

## **Sweet as Blood, Biting as a Sword**

by

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When Tzu Lung had last been to the village of Shui, he had been seven years old. When he returned, he was twenty and everything looked different and strange.

Northeastern Tsao Chao, near to Kong-yan, was dense woods covering hills of jade. The summers were mild and short, the winters were long and bitterly cold. Spring was a season of flooding and mud as heavy rains combined with melting snow to create torrents in the innumerable valleys of the Hai-long province.

The village of Shui existed to feed the fortress that stood on the hills above it and dominated the valley below it. Most of the economy came from the mining of jade and trading of furs. It was a rough hewn and rowdy town, fierce and independent.

Tzu Lung crossed the swollen rivers and muddy valley to get there. His saffron robe was covered with mud while his feet and calves were caked with it; three weeks growth of hair furred his head. He carried only a simple sack over his shoulder and a staff as he entered the town. Several children ran up to him, splashing through the thick mud, to stare openly while the others in the town only gave him furtive glances.

He was an outsider, now, in the place where he had been born.

While he walked through the muddy main street of the village, he stopped in front of the inn where his mother sent him to get wine when he was a child. After a moment's hesitation, he went into the building.

The main room was a large, wide room set with tables and booths. It was lit, now, only with sunlight giving the interior of the building a golden haze as light slanted through the many narrow windows. The whole place was made of wood, worn smooth with the passage of time. In one corner was where the innkeeper sat, on a low chair, next to the vats of wine with a door into the kitchen. Currently, with the roads all of mud, the inn was almost empty.

The innkeeper was the same one from his youth. The black hair had turned iron gray, he had put on weight and gained wrinkles, but his narrowed eyes had the same suspicious look to them. He was Tien-poh, Tzu Lung remembered.

Tzu Lung walked up to Tien-poh. Tzu Lung leaned his staff in the crook of his arm, placed his hands together and bowed towards the innkeeper, saying, "Namaste."

Tien-poh nodded and stroked his chin. "How can I help you, young monk."

"I am looking for a woman named Jing-mei. She is in her mid-thirties . . ."

"Jing-mei is dead," Tien-poh cut in, brusquely, unthinkingly.

"Oh," Tzu Lung said as the words burned him, for Jing-mei was his mother. "I . . . thank you." He bowed, again, and took his staff in his hand and turned to leave. Then he stopped and turned back to Tien-poh. "Sir, can you tell me the manner of her death? The manner of her life?"

Tien-poh gazed for a while at Tzu Lung before saying, "Who are you to be asking that, young man?"

"I am Tzu Lung. I am her son."

Tien-poh's face softened a little and the man frowned. "You don't drink, right?"

"Alcohol? No, sir, I don't."

Tien-poh poured a bowl of wine, anyway, and drank some of it. "She died three years ago of the plague. More than that, you don't want to know."

Tzu Lung felt his lower lip quivering, slightly, as the emotions welled up inside of him. He had not expected this. Tien-poh, on the other hand, saw a grave hardening of Tzu Lung's eyes and a tension in the young man's form.

Tzu Lung said, "I want to know."

Tien-poh took another drink. "I don't want to tell you."

Tzu Lung fixed his hard eyes, then, on Tien-poh.

"You're a monk," Tien-poh said. "You're not going to rough me up."

"I was a monk. I left."

"She sent you to the monastery because she couldn't feed you after your father died in . . . a . . ."

"Brawl. My father was in a brawl and he was stabbed in the throat. I was there."

"Yes. After that, your mother couldn't make ends meet . . ."

"I was there for that, as well. Master Tien-poh, please, tell me what I was not there for."

The man sighed and finished his bowl of wine. Then he said, "After she came back, well, she didn't have any family. She became a . . . comfort girl."

Tzu Lung paused, and his eyes tightened more, and he said, "She became a prostitute."

"She was a sweet woman. She mostly just danced, except when times were hard."

"I'll take that as a yes to my question."

Tien-poh nodded. "Well, yeah. But even that doesn't last too long. It's a hard life. It takes its toll. She . . . she eventually gave up the ghost. She took ill and didn't do anything to help herself out of it, refused to see a doctor. She was tired of . . ."

"She was tired of what she had become. She was tired of life. Of her life."

Tien-poh nodded, again.

Tzu Lung inhaled to try to focus his emotions; he couldn't do it, but managed a neutral look. He said, "Thank you. I think any more description would be counterproductive . . . except for two things. The first, was there anyone who treated my mother badly?"

"She got roughed up a couple of times, but . . . no one stands out."

"I see. The second, the man who stabbed my father was part of the Red Turban bandit gang. Are they still in the area?"

Tien-poh took a long time to answer. Then he said, "You're not thinking about fighting the Red Turbans. Not even the Marquis challenges them. They're of the Guang-ri, and to cross the Guang-ri is death even if the Red Turbans don't kill you."

"I'll also take that as a yes." He bowed from the waist, his hand still on his staff. "Na-maste."

Then Tzu Lung left the inn.

Tzu Lung left to meditate. He was no longer a monk, but the habits died hard – he didn't know how to just think like someone with a normal life might have done. Near the common square, he sat in the lotus position and tried to dissolve himself with the universe, trying to purge himself of the feelings that welled up inside of him.

He meditated into the night, ignoring the rain, and in the morning children discovered that they could hurdle mud clods at Tzu Lung, who would not flinch. As the sun was at about ten o'clock, a man with a spear and a swagger, wearing a leather jerkin and studded belt and leather boots and black woolen pants came up to the Tzu Lung.

"I heard you were asking about that whore, Jing-meï," he said. "It's a goddamn shame she's dead, because she was one wild ride in the sack."

Though Tzu Lung heard the words, he was enough in the meditative trance that they did not wound him. Some part of Tzu Lung wondered why the man was being so intentionally cruel; he had seen this sort of behavior, before, and it troubled him to his soul because it was completely . . . pointless. The man swaggered from side to side, around Tzu Lung.

"Yeah, I figure the whole town rode that horse," the man said, trying to get Tzu Lung's goat. When Tzu Lung did not rise to the bait, the man struck Tzu Lung in the side with the butt of his spear, but not hard enough to rouse Tzu Lung from his meditation. "You should listen to this, son. It's exciting stuff."

Tzu Lung did not move.

The man was frustrated and said, "I used to smack that bitch around, too." It was something that he had heard from Tien-poh – that Tzu Lung had asked about the men that had abused Jing-mei.

It worked, too. Putting off his meditation, Tzu Lung's half-lidded eyes opened with burning ferocity. He said, softly, "Though you appear not over-bright, you appear to have a fully functional reason, as you are testing me for emotional weakness. You have advanced your will. You are therefore responsible for your actions.

