name was founded by the kings of Qin long before Qin had even dreamed of being an Empire, but even back then the spot had

probably already hosted some sort of settlement for a couple of centuries. Today, however, the mega-farms and the agrarian corporation that ran them had finally rendered the metropolis obsolete. It was left a desiccated husk of its former self, its lofty towers slowly crumbling to grey dust. The city center was nothing but a petrified forest of concrete; only in the outer suburbs were there any signs of life.

Rabbit chased away her compliant cloud and floated down into an alley alongside one of these zones of movement on the north side of town not far from the Fu River. Stepping out casually into the road, she found a scene quite unlike our first view of Hangzhou street life. Small groups of people wandered up and down the road, wrapped in rags but shouting cheerfully to each other in a melodious dialect. Not a one stood less than a full head shorter than Rabbit's already unimpressive stature. The street seemed to be a center of scrap metal collection; piles of excavated rebar and other assorted rust heaps loomed over the mud-streaked road on both sides. At the north end of the street, an orchestra of rhythmic metallic hammering suggested that the material was being re-fashioned into something else on the spot. Rabbit waved over an old man with a face as wrinkled as a month-old jujube, pushing a three-wheeled cycle as rusty as the scrap metal piled on the back of it.

"Hey there Miss! What can I do you for?" he greeted in a barely comprehensible Sichuanese accent.

"Good morning. I'm trying to find my way to the Chengdu Biological Research Center? Any idea where that might be?"

He scratched his balding head. "I heard of it, but it's a long ways from the city. Up on Ax Hill to the north. What kinda business could you possibly have up there?" The man eyed her ceremonial robes with more curiosity than suspicion in his beady eyes.

"Oh, you know... research stuff." She thanked the man and hurried around the corner to a more deserted area before taking to the sky again.

-- *Splinter-of-Jade, Grand Historian of Mount Penglai*

Chengdu, July 23rd, Third Quarter, Fiscal Year 2046

Part Seventeen Biological Innovation in Liu State

Flying northwards along the Fu River, beyond the line where the ruined city abruptly gave way to the first of the mega-farms, Rabbit scanned the sea of green soybeans for anything resembling an Ax Hill. It wasn't a difficult search; the sprawling kilometers of soybeans gave way in turn to an equally expansive bamboo plantation, which at its center rolled up and over a large, undulating cluster of hills. Around the peaks of the hills, a complex of white buildings rose out of the waves of swaying greenery. Rabbit cautiously circled around the facility a few times before alighting a safe distance away on the dirt path beside the maglev rail almost hidden beneath the bamboo. She started walking down the line towards the slope of the hills.

"So now what? You just talk your way in claiming you're with the company opera troupe?" I asked.

Rabbit looked down at her extravagantly-patterned kitchen god robes. "Damn. What I wouldn't give for my old transforming robe. I hope those people down on the Ao River are fully appreciating their new mountain." She shed the top layer of clothing and tossed it into the forest. "I guess I'll have to do my best with what I've got." The under-robe was solid dark blue silk, quite a bit less noticeable than the embroidered outer garment. She tightened the sash and ripped off most of the trailing hem and wide, flowing sleeves. To finish the effect, she rubbed up against the dirty stalks of bamboo to transfer some of their film of algae to her costume. Exiled from my hiding place, I stood aside with my netpad.

"Looking like a real farm girl! A particularly tall farm girl, granted, but not too bad. But where am I going to ride now?"

She picked up myself and my pad, showing the device inside her robe and setting me down on her right shoulder. The coarse joints of the bamboo had opened a number of tears in the ceremonial garment's delicate fabric; I crawled into a rip on the shoulder, pushing back the cotton padding which was trying to make its escape.

“Good enough,” I evaluated, peeking my head out unobtrusively.

“Hey, at least the disguise is better than the plan.”

“Oh, don’t even pretend you actually have a plan!”

“Hey now, don’t question the woman who bluffed her way into the God of Wealth’s treasure room!” She began making her way briskly up the path. “I’ll think of something on the way.”

She walked in preoccupied silence up the forest track, climbing the slope of the hill until the gates of the complex appeared ahead. Chrome calligraphy over the freshly-whitewashed portal announced that we had found the right spot: Chengdu Biological Research Center. Two armed guards sat smoking in front of the gatehouse; the taller of the pair rose to his feet while Rabbit approached as slowly as she could get away with.

“You don’t think Mrs. Wang will mind if I impersonate her, do you?” she whispered over her shoulder.

“What?! That’s the stupidest...”

But I could already see that Rabbit was changing her face, making it just slightly older and thinner. She still didn’t look the least bit like her partner’s wife, though.

“Good morning sir,” she ventured to the guard.

“What’s your business?” he barked. Courtesy obviously wasn’t a high priority in the training regimen here.

“I... I’m here looking for my husband.” She squinted, struggling to wring moisture from her eyes. So she was going for the sympathy route. Clever girl. “His name is Wang Xian, from Hangzhou. I’ve come such a long ways to find him...” She sniffed convincingly.

“Sorry ma’am, but I don’t know who you’re talking about. I don’t think your husband is in here.” He glanced back impatiently at his cigarette burning down in the ashtray.

Rabbit launched into a fine display of tragic despair. “Oh please, sir, please! He came here months ago to visit someone.... the Director, I think. Please call him and ask, I’m begging you! My husband has been missing all this time, and I have nowhere else to turn!”

The guard sighed and pulled out his netcomm, seeing he wasn’t going to get rid of this

burden without passing it off quickly. His friend back at the smoking table snickered and leaned back in his chair.

“Hello, Mr. Li is it? Is Dr. Jiu available? Yes, I’ve got someone asking for him at the outer gate. This should just take a second.” He waited for a moment; Rabbit sniffled miserably and watched him out of the corner of her eye. “Yes, Dr. Jiu, it’s the front gate. We have a woman asking about a Mr. Wang from Hangzhou who supposedly visited you a couple of months ago? It’s his wife. Do you know anything about this?” He paused again. “Alright, I’ll keep her here. Sorry to bother you sir.”

The guard returned to his smoking, assuring “Mrs. Wang” that someone would be along to speak with her soon. Ten minutes later, a tall, clean-cut man in a lab coat and glasses walked out to the gate. Rabbit prepared herself for another fit of hysterics, but the scientist just greeted her courteously and led her inside.

“I’m Dr. Ming,” he explained, “Our director Dr. Jiu told me you were at the gate. We are both associates of your husband’s.”

