

Ceramic DM Winter 2007 – Round 3, Match 2
Mythago vs. Carpedavid

King of Snake

In the days of the Southern Song Dynasty, in the land of Hangzhou, two snake spirits took on the form of humans. One named herself Bai Suzhen, the white snake, and the other named herself Chingching, the green snake. While out wandering one day, Bai and Chingching met a simple medicinal herb merchant named Xu Xian, and Bai fell in love with him at first sight.

Bai and Xu quickly married and opened a medicine shop, which allowed them to live a comfortable life together. Xu's skill in medicine drew disciples from all over the region, and one day a powerful monk named Fahai arrived from the Jinshan temple.

Fahai asked to study under Xu, and to prove his worthiness as a student, he revealed that Bai and Chingching were not humans, but were, in fact, spirits in disguise. Xu refused to believe Fahai and drove him away, refusing to ever take him as a student.

Fahai persisted, though, and, on the day of the Dragon Boat Festival, he convinced Xu to offer his wife some wine, as was tradition. At first Bai refused to drink the wine, but Xu was insistent. When Bai drank the wine, she became violently ill and fell unconscious.

Distraught, Xu went to find herbs to cure his wife. While he was out, the wine loosened Bai's control over her form, and she transformed back into a snake. When Xu returned, he was horrified to find a giant snake where his wife should be, and he died from fright. Triumphant, Fahai imprisoned the weakened snake spirit in his alms bowl and returned to the Jinshan temple.

Chingching could not bear to see the fate that had befallen her sister and brother-in-law, so she retreated to the mountains to meditate. After a year spent focusing her energies, she traveled to the Jinshan temple to demand her sister's return. Fahai refused, so she used her magic to flood the temple.

Fahai and his disciples fought back, and in the process injured Chingching. In her weakened state, Chingching could not control her powers, and the flooding extended throughout the region, wiping out village after village, killing tens of thousands of innocent peasants.

Seeing the damage being caused, Fahai released Bai under the condition that she use her own powers to stop the flooding. The white snake accepted the terms of her release, and once the waters were under control, she returned home where she used the powers of the sacred lingzhi herb to restore her husband to life.

Bai apologized to Xu for concealing her true form, and asked for his mercy. He was so moved that he forgave his wife for her deception, and the couple lived together in the medicine shop until the ripe old age of one hundred and three.

But this is not their story.

This story begins at four o'clock in the morning, when the ringing of a gong woke the monks of the Jinshan temple. Each of the monks rose from the wooden benches where they slept, wrapped themselves in grey robes, and made their way to the courtyard. The abbot of the temple, a middle-aged monk named Shi Yong Xin, watched closely as the adepts ran circuits of the courtyard for an hour.

When the morning exercise turned to meditation, he wandered up and down the ranks of students, smacking them with a bamboo cane when their posture slackened (indicating that they had slipped from deep concentration into deep sleep).

Finally, he led the group in the practice of wushu for another hour; he taught them the secret strikes of dragon fist, which can break through any enemy's defense; the principles of qing gong, which allows the body to become light as a feather; and the discipline of nei jing, which harnesses the vital energies that flow through every body.

When the gong rang at seven o'clock, the monks were more than ready for breakfast: a simple bowl of rice. Prayers accompanied breakfast, and once each monk had eaten, they turned their attention to their daily chores. Shi Yong Xin wandered through the temple, watching his disciples sweep the courtyard, clean the prayer hall, and polish the bronze statues of Buddha.

Normally, he paid very close attention to each monk's activities, and would rap them with his bamboo cane if he found any deficiencies. Today, though, his concentration was on other matters. He wandered for a while, lost in thought, until he happened upon the object of his contemplation.

"Fahai," he said as he motioned to a young monk of eighteen years.

The monk looked up from his task of scrubbing clean the cracks between cobblestones in the courtyard. "Yes, master?"

"Come with me Fahai."

Fahai set down his brush, stood up, and followed Shi Yong Xin through the monastery. They wandered in silence for a minute before they reached the prayer hall. The abbot ushered all of the monks out and then crossed the hall and knelt down before a bronze statue of Buddha. Fahai followed and knelt down next to his master.