"I will give you one chance to retract your words about striking my mother. Perhaps you were lying in order to rouse me."

"Hell no! I beat that bitch within an inch of her life! She had to take it! I'm the headman's son!" He laughed.

"Then you have once chance to kill me. I advise you take it. Pray for success."

The man looked down at him. "You're threatening me? Some skinny monk, unarmed, is threatening me?"

Now, a small crowd had gathered at a safe distance around the two men.

Tzu Lung said, "I think I am threatening you. Yes. That is precisely it. I've never done it before, so forgive me if I'm not good at it."

"I beat the bitch, I get to kill the son. This is a good day," the man said, spun the spear around so he could thrust it overhand at Tzu Lung. Then the spearman lunged with the tip towards Tzu Lung's chest.

Tzu Lung caught the haft, right below the head of the spear, and instantly got into a low crouch, his right leg pressed against his chest, his left leg trailing out behind him to absorb the impact of the man's weight and strength against the spear. Tzu Lung was pushed back two inches, a furrow of mud about his feet, but the tip of the spear hovered an inch over Tzu Lung's heart.

The headman's son's eyes widened. He said, "I lied. I lied to get your goat!"

"Now I don't believe you," Tzu Lung said. Then he grimaced and pushed back, shoving the headman's son back through the mud, even though the man attempted to resist, tried to force the spear forward into Tzu Lung, as Tzu Lung narrowed his base and stood to close to his full height.

When the tip of the spear was about a foot from Tzu Lung's body, Tzu Lung spun and leapt over the spear, catching the headman's son in a powerful kick and also jerking the spear from the man's hands. The headman's son staggered away, almost falling down, and Tzu Lung flipped the spear in his hand and prepared to throw it.

"Please . . ." were the last words of the headman's son as Tzu Lung hurled the spear. The tip hit square in the breastbone, split it, and passed through the man's body. The headman's son looked surprised, briefly, before blackness overcame his vision.

It was the first person Tzu Lung had ever killed. He felt ill as he watched the dead body fall into the mud, blood welling obscenely from around the shaft of the weapon. He realized that he had not even learned the dead man's name, and knew this was the truth of it – that those we kill are nameless, must be nameless, to ease our murder of them. And though he knew, according to the precepts of Davana Buddhism, that he had not erred in killing one who was going to kill him, he felt a tremendous sense of remorse. He also had a terrible premonition that his life would be full of blood, so he also felt sadness.

He looked at the people who were watching. They feared him, now. Only one of them, a young girl of perhaps eleven years, did not. To her, Tzu Lung said, "Take me to the headman."

The headman of the village was Mao-yu and a different man from when Tzu Lung was living in the village when he was a boy. Mao-yu's office was the first room of his house – which was quite a bit nicer than any building other than the fortress – and it had the look of a man who was trying to pretend he was a real mandarin and not merely the headman of a provincial village. In his dress, Mao-yu was also trying to project a regal air, but it didn't fit his windburned face and weathered hands, the signs that he had once worked under the sun and wind with great vigor to acquire his position.

Tzu Lung was not the first to Mao-yu's office. A young man had run ahead of Tzu Lung and his guide, and the guide had merely pointed out the building and then fled for fear of what was to come. The man who had made it to the headman's house first was in the doorway and talking frantically when he saw Tzu Lung approach.

The young man's face twisted in fear and he said into the headman's office, "Master, call the marquis!" Then he set off, away from the building, at a run.

Tzu Lung walked up to the now vacant doorway and looked in. He noted the attempts at culture and the roughness of the headman. In Mao-yu's eyes Tzu Lung thought he could see the same hardness as in the son, but more cleverness.

Tzu Lung bowed, his hands together, and said, "Namaste."

Mao-yu was sitting at his desk, a plain silver cup in one hand and a pipe in the other. He sucked at the pipe a bit and exhaled a cloud of blue smoke. "You're the monk that killed my son?"

"Yes. I am Tzu Lung." He did not enter because he was still covered with the mud of travel and the play of the children.

Mao-yu took another inhalation of his pipe. "He was my only son that survived to adulthood," the man said. He didn't appear too angry, but his face was blank. Tzu Lung could not penetrate the look to see if it was merely acceptance of the death or a hidden fury that could erupt at any minute or something else entirely. "But, if I heard correctly, my boy attacked you, first."

"He did, though I certainly provoked him beforehand. I drew out his fury so I could kill him," Tzu Lung said, his own voice very cold.

Mao-yu drank out of the silver cup and set it down. "Why did you provoke him, then, monk?"

"I'm not a monk. Not really. I left the monastery to seek my own way."

"Oh, then you're a wandering monk."

Tzu Lung shrugged. "I came here because in my youth, my mother gave me to a monastery because she couldn't feed me. She returned here and was forced into a life of prostitution to feed herself. She is dead. Your son, for reasons I don't understand, came and mocked me that he had . . . abused my mother." He paused because once again he felt something tightening in his chest. "I am a Davana Buddhist. Since he abused others, he had opened the door to his own abuse without moral recourse to a higher authority."

While Tzu Lung had spoken, Mao-yu had been smoking. He exhaled. "Yes. I've met one of the Devil Monks, before. If you do something to someone, other people can do that to you without hurting their karma."

Tzu Lung nodded.

Mao-yu said, "My son was the captain of the town militia. This must go the marquis. I must arrest you."

Tzu Lung held out his hands, then, and nodded.

As the headman came around the desk and put the iron cuffs on Tzu Lung, he asked, "What was the name of your son, Headman Mao-yu?"

"He was Huai-li."

"Did he have a family of his own?" Tzu Lung asked, and suddenly, painfully, realized that this could be very important.

"Yes. He had a wife and two daughters," the older man said.

Tzu Lung lowered his eyes. "Ah. I have created a widow and two orphans. I have created the situation that caused me to kill your son. Now, I do feel diminished." He had to clench his teeth to keep from crying at that realization.

Mao-yu then pushed Tzu Lung out the door and towards the fortress of the marquis.

The Marquis of Shui was Miao-xiong Chun. He was the son of the old marquis who had ruled the valley when Tzu Lung was a boy and was only a few years older than Tzu Lung. Miao-xiong had a reputation for being a great hunter and one of the finest archers and horsemen in all of Tsao Chao. He was a shortish man, but very stocky, with a wispy beard and mustache over a broad and smiling face.

Mao-yu took Tzu Lung up the winding path to the fortress and entered through a small gate. It was small, as fortresses go, and well kept. The wealth of jade from the mines below assisted greatly in keeping it up, and excellent engineers had constructed it over the centuries. Inside the walls, it was a miniature village of its own, having a smithy, mill, extensive storehouses and stables, as well as the main fortress that occupied the the majority of the area of the enclosure and reared itself five stories into the air with elegant, scarlet painted tiles and demon warrior statuary. The entrances were protected by jade statues of celestial lions. The place was buzzing with the activity of the servants of the palace and the occasional aristocrat dressed in brightly colored silk with fur trim and golden embroidery.