“Is he here?” Rabbit asked frantically. “I’ve spent weeks coming all the way from Hangzhou to see him. I had to sneak across the border, and I have no money left. I must find him!”

“Don’t worry, your husband is here,” Dr. Ming reassured her. “I’m sorry he had to depart so suddenly, but he was in grave danger. He’s been worried sick about you -- communications are so difficult these days between our States.”

Offering no further conversation, the Doctor led Rabbit through the research campus to the largest structure, a monolithic white block rising several stories up from one of the higher crests of the hill. The inside was all shiny tiles, spotless as a hospital. They rode an elevator to the sixth floor and followed a winding hallway to one particular locked door marked with “Wang Xian, Visiting Associate” on an aluminum plaque. Dr. Ming unlocked it with a key chained to his belt and the two stepped inside.

The room inside was a windowless apartment; the door, Rabbit noticed too late, was as thick and heavy as that of a prison cell. Wang Xian sat slumped on a sofa inside reading an old-fashioned paper book, looking much the

worse for wear.

“Mr. Wang, you have a visitor.”

Raising his head from the dog-eared pages of the book, the look on the fallen businessman’s face shifted from torpor to fear in less than a second, bypassing shock entirely. It was almost as if he’d been rehearsing this moment for a long time. “Miss Tu! Look out, it’s a trap!” he cried out.

Rabbit froze and looked uncertainly to Dr. Ming, who stood between her and the door. He grinned and gave an affirmative nod. “So you are the famous Miss Tu after all. Good, good, We’ve been waiting a long time for you. Mr. Liu isn’t getting any younger, and progress on his immortality research has run into some roadblocks that cannot be overcome without human subjects. You’re just the associate Chengdu Biological Research needs on its team.”

“What do you want with me? I don’t understand!” Rabbit stammered fearfully.

“Ah well, you don’t have to understand, that’s the scientists’ job. They just want to learn from you, ask you some questions, tinker with the sorts of molecules you put in your toothpaste. But that’s just them.” His grin took on a more devilish angle. “Personally I’m not actually a scientist myself, though I am a seeker of knowledge. I’m just here to make sure you get what you deserve. Being locked up in a laboratory for a few decades is small retribution for all the countless human lives an immortal toys with and discards. I lost a friend and colleague on Flowing Silk Mountain -- you murdered him for the sake of your *toothpaste*. For that, I’m going to make sure you’re as uncomfortable here as...”

Rabbit smashed her fist into the side of his sneering face, felling the spy like a tall bicyclist riding into a short tunnel. She leapt over her prone adversary, banging the reinforced door open and skidding on the tiles outside. “Mr. Wang!” she called. But before she could see if he was following, two helmeted and faceless guards turned down the hallway from the direction of the elevators. They were equipped with a caliber of body armor untypical of your average research institute, and what looked like large black toy guns trailing extension cords. Rabbit turned to face them, enraged.

“You people are crazy! Go on, shoot, it’s only going to make things worse for you when I get over there!”

The guards compliantly fired their weapons. Two lines of blue fire seared our vision, one of them slashing into Rabbit’s right arm. She stared at the appendage incredulously; it hung limp as a dead fish at her side. Changing her mind, she turned the other way.

The vigilante spy clicked the cell door shut right behind her, rubbing at his jaw. “Ow! I *really* need to remember not to talk so much. Revenge is just no fun if you don’t get to ex... *oof!*”

Rabbit knocked him flat a second time, flying down the hallway away from a burst of searing blue beams. The guards rushed after her, but rounding the corner they too were abruptly swept off their feet, their guns torn from their hands. It would seem that energy weapons, however ingenious their manufacture, are fundamentally limited by the length of their extension cords.

Rabbit careened through the twisting passages at a dangerous speed, searching futilely for any outside windows. The best she could find was the emergency staircase leading down. The ground floor looked mostly identical, but unfortunately it was in more active use. Technicians moved between labs pushing carts of samples and equipment; not a few were interrupted in their work by Rabbit’s mad dash. The cleanup job must have taken hours afterwards. Disoriented in the windowless maze, she fled not outwards to freedom but inwards, to a cavernous central chamber rising the full height of the building. Everything inside reverberated with a subsonic hum and glowed with an intense ultraviolet light that couldn’t possibly be healthy for human eyes. Even in the midst of her flight, Rabbit was compelled to momentarily slow to a halt. The source of the light was a cone reaching from the floor to a point on the ceiling high above; this was formed of streams of the same blinding blue beams fired by the guards’ weapons, though these burned continuously, emitted by a dense circle of cannons ringing the middle of the room. Inside the cage formed by these bars of light, large listless animal forms lay about on the hard floor and floated aimlessly to the peak of the cone and back.

“Pandas!” I gasped.

My companion was shielding her poor mammalian eyes with her one functional arm,

unable to make out the shapes clearly. “You’re kidding me.”

“Stupid animals, can’t leave a bamboo forest well enough alone! Now we know how these labcoats developed their fancy immortal-zappers. Come on, let’s not give them any more practice!”

Rabbit flew around the cage and out through the opposite door, destroying a few more experiments-in-progress before she found the proper exit.

Escaping the tower, she took off at once for the sky, and not a moment too soon; snipers were in position outside on the research campus, and blue flame shot past at arm’s length as she put distance between herself and the lab. Rising high above the bamboo forest, she returned to the course of the Fu River and followed it back towards the outskirts of ruined Chengdu in search of a safe haven. She had to hold onto her debilitated right arm with her left to keep it from flapping around in the wind.

“That’s it, these cheese-eaters are definitely in for it now! I’m going to flay them alive with a rabid squid!”

“You do that, but be careful,” I cautioned.

“Careful?!” shouted Rabbit, “What in the Toilet Goddess’s name do you think I’m doing running away?!”



Rabbit didn’t dare return to the bamboo plantation, and the bare fields surrounding it offered no protection whatsoever -- the identical, corporate-issue farm dwellings didn’t look the least bit inviting. There was nothing for it but to fall back to the postapocalyptic surroundings of Chengdu. Moving from one zone of activity to the next -- most of which seemed devoted to scavenging materials from the decaying urban center -- she soon found a lodging house of a sort. The shabby squat in a dangerously dilapidated building actually claimed to be a wine shop, for the ground floor was furnished with a few cinder-block seats and tables and several large barrels of some mass-produced grain alcohol. In the back room, a fierce old lady with a coal stove was stewing up a potent pot of rice noodles that made eyes water all the way up the block.

