

MESSENGER'S PLIGHT

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A GUST OF WIND hurled heavy flakes of snow into Hsing Li's face. Behind her, Sonpa, her brother's horse, whinnied nervously and limped forward. Li would have to leave the stallion behind and secure a new mount in Chun Bai. "Come on, Sonpa, it's not much farther to the inn."

The storm had blown in from the north just after dawn. Like a northern marauder it transfigured everything in its path. Midway through the morning, Sonpa had slipped on a treacherous decline and twister his right foreleg. The snowstorm, combined with the horse's injury, had slowed Li's progress intolerably. She had to get to Shaun Yi by the full moon or her family would lose their honor. Yet she still had to trudge across another ridge to reach the High Lord's city.

An hour before noon, sodden and deeply chilled, Li led Sonpa into the shelter of a small wooden structure attached to a timeworn stone inn. The building had one weathered door and above it, a sign bearing faded illegible strokes of calligraphy. Pale yellow light leaked from the edges of the door to the inn. Li resisted the temptation of the warm inn and turned instead into the stable. She removed Sonpa's saddle and strapped a blanket over him. "I'll get you some grain," she promised the horse as she led him into the first of three empty stalls. Satisfied Sonpa would be all right, Li left the shelter of the stable and crossed to the inn.

The wind resisted her efforts to enter the building. She managed to get one leg and shoulder through the door, when the innkeeper saw her struggles and came over to help. "Welcome to the White Dragon. On such a stormy day, I did not expect guests. I am Chow Yuen, the owner." Yuen pushed the door closed. He bowed formally from the waist. Waving a hand toward the middle of the room, he gestured to a small fire burning in the center of a round stone hearth. "Please, sit and warm yourself. I will bring you hot wine and a blanket."

Li fought the cold wrought stiffness in her face and smiled at him. “Your offer is kind, but I cannot stay. I need to cross Yu Soong Ridge today if I am to reach Shaun Yi by tomorrow night. Can you recommend a stable where I can trade horses? Mine twisted a foreleg crossing Mei Ridge.”

The innkeeper placed his long-fingered hand on the small of Li’s back and firmly guided her to the cushions near the hearth. “Chun Bai is a simple town. We do not have a blacksmith or a stable. Besides, the High Lord’s city has rested at the foot of Yang Mountain, in the shadow of Bai Lung Temple for more than six hundred years. I am sure it will remain in place for a few days, if you wait out the storm here.”

Li chuckled. “I’m sure, but my business requires I reach the city by the full moon.”

Yuen plucked two ceramic cups from a teakwood shelf positioned about the hearth and focused his pale eyes on her. “What business is so urgent that it cannot wait a few hours or a day?”

“I bear an Imperial message.”

The innkeeper’s white eyebrows disappeared into his hairline. “Many Imperial Messengers have stayed here over the years, but not one of them has been a woman.”

“My brother Hsing Tsu is the messenger. He stopped at our mother’s home on the way here. My mother mentioned a loose tile on the roof and Tsu insisted on repairing it before traveling farther. He fell. The healer said he broke his leg in three places and would not be able to ride for weeks. I promised to deliver the message for him.” She did not dare tell the innkeeper the rest of what Tsu had imparted to her. If General Kuan’s message did not reach the emperor in time, they would dispatch the reserves to the wrong location. If she failed, many would die.

Yuen returned the cups to the shelf next to a grouping of wooden bowls and spoons. “Let me see what I can do for your animal. Hang up your wet clothing on the pegs by the fire and let them dry.” He pointed to a series of wooden pegs on the hearth. “You will not make good progress if you are weak from hunger and cold. The large copper kettle contains stew, the small pot—brandy wine.” The old man crossed to the door and pulled it open. Snow blew in past the threshold and pushed back his long white hair and mustaches like so many silk ribbons. He did not seem to notice the cold as he walked calmly into the storm.