Mao-yu and Tzu Lung were kept in the courtyard while a militiaman went to pass along Mao-yu's message about the prisoner. Two other militiamen stayed close at hand, ostensibly to guard Tzu Lung, but even though they knew Tzu Lung had killed their captain they didn't move to abuse him, or even really speak to him.

When the messenger to the marquis returned, he said to Mao-yu, "The marquis wants to see this traveling monk immediately."

Mao-yu bowed and grabbed Tzu Lung by the arm and pushed him ahead. The messenger accompanied them into the palace, and the two guards, who fell in behind Tzu Lung and the headman. They didn't go far, through a large hall that rose three stories above them, surmounted with thick pillars and decorated with silken tapestries with flags hanging from the ceiling, into a smaller hall, long and narrow with walls covered with frescoes and terracotta statues painted gold of great warriors. At one end was the marquis, sitting behind a large table with a couple of other aristocrats, one older with skin bronzed from the outdoors and the other an extremely pretty man with large, dark eyes.

"On your knees!" the guards said, and on their words they struck Tzu Lung behind the knees, on his hamstrings, dropping him to the floor. Mao-yu and the guards bowed and stayed bowed until the marquis motioned them up. Tzu Lung stayed where he was and watched Miao-xiong with cool and expressionless eyes.

"This is the wandering monk that killed Huai-li. He doesn't look too impressive. He looks covered in shit!" Miao-xiong said, laughing and slapping the table. The bronze faced man also laughed, loudly, but the effeminate man's laughter was strained. Then Miao-xiong leaned back and regarded Tzu Lung, leaning to the side of the chair closer to the bronze skinned man. "Who are you, monk? And why did you kill my militiaman?"

"I am Tzu Lung. I do not consider myself to be a monk, anymore, though I was trained as one. I goaded Huai-li into a mood to kill me because he claimed to have abused my mother," Tzu Lung said, his voice calm.

"Your mother – she was Jing-mej, right? The whore?"

Tzu Lung's jaw muscles tightened before he could force himself calm. He exhaled and tried to pour his anger into that breath so it could escape him. "Yes."

"It's a pretty stupid thing to test a man about his mother. I would have killed him, probably," Miao-xiong said, frowning and nodding his head. "He attacked you first, right?"

"That is a fact," Tzu Lung said.

One of the guards chimed in, "There are a dozen witnesses to it, lord. Huai-li was spoiling for a fight. You know how he is."

"I know how he was," the marquis said with a black smile. "I regret the loss of Huai-li. He was a good fighter. But . . . I don't see a crime, here."

The guards then seized Tzu Lung by the arms and hoisted him to his feet. The marquis made a sign for them to wait.

"What about you, Tzu Lung? What are you going to do, now?"

Tzu Lung's eyes, which had never left the marquis's, tightened. He said, "Lord, there is another matter I wish to attend. I also had a father and I would like to look into the eyes of the person who drew out my father's blood, too."

Miao-xiong smiled his black smile broader. "Maybe you're not a monk, after all. You've got the taste for revenge in you. Do you know the man who killed your father?"

"Not precisely. I know he is part of the Red Turbans."

That created something of a stir. The guards shifted uncomfortably. Mao-yu shuffled his feet and looked hard at Tzu Lung, then at the marquis. The men beside the marquis looked at each other, looked at Miao-xiong, who raised a hand to stop the consternation.

Miao-xiong said, "How long ago was your father killed?"

"Thirteen years and eight months."

"Give it up, then. Either the bandit that slew your father is himself dead, or a chief amongst the Red Turbans and outside your reach. If the man is dead, he is serving his time in hell for his evil. If he's a leader of the Red Turbans, to confront him would be suicide. It is never wise to test those of the Guang-ri."

"I understand these things, Lord Miao-xiong. Yet, I still have the passionate desire in me to confront this man, if he can be confronted."

The marquis shrugged and waved his hand for the guards to leave with Tzu Lung. He said, "It is nothing to me if you seek death with the Guang-ri. Free him."

Almost all of Tzu Lung's life, to that point, had been spent confined to the walls of the Seven Oaken Pillars monastery. He had been given the tools to think, and to think admirably well. He had been taught to learn, and take pleasure in learning, and that would be a lifelong habit. But in terms of practical experience, Tzu Lung had very little in the way of that. When thinking about the Red Turbans, he found himself exercising a set of intellectual muscles that had never seen use before.

Furthermore, he was distracted. In the days that followed the death of Huai-li, he found himself watching the widow. Her name was Lu-yao. She was a pretty woman, certainly younger than Tzu Lung, who wore clothing better than the women around her who, yet, was humble – Tzu Lung could sense that the clothes were the husband's idea, the vanity of the son an echo of the vanity of the father. Lu-yao was slender in the way of the women of Tsao Chao, with her black hair silky and long, with a pronounced peak; her skin was bronze because, despite her clothes, she was not a high born woman and had spent much time outdoors. She was often with one child of two years and another less than a year old, the children of Huai-li. Tzu Lung watched her so she would not see him, watched her go through the motions of burying her husband and the motions of mourning. He could see that she didn't care to mourn, too much, but that other worries occupied her – such as the way she was very careful when buying wheat and how she stopped buying meat entirely. They were the actions of a woman suddenly concerned with money.

It wounded him. It wounded him because he knew what could well come next. Tsao Chao was not kind to widows, especially those that didn't bear sons. His experience in the

monastery had told him that sexism was stupid and foolish, but it was a powerful social force in the countryside and something that he could not change. He had wounded this woman by his actions, without thinking, and he felt he owed her for the life of her husband.

Survival was getting to be an issue for Tzu Lung, too. He had been provided with a good amount of food from the monastery, but it was running out. He had cut the final fourth of his food into half rations, but even that was going faster than he imagined it would. Also, his nights were cold and uncomfortable, because he had no place to stay. He realized that he had to get work – but how did this allow him to pursue his interests against the Red Turbans? He realized why vendetta was a rich man's game – only they had the leisure to pursue revenge. Poorer people had to make due with burning hatred alone, or the consolation and nobility of forgoing hatred. He then chided himself for such cynicism and fury. While he no longer considered himself a monk, he still did consider himself a Buddhist, and such things were beneath even a lay Buddhist. He knew better.

He also knew that only death awaited him without food and shelter. He sought help with the innkeeper.

"Tien-poh, I need work," Tzu Lung frankly said, walking up to the man in his inn as he directed his sons in serving the clientèle.