"Do you remember last month when I was bitten by a snake?"

"Yes master, I went to get the sacred lingzhi herb to heal you."

"Yes, and you returned just in time. Do you remember what kind of snake it was?"

“A mountain viper, you said. We searched the entire temple for it, but it escaped before we could find it.”

“Indeed it did escape, Fahai. But it wasn’t a mountain viper.”

“Master?”

Shi Yong Xin lit several sticks of incense and placed them before the statue. The sound of monks in the midst of labor echoed in the background. “The snake that bit me was no ordinary snake. It was the King of Snake.”

Fahai shuddered. Everyone knew tale of Madam White Snake – they knew of her imprisonment by the temple, of the destruction of the temple and the surrounding villages, and of her husband, Xu Xian, who she had brought back from the dead. Fewer knew that Xu, having been brought back from the dead, had developed magical powers that rivaled even Bai Suzhen’s. He was known by those in the martial world as the King of Snake.

“But didn’t Xu die, master?”

“Yes, he did – at the age of one hundred and three. But he has returned.”

“Returned? How?”

“That I do not know, but the King of Snake was here that night, and he stole our most sacred treasure – the scroll of the Lotus Sutra.”

“Why would he do such a thing?”

“Revenge, perhaps,” Shi Yong Xin said with a sigh. “He may also be trying to regain his power.”

The thought of the King of Snake regaining power frightened the young monk. “Well, then he must be stopped.”

“Yes, Fahai, he must. And you must be the one to stop him.”

Fahai felt his blood run cold. “Me, master?”

“You are the champion of Jinshan temple, Fahai, just as your namesake was five hundred years ago.”

“I am?”

“Yes, Fahai, it is your destiny.”

“Destiny?” This was the first time that the abbot had ever spoken of destiny.

“Fahai, we all have a destiny which we must fulfill.” He paused for a moment before continuing, “You are our strongest and most able student. Your knowledge of the sutras is exceptional, and your martial prowess exceeds that of everyone else, including me.”

Fahai was silent. He had never known a home other than the temple. Though he was comfortable traveling the surrounding countryside by himself, he always knew that the temple was waiting for him to return. From the look on his master’s face, he suspected that he was not going to return from this journey.

“The honor of this temple rests upon your shoulders, Fahai.”

“Yes, master.”

Shi Yong Xin rose and beckoned to his disciple to follow, “Come. We must prepare you.”

Before a monk of the Jinshan temple leaves to travel the world, he undergoes several purification rituals. Then, just before he walks through the front gate, the final ritual is performed. The next morning, Fahai knelt before the front gate of the temple as Shi Yong Xin and the other monks gathered ‘round.

The abbot took a sickle from his belt and began to shave Fahai’s head, chanting a sutra of protection while he worked. The other monks chanted along with Shi Yong Xin, though they still managed to clap and cheer as each lock of hair hit the ground. [Image 1]

Once the ritual was complete, the abbot motioned to Fahai to stand. “You must never trim your hair with any blade but this one,” he said, “Which means that you may not cut it until you return.”

“Yes, master,” Fahai was familiar enough with the custom, having undergone it several times before. Still, he expected and appreciated hearing the instructions each time.

“The length of your hair will provide a measure of your experience. The longer it is when you return, the more knowledge we will expect you to bring back.”

Fahai took a deep breath and then bowed. “I will attempt to grow it long enough to circle all of China.”

The abbot smiled. “This marks a new beginning for you, Fahai.”

“I will make the temple proud, master.”

Thus it was at the beginning of spring that Fahai left the Jinshan temple and set off on foot, heading north. According to Shi Yong Xin, the King of Snake was likely to head west toward

India, so Fahai planned to meet up with Chang Jiang, the long river, and follow it west as it cut across the length of China.

First, though, he needed to find an antidote to the King of Snake's venom: the magical lingzhi herb. Also known as the mushroom of immortality, it was a kidney-shaped fungus so rare that it grew on one in ten thousand trees, and only then in very few locations throughout China.