Rabbit settled in here among the jostling lunchtime crowd of scavengers, draining three bowls of the mordacious stew. Though she clearly stood out among -- and head and shoulders above -- the other patrons, she offered no conversation, and none was asked of her. The crowd kept each other well enough occupied with jokes, stories and arguments I could barely understand half of. As she ate we paid careful attention to the local form of makeshift currency: oddly enough, the scavengers were paying for their meals in chopsticks. Of course they were also eating with chopsticks, but these were cheap, splintery pieces of split bamboo; the utensils preferred for exchange were more finished and rounded, usually branded with decorations, and doubtless gathered from the city ruins all around. This standard proved providential, as it was a simple matter for an immortal with a basic understanding of the wood element to coax a few pairs of sticks from one form into the other.

With her counterfeit funds, Rabbit was able to pay for her three bowls of noodles, a “suite” on the upper floor for the night, and as much industrial-strength rice wine as she might require. Abandoning her earlier stated intention of regrouping and working out a new plan of attack on the Research Center, she instead spent the afternoon using her one good hand to drink herself under the cinder-block table. The stolid old proprietress had to drag her up to her cot before the evening crowd even arrived. Here, I kept watch over my defeated companion and recorded the day’s events through the rain-drizzled summer night.

-- *Splinter-of-Jade, Grand Historian of Mount Penglai*

Chengdu, July 23rd, Third Quarter, Fiscal Year 2046

Part Eighteen

The Assault on Ax Hill

Rabbit and I awoke to find another person in her bare concrete room, leaning against the single pillar that apologetically stood in for a wall on the side overlooking the street. The person certainly wasn't anyone we would ever have dreamed of seeing in this remote place, but they were not in fact a stranger.

"Manager Gu!" Rabbit cried out, leaping halfway to her feet before the lingering effects of the previous day's drinking kicked in.

The Manager of White Snake Inc.'s #5 Phoenix Pool Manufacturing Facility winced as his former boss fell back on her sackcloth mat. "Easy there," he chuckled, "the shopkeeper says you drained the better part of a quarter barrel of her finest solvent yesterday. I take it your business meeting didn't go well?"

"Not at all," she croaked.

"Well, we'd guessed as much from the way they were shooting at you when you left."

Rabbit propped herself up on her left elbow and tested her right hand; she could move it again, rather weakly. She gave in and rewarded the manager's composure with a questioning look. "Alright, you win. Who is this 'we' exactly?"

"Everyone!" he beamed. "The entire team from the #5 plant. Well, minus some of the old ladies, but even they sent along a contingent."

"You're all here at the labs?" she asked warily.

"Oh no, we haven't joined the other side! Don't even think such things. We're doing it guerilla style, in the bamboo forest! How do you like that?" The man's grin looked in danger of splitting his face in half permanently.

"So all of the employees from your factory snuck across the border and made it all the way to Chengdu to live undercover in the forest, just to keep an eye on Mr. Wang?"

"No no," the manager corrected, "all the employees from *your* factory! Without you and Mr. Wang, we don't have a factory, or anything else for that matter. We had nothing better to do than head out here to lend a hand."

"How did you know where to come?"

"Ah, you're not the only one in the know my

girl. Mr. Wang wrote to me too before he disappeared, warning me about the mysterious man who was threatening him. He was afraid the guy might come down and bother us in Phoenix Pool. But instead we came over here to bother him, ha!"

"And do you have some plan?"

"Our plan was to wait for you. Now you've arrived, and the #5 Phoenix Pool Army is at your command!"

Rabbit sat up and shook her head incredulously. "I need to have a word with Mr. Wang after all this. We really don't pay you people enough."



Rabbit rode with Manager Gu and two of his "lieutenants" on the back of an empty lumber transport running the maglev route from the northern border back to the Ax Hill bamboo plantation. Most of the transports carrying low-value goods were unmanned vehicles, and our friend claimed that all manner of questionable individuals without respectable farm jobs used them for long-distance travel. Rabbit's offer to take everyone back via cloud was turned down, partly because of the need to keep a low profile and partly because the men were also bringing back a heavy stack of scrap rebar. This, they explained, was for making weapons. Sitting on the slowly swaying bed of the transport, endless fields of rain-spattered soybeans rolling by like a minimalist rotoscope, Rabbit regarded the little bundle of salvaged metal with a skeptical eye.

"You sure you guys are up to this? I can tell you, those guys at the lab have some serious guns."

The three men laughed along with each other at some private joke. "That's what you think, but that's 'cause you're the one they're made for," the manager explained cryptically. "You're on their wavelength, you and the pandas. Those fancy stun-guns affect a normal person about as much as a flashlight. We know, because the technicians like to take them out into the forest on Sundays to play laser tag."

Rabbit was stunned. "What?! They came up with something that *only* affects immortals?"

"I guess they didn't expect to be defending

themselves against normal folk.” He winked broadly.

“That just doesn’t seem fair,” she complained. “Sounds perfectly fair to me. There are plenty of things that affect us but not you. An iron bar to the head, for one.” The manager patted the bundle of rebar lovingly.

“How much else have you figured out about these guys?” Rabbit asked after a few more minutes of quiet riding. I silently thanked my companion for interviewing primary sources on my behalf. She really was becoming a good partner for a Grand Historian, and not only because of the history she herself kept making.

“What do you want to know?” Gu’s grin reappeared instantly. “Our boys are everywhere.”

She pondered possible lines of inquiry. “To start with, who runs that place?”

The manager leaned back as if she’d hit him with a real doozy. “Weeell, the locals say it actually started out as a panda breeding and research deal back when they were still trying to save the species. Dr. Jiu is the Director of Research now, but he’s just some brilliant genius type they hired to head things up. Dr. Ming -- or whatever his real name is -- is just working there as a consultant, bringing some industrial espionage know-how to the group to help them lure you in. But maybe they’ll fire him after yesterday. I don’t know who’s *supposed* to own the Center or what its purpose is *supposed* to be, but anyone can guess it’s really just a pet project of whichever Liu is in charge now. And I know you’ve already figured out for yourself what sort of research they’re really up to, because that wasn’t your first question”

“Yeah,” she confirmed, feigning boredom. “The same old immortality business. People can be so unoriginal.”

“Aye, but you have to admit Mr. Liu has the jump on the rest. Not even the First Emperor of Qin had a cage of immortal pandas to experiment on, or a real live immortal woman to trap and interrogate. Science sure is amazing.”

“Science, ha! They almost got me through old-as-dirt, bargain-bin dirty tricks, not *science*. The only science they’re going to need now is some damn good reconstructive surgery when I’m done with them.”