Tien-poh looked at Tzu Lung and grimaced, sighing. He shook his head from side to side a bit. Tzu Lung felt that the signs and groans weren't directed at him, but rather at the situation.

"Master," Tzu Lung said, "I need this assistance. I assure you that the monastery teaches an excellent work ethic."

"I know that. Everyone knows that monks work without complaint, no matter how ridiculously low their wage," Tien-poh commented. "It is that . . . well, if I set you to work, I know what will happen. People will come in here to challenge you, or try to hire you to draw blood for them. Word has gotten around on how you killed Huai-li. How you did it easily, even after giving him the advantage."

"The Guang-ri. The triads," Tzu Lung sighed.

"Yes. The underworld reaches here, and they always have use for strong fighters and often feel the urge to kill those fighters that will not join with them. They will not allow you to be still."

Tzu Lung shrugged. "I will resist them. I have no desire to fight for the underworld."

"I . . . I am not sure they will let you. You're a potentially dangerous man, dangerous to them, because you have the skills to fight them," Tien-poh said, showing considerable worry.

"Then I will die. If you like, I will do my best not to die on your time."

That made Tien-poh laugh a bit. Then he nodded his head as if Tzu Lung had passed some test. "You've got spirit, boy. And I've dealt with the Guang-ri before. I shouldn't worry so much. And in places like this, fights happen, anyway. At least you'll be able to handle them, probably without so much blood as a lot of others. So, we have it, then? You'll be the protector of this place. The traders with their winter furs will be coming in, as will the jade from remote places. Spring is very busy, very dangerous, here. Until summer's end, at least, you'll have a place to stay and food to eat and fifty coppers a week."

Tzu Lung bowed. "Namaste, loh-pan," he said, using a title of respect.

The work suited Tzu Lung and he quickly saw advantages to the happenstance – advantages he knew he should have realized before approaching Tien-poh. In an inn like this, in a safe place under the shadow of a fair aristocrat, many people would come and mingle during the nights and evenings to stay awhile in relative comfort and security. They would drink and they would talk. Tien-poh didn't particularly care if he spoke to the patrons, so long as he did not make trouble. The patrons were furriers who traveled far and wide. They were jade miners carrying their shipments to cities in the south, or supplies north to the mines. All of them had something to say about the Red Turbans.

The Red Turbans was the largest gang of bandits in northern Tsao Chao. In wintertime, the gang would break up to several different locations through the province, gathering together during the spring to begin the raiding of mercantile caravans trading in furs and jade. They'd keep up the raids until midsummer, and they proceed to raid farming communities for the stores they'd need for the winter. By the time of the first snows, they would have broken up into smaller encampments to ride out the winter and start the process all over again the next spring. They'd been doing it that way for decades and the weak government of Tsao Chao couldn't begin to stop them in a remote province. Only the personal bravery and leadership of Miao-xiong Chun prevented the Red Turbans from raiding Shui, itself. For this reason, the village prospered while the people hoped that the marquis might be made provincial governor and put an end to the Red Turbans, though through the broader ties the Red Talons had to the Guang-ri, and thus to the Imperial government, few people thought that Miao-xiong Chun would get such a post.

Tzu Lung remembered that his father had been killed in wintertime. He remembered very distinctly that he could not be buried because the earth was frozen solid under a heavy blanket of snow. He remembered the bitter coldness of his tears.

He asked Tien-poh about it. He said, "Do Red Turbans come in the village in wintertime?"

The old man, who had been fixing a table, thought for a moment and said, "Not anymore. Not since the new marquis defeated them at the ford. That was six or seven years ago. Before that, they didn't raid in the village, but they'd occasionally come for trade or whatever."

"During winter, correct?"

He leaned on his sawhorse and thought a moment. "Yes. Always during winter."

"Did they stay the night?"

"Sometimes yes, mostly, not." Then started back to work. "But they're gone, now, Tzu Lung. You should forget about them. Work on building a new life."

He had nodded and gone about his business. Every week or two, he delivered a package of food to Lu-yao, making sure not to be seen. He had no need of the copper pennies that Tien-poh gave to him, other than to buy some more normal clothes, which was easily done. He felt a terrible burden of responsibility towards the woman and her children.

In his head, however, an idea had formed. The Red Turbans must have a lair, nearby, where they wintered – or, at least, where they once wintered. It made a certain audacious sense. They hid under the noses of their greatest enemy.

He had all summer to search. Since they usually returned to wherever they previously stayed, it simply could not be too far, he surmised. Tzu Lung was young and healthy. He could run like the wind for hours at a time. He began to put that conditioning to the test in his search of the hills around Shui.

It was after midsummer that he found what he was looking for. In the next valley over, he found a series of caves set into a recess. In the caves, he found everything people would need to be comfortable for a long winter's stay – beds, fire pots, cooking utensils – as well as barrels half full of rice and other grains. He also found a chest full of treasure – coins of silver and gold, jewelry of rich metals, bolts of silk. He had never seen so much money in his entire life and he was sure this was the accumulation of bandits, and that they intended to return to their lair.

Thus, all Tzu Lung had to do was wait for winter to set in.

The first snows had settled in the village of Shui, encrusting everything in a delicate, crystal patina of white. Soon, the snow would be churned to muddy filth that would splatter through the village, and then the village's roads would be frozen into solid and unbreakable sheets of ice, but between the snow becoming filth and the bitterest colds of midwinter, Shui was beautiful.

Tien-poh had told Tzu Lung that he could stay as long as he pleased. Tien-poh's inn had a reputation for security due to the talented, incorruptible guard which had increased Tien-poh's



profit because he acquired more, and richer, clients. But the first snow brought the general lay-off, the time of ease in which Tien-poh spent with his family enjoying the fruits of his labor. It also meant that Tzu Lung had a great deal of time to himself.

Tzu Lung cultivated patience. He kept his time mainly to himself, and the village had grown used to his reticence. He didn't create trouble so long as no one created trouble with him. He did not drink, nor smoke opium or hashish. He didn't chase women and women found advances on him to be futile. He seemed only interested in reading books – mostly borrowed from the marquis – or various martial exercises. They did not know what burned inside of him. The wiser amongst them realized they did not want to know what drove the former monk.

Tzu Lung sat near the fireplace in Tien-poh's inn, where a small fire burned, in light meditation. Tzu Lung lived in the building as a way to protect it from thieves and vandals. Tien-poh had come to trust the frugality of Tzu Lung so much that the owner of the inn placed no orders against Tzu Lung using whatever he needed, so long as a tally was kept. Tien-poh realized what a good deal he had in the person of Tzu Lung and many of the young women who had flirted with the man did so at Tien-poh's suggestion; a married Tzu Lung would stay in Shui, the innkeeper figured.

