

神海閑談 TALL TALES FROM THE CELESTIAL SEA

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

TORRENTIAL, IS THE CELESTIAL SEA! VAST, ARE THE MANY PLANES! Countless worlds scattered through the dark emptiness, countless rocks peeking above inky waves. They form groups and chains, that make constellations of worlds. Within them, the *greater deities* be emperors, the *lesser deities* be ministers, the *immortals* lesser officials, and the mortals innumerable below. And those great realms are split and divided, into many small planes, like an archipelago. Between the great realms are vast emptiness, so far that it cannot be described by mere north, south, east, and west; so far that it cannot be measured in feet, yards, or miles.

In the dark seas, a certain lonely archipelago was born, the setting of our story. It has its many gods and many planes, Man, Dragon, Elf, Demon; a history of a million years, a land bearing billions. Great calamities cycle, lesser calamities turn, the past saw countless colours, the future hides great mysteries.

These people call their world the *Celestial Sea*. Thus the name of our collection: TALL TALES FROM THE CELESTIAL SEA, which records tales and legends from this world, telling of great immortals and fierce beasts, the dance of the gods, and the encounters of mortal men.

This collection of short stories was originally published by Yanwenyuan in Classical Chinese. Whilst this translation seeks to be faithful to the style of the original, certain expressions and tone are bound to be different post-translation.¹ The original work can be found at Yanwenyuan.uk.

In Classical Chinese works, there is often inline commentary in small text, that explains the context, meaning, or commenter's interpretations of the larger text. The inline commentary here comes from "the commentary of the outer worlds", a meta-commentary of sorts which I have written using context and references of our real world, to explain analogues and parallels in the Celestial Sea. These are indicated by small text in the paragraph.

All other standard text is "in-world", including the occasional preface or postface (termed "Expanding").

天歷 THE WORLD ERAS

An ancient song goes:

O Heavenly Dragon in the West!
With thy ruthlessness and ire;
Forgetting thine lord begets death!
Thy seas becoming mountains.

¹We have decided to use a nonstandard adaptation of Wade-Giles romanisation for archaic effect.

The great river walks west-to-east,
The Dragon soars through the sky;
The sun and moon are a-splitting,
Split are crimson and white.

Commentary: “the great river”: Han; “the Dragon”: Lung; “crimson”: Ch’ih; “white”: Ming. This poem comes from the Tao-book *K’ang*, a book in the novel *Torrential Rains*. Dragon (龍) refers to the heaven-dragons, long bodied divine beasts, and not the winged, four-legged mountain folk. In ancient times, the character 龍 was used to refer to the latter, but they usurped the former’s name. Travellers from outer worlds may note that seal script forms do exist for 龍 which do indeed depict something akin to a winged beast, with its head at the top, tail at the bottom, and two wings either side. (Though in the real world these are merely variants) By the time the Yan ruled the central plains, the rule of dragonkind had already been cemented for countless centuries, and the distinction between the “dragons” was lost.

Scholars from across the western mountains studying the history of the world split it into several ages. Commentary: one can see them as Europeans. The first was the Age of Ancients, lasting countless years. This was when the many planes had yet formed, and only gods roamed the waters. The second was the Age of Fire, lasting countless years. This was when the many races rose. Third was the First Age of Dragonkind, marked by the Yan conquering the central plains, and the old Kingdom of Atun-Orizan² established itself in the deserts. It was a time when dragonkind ruled the mortal world, Commentary: two-winged four-legged dragons. Today, the material plane is split into three regions by the Yan people, being the western, central, and eastern lands. The great desert is in the central land, and the Yan dynasty ruled the east. and lasted nine thousand years. Fourth was the Age of Steel, a time of chaos; in the west Ryvien built his kingdom; in the centre Atun-Orizan sent its armies wide; and in the east the great empire fell to warring states, a time called the *Long Conflict*. This age lasted two thousand years. Fifth was the Second Age of Dragonkind, the three lands simultaneously united under three powers, and dragonkind ruled supreme. This lasted seven thousand years.

Sixth and Seventh were the Rebirth, and the Age of Man, the former a hundred and fifty years, and the latter four hundred, lasting until the present. The two great empires of the west and centre fell, the dragons were driven into the mountains; the “rebirth” was a time of brutal war, and the Age of Man saw humanity control all under heaven. Commentary: the preset refers to the seventeenth year in the reign of Caesar James Augustin Andolyn of the Ryvenian Kingdom, or the thirty-seventh year of the Tsu-lung Emperor of Shang. *Torrential Rains* is set some twenty to thirty thousand years after this time. As for the Great Yin