The Phoenix Pool guerillas made their camps in the depths of the forest, constructing low bamboo structures far from the areas where early summer cultivation was beginning. The resourceful factory workers had adapted well to forest life, but they looked to have had a miserable couple of months. Of the hundred-odd workers who had successfully made the trek from the Ao River, the majority were close to or younger than Rabbit’s eternal twenty-two years; some of the others were quite old. But under the enthusiastic leadership of Manager Gu, they had formed some semblance of a tight paramilitary unit while waiting for their savior. Rabbit was, needless to say, received with all the celebration befitting a true messiah. The commitment of the young irregulars to covert silence was sorely tested as they ran back and forth, whispering animatedly to their comrades. They reminded me of nothing so much as a colony of ants, touching antennae as they spread joyful news through the camp. Amid this, a few silent but ecstatic little dances broke out, while other soldiers retained their composure enough to look stoic and impressive in front of the long-awaited celestial arrival.

Entering the barely restrained jubilation of the encampment, Manager Gu passed the bundle of rebar off to a contingent of waiting young men for filing into weapons, then beckoned his four other lieutenants over to introduce them to their new Mistress Commander. The bewildered general in question received them with as much ceremony as she could manage with a straight face, still getting used to the idea of leading a home-brewed army. Before long, the rasp of files on metal filled the camp, sounding dangerously loud in the silent forest. In reality, though, the dense ranks of bamboo soaked up sound like a thirsty sponge, a perfect ally for a covert operation like ours.

“If only the Immortal of the South Pole could see you now,” I whispered from Rabbit’s shoulder. “Leading a guerilla army of workers out in the jungle! You might as well break out into a chorus of the *Internationale* right now!” She silenced me with a smack on her shoulder. “A lot of bugs out here,” she

commented offhand.

"You got that right," Manager Gu nodded. "More spiders than you could fit in a frying pan. And believe us, we've tried!" The nearby soldiers cracked up at the joke; it was unclear whether it was funny because it was such a ridiculous image, or because it was true.

"Right!" the manager hissed in his loudest whisper, "Let's have reports, and make it snappy for the new General!" His six lieutenants crowded closer.

"The labs have been quiet all day," the senior lieutenant -- no older than twenty-seven -- reported with a pitiable attempt at a salute. "The snipers are still out on the roofs, but I don't think they're expecting a return visit from Miss Tu anytime soon." He nodded to the newcomer respectfully, as if apologizing for even presuming to utter her name.

"That's perfect," Manager Li enthused, hopping up and down. "We should strike while the iron is hot, then. Assuming of course General Tu agrees?" He looked to Rabbit for confirmation.

She shrugged in a manner rather unbecoming of a supreme officer. "Sounds good to me. What do you all think?"

A younger female lieutenant with a raffish green bandana raised her makeshift sword like a thousand kung fu movie stars. "Beggin' yer pardon, but this outdoor life is gettin' old. I'm ready to fight our way out of this forest. Let's go!"

The other officers brandished their own weapons in agreement, raising quiet slogans.

"Alright then," Rabbit said, finally taking charge. "Here's the plan. We're going for a straight-up frontal assault. Those main gates should be a pushover." She surveyed the faces of her officers, seeing ambivalence and surprise. She laughed. "Haha! Don't look like lambs at the slaughterhouse! I have more of a plan than that, of course. It's just a surprise." Somewhat reassured, the soldiers put on brave faces and disbanded to gather their respective units.

"When did *you* come up with a grand strategy?" I whispered.

"About sixty seconds ago, what did you expect? Just wait, I think you'll like it." General Tu strolled off in finest martial bearing to survey her force.



I missed the further preparations for battle, taking the next hour or two off to get my records up to speed, but from the looks of the sweatshop-employees-turned-insurgent-force there wasn't much to prepare anyway. It's a wonder it took them even that length of time to gird themselves in their camouflage of stitched bamboo leaves and collect their homemade weapons. There were almost enough iron stakes to go around, but for the twenty or so unfortunate privates left without Rabbit used her control over the wood element to mould sharp bamboo spears. The end result was like something out of a no-budget Hong Kong television adaptation of the *Water Margins*. I suggested, in fact, that we ought to film this whole thing and make some money on the side. Still, as General Tu astutely pointed out, young men with pointy sticks have accomplished greater deeds than this.

By four in the afternoon, the force was prepared and making for their position. With the high walls and electric fencing surrounding the complex, the only approach really was through the main gates. Strategically speaking this was lamentable, but the two unarmed security guards manning the portal honestly didn't look like that much of a threat. Besides, Rabbit said she had a plan.

"Get within sight of the gates and wait for my sign," the General ordered, turning to split from the group at the first slope of the hill. She was still just wearing her modified blue robe, but had adopted one of the guerilla force's pointed bamboo hats just so she could wear it at a dashing military angle.

"Did we have a sign?" asked the confused Manager Gu.

"You'll know it when you see it!" she shouted over her shoulder as she ran off between the stalks of bamboo. A short distance away she hopped into the air and pushed her way up through the canopy of feathery branches, soaring skywards. In the diminishing light of the overcast late afternoon, she was in little danger of being spotted from the complex. She floated higher until we could see the whole hill laid out below.

"You don't want to miss this, Grand

Historian!” she shouted.

I crawled out of my burrow at her shoulder for a better view and stretched my jumping legs, letting my antennae sway in the wind. “Alright, let’s have it before all these mortals die of old age.”

Rabbit began muttering under her breath, holding her left hand open over her head and scrawling calligraphy with her left, as is her manner. It took me a moment to register the movement I saw below. The swaying sea of green was flowing against the island at its center. The upper branches thrashed like whitewater as new bamboo shoots sprang up on the inner periphery, rocketing to full height instantly. These new plants in turn sent out runners of their own, bringing the forest right up to the walls of the complex. And the spirited plants didn’t stop there; runners shot up the walls, coiling like snakes and vaulting over the high barriers to reach the fertile soil inside. At the main gate, the bamboo plants virtually marched right in, spilling through the bottleneck into a widening pool in the campus’s gardens, where they met with the new growth pouring over the walls. The overall effect looked as if the sea of green had become a literal ocean, flooding the dry outpost at its center. Within a minute, only the tops of the taller buildings formed square islands in an unbroken forest, and only the highest main tower on the hilltop -- home to the panda cage -- rose more than a few meters above the emerald blanket. With a final couple of violent thrashes, the bamboo fell calm.

“You’re not bad at this guerilla warfare thing!” I congratulated. “A portable forest -- that’s the first real innovation the form has seen in ages!”