The door to the inn opened and Lu-yao entered, carrying the latest package that Tzu Lung had left for her. He came to full, ordinary consciousness as she said, standing just inside the door, "You're the man who leaves these for me. The one who killed Huai-li."

It wasn't a question, so Tzu Lung did not insult her intelligence. He had been caught. He said, "Yes."

"Why do you do such a thing?" she asked, but then the words tumbled on. "You should stop. Men . . . have started to approach me. They believe the reason you rebuff the women, here . . . because I am your paid woman."

"Ah. I did not see that. I did not know," Tzu Lung said, and felt his heart was heavy. "I only wanted to try to insure you and your children had enough food and money. In killing your husband, I recognize I have done you ill." His brows furrowed, too. He was perplexed at the innumerable ways men found to be petty and evil. It wore at some spot that was sensitive, that he didn't even know he had until he had left the monastery.

"Please, then, stop. I do not want my children to think their mother is a whore."

She turned to go and Tzu Lung said, "I will leave you one more gift, then, Lu-yao. Just one, if I am able. Then you will see no more of me, nor have any reason to hear my name."

She opened the door and paused. She uttered, "It won't be necessary."

"But it will be so," he said as she left into the weather, closing the door behind him.

Tzu Lung waited until after the first serious snowstorm to check the encampment he had found almost four months earlier. He had been told that the pass would be full of snow, by now, and long distance travel would cease until the spring thaw.

He didn't go straight up to the cave. He wanted to be careful, circumspect. So he looked for horses quartered in the low valley grasslands. He found them. Twelve in all. They were hobbled but being watched by a youth, certainly no more than fourteen or fifteen years of age armed with a bow, arrows and spear. The boy also had a horn. The mere presence of a human nearby was enough to keep the wolves away, usually, unless they were particularly hungry.

No one probably found this suspicious, either. The whole province was filled with semi-nomadic people, merchants in good weather, hunters all year around. They were close to the barbarians, here, always. It was probably just a matter of taking off their turbans to be transformed into Khitan nomads. The only reason why Tzu Lung found it suspicious, found it *certain*, was the treasure. They had to be bandits.

After he was reassured at their occupation of the caves, more or less, he had to think of something to do about it. As much as he was certain – in the way of a person from a harsh society reckons things – that the Red Turbans deserved nothing but annihilation, he didn't see him-

self as the instrument of a mass slaughter against them. Not only was it extremely uncertain if he could destroy them, killing sat uneasily with him. He didn't want to kill them all. Just one.

He knew it was revenge and against the precepts of Buddhism, even Davana Buddhism. Implied consent was not to be used as a tool of vengeance, but as one of defense and justice. While it could be argued that killing a murderer was justice, in his heart Tzu Lung realized that wasn't his case. For justice, he would simply take his information to the marquis and let the law handle it. No. He wanted to kill the man who drove the dagger into his father's neck – it was the oldest story, one of tragedy and horror to be inflicted down the generations as vendetta brought vendetta. But the urge to kill was in him. Not all the sutras and mantras of the monastery had driven it from his soul. He merely hesitated to commit a mass murder.

Again, he had to use muscles in his mind left untouched by the simplicity of the monastery. He was not versed in treachery and he swiftly must become so.

Then it came to him in a sudden insight after long meditation. They were trapped in the narrow line of valleys around Shui. All of them. This gave him room to maneuver.

He fixed his mind on what he must do, then. He would isolate one of them – one of them old enough to have been a man when Tzu Lung's father was murdered – and interrogate the man. His mind did not like to consider what he must do if the man refused to speak.

He had time and used it to watch the cave. One of the things he did learn at the monastery was how to sit still, be patient and be very, very quiet. Eventually, as dusk was coming and Tzu Lung thought of retreating, a man came from the caves and down the path, muttering something angrily. There had been a fight and someone was going outside to cool down, the man struggling into his heavy furs.

Tzu Lung shadowed the man until the time was right – then Tzu Lung took the man from behind, capturing him in a choke hold. The man struggled, briefly, as they kicked up snow, but he slumped in seconds. Tzu Lung hoisted the man over his shoulder and carried him to where a stream cut a furrow through the woods. The water in the stream wasn't completely frozen, the center was still clear running. Near the banks and amounts rocks that trust upwards there was a rime of ice. There was, perhaps, a foot of snow on the ground and trees all around.

Tzu Lung dumped the man on the ground. He was already waking up and Tzu Lung disarmed the man of a wickedly curved knife, throwing it into the woods. It was already dark under the trees; Tzu Lung had been trained to deal with this sort of darkness. The training of the monks was incomplete, but where it existed at all it was very good.

"What in all the hells is going on, here? Is that you, Bourtai?" the man said, groping around him and pushing himself to a sitting position in the darkness.

Tzu Lung stood near the man, within reach, but only barely. He said, "No, I am not Bourtai. I am Tzu Lung."

There was a pause in the darkness. "We've heard of you. You're the new bad ass bouncer in Shui. Bourtai wanted to talk to you about the Guang-ri."

*The Guang-ri.* The mysterious underworld of fighters that permeated all levels of Tsao Chaoan society, even into the lands of the Mon-Khymer and the Pratapravan archipelago. Maybe beyond. Maybe into Akivasha, as well. During his monastery training, the existence of the Guang-ri was only dimly hinted at, a world of secular martial artists that were as worldly as the monks were austere. Tien-poh had mentioned them, in passing, and said that it would be inevitable that they approach Tzu Lung, one way or the other.

This upset all of Tzu Lung's plans because he felt the burning of curiosity inside of him, now.

Tzu Lung said, "I am here. Take me to this Bourtai."

The bandit got up, a dark and small laughter coming from his throat. "Why'd you do that to me, man? You didn't come here to just talk to Bourtai. You knew about where we were at. You dropped me but didn't bleed me for a reason."

"You should have shown more prudence, sir, and waited until we were in the presence of your troop to say that. I can see how I erred by switching my plans without thinking. But I also see how you erred," Tzu Lung said, calmly.

"What does that mean?"

"If you had gotten me to the others and then revealed what I had done to you, you'd have a chance to stop me, to kill me. Out here, you're alone with me, and unarmed. I'm going to take you to the marquis, where you can face his judgment."

"Ha!" the man laughed, striking a fighting post. "You took me by surprise, before. You're not going to lead me to the headman's block."

Tzu Lung flowed into his own fighting stance, high and floating on his toes.

The man charged, more than half-blind in the darkness. Tzu Lung stepped to the side and delivered what he felt would simply be a stunning blow to the man's throat – but the man rushed in too quickly. Tzu Lung's iron hand crushed the man's trachea. It took only a spare few minutes for the man to die.