Fortunately, one of those locations was a small forest that lay directly north of Jinshan temple. It was there that Fahai had traveled to find the lingzhi herb when his master had been bitten, and it was there that Fahai now found himself. The first time he had been lucky – he had felt a voice call to him – directing him to the one tree in the forest on which the mushroom grew. At the time, he thought it had been the hand of Buddha, for his master was a pious and good man who deserved the intervention of the divine.

Now, though, as he stood at the entrance to the wood, he wasn't so sure. He heard the voice again, but this time he detected a distinctly feminine tone. As he followed the voice, he felt a nagging sense of familiarity – and not simply from the last time he had heard it.

He spent nearly an hour following the voice, climbing through underbrush, and running up and down gullies, before he emerged into a clearing. There stood a magnificent silver birch. He immediately recognized that it was the same tree he had found previously, but he didn't remember it looking so...beautiful.

Fahai stared up at the tree, for it had taken on the form of a woman. Her legs sprouted from the trunk, her arms merged into the branches that stretched overhead, and an exquisitely sculpted face peered back at him from a frame of leaves. [Image 2] "Hello?" he said softly.

"Welcome," the tree replied.

Now that he could place a face to the voice, he had a hunch as to the tree's identity.

"Chingching?"

"Yes, Fahai. It is I," her voice sounded like the rustling of leaves and creaking of branches.

The young monk shuddered – the green snake that had lost control of her powers and killed thousands now stood in front of him, transformed. "What has happened to you?"

"I have imprisoned myself here in order to atone for my misdeeds. Where once I created destruction, I now offer the gift of life."

He looked at the base of her trunk – there were two small kidney-shaped mushrooms growing at the very bottom. "Though I am grateful, I do not understand why you offer the lingzhi to me."

"You will need it to combat the venom of the King of Snake."

Fahai accepted the truth of the statement, but something else tugged at the back of his mind.
“You brought me here on purpose. To what end?”

“To help you fulfill your destiny – the same reason that I brought you here last time.”

“My destiny?” This was the second time someone had mentioned destiny to him in the last week.
“What do you know of my destiny?”

“Only that I play a small part, and that the rest is for you to discover.”

Fahai frowned. He didn’t like the fact that everyone but him seemed to know about his destiny.
“I thank you, Chingching,” he said, bowing deeply. He carefully cut the lingzhi off of the tree, wrapped them in a white silk cloth, and then placed them in the base of his pack.

Once he finished, he pulled out a second white silk cloth, tied it around a low branch, and then offered Chingching his blessing.

“Thank you Fahai,” she said sadly. “Perhaps once I receive ten thousand more blessings, I will have finally paid off my debt.”

Fahai smiled. “If I survive my quest, I will be certain to come back and offer you one more.”

The young monk spent the night sleeping under the watchful eye of the remorseful spirit. The next morning, he bid her farewell and then resumed his journey. A week later, he arrived at the Chang Jiang and began his long journey west. As he moved from village to village along the river, he would produce his alms bowl and beg for enough money to buy a bowl of rice.

Fahai’s hair became shaggy at the same time he wore out his first pair of sandals and at the same time his stomach began growling at him without pause.

Bo enjoyed being a bully. As the enforcer for the region’s governor, he was able to boss people around, demand tribute, and occasionally knock a few heads together with his club. Most days he stood around in his leather smock, showing off his biceps and looking very pleased with himself. This day, however, he had work to do.

A group of peasants had gathered at the river, for this day was the day of atonement. They would wade into the river and wash themselves with fragrant herbs in order to wash away the impurities that they had gathered over the past year. This was all well and good, Bo thought, but they were taking entirely too long. The more time they spent at the river, the less time they spent in the master’s fields. The less time they spent in the fields, the less money his master would make. The less money his master made, the angrier he would become with Bo.

Bo, therefore, meant to send the peasants back to the fields. After parading back and forth along the shore for a few minutes without eliciting a response, he walked down to the end of a wooden

dock, jumped in, and waded toward them. “All right all you good for nothings!” he yelled as he swung his club over his head, “Get back to work!” [Image 3]

The peasants screamed and splashed toward the shore - all except one young man who was wearing a set of grey robes. He turned and glared, which made Bo unhappy; Bo shook his club menacingly in the air.