“Why use the terrain as an ally when you can just conscript it?” she congratulated herself.

“Remind me to name a really ridiculous chess move after this someday. The excessiveness of your solutions never ceases to amaze. The bird’s eye view was great, but I’m disappointed I didn’t get to see the looks on anyone’s faces in there. That’ll teach them to respect their elders!”

“Hey, your netpad has a camera, right?” she asked, digging the device out of her robe. “I gotta get a shot of this.” She grappled with the pad, trying to find the camera function.

I waited patiently for her to give up the endeavor; my pad did not, in fact, come with

photographic capabilities, it’s strictly a business machine. “Ah, aren’t you forgetting something, Mistress Commander?”

“What, you mean my soldiers? They can take care of themselves in there. I’ll just wait a minute for all the snipers to abandon their posts and then head for Mr. Wang’s cell.”

“Alright, you’re the CO,” I shrugged. “I’ll meet you there. My recording duties call.” I hopped off my companion’s shoulder and fell like a stone.

-- *Splinter-of-Jade, Grand Historian of Mount Penglai*

Ax Hill, July 24th, Third Quarter, Fiscal Year 2046

Part Nineteen The Tower of Light

In the bare, eerie understory of the freshly sprouted bamboo grove, it wasn’t hard to find the action. The fighting was brutal, primitive, and noisy as a plague of street vendors. The center’s security force were lent an advantage by their body armor, but they quickly discarded their energy weapons and grabbed whatever was at hand once they discovered that their attackers weren’t immortals -- or simply reached the ends of their extension cords. The insurgents, in turn, used their camouflage and the general chaos following the sudden bamboo invasion to their advantage. I’ve seen my fair share of hand-to-hand warfare in my thousand years, but the dynamic changes when neither side has any formal training or professional armaments. I’ve also seen plenty of wine shop brawls and market riots -- it was these that more readily came to mind as I took note of the carnage. Catching the general gist of things, I decided my duties had been fulfilled and I could indulge in a more participant form of observation. I was never one to pass up a good public brouhaha.

I had an appointment to keep, so I only smashed up the half-dozen or so bemused guards I came across on my way to the main building. The old skills were coming back to me.

“The kung fu movies know what they’re talking about,” I shouted gleefully to a confused guerilla fighter as he watched an armored guard go down seemingly of his own volition, “bamboo forests really are perfect for this sort of thing!”

As I was putting the finishing touches on poor number six with a couple of fighting-cricket kicks I hadn’t used in years, bouncing him off the springy bamboo trunks as if they were boxing ropes, orders buzzed over the campus-wide intercom. Though distorted by the loudspeakers and filtered through the dense trunks, it had the distinct oily quality of Dr. Ming’s slippery voice.

“Security officers, return to Tower One with your mu-meson beamers. The immortal is going to attack here!”

The spy was no fool. I left my guard alone to slump peacefully to the grass and made for the white edifice ahead, weaving between trunks like a daredevil bumblebee.

I didn’t see any guards there when I arrived; orders or no, they were being kept plenty busy elsewhere. I was happy to see it, because a lone figure was just now drifting to the hilltop from high above. I spiraled up to meet her halfway, perching lightly on my companion’s shoulder.

“Did you make a good account of yourself, bug?” she asked, noticing my return.

“You know it! There’s a couple of security grunts down there who won’t look at arthropods the same way after this.”

“Well I’m glad you’re having fun. Any recon?” questioned the General.

“I think our undercover friend might be in the tower, he was calling over the loudspeakers for the guards to come back. I don’t think many of them are in any shape to respond, though.”

“Good, I’d better get in there quick then.” She alighted in the twilight realm beneath the bamboo, next to a side entrance of the tower.

“You do realize this is almost certainly a trap?”

“Whatever,” she sighed.

“Just checking.”

The halls inside were deserted, but occasional whispers and bumps echoed from behind the closed doors on either side. The scientists and technicians, I guessed, were hiding under their laboratory tables. The passages also throbbed,

as before, with the low-frequency vibrations of the beam generators holding the pandas captive at the building’s center. Rabbit rushed silently past the upturned equipment carts and scattered Petri dishes littering the hallway, making a beeline for the stairs. Her spatial memory surprised me; the emergency staircase was right where she’d left it on her way out the previous day. Then I realized she’d just been following the glowing signs on the ceiling.

She literally flew up the staircase, rising to the sixth floor in a matter of a few dizzy seconds. I noted that this was, in fact, the highest storey of the tower, the stairs above us leading only to the roof -- quite an unoriginal hiding place for a dandy-in-distress, I mused. Peering around the cracked door into the upper hallway, Rabbit judged that the coast was clear.

“Do you remember how to get there from here?” I whispered uncertainly.

“I think I can find it from the elevators.” She pointed up to the backlit green sign on the ceiling, an arrow pointing to the left marked with the universal stickmen-in-a-box elevator symbol. Levitating down the hall after the signs, she rounded the corner just a few meters from a trio of black-armored guards standing in front of the elevators with weapons leveled at the silent metal doors. She quickly reversed direction before she was seen and tried another route. After a few minutes of careful wandering, both of us scanning the doors on either side, we finally peeked down a familiar hallway where a lone guard was stationed outside a closed door. Rabbit shooed me off her shoulder. I obediently took to the air, flew silently down the corridor at ceiling level, and brought the sentry down with as silent a kick to the head as I could manage. Fortunately, he wasn’t wearing a helmet; armor did seem to be in limited supply after all. In fact, the poor grunt looked like he might have been an ordinary lab technician requisitioned for this duty. If that was the best Dr. Ming could manage, I thought, maybe Rabbit wasn’t in such grave danger after all.

My companion hurried down the passage to the door; this was indeed the reinforced portal bearing the name “Wang Xian, Visiting Associate.” Not wasting a moment, Rabbit

drew her last wooden chopstick from the wine shop in Chengdu out of her robe and held it up to the keyhole. Under the power of a few mumbled words of elemental magic, the tip thinned and lengthened until she could insert it into the lock. She concentrated a few seconds longer to form the right shape inside, then turned the makeshift skeleton key with a stubborn click. The door instantly jerked open, pulling the chopstick from her grasp. "You're back!" Wang Xian stood inside holding the door, disbelief on his face. "Not for long," Rabbit answered. She grabbed her partner's wrist and yanked him into the hallway. "The stairs are this way." Mr. Wang ran as fast as he could on the slippery tiles, Rabbit pulling him bodily along from a foot higher up. Making it to the safety of the staircase, Rabbit started up rather than down. Either she didn't want to repeat herself, or she was in a real hurry to get out of here, or maybe she just hadn't noticed the roof exit until now. She kicked open the unlocked door and ran out onto the roof. There was nobody to be seen; she was home free, with the welcoming evening sky beckoning her to it. She held Mr. Wang's hand tighter and jumped like she wanted to reach Hangzhou in a single leap. As their feet left the rooftop, a blinding flash like a visual thunderclap cut off the sky. The two partners fell back heavily to the concrete, stunned and dazzled.