Tzu Lung frowned. He had not intended to do that. The killing burned in his stomach like poisoned drink; the second man he had killed in his lifetime. But Tzu Lung focused himself and put the death behind him long enough to hide the body in a pool of still water, under the roots of a tree. He had to break off an inch thick sheet of ice to fit the body, and knew that in the night's cold it would freeze over, again. The body would not be found until spring, if then, when it would be far to late to matter.

Tzu Lung waited in Shui for the bandits to come, now that he knew they would.

He didn't have to wait long. He was in the empty inn, exercising in the now empty floor, when the door opened. Two men came into the building. They were not locals.

One man as tall as Tzu Lung, and considerably heavier, came in. He carried two chopping swords over his shoulder by a cord and he wore heavy leather bracers with brass studs on his forearms. He had a dark and lined face. He was, perhaps, thirty years old and otherwise dressed in a heavy fur cloak with an elaborate silken tunic underneath it.

The second man was older, perhaps by ten years, and shorter if equally stocky. He carried over his own shoulder a long, brass sheathed club with studs along the length of it. He wore a fur cloak, too – fur was quite common in his province – and also wore an elaborate silken tunic under his cloak. Both men had leather leggings and boots.

*Guang-ri.* His mind told him it was so. He came out of a cat stance to his full height and regarded the two men.

The older said, "I'm Bourtai and this is Katau. We wanted to see this famous bodyguard that the owner of this dive has gotten for himself. A Davana Buddhist, right?"

Tzu Lung nodded.

Katau went off to one side of him, and Bourtai to the other, catching Tzu Lung between the both of them. Since this was the sort of situation that Tzu Lung was trained for, his mind started calculating the things he might need to do to escape or fight. He put the premium on escape. Both men had the look of competence about them.

Bourtai said, "That means you probably study the Jade Lion Fang. They put a premium on unarmed moves, right?"

Tzu Lung looked at the man with a fixed eye and said, "There is one way to find out."

"Confident. Maybe cocky," Bourtai said. He sat down on one of the tables that Tzu Lung had pushed to one side. "But we know you have good skills."

At that, Tzu Lung's face almost betrayed him, because the man he had killed was in the front of his mind. He feared that they knew, somehow, that he had done the killing.

Bourtai went on, "During the summer, you bested two of our men. You didn't know, at the time, but it was a test. You passed. Not to mention you killed Huai-li."

Tzu Lung could feel himself relax, slightly, but didn't like it that he had tensed up at all. He said, "I wasn't aware I was in need of testing."

"We wouldn't mind having a strong man like you on our side," Bourtai said, ignoring what Tzu Lung said.

He paused. It would be easy to set Bourtai on his way. Now that he was sitting down, Tzu Lung had little doubt he could cripple Katau fast enough to fight Bourtai without interference. Reasonably sure, anyway. But that wouldn't tell him, anything, and he sought knowledge as a prerequisite to his revenge. So he said, "Why should I join with you?"

Bourtai shrugged. "Wealth and power. We belong with the Red Turbans" – Tzu Lung had to suppress a feeling of sick exhilaration – "and we're the people who rule this province. With us, you could be great, instead of guarding some cheap bastard's wine for a few coppers while he lines his pockets with gold."

"You offer an interesting point," Tzu Lung says, realizing he had never actually lied since he was a very young child and was very much out of the habit.

"You'd stay with us during the winter and in the spring when we gather together, you can be indoctrinated into the order. You're strong. You'll survive." Bourtai paused. "Better than staying here all your life, going nowhere. With the Red Turbans you could have a future."

Tzu Lung nodded, feeling somewhat troubled that he couldn't even tell Tien-poh that he was leaving, though he knew the old man was expecting it at some point. Tzu Lung didn't agree, but he said, "I accept."

"Good. Katau, put the blindfold on him." When Tzu Lung looked apprehensive, Bourtai said, "It's okay, it's just for security. We don't want you to betray us and rat us out to the authorities – we have to look out for security. You're not one of us, yet."

Tzu Lung submitted to the blindfold and submitted to being carried by the powerful Katau. Of course, he knew the way in any event. Their security measures meant nothing to him – save to put them off their guard.

It was only then that he realized that this was like fighting. The way of the Jade Lion Fang technique was to play out the fight in one's mind long before it occurred. It was common for there to be double, triple and even quadruple feints, for both sides to be so feinting, to prepare the enemy for a killing strike. So it was with deception, too. He could feel the multi-layered nature of it. He had stumbled into a deception like a feint. He was indifferent to the blindfold and submitted to it, because he had already scouted out the area. His submission to the blindfold was a deception, a feint, and they could be layered and ordered in the same way as the swift blows of a battle.

The realization had a dramatic effect on him, of how words could be used to deceive. Certainly, on some level he realized that words had multiple meanings, but in the temple they had been used to reveal, not conceal.

Even the strong Katau had to rest several times. The journey it took Tzu Lung three hours to run took them the long winter night to travel. But in the end, he was precisely where he thought he would be.

When Bourtai pulled off Tzu Lung's blindfold, he found himself in the main cave he had discovered during the summer. It was a large, low space that had been divided into rooms by using heavy hangings. Light came from the fire pots and a pair of lanterns – very dim light for such a large space. In the air was the smell of woodsmoke, burnt food, sweat and waste. Bourtai introduced Tzu Lung to the six other men and three women that made up this cell of the Red Turbans, and two young boys to watch the horses against the wolves.

It was easy to get them to talk, too. During each meal, most of them drank, sometimes heavily. All Tzu Lung had to say was, "Tell me a story."

Tzu Lung stayed with them for three weeks. He watched their rhythm of training in the martial arts under Bourtai – only Bourtai and Katau had real skill. He watched their boredom and

parties of alcoholic stupor. When they were in their cups, Tzu Lung asked, "Why don't you go to Shui more often?"

It was Katau who said, "That bastard marquis. He runs a good military operation."

Katau's woman, Koke, who was curled up next to the large man, said, "He actually defeated a small group of us, what, five years ago?"

"Seven," Bourtai said, sullenly. "It was seven years ago. The second year Miao-xiong Chun was in office after his father died."

Tzu Lung said, "So, before that, you went to Shui?"

Katau barked a laugh. "Ha! We went in public, wearing our turbans! The old marquis had no guts for war."

Koke said, "Spent a lot of time in that inn you used to guard."

"Really? Did any of you do anything, well, that I would have had to have stopped?" he asked.

One of the others laughed, "A few fisticuffs. If you were there, it probably would have been worse. It always got worse when someone tried to break it up."

Katau said, "Yeah, Bourtai killed a guy in there because he got in the way."