Left alone, Li decided to follow the man's advice—to a point. She removed and hung her now dripping cloak and mittens on the peg nearest the fire. Next, she poured herself a cup of the brandy and opened her pack. Her reflection in the kettle mimicked her movements. The copper revealed a young woman with a round face and a sinewy build. Cold had softened her normally gold complexion to a pale yellow and her thick black braid glistened with droplets of snow turned to water. She looked like a doll a noblewoman's child might own, except for the dark blue male attire of a long tunic and pants. In the kettle, her eyes reflected the firelight, making them look like inverted stars.

First, she removed the scroll bearing the General's message from the leather satchel. On the missive, Kuan's huge thumbprint provided security. Flint, candles, a direction finder, cook pot, eating sticks, and a small bag of kindling followed. Court garb, food, and the note of passage from her brother remained in the large shoulder bag. Her blankets, shelter, and other large items she had left with Sonpa.

The brandy wine warmed her throat and stomach as she sipped it. Within a few minutes the sweet feeling had spread to the rest of her body. She stood to reach for a bowl when the door opened and a gust of wind announced Yuen's return. Casually, he brushed the heavy, wet snow from his tunic sleeves and crossed the stone floor to join her. "Your horse's ankle is sprained. He will need several days of rest before he can travel."

Li bit her bottom lip and considered the possibilities. Only thirty-six hours remained before the High Lord marched with his army. On Sonpa, she could have reached Shaun Yi by late tonight. The storm had slowed her too much. Now, even riding, she could not reach her destination before tomorrow morning. "Is there a farmer or a merchant in Chun Bai with a horse I could borrow?"

"The only animals you will find here are chickens, dogs, and pigs. I am sorry." Yuen reached beyond her to recover a bowl and spoon. "You must surrender to providence. Eat, and I will prepare a room for you."

"No. Thank you for the offer, but I cannot remain here. The message must reach the High Lord. If I must walk, I have no time to lose."

The lines deepened the innkeeper's forehead. "You are a determined young woman. It grieves me to see you take such a risk. Perhaps ..."

“Yes?”

“I have never seen him, but they say that a hermit lives in a cave a three-hour walk north of the town. It is also said, he sometimes rides a horse. If you can reach his grotto, he may lend you aid.”

“Thank you, Master Chow.”

She'd left the town of Chun Bai three hours ago and still, she'd found no evidence of a grotto. The road cut an icy path through a pine forest. Tree boughs heavy with snow and icicles angled sharply toward the ground. Some of the larger branches lay broken from the strain. Among the treetops, the wind played an unearthly song. The only other sounds were the crunching of Li's feet and the rasping of her labored breathing as she fought her way through the high drifts. She must find the hermit by the time she reached the promised split in the road or turn west for the pass.

Two hours later, Li arrived at the split or so she thought. The wind had grown steadily worse, and she could not see more than a few feet in front of her. With the visibility so poor, she might have passed the hermit's grotto without knowing it. Little matter now, she would have to keep moving or freeze to death.

It took several fumbling tries and the removal of her right mitten to get the direction finder out of the pack. Her path had veered slightly to the west already, which meant she must follow the left split.

“Fool!” The word cut through the wind as easily as if the speaker stood next to her. He, or at least Li assumed the stranger to be a man, stood an arm's reach away on the road bearing north. His long white hair looked like a mantle of snow and ice. He was dressed simply in a ragged tunic and half-pants. With one swift look he assessed her, then turned away. “Follow me.”

Li hesitated. This strange old man wore no boots, not even sandals, yet if she wanted to borrow his horse, she had no choice.

He guided her through a maze of trees and snow shrouded bushes until they came to a large cave with a small opening. The entrance looked like a giant eagle's talon had scraped it from the mountain. Li stopped at the entrance. The hermit's grotto contained no fire, torches, or lamps. Light came from glowing green moss that beetled from the upper reaches of the cave. To her right, water flowed out of the wall and into an ice

edged pool. Against the back wall, a small patch of white-and-brown winter mushrooms flourished. In contrast, the left side of the cave contained only a small pallet of woven rattan. She did not see a horse or any evidence of one ever being there.

“Satisfied your curiosity, or will you stand at my threshold all night?” The hermit regarded her with pale, ice-blue eyes that made her think of Yuen. The inflection in his voice sounded at once irritated and amused. His furrowed brow and half smile, expressed the same sentiments.