“What are you doing?” Fahai exclaimed. “This is a sacred ritual that you’re interfering with.”

“Bah – back to the field with you!” Bo roared.

Fahai reached into the folds of his robe and pulled out a rope of prayer beads. “Alas, I am not a field worker – just a humble monk.”

Bo paused for a moment. He had never beaten a monk before, but then, again, no monk had ever spoken out against him before. He looked around at the crowd of peasants who had stopped running and were now watching. Bo was not a bright man, but he realized that if he let one peasant tell him what to do, they would all think they could tell him what to do.

“You will pay for your insolence!” Bo yelled as he swung his club at the young monk’s head.

Fahai deftly ducked under the club and dashed back out of Bo’s range. “Please, I have no interest in violence, but I must defend the honor of this sacred ritual.”

“And I must defend my master’s money.” Bo raised the club above his head, jumped forward, and then brought it crashing down in a great arc.

The monk jumped back once again, just barely avoiding getting his skull crushed, and once again held up his hands in supplication. “Please, sir, I only ask that you respect the honor of this ritual.”

“And I said, get back to work!” Bo screamed as he jumped forward again, swinging wildly.

Fahai splashed back toward the shore, dodging the club with each step. As Bo careened toward him, Fahai grabbed a washing bucket and sent it flying. The bucket bounced off the big man’s forehead and fell into the river with a loud splash.

The group of peasants that stood behind Fahai laughed and pointed. Bo’s face turned crimson as his face contorted with rage. “I’m going to kill you!” he spat as he lunged toward the monk.

Fahai turned and vaulted out of the water, springing onto a wooden rowboat and then onto the dock. With a quick flick of his foot, he sent several planks of the dock shooting toward his opponent.

Bo knocked aside each of the planks and then brought the club over his head once again. “So, you are a martial artist, are you?”

Fahai nodded.

“Then feel the might of the Thundering Blade!” he exclaimed as he slammed the club into the river in front of him. A knife edge of water erupted from the end of his club and raced toward the dock, knocking Fahai into the river beyond.

The group of peasants gasped as the monk was sent flying, and then applauded as he landed on his feet with a tremendous splash. He sprang from the water, sailed through the air, and landed back on the dock. This time, he sent every remaining plank of wood careening through the air toward Bo.

The brutish enforcer was able to knock aside the first few planks with ease, but then became overwhelmed by the hail of flying debris. He put up his arms to shield his face, which left Fahai with an opening.

The young monk somersaulted off the rowboat and flew toward Bo with his feet extended over his head. “Wrathful Dragon’s Tail!” he yelled as he flipped his legs downward and slammed his heels into the big man’s head.

Bo staggered back, dropped his club, and then collapsed.

After Fahai fished the enforcer out of the water, he dumped him in the rowboat and pushed it out into the river, where the current caught it and carried it down stream. The group of peasants cheered as Fahai returned to shore. “Please,” he gestured toward the river, “continue with your purification.”

Later in the afternoon, as Fahai dried his robes in the cool spring breeze, the peasants of the village began to bring him gifts. First they brought bowls of rice, which he gratefully consumed, then bundles of nuts, bags of fruits, and even new robes.

“Please, please, I have asked for none of this,” he said to a woman who offered him a brick of tea.

“But we give it freely,” said an old man who carried a steamer full of pork buns.

“Perhaps it was your destiny to come here and protect us,” a teenaged girl said as she draped a silk sash around his shoulders.

“Yes, it must be destiny. Buddha has sent you to us,” the crowd agreed.

The thought was tempting. For the first time in a month, Fahai’s stomach was not growling at him. After a moment of contemplation, though, he shook his head. “No, I do not know what my destiny is, if such a thing even exists, but I do have a duty to fulfill.”

The villagers refused to let Fahai leave without filling his pack with as much rice and fruit as he could carry. He thanked them profusely, offered them his blessing, and then headed west once again.

Spring gave way to summer by the time Fahai reached the Three Gorges. The osmanthus trees were in full bloom, their white blossoms filling the air with the sweet scent of apricots and ripe peaches. He wandered through verdant fields of camellia, occasionally stopping to pick the young leaves so that he could make fresh tea.