On the peak of Ax Hill, it was evening no more. The darkening sky had been replaced in an instant by painfully bright day, albeit day on a world positioned much too close to a dying sun. The tower and a hundred-meter radius of forest around it blazed far into the ultraviolet spectrum, farther even than a cricket can perceive. Beyond that hundred-meter limit, the world simply vanished. The light, and the mind-rattling hum that accompanied it, were precisely the same we had seen and felt beside the panda cage. Rabbit must surely have realized as quickly as I that this was the same enclosure, just on a much larger scale. And this looked to be a newer model; instead of individual laser-like beams forming the bars of the prison, the ring of emitters around the building produced a solid wall of light, its intensity unbroken even by the web of bamboo branches it burned through in places. There didn't look to be a gap large enough for even a cricket to pass

through unscathed. It was as perfect a snare as a mortal could hope to devise.

Rabbit pulled her partner to his feet, but didn't move, rooted to the spot with indecision. Her suspicion that she had been walking into a trap had clearly done little to soften the blow.

"What do you think?" asked the man who currently called himself Dr. Ming, strolling onto the roof and surveying the view as if it were a lovely day on the beach. Behind the spy, ten or more black-helmeted guards poured out of the stairwell trailing extension cords like animated marionettes. They lined up and locked their weapons on Rabbit.

"Don't worry, I'm going to be brief this time, even though I have all the time in the world..."

"I'm not worried," she interrupted coolly, "I don't need more than a minute to beat the bean paste out of you."

"That won't be necessary. We have your little Red Army under control now, at least what's left of them. We can let the kiddies and the esteemed Mr. Wang return to Waha State now, or we can do things your way."

Rabbit let go of Mr. Wang's wrist and dropped her head, renegade tears escaping from her eyes despite her best stubborn efforts to hold them back. "Yeah yeah, you don't have to explain it to me. I know I'm the one you want. You can *have* my worthless feathered butt. I've had it laid out enough times, I know this is all my fault anyway. Just let the others go peacefully, or I really *will* tear your liver out through your ear." The spy nodded, motioning for three of the guards to escort the near-catatonic Mr. Wang down the stairs. "I'm sorry, partner," she called after him. "You shouldn't be here. None of those kids from the factory should be either, or Manager Gu. And neither should you."

I didn't realize who the last apology was directed at until Rabbit tore open the rip at her shoulder, snatched me out of my burrow, and threw me from the roof as hard as she could. The force behind her throw was such that I didn't even have to use my own power to make it all the way to the barrier; indeed, I didn't have time to do anything but mentally brace myself before hitting the wall of brilliant blue light. Within, I found only darkness.



I didn't realize until later that I was out for nearly two days before awaking to pain and befuddlement on a cold bed of packed dirt. I climbed out from under the leaf litter on the forest floor, watching the otherworldly glow of the light-barrier twenty meters away. So the energy stream really did just have a nasty stunning effect on immortals, I thought to myself -- otherwise I never would have survived that trip through even to the modest extent I did. Beyond that I knew little. I wondered if the weariness I was feeling was a residual effect of my passage, or whether exposure to the energy even at a distance had a partially debilitating effect. If this was the case, I wondered how Rabbit was doing inside. After this, I wondered if Dr. Ming hadn't seen Rabbit sending me away, or if they just hadn't managed to find me out here. Both seemed likely. Heaven knows, I'm used to being overlooked. I must admit it comes in handy for a historian.

I hopped up through the canopy and started a slow circuit around the cage, more out of curiosity and duty to my record-keeping than any hope of finding a way in or out. I fully trusted the man who vanquished the Immortal Woman Rabbit to do a proper job of building her prison. The walls of the tower of light rose from emitters buried in a full unbroken ring at ground level to a point a good three or four hundred meters above where they crossed over themselves, fading out into the heavy, rain-laden clouds above Ax Hill. The conical spire formed must have been visible for a hundred kilometers. I wondered how the Hope Group was going to explain this one; I was sure they already had something drafted up. I was equally without doubt that the prison was unassailable to immortals both inside and out. Whatever considerable power source was running it, I guessed, must be in or under the tower itself, and must be protected by the same energy fields. It was a self-contained world that any ordinary old grandmother could walk in or out of, but not even Jest-Much, the antediluvian God of War, could hope to breach as a celestial.

Sure enough, the inevitable tragic fruits of Rabbit's meddling in the mortal realm could not be avoided; indeed, any historian knows they never can be. Not even the Liu State spy himself could be blamed for acting as an agent of fate -- nor could I. Even if I had tried my hardest to dissuade her from the start, I knew, I could not have steered her away from her path; there is a set pattern to these things, as immutable as the universal *Dao* itself. Whether the immortal in question is regarded as a hero or a ravager is purely dependent on how they meet their downfall. By making of her end a supreme sacrifice to save those mortals whose lives she had toyed with, Rabbit had placed herself among the ranks of the finest champions. It was my humble duty now to finish my history, so that my dear friend's glorious end might be immortalized and her tale stand as one more warning to the daydreamers of the higher realms. With these thoughts I turned away from the tower of light, my tiny heart as heavy as a millstone, and headed East. History can be a lonely career indeed.



More than half the floors of the White Snake Tower were lit when I returned to Hangzhou in the early hours of the next morning, but the animated billboard atop the building made no mention of Rabbit's former company. The screen played a celebratory loop advertising Golden Leaf Laundry Powder, a product that appeared every bit as miraculous as White Snake toothpaste -- if the hyperbolic animation sequences were to be believed. I entered the building through the roof, squeezing between the crack of the elevator doors and floating down the shaft to the fourteenth floor.