Not reassured in the least, Li forced herself to smile politely and enter the musty hollow. “Your home is lovely.”

“My home is a hole in the mountain. You didn’t come here to lie about the splendor of my abode. What do you want?”

“To borrow your horse.”

The hermit crossed to the mat and sat with the bonelessness of a cat. “What makes you think I have a horse?”

“The innkeeper at the White Dragon told me that you might have one. If you do not, I will leave now. I have far to go, and the storm is impeding my progress.”

Her taciturn host arched an eyebrow at her. “You do not approve of the storm?”

“How could I approve or not? For me, it would have been better if the White Dragon King would have chosen another time to bestow his blessing on the land.”

“I see. Have you ever thought that if this inconvenience did not occur now, the farmers in the valleys below Yang Mountain would not have enough water for spring and summer?”

“It needs to snow, but I wish it would stop long enough for me to get off the mountain.” Li started to edge back toward the entrance. She did not want to affront her host, but she must continue her journey—and soon.

“You think your needs are more important than the exigencies of others the spirits guard?”

“No, not really,” Li edged another step toward freedom.

A blast of icy air encompassed Li and pushed her away from the entrance. “No, you may not leave yet, my little mortal. You have yet to tell me why I should make the snow stop.”

Li turned and ran into a sheet of ice where the entrance once stood. She bounced off the stone-hard wall and fell to the cave floor in a heap. The hermit made a rasping sound like ice being shaved, which Li took for laughter. Angry and afraid, she stood and turned to face her captor.

The hermit had changed. Instead of a thin, crotchety old man, she faced a wondrous beast. His head looked like an albino camel, except that the large rabbit eyes were the same icy blue of the hermit's. His ears would have been at home on a cow, but the icicle horns made her think of a deer. A sinewy neck twisted and raised like a white snake revealing the only scale-free area on the beast, much like the soft belly of a frog. Legs longer than a tall man, although short for a dragon's body ended in pawed feet with huge white talons. Short fins like junk sails fanned out along the length of huge body and long tail. Despite her best efforts not to, Li gasped.

The White Dragon King lowered his sinewy head until he could look directly into her eyes. "So tell me, little mortal, what message is so important that it cannot wait three days until your horse heals?"

"Great Sir, I bear a message to Lord Ao. If I do not deliver my message in time, the reinforcements will go to the wrong place. Many will die."

"Many will die if I do not provide enough snow to melt in the spring. Their deaths will take longer and have no meaning."

"Forgive me Lord Dragon, but how can the delay of a storm make any difference in the spring melt?" Li held her breath hoping He would not take offense to the question.

The white dragon sighed, and his breath covered Li with a thin layer of ice. "Things are not as simple as you think, little one. To cause a great storm like this, I must work with my cousins, the air dragons and the water dragons. The latter must provide the needed moisture, while the former must guide the clouds to the correct place. It is only then that I can breathe upon them and cause the clouds to weep snow. My cousins and I planned for many weeks. I grieve for your sake we cannot reschedule, but next week my cousins and I must provide for others. You will find everything you need to live for a week or two here in the cavern. For your own safety I must seal you in, for I must make the storm stronger tonight and your roads will become impassable."

"Please, you must not."

“Have I not said it is for your safety, little mortal?”

“Lord Dragon, I do not worry about my safety. Please let me do something to prove my need to you. It’s not just for me. It’s not just for the Lord Ao or General Kuan or the men in the army. I gave my word to my brother, and he gave his to the General. My family will lose face if I fail. I’ll do anything. I’ll go to your temple after I deliver the message to serve you for the rest of my life if that’s what you want.”

Icy blue eyes locked with her dark ones and Li felt herself weighed and judged. Like an acupuncture treatment, she felt him probing into her soul. After a moment he withdrew. “Very well, I will test you. Find a way to open the door to the cave by morning, and I will help you reach your destination. Fail... and you will remain here as a hermit for the rest of your life.”

A test! The Dragon King would decide her family had no honor to preserve if she refused. To say yes meant she would have to get out of the ice-sealed cave. If she failed—She could not think of that. She nodded firmly and said, “I accept.”