As he stood on the high cliffs that overlooked the river a hundred feet below, his hair fluttered in the breeze. He reached up and tucked it behind his ears, then sighed. He had crossed the river a hundred times during his journey, and the trail on the northern side of the river was becoming impassible, so he needed to cross again. *Time to get to work*, he thought.

Fahai spent the next day building a raft from bamboo and reeds. The day after, he followed the river until he found a good spot to cross. Here, a trail led down the side of the cliffs to the tranquil river below. The young monk dropped his raft in the river, tested it to make certain that it wouldn't sink midway, and then paddled out using an oar he had fashioned from an old tree branch.

The current was lazy at this point along the Chang Jiang, so Fahai took his time and paddled without exerting much effort. After ten minutes of paddling, drifting, and enjoying the warmth of the summer sun, he reached the midpoint of the river. He yawned, stretched, turned to look upstream, and nearly jumped off his raft.

From the center of the river emerged a beautiful woman. She had flawless, pale skin, long, black hair, and wore a diaphanous white dress that Fahai could only consider immodest. [Image 6] He stared, slack jawed, as she rose out of the water. Her ascent stopped only when her bare toes just touched the surface.

Fahai dropped his oar as he realized who the woman was. *Bai Suzhen! She has returned, too? What is she doing here?* He felt a twinge of activity below his belt. *Why is she so beautiful?*

"Welcome to the Three Gorges, Fahai," the woman said as she winked and licked her lips.

"You may have managed to seduce your husband, Bai Suzhen, but you can't corrupt me with temptations of the flesh," He gulped. *It is very lovely flesh, though.*

"Oh, I don't need to corrupt you," she smiled, "only distract you." Fahai tore his attention from the entrancing vision just in time to see a wave of water ten feet high roaring down the river behind her.

"Floating Leaf Step!" Fahai exclaimed as he somersaulted over the incoming wave and landed lightly on the surface of the river. The wave picked up Fahai's raft and sent it tumbling

downstream where it smashed into a thousand splinters on a rock outcropping. He dashed toward Bai Suzhen, each step creating a tiny ripple.

“When Xu and I died, we joined the gods and goddesses in Heaven, but our anger at your meddling was too great, and we were condemned to return to earth,” said Bai Suzhen as she jumped twenty feet into the air, her white dress rippling in the breeze. “Feel my Crushing Palm!” she yelled as a colossal fist of water erupted under Fahai’s feet.

The young monk tried to leap to avoid the fist, but he was a split second too slow and was knocked out of the air. “It was your deception that caused this pain, not my temple’s meddling,” Fahai said angrily as he tumbled backward along the surface of the river, carving a trough in the water. The white snake swooped toward him and lashed out with her heel, but Fahai dodged to the side, sailing up into the air toward the wall of the gorge.

He pushed off the rocks and dove back toward Bai Suzhen. “Five Headed Dragon Strike!” he yelled as threw a volley of punches at the vital areas of her body. Bai blocked the first four strikes with a superhuman speed, but missed the final strike to her heart, and screamed in pain as she was sent flying across the gorge into the opposite wall.

“Not your temple, Fahai – you,” the white snake in human form spat, “When we were exiled back to earth, you voluntarily returned.” She dropped back down to stand on the river. “Why couldn’t you just leave us alone?” Bai Suzhen disappeared under the surface, while Fahai tried to understand what he had just heard.

Was he indeed the reincarnation of the elder Fahai – the monk that had imprisoned Bai Suzhen so many years ago? Was that why he had been chosen for this journey now? He was lost in contemplation for only a split second before the river rose from its bed and twisted upward toward him; a massive set of jaws opened below his feet.

“The Great Water Dragon!” he gasped as he looked around for some method of escape. He realized that he would not have time enough to avoid the dragon, so he took the only option open to him: he dove straight down into its waiting jaws.

The current clawed at him, dragging him angrily toward the earth. Instead of fighting, though, he used it to propel himself. As he plummeted toward the ground, he spotted Bai right where he expected her to be: the heart of the dragon.