Unlike most of the building, it was pitch black. The flimsy picnic table was still there, as was the single inhabited room with its four occupants slumbering in the sizeable, yet still barely sufficient, bed. Having no trouble finding my way around with my excellent nocturnal vision, I climbed through the

poorly-joined drawers of the cheap aluminum desk until I found a netpad. Switching it on, it proved to be Mrs. Wang's -- a major downgrade from her previous top-of-the-line model, but good enough for my purposes. I dimmed the screen as far as I could, accessed the net, logged into my account, and retrieved my nineteen records from backup. Inside the cold, dark drawer, I continued where I had left off, bringing Rabbit's tragic tale up to the present as faithfully as I could. After I finished, I started going back to do some editing on the previous hurried chapters. I didn't even worry about what I was going to do with the writings afterwards. Great histories have a way of making it onto the shelves of the Grand Heavenly Archives one way or another, be they written on bamboo in scholarly calligraphy, input on a netpad screen, or scratched on the walls of a cell. It's the writing that counts. I was just going to have to tell my friend Han Xiang to apply for a library card if he wanted to read my work after I returned.

I was still going over my work two hours past dawn, when in the other room the elevator dinged. I'd already heard Mr. Wang's parents take their granddaughter out for a walk and some breakfast a short time before; only Mrs. Wang was there to hear it. She shuffled out cautiously, but rushed into the next room with a soft cry when she saw her husband step into the apartment. I abandoned my writing and squirmed out of the drawer, hurrying to see the reunion. Wang Xian hugged his wife, his eyes squeezed tight. Manager Gu stood to one side, grinning like a



The poorly-fit metal drawer screeched open with a yank. Absorbed in my writing, I nearly jumped out of my carapace with surprise. Mrs. Wang looked down at me, only a hint of surprise showing in her tired eyes. "Well, good morning," she said calmly. I had nowhere to hide. I just bobbed my antennae politely and looked back up at her. "Good morning to you too, ma'am." "So you must be our Miss Tu's little friend,"

she guessed, crouching down for a closer look. "What are you doing back here?"

"You know me?" I asked, my simple little heart still recovering from shock.

"I've seen you around with Miss Tu. I'm not blind, you know, and you two were living in my house for quite a while."

I shrugged my hind legs, accepting this. "Sorry to sneak around like this, I just needed to borrow your netpad."

"Are you writing to Miss Tu?" she asked, glancing at the screen hopefully.

"No, unfortunately I'm just writing *about* her," I replied miserably. "She ran into some trouble, and won't be coming back."

Mrs. Wang shook her head in condolence. "I'm sorry to hear it. Isn't there anything you can do to help her?"

"I'm not well suited to self-pity, but look at me!" I laughed. "I'm just a simple insect who came along to play historian. I used to be her protector, but she's a real immortal now, plenty more powerful than me at least. If my friend can't help herself, Yama knows there's nothing I'll ever be able to do for her."

"So that's what you're writing, her history?" she asked, looking skeptical for some reason. I took her expression for condemnation, and withered beneath it.

"Nothing else to do now."

The woman picked up her pad and looked over the screen. "Well here's your problem right here." She turned the device around and held the screen downwards for me to read.

"*Manager Gu stood to one side, grinning like a...*" I read out loud from the last line of the visible text. "Yeah, I didn't finish because you opened the drawer before I could come up with a good simile."

"No no," she explained in the voice she ordinarily uses for teaching simple facts to her young daughter. "What you're forgetting is, my husband hasn't come home yet."

"Hasn't... *what?*?"

She smiled mysteriously. "I didn't know historians were allowed to write about things before they happen. Doesn't that make everything a little confusing?"

My poor, tiny head felt like it had just disengaged from my body. I couldn't possibly believe what I was hearing. "I... I think..."

"I think you have more power than you realize." She set the pad back down in front of me. "I'll bet that happens to you immortal types all the time."

In the other room, the elevator dinged. "Right on cue," Mrs. Wang winked. "I'll leave you alone, I think you have some writing to do." She shuffled out cautiously, but rushed into the next room with a soft cry when she saw her husband step into the apartment.

Barely hearing the jubilant sounds outside, I returned to my document, struggling to calm my nerves. I didn't take time to wonder at what point I'd started writing of events before the fact. I didn't think about how many disasters, battles, and hardships I might have brought into being through the words in front of me. I certainly didn't pause to dwell on Rabbit's gloriously tragic fate, or the nature of fate itself. I just finished off the nineteenth document and began writing the last. It's the writing that counts.

-- *Splinter-of-Jade, Grand Village Idiot of Mount Penglai*
Hangzhou, July 27th, Third Quarter, Fiscal Year 2046

Part Twenty The Deliverance of the Immortal Woman Rabbit

Exhausted beyond belief from hours of writing and two inter-State flights in as many days, I drifted down to the dirt path along the maglev rail, close to the fenced boundary between soybean fields and bamboo. Flying this far under my own power was murder, I thought to myself -- however much I dislike magic, I really needed to get Rabbit to teach me some cloudmaking when we got home. I looked up and down the path between fields fresh with morning dew (or pesticide spray), woozy and unstable. There was an old man in a shabby coat sitting by the boundary fence, utter misery on his wrinkled face. Tear streaks stained both sides of his enormous nose.

I knew exactly who the man was. I hobbled up the path to greet him.
"Hail, Honored Sir, and good morning!"
"Not really," he observed. His speech was

gruff, but not unkind. He looked like he could use a friend.

"I take it you're the earth god from yonder hill?" I ventured.

"And I take it you're a talking cricket. What an odd meeting." His face didn't brighten one bit.

I looked up through the fence to the cone of light enveloping the nearby peak, shining more white than blue in the morning sun. "You don't look too pleased with the new development. I take it they didn't come to you for a building license?"

"I was out visiting a friend when they turned that damned thing on," the local deity complained, holding out his calloused hands as if pleading before a court magistrate. "Now I can't get back home! It was bad enough when they built those monstrosities on top of my peak, but now they have to wrap it up in a god-proof net too? And that's not the half of it! They also stuck a *nuclear* generator down in the middle of my poor hill to run the thing -- that can't be good for the environment, I don't care what their engineers say. No justice these days, I tell you. Never would have stood for it back in the Tang dynasty."

I shook my head. "Indeed not. Kicking an earth god out like that -- I'd say they're in for some rotten luck."

"You can say that again! Why, the last time..." he stopped short and raised an eyebrow at me. "Just what are you getting at, sonny?"

"Ah, well. I happen to have a grievance with our friends on the hill too, and I could use some help from an honorable deity such as yourself."