The dragon reared and nodded in return, before vanishing from sight. His parting words echoed hollow against the walls of the cave. “You may use anything you have or anything you can find in the cave.”

Li emptied her pack onto the floor, seeking something she could use as a pick on the ice. Failing to find anything useful, she extended her search to the cave. She found a stalagmite cluster growing near the mushroom garden. Wrapping both hands around a hand-sized stone, Li pulled back and applied all her strength to it. After several minutes of trying with no success, she moved to a smaller stone. Then to a smaller stalagmite, until finally she found a stone piece twice the size of her thumb. This, she snapped off for use. Warmed by the exertion, she shed her cloak and mittens and left them by the mushrooms.

She chipped at the ice barrier slowly and methodically for several hours. After making only a small indentation near the middle, she had to stop. Partially because she had fatigued herself, but also because she felt weak and needed to eat. Lord Dragon said she would find everything she needed to live for a week. He should have left food, water and hopefully wood. The pine logs when she found them, looked like they came from a full-grown tree ripped to pieces by the dragon’s talons.

Deciding she would want the fire pit by her mat if she needed to sleep, Li set up a boxlike cooking pattern with the logs. From the pile of her belongings, she retrieved her kindling chips and flint. The small, dry wood caught quickly, and Li encouraged the flames to transfer to the ripped edges of the logs. In only a short time, she had a strong fire with which to cook her travel stew. She filled her pot with water from the wall and set it on the logs to boil. This done, she returned her attention to the ice wall. Her progress looked unimpressive. The fire had warmed the small cave considerably and Li removed her outer tunic to compensate. Fire—how foolish of her not to think of it before. She should build a fire near the door and melt the ice.

It took only a few minutes to move the fire and replace her cooking pot. The ice took on a glassy cast and tiny rivulets of water traced their way down its surface to the floor. “It’s working!” Excited, Li added more logs to the fire. The heat increased. Water sluiced down the door, and the ice looked clearer. Relieved she would not have to chip her way out, Li replaced her items in the pack, except a food packet and the pot. She would eat and then leave.

A hissing sound was the first warning of trouble. Gray smoke filling the room confirmed the problem. The ice turned water had traveled the short distance to the fire and was extinguishing it. She tried to pull the logs away from the wall, but more of them fell into the water and the fire died on contact with the water. Worse yet, her stew water looked ready to tip over and she would burn her hand if she tried to stop it. The Dragon King might find her trapped and hungry in the morning, but at least she wouldn’t have to explain away an injury.

The cooking pot turned over, dousing what little remained of her fire. Water splashed onto the ice door and collected at the bottom of the ice block. Weary, and disgusted at herself for not thinking far enough ahead to anticipate the problem. Li sat on her haunches and waited for her pot to cool. She admonished herself to make the best of it and pressed the pot against the ice wall. Except the ice wall had a significant dent at the bottom where the water had spilled.

Fight water with water—not fire. Li retrieved her kindling and flint from her bag and started a new cooking fire over by the pallet. She used her mittens to retrieve the pot and filled it with water. When the water boiled, she carried it to the wall and splashed it against the bottom. While more water heated, she kicked at the wall where the ice had

thinned. An hour of alternating force with hot water resulted in a head-sized opening in the door. Hours later, fatigued and aching, Li crawled out of the opening.

The Dragon King's voice called from inside the cave. "Congratulations, little mortal. You impress me. I did not think you could do it. Since you have, you might as well rest until midmorning and I will take you to your Lord Ao."

Li stuck her head through the opening. The cave appeared unoccupied. "Lord Dragon, are you in here?"

The scraping ice laughter sounded as the white dragon appeared. "Yes, I have been here the whole time, Even when you made it miserably hot, I stayed. You could not see me and assumed I had left. Come back inside, where you won't freeze."

Li crawled through the opening, then faced the white dragon. "My lord, the message."

"It must wait. The storm has almost reached its climax."

Pressing her lips together, Li looked out the opening she had created and considered trying to walk. Snow swirled in chaotic circles, obscuring the landscape. If she tried to hike, she would lose her way in only a few feet. Only a snow dragon could navigate a blizzard. Perhaps she could convince him to take her immediately. "The snow is your element. Can you fly to Shaun Yi in such a storm?"