The white snake’s eyes widened in surprise as she saw the young monk speeding straight toward her. She tried to turn and swim away, but Fahai slammed into her back, driving her into the riverbed thirty feet below. Bai crumpled, and the gargantuan column of water crashed back to earth, sending a massive plume of mist and foam soaring into the air above the gorge.

Fahai grabbed the body of the white snake, braced his feet on the riverbed, and launched them both into air high above the water.

Bai looked at the young monk and a look of realization crossed her face. “I understand now,” she groaned.

“Understand what?!” he yelled

“Destiny,” Bai answered as her eyelids begin to close.

Fahai pulled her close to him, “Destiny?! What is my destiny?”

She stroked his face softly with one hand and smiled weakly. “You’ll figure it out soon enough.”

“Figure out what?” Fahai yelled, only to feel her body go limp. After a moment of silence, he let her body fall into the waiting waters far below.

Summer turned to autumn and autumn to winter by the time that Fahai reached the foot of the Himalayas. He spent several days begging in the few nomad villages in the area until he could afford to buy a set of heavy robes made from yak fur. He wrapped his hair, which now reached to his mid-back, around his head and secured it with a scrap of cloth. He hoped that it would keep his ears warm.

For seven days, the sun shown down upon Fahai, warming him while he traveled during the day. At night, he was fortunate enough to find plenty of wood to build a fire, and so he retained the warmth he had built up. On the eighth day in the mountains, however, the wind picked up and the snow began to fall.

He was in the middle of a rocky pass when the blizzard hit; the wind that was channeled along its length cut through his robes and the snow battered his face. He looked around for shelter but saw none. *This is bad*, he thought. He had no choice but to press on.

The pass wound up into the mountains, and with every step the air grew colder, the wind more bitter, and the snow heavier. Fahai couldn’t tell how much time had passed since the storm began – the snow blotted out the sun and the cold numbed him to the core; he couldn’t even feel his stomach grumble.

The snow swirled around him, and Fahai began to feel tired. He stumbled on for what seemed like hours through snow that swirled around his knees. He grew more and more exhausted with each step, until he finally decided to sit down and take a nap. Suddenly, he saw a small figure wandering through the snow in front of him. The creature stood about three feet tall, and, except for a ruddy red face, it was covered from head to toe in shaggy grey hair. [Image 4]

The figure looked at him and waved. “Hello!” Fahai yelled over the roar of the wind as he waved back. *What can it be? A yeti?*

The little figure smiled, so Fahai approached cautiously. It was indeed a yeti, but it looked like a child. He looked around, but couldn't see any looming figures through the snow. Still, if it was a child, there must be adults nearby, and he was in no condition to fight a full-grown yeti.

"Hello little one," Fahai said as he knelt down in the snow. "What's your name?"

"Ang," the little yeti said quietly.

"Hello, Ang. My name is Fahai."

"Fa. Hai." the little yeti pronounced each character independently, and then smiled sheepishly.

"What are you doing outside in the middle of a snowstorm, Ang?" He realized as soon as he said it that it probably sounded silly. The little yeti didn't look the least bit concerned by the raging blizzard.

"Looking for herbs. My mommy is sick and my daddy said that herbs would make her feel better."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Ang, but I think it might be hard to find herbs under all the snow."

"That's why I brought this stick," he proudly held aloft a gnarled tree branch. "For poking in the snow."

"Ah." Fahai was certain that a raging yeti parent was going to come charging down the pass at any moment. Nevertheless, he hoped that he could get Ang to find him shelter from the storm. "What is your mother sick from?"

"She was bitten by a snake."

A snake? In these mountains? Still, perhaps she ventured down into the valley. Fahai's thoughts settled on the lingzhi buried deep in his pack. He sighed. As much as he was certain that he would need it, he couldn't bear the thought of this little creature losing its mother.

"Ang, I think I have an herb that would help your mommy."

"Really? Wow!" the little yeti's eyes lit up as he smiled. "Come with me. I'll take you!" He grabbed the young monk by the hand and led him deeper into the pass. While Fahai didn't feel any warmer, the time seemed to pass more quickly. Before he knew it, Ang pulled him between two boulders and they emerged into a dry cave.