The earth god of Ax Hill carried me on his shoulder through the bamboo forest, following his own secret paths to a spot only thirty meters or so from the edge of the tower of light. He traveled quickly for an old man, covering ground as only a spirit of the earth can. When we reached his designated spot -- a completely unremarkable patch of bare ground between the bamboo stalks -- he studied the area, scraping his foot at the hard soil beneath the leaf clutter, and took a step back. Striking a pose, he clapped his hands as if he were about to dance. The sound died out quickly in the thick forest. A moment later, however, another sound answered it from below. The groan from the bowels of the hill grew into a detectable shaking, drowning out

even the subsonic hum of the force field generators. At the god's feet, a fissure two meters long split open with a sharp crack. Yellow bamboo leaves fell over the edge and drifted into the darkness below.

"There you go, sonny. That's about as big as I can make it without the whole place falling to pieces, especially with that damn nuclear machine down there and all."

"Oh, thank you, it's plenty big for me. I'll just be a moment."

I hopped into the fissure and followed the uneven cleft in the rock, which, sure enough, formed a tunnel a good forty or fifty meters long. I came out of the ground inside the field of energy, where the research building still glowed with the same intense, unhealthy light. I stopped on a bamboo stump to get my bearings; the plants had already been cleared from the inside of the cone, leaving a field of giant stubble. I caught my breath, beginning to feel drained. I was sure now the blue light had some effect on immortals even at a distance. Shaking off the lethargy, I made for the doors of the lab.

The inside hadn't changed a bit. I crawled along the corners of the hallway ceilings like a cockroach as fast as I could run, willing the busy researchers below not to notice me. After one or two false turns, I found the chamber at the center. The panda cage was still there, looking an order of magnitude smaller after seeing its giant cousin outside. A handful of armed guards stood around the periphery. The ten or so captive pandas lay about inside, only one of them now floating in lazy circles halfway up the cage. I zoomed behind a guard and between the beams of the cage, feeling my muscles tingle unpleasantly as I passed near the rays. There, amid the animals, Rabbit lay resting against the side of a large snoring panda. She was wearing a heavier, padded version of a hospital gown, staring up at the ceiling. I alighted on her knee and chirped.

"Having fun?"

Her eyes fell to me and widened. "Spu... Hey!"

"Get ready to go." I left her and flew back through the bars. A cursory search of the surrounding chamber turned up no easy way to open the cage. Checking out the guards to see if any of them had keys or such, I recognized one of the security employees.

Fortunately, it seemed that helmets weren't required for this duty. He had been wearing one last time I'd met him in the bamboo forest during the battle, at least until I'd ripped it off the poor guy's head. Funny how you never forget the face of a man you beat the stuffing out of. If I had any doubt, the nasty black eye was proof enough. I landed on his armor-padded shoulder.

"Hey bugbait," I whispered in his ear. He almost dropped his gun, straining to look at me out of the corner of his eye. The muscles of his shoulder crawled under my feet. "Don't say a word, or I'm taking a romantic cruise down your ear canal. Eyes front." He nodded and turned his head back, shaking like an electric eel with its polarity reversed. "You know what to do. Turn off the cage or it's straight for the brain."

He walked as casually as he could -- not very casually at all, under the circumstances -- up to an unobtrusive keypad on the wall, and started jabbing at the numbers.

"Hey Hanbao, what the hell..." someone shouted.

The bars of the cage flickered and died, leaving the room in partial darkness. Belying their reputation for sluggishness, the pandas actually realized the implications of the development before most of the guards. A couple of hapless sentries were mauled before anyone even thought to open fire. Rabbit didn't wait around to see the results, and neither did I. I caught up with her in the hallway and grabbed onto the shoulder of her gown. The technicians proved to be fast learners; they dodged inside their rooms at the first sounds of screaming, leaving the halls empty of so much as a single white coat for our flight. Rabbit, for her part, had been just as quick at picking up the floor layout and made a beeline straight for the front doors with the orienteering skills of a veteran lab rat.

"Head for that hole in the ground!" I commanded. My companion pulled up short at the dark fissure.

"Sorry, but I don't think I'm going to fit..." she observed, panic undermining her intended sarcasm.

"Just give me a second." I jumped to the edge of the pit. "HEY OLD MAN AX HILL!" I hollered as loud as I could into the hole. "LET 'ER RIP!"

Rabbit looked around fearfully. "I don't know what you're up to, but..."

She stumbled and braced herself as the ground began bucking and trembling beneath her feet. I jumped to her shoulder with a victory whoop.

"Wait for it..."

As the roaring earth shook harder and harder, like a buffalo trying to dislodge a bird that has grievously overstayed its welcome, the ingenious security shield reached the limits of its design tolerance. The sky above us strobed for a split second, then reverted to a natural grey. The drastic downward shift in light frequencies was enough to make any mammalian optic nerve hand in its resignation. Rabbit blinked away stars, fighting for balance on the gymnastic soil.

"I know you can't see right now, just go straight up!" I shouted.

"Gladly!" she responded, and shot skywards like an arrow loosed from the bow.

"Higher, higher," I urged unnecessarily, until we were close to the cloud cover. Rabbit slowed and rubbed her eyes clear. She turned for a last look below just in time to see the miniature nuclear reactor buried beneath Ax Hill lose its cool and go off like an angry downstairs neighbor.

We dallied just long enough to watch the former research facility -- former *hill* for that matter -- settle into another fine public relations disaster for the Hope Group, dust cloud rising like a beacon. Whooping in victory, Rabbit plucked me off her shoulder and planted a sloppy kiss on my head that would take me an hour to clean off. "I knew you'd be back!"

"Don't mention it."

"I must say this is impressive, even for you," she complimented, surveying the carnage below with a connoisseur's eye.

"Thanks. I can't take all the credit though. I worked some connections, got a little help from the local earth god."

"You got an earth god to blow up his own hill?!" she laughed. "Those guys usually won't poke their heads out to save an orphanage from a landslide! Heck, Lan Caihe says most of them don't even exist."

"Yeah well, this guy was quite a character." I snickered cryptically at my own joke.

The breeze died down; we watched the

column of rising dust drifting perilously close. Rabbit took one last look below and soared beyond its grasp, through the layers of grey mist to the clear sunlit vault above. She summoned up a pink cloud and lay back, slumping into its folds with a sigh. Nothing more needed to be said -- we both knew we were finished with this mudhole for a good long while. Picking up speed, she swung around the clear sky in a decidedly non-Euclidean arc, steering her cloud in the particular direction of Mount Penglai, which is no direction the First Emperor of Qin ever dreamed of.

-- *Splinter-of-Jade, Grand Historian of Mount Penglai*

Hangzhou, July 27th, Third Quarter, Fiscal Year 2046