The dragon tilted his head and twisted his spike-toothed mouth into the semblance of a human grin. "I could, but why should I? You're the one with a message to deliver."

Li bit her lip, drawing hot, salty blood. "You promised to take me to Lord Ao."

"Yes, but I did not say when."

"Please, I must go now."

A sad tone entered the dragon's voice. "If I take you now, you will most likely die."

When Li answered, her voice was barely a whisper. "If I do not go, many will die. Did not Lao Tzu teach that we should embrace all things? I know my brother would offer his life to see the message delivered. I cannot do less than he."

"Very well, little mortal. Gather your belongings and we will leave."

When Li joined the snow dragon outside, the massive beast laid his head on the ground in front of her. "Get in."

Li looked at the gaping mouth and lurched back a step. “I thought I would ride on your spine or that you would carry me.”

“The razor edges of my spine would separate your legs from your torso. If I carried you in my talons, the cold would kill you in minutes. Your only hope for survival is in my mouth.”

Forcing herself to move forward, Li climbed into the icy cavern of the dragon’s mouth. Teeth which could have passed for massive ice-shrouded stalagmites and stalactites closed. The dragon’s tongue was like hard snow and his breath a frosty breeze. Li huddled into her cloak and prayed to the spirits of her ancestors that the lord dragon did not forget her and swallow.

Even in the dragon’s mouth, Li could feel the buffeting of the wind and the difficulty of the flight. She had not thought it would take so long, and she felt so very cold. She knew she dared not close her eyes. Sleep in such a cold place would certainly bring death and failure.

Li gasped as she jerked awake. She had to fight, had to stay alert. It could not take much more....

Bright white light bathed her face, penetrating her closed eyelids. A babble of voices filled her ears. Her whole body burned as if touched by a million sticks of incense. Painfully, Li regained consciousness.

“Lord, she wakes now.” The obeisant tone in the voice told Li the man spoke to someone of high rank.

“Wha?” Li opened her eyes. She sat in the middle of a meditation garden. Tiny trees and winter flowers were covered in light, powdery snow. A small group of nervous-looking courtiers and soldiers watched her. Uncomfortable under their intense scrutiny, she struggled to rise.

A smooth-faced soldier in the red and gold of imperial service helped her to sit. “You should remain still,” he warned her. The cold has sapped your strength.”

Li worked the stiff muscles of her mouth to loosen them. “Please, where am I?”

“In Lord Ao’s garden, at Shaun Yi.”

“How?”

“A snowstorm descended on the palace with a fury, but stayed only a moment. When the wind calmed, we found you lying on the ground.”

“Then, I am not too late?”

“Too late for what?”

“I must see Lord Ao. I bear a message for him.” Li looked around the snow-shrouded garden in search of the great lord. A warrior with a crimson face veil edged in gold and armor painted with the five-fingered imperial dragon, sat observing her from a rattan chair. Li focused her attention on him. “My Lord, I bring a message from General Kuan. Please I beg you to allow me to deliver it.”

The veil moved with the breeze of the High Lord’s breath. “Give the message to Lord Shih.”

Li fished the scroll from her pack and passed it to the crimson-liveried courtier. He examined the seal. “It is from General Kuan.”

“Bring it to me,” the High Lord ordered. The courtier crossed the garden and presented the scroll with a deep bow. “This changes much.” He passed the scroll back to Lord Shih. “See that my officers learn of the new route.”

Shih bowed and scurried out of the garden. Lord Ao turned his veiled face toward Li. “You have done well and at great personal risk. You have my thanks.”

Li bowed her head in response. The emperor rose and left the garden. His entourage followed. The only ones remaining in the garden were the smooth-faced soldier and a white-haired man with pale eyes, who looked similar to, but not exactly like the innkeeper and the hermit.

Li smiled at him. “You have been most kind, my lord. When the weather allows, I will go to your temple.”

“Nonsense. I do not want you to serve me because you have to—you would only make yourself and everybody around you miserable. Rest a few days and go home. Travel by way of Shaini, we will not make a storm there for another three weeks. In the spring, come visit and collect your horse. Farewell, little mortal.”