A small fire near the mouth of the cave illuminated the interior. Fahai looked around to see a massive female yeti, well over nine feet tall, lying under a yak-fur blanket against the far wall. Leaning over her and gently stroking her hair was an even more massive yeti.

"Daddy!" Ang exclaimed as he ran toward them.

The yeti looked up and then jumped to his feet when he saw Fahai. “Ang! You know that you cannot bring humans here!” He looked to the yeti under the blanket, then to his son, then to the intruder. He advanced menacingly toward Fahai. “You must leave, human!”

“Please forgive me,” Fahai said as he bowed deeply, “but I believe that I may be able to help your ailing wife.”

The yeti stopped. “How can a human help?”

“Your son stated that your wife was bitten by a snake. I happen to be carrying the lingzhi herb, which saved the life of my master when he was bitten by one.”

“Let him try, Lhak-pa,” the female yeti said in a weak voice.

“But he is a human, Pa-sang.”

“Not all humans are wicked, Lhak-pa.”

“How do I know that you are not here to hurt us? Humans hunt yeti.”

“I am not a hunter, but a devoted servant of Buddha,” Fahai said, then nodded to the small bronze Buddha statue that stood in the far corner of the cave. Lhak-pa stared at the young monk for a minute and grumbled. He looked at his ailing wife, then at his child, then at his wife again. Finally, he stood aside.

Fahai strode over to Pa-sang and knelt down. He rummaged through his pack and then brought out a small package wrapped in silk. He unfolded the silk and set the two small mushrooms contained within on the ground. “I believe that you must take both herbs,” Fahai said, “as you are far bigger than a human.”

He turned to Lhak-pa, “Do you have some tea? It will make eating the herb easier.”

The yeti nodded to Ang, who ran to the fire and returned with a large stone cup. Fahai helped Pa-sang sit up, and then fed her both mushrooms, followed by the tea. “Rest now. It will take some time, but I believe that you will recover fully.”

The young monk looked at the empty silk lying on the ground and sighed. He now had no protection against the King of Snake. *I hope that destiny knows what it's doing*, he thought. He placed the silk back in his pack and stood up.

“You must have been destined to meet Ang when you did,” Lhak-pa said. “Humans don’t often survive in the mountains in the winter. We often find corpses after storms like this one.” Fahai nodded. “Why are you out here in the first place?”

“I am on a journey to seek out the King of Snake, who stole the Lotus Sutra from our monastery.”

“The King of Snake,” Lhak-pa face contorted, “He is the one who poisoned my wife.” The yeti pounded his fist against the wall of the cave, “Two days ago he came through this pass. Pa-sang was trying to chase him away from the cave when he bit her.”

Fahai nodded – he realized that he journey was nearly at an end. “If you help me cross these mountains, I will be able to avenge both my temple and your family.”

Lhak-pa’s ruddy red brow furled in contemplation for a minute. “I will hold the storm at bay for you. This much I owe you.” He wandered to the front of the cave and peered out as the howling winds began to die down. “I cannot offer more assistance than that, though. I must watch after my wife.”

“I understand,” Fahai said with a bow, “I thank you, Lhak-pa.” The young monk wrapped his robes tightly around himself and stepped out into the snow.

Fahai emerged from the pass to find himself looking out at an evergreen-covered mountainside that bordered a mist-covered valley. A narrow trail wound down the side of the mountain and disappeared into the mist five hundred feet below. Sitting on a rock outcropping, dangling his feet over the edge of the trail, was the target of his quest: the King of Snake.

Xu turned to look at Fahai. His skin was dark brown, almost black, and he wore the grey robes of a peasant. “So, to what do I owe this honor?” he said with a grin.

“You know very well that you stole the Lotus Sutra from Jinshan Temple. I have come to reclaim it!”

Xu opened his mouth and laughed. A bright green snake darted its head from his mouth and flicked its tongue. It turned toward Fahai and hissed. [Image 5] “Pitiful. I go to the trouble of traveling all the way across China to steal a sacred scroll, and this is who they send?”

“I am not to be taken lightly, snake. I have followed in your footsteps, defeated your wife, and survived the mountains. I will restore the honor that you took from my temple.”