Tzu Lung looked over at Bourtai. Bourtai smiled a bit and drank from his cup. When Tzu Lung didn't let up the sense of expectation of the story, Bourtai said, "It was over ten years ago. Not much to it. I was doing some gambling and one of the men who was playing was cheating, so I started to beat him. One of the town's folk, a big furrier, tried to stop me so I cut him up. Within a year, I got to fuck his wife because she was a hooker – without her man, she had no way of making money. I guess that's what the mandarin's refer to as irony."

Tzu Lung's stomach went cold and his heart felt like a lump of ice. His blood became ice water. Bourtai had spoken without much in the way of malice, as if he had done a casual thing. All the other bandits laughed and Tzu Lung had to dig up every last ounce of his control to make a smile.

But it only lasted a second, because Tzu Lung realized that Bourtai knew that Tzu Lung had killed Huai-li. If Bourtai made the connection that Tzu Lung killed the militiaman to avenge Tzu Lung's mother, Bourtai might make the connection that Tzu Lung was the son of the man he killed. He realized how he had erred in killing Huai-li in public, how badly he lost control in killing the man there and in that spot.

But Bourtai drank more wine, reached over and slapped Tzu Lung on the shoulder with a laugh, and said, "You'll get used to it, Tzu Lung. The life in the Guang-ri grows on you. Soon, it's what you live for – to face men in a fight."

Katau nodded. "It's the most exciting thing in the world, to test your skills against another."

Tzu Lung managed a more real smile because he knew that was true, and knew that he would soon have reasons to test his skills.

Tzu Lung liked to run. None of the others particularly did, so he would often run alone. He used this time to think about what he needed to do.

He needed to talk to someone. So, one day, he ran to Shui, to the headman's house. He knocked on the outer door and opened it when Mao-yu said for him to enter. Tzu Lung only opened the door.

"You," the headman said sitting at his desk. "We all thought you left this place."

"I had. I came back. There is something I need help with."

Mao-yu's eyes hardened. "I have struggled to bear you no ill-will in the killing of my son, but we will never be friends, Tzu Lung."

"Master Mao-yu," he said, bowing, "this is business. It concerns the Red Turbans."

Mao-yu's eyes went from hard to curious in slow stages, and then brightened with understanding. "Ah. You've found that they winter in the caves nearby."

"You know?"

"Of course I know. But what of it?"

"I want to help capture them."

"All of them?"

"Save but one."

"The one that you must kill to satisfy your thirst for revenge, as you did against my son."

Tzu Lung nodded.

The headman sighed and waved Tzu Lung entirely into the room. "You're letting out the heat, boy." After Tzu Lung had entered and closed the door, Mao-yu said, "You must realize that there are reasons we haven't arrested the bandits. We know exactly where they are."

Tzu Lung nodded. "You don't want to bring down the combined wrath of the Red Turbans or other elements of the Guang-ri. Shui is profitable so long as it is safe, and it is safe only so long as it does not arouse the undue ire of the Red Turbans."

"It is not known if the marquis can win against all the Red Turbans. If we could certainly extirpate them, they would be destroyed. But the price to pay if we fail is too large. It is prudent for us to secure our own prosperity. Perhaps when the marquis is made governor we will destroy them." The headman was hesitating. He wanted to say more.

Tzu Lung understood. He said, "Ah. You don't want me to move against the Red Turbans, either, for fear that I will bring down the wrath upon Shui."

"Yes," the headman said. "You seemed concerned when you killed my son that you had left his wife a widow and his children orphans. Consider the misery you will inflict by satisfying your revenge."

Tzu Lung lowered his head and smiled blackly. He understood why enlightenment was sought in the simplicity of monasteries and not in the lives of ordinary people.

Tzu Lung sighed before saying, "This is a tiny nest. The Red Turbans are large. They won't miss the numbers."

"Perhaps. But the marquis must operate in the open, Tzu Lung. If you bring him prisoners, everyone will know that the marquis has chosen to fight."

"I have come to the wrong place for help. Even when the government is not corrupt, it is cowardly. It is not to be wondered why the Red Turbans rule this land far more than officials," he said with disgust. Before Mao-yu could answer, Tzu Lung left, slamming the screen shut. He realized how Mao-yu was manipulating him, making the government's performance of its proper duties, and the danger that sometimes involves, justify quietism. In his mind, Tzu Lung knew that what he would do might bring the wrath of the Red Turbans on Shui – but by not fighting the bandits, he recognized a much greater tragedy befell people in other villages because of that cowardice. He shouted back at Mao-yu's home, "Just because you don't see the people suffering in Shui, doesn't mean they don't suffer, old man! Your cowardice condemns others!"

Then he ran back to the caves, the words of the ancients moving on his lips, "*When the government is full of cowardice, the wise man refuses to do nothing.*"

He knew what he had to do. It had been decided for him.

They must all die. He must become the executioner he feared. His whole life stretched in front of him, then, and it was full of blood.

He waited until they had another party. They had gotten used to the fact that Tzu Lung didn't drink, ignored him, and as they drank more and more, it mattered less and less that he was uncharacteristically sullen. Eventually, some had taken to their beds and others lulled in stupor in the main body of the cave where they took their meals.

Tzu Lung could have killed them all with nothing but a dagger, or his fingers. He stood over Katau as he laid out in a drunken loll in some furs, a skinning knife in hand, knowing precisely where to strike, but not having the heart to do it. The other times he had killed, it had

been in the heat of a fight. In cold blood, he didn't have the heart to do it. It was too much like murder and cowardice. Justice didn't, couldn't, feel this way.

Bourtai's voice startled Tzu Lung. The bandit's tone carried neither drunkenness or anger. "It's me you really want," the bandit said.

Bourtai got to his feet and dusted himself off. He repeated, "It's me you really want."

Tzu Lung nodded.

"One of the kids followed you. He's a pretty sneaky runt. I set him on you, like a dog, because I remembered why you killed Huai-li. Yeah, because he tried to kill you, but he mocked you about your mother. And I killed your father." He laughed a bit. "I've killed lots of people. Your old man was tough, he just didn't have any training at killing men. I didn't mean anything by it.

"But, hell of being burned forever, revenge is the perfect way to get into the Guang-ri. Someone kills someone you love, you learn to fight, and you get your revenge. Then what? All you know how to do is kill someone. It's a natural fit. I don't want to fight you, boy. I don't want to have to kill you. Put down the knife and go to bed. We can talk about this in the morning. Or never. You don't have the heart to kill people in cold blood, yet. Not yet."

After he finished speaking, Tzu Lung looked deep inside of himself. He realized he could throw down the knife and leave, even return to the monastery. When he'd left the monastery, he didn't realize how confusing, how painful the outside world could be. He was on the verge of abandoning his revenge.