“I see,” Xu chuckled as he climbed to his feet, “Did I at least kill that soft-skulled abbot of yours?”

“Shi Yong Xin is alive and well, thanks to your sister-in-law, Chingching.”

“Well, she’s always been weak. She should have finished off your pitiful little temple when she had the chance.”

“She is much stronger than you think, Xu.”

“I imagine that she thinks it her destiny to be imprisoned like that.”

“What do you think your destiny is?” demanded Fahai.

“To meet you,” said Xu, “and to destroy you!”

“Five Headed Dragon Strike!” Fahai yelled as he lunged at Xu. The King of Snake deflected each of the monk’s blows, grabbed the collar of his robe, and then stepped backward, sending both of them plummeting off the side of the mountain.

The wind roared in Fahai’s ears as he and Xu fell toward the mist below. “Cobra Strike!” Xu yelled as he jabbed at Fahai with a rigid hand, hitting him in the neck and solar plexus.

The monk gasped for breath as he clutched his neck, and Xu followed up with a flurry of kicks to his midsection. Fahai was spun around like a top from the power of the blows, and he struggled to right himself.

Fahai tried to dodge out of the range of Xu’s attacks, but the King of Snake was too quick and caught him behind the neck with a hook kick. Fahai’s head snapped forward from the force of the blow, and he was about to try and catch himself when he realized that he had been given a lucky opening. Using the momentum that had already been generated, Fahai somersaulted toward Xu, kicking his legs out behind him.

“Wrathful Dragon’s Tail,” Fahai screamed as he flipped over in midair and slammed his feet into the back of Xu’s head. The force of the blow sent the King of Snake tumbling away from him and he disappeared into the mist below. Fahai dove after him, tearing through the air and crashing into the mist, only to realize his mistake after he flew right past his opponent.

“Ha! I’ve got you now!” Xu exclaimed as thick bands of mist formed around Fahai, pinning his arms to his body. “Feel the Python’s Grasp.” The monk struggled and tumbled head over feet as the rippling coils began to constrict, squeezing the breath out of him. The two continued to fall as Fahai felt his ribs begin to crack, one by one.

The King of Snake swooped in from above and grabbed him by the collar of his robe once again. “And now, you shall feel the Adder’s Kiss,” Xu opened his mouth to reveal the small green snake, its fangs bared. He pulled Fahai slowly toward him as the snake extended itself toward the monk’s face. Fahai could see the venom drip from the ends of the snake’s fangs.

Then, as suddenly as they entered the mist, they fell clear of it, directly above a copse of pine trees. The coils pinning Fahai’s arms disappeared, and the King of Snake looked shocked as the young monk from Jinshin temple reached up and grabbed the green snake by the neck with one hand.

The next second, they crashed into the trees, and Fahai grabbed a branch with his free hand, abruptly stopping his fall. Xu's momentum continued unabated however, and he fell through the tree, his body tearing away from the snake as Fahai held tight. Fahai heard a sickening crunch as the King of Snake's lifeless body hit the ground.

Fahai waited for a moment before breathing a sigh of relief. Then he looked over to the lifeless snake that he held in his hand and his heart sunk; the snake's fangs were both fully embedded in his flesh. Fahai shook the dead adder from his hand and then climbed down from the tree.

He groaned in pain as the venom worked its way into his body; it felt like his veins were burning from the inside. Collapsing against the base of the tree, he looked over to see Xu's corpse. Without the lingzhi to heal him, he would join Xu within three days. *Wait.*

He sat in silence for a minute – the only sound the breeze rustling the leaves of the trees – and replayed the course of events that had led him here: his master, Chingching's benevolence, the slaying of Bai, his defeat of the King of Snake, and the venom now running through his veins. After a minute, he smiled and laughed to himself. *Of course. Now I see.*

Though he would not be able to return the Lotus Sutra, Fahai had brought honor to his temple, and, he now realized, almost fulfilled his destiny – there was just one more task to accomplish. He assumed the lotus position and began to meditate. In three days, the venom would reach his heart, and Fahai would join Xu Xiang and Bai Suzhen.

Then, I will be able to keep an eye on them.