But Katau seized his ankle and shouted, "Traitor!"

Tzu Lung was flipped to the ground, onto his back, and he kicked at Katau's face, hitting the man in the jaw. He used the momentary slackening of Katau's hand to free his foot and roll backwards and flip to his feet.

Tzu Lung heard Bourtai shout, "No, you idiot!" Katau didn't hear the words, or understand them, and afterwards it was too loud to hear anything at all.

Katau climbed to his feet, hurling one of the firepots – grabbing it by one of its legs – towards Tzu Lung. Tzu Lung dodged under the hurled pot – the coals scattering to catch several curtains on fire – and struck the big man with a focused strike from the heel of his hand to Katau's temple. Katau fell to the ground with his eyes glazed; Tzu Lung's blows could shatter bricks and he felt Katau's skull crack under the strike.

By then, the others were up that could be wakened. They saw the fight and knew what it meant – but there was no coordination to their clumsy attacks on Tzu Lung. They crowded in on him, getting in each others' way, no one knowing what the other was doing.

From his low crouch, he lashed back with a foot, sweeping two of them to the ground. He stood up from the spinning sweep and kicked a third in the inner knee; as the man fell to the ground, Tzu Lung smashed his knee into the man's head, throwing the injured man to one side. The fourth slashed at him with a saber, cutting Tzu Lung's shoulder as he tried to move away, and a fifth grabbed Tzu Lung around the face from behind and tried to drive a dagger into Tzu Lung's throat.

Tzu Lung caught the wrist with the dagger and brought his leg up so the heel of his foot smashed into the man's groin in a donkey kick. The man with the saber rushed with a slash, and Tzu Lung twisted and used the body of the man who grabbing him as a shield – the saber slashed through the man holding on Tzu Lung, who then fell from his wounds. Tzu Lung kicked at the hand that held the blade, knocking it to one side, and followed up with a swift lunge punch over the saber man's heart – the man fell back and down; he would stay there.

The fire spread. Katau got up, shaking his head, slightly, blood running down his face from his nose. Something inside was broken. He drew his swords and said, "Hold on, monk. I'm not through with you, traitor."

Behind Katau, Bourtai was struggling with the two youths to carry the treasure from the cave. It was a wise maneuver if he wanted to save the money; there was enough cloth and

wood in the cavern to burn hot and long. Many of the bandits simply were not getting up, either, too far lost in drink, but one of the women was going out, trying to pull her man with her. It wasn't working; he was too heavy as a dead weight.

"I don't want this," Tzu Lung said to Katau, who slashed at Tzu Lung with a sword. Tzu Lung backed away as the blade narrowly missed him. Katau pressed on, using one blade to turn Tzu Lung to one side so the other could find him. For a big man, he had good timing, and the heavy chopping blades of his swords would certainly make heavy wounds.

But while he had timing, he didn't have forethought. Tzu Lung did a triple feint. He stepped to a place where he knew Katau would slash, moved to where the other sword would slash at him – ducked under it – and placed himself where Katau ought not to slash but would, if his pattern repeated itself . . . .

It did. Katau slashed, over extending himself. Tzu Lung blocked the hand with the sword and stepped in, focusing his power for the *lion fang strike*, and the reason his art was so deadly. Tzu Lung's fingers ripped into the flesh of Katau's groin, where the leg met the torso, slipping between the man's thews and tendons to sever the artery in his leg. His hand moved swift as lightning and Tzu Lung ducked the reverse stroke of Katau's second sword and took a step back.

Katau tried to step towards Tzu Lung, but could not. He fell, again, and would not rise as blood gushed from the wound Tzu Lung gave.

Around him, the fire had spread. It was turning into an inferno. It crackled hot on his skin and his lungs started to ache.

Tzu Lung left the cave and all those still in it before the smoke overwhelmed him. It still didn't feel like justice, but it didn't feel like cold-blooded murder, either. He wasn't sure what this was, anymore. It was a combination of exhilarating and sickening.

Outside, Bourtai sat on the chest he'd taken out of the cave and the woman, wrapped in a blanket, sobbed, though Tzu Lung did not feel responsible for this one. He was going to leave and Katau . . . .

He chided himself for inhumanity. Her pain was real, regardless of the cause.

"The kids are getting the horses. We're going to try to make it south – its pretty easy to go south," Bourtai said. He laughed a bit at the soot covered Tzu Lung. "Things got fucked up, Tzu Lung." He shrugged. "It's nobody's fault. It's the way things go when you're part of the Guang-ri. Life is exciting."

"I don't feel excited," Tzu Lung said.

"You feel sick." Bourtai smiled and shrugged, again. "That'll pass. It's like the first time you smoke hashish. It just makes you confused and feel weird. It takes a while to appreciate the smoke. The same is true with blood."

"I'm going to kill you, Bourtai," Tzu Lung said.

Bourtai's jaws clamped. "You're not a cold blooded killer, Tzu Lung. Not yet."

Tzu Lung took a step closer to the bandit. Bourtai tensed, but he did not budge. "I saw you fight. You could kill me in a fight, especially without my mace. But you're not going to. You've not one of us, not yet. I can show you how to be one of us, but you're not one, yet."

The woman had stopped crying and looked at the two of them with wide eyes. She was taking short, painful breaths. "Stop it. Both of you," she said.

"Shut up, woman!" Bourtai said. "This isn't your business!"

And with that, he fixed his eyes on Tzu Lung.

Bourtai said, "You won't do it. You're strong, but you're not my master in this. Stay by me; soon I'll be your servant and together we can rule the Red Turbans."

Tzu Lung clenched and unclenched his fists. He could not bring himself to kill Katau. He had been on the verge of leaving, of returning to the Seven Oaken Pillars, but every time he clenched and unclenched his hand he felt the blood of Katau on it.



"There is no moral difference between killing in hot and cold blood. And you deserve it," Tzu Lung said, then struck. Afterwards, he realized he would be sick, but it only took a moment's rationalization to strike.

Tzu Lung entered Shui leading two horses with bulging saddlebags. He guided the beasts up to Lu-yao's house. From one of the saddlebags he took two heavy bags, each holding about a gallon worth of goods.

Lu-yao came out of the house. "I told you not to come here," she said.

Tzu Lung threw the bags at her feet. "I'm leaving Shui. This is enough money to clear the debt between us; it is more money than your husband would have ever earned in his lifetime. Use it well."

He took his two horses and guided them out of the city, where he met with the survivors of the cave – the woman and two children. They had their own wealth, their own horses. He said, "I'm going south. If you want . . ."

"We'll stay here," the woman said, nodding her head. "At least until spring. We have means."

He nodded and left the town of his birth behind him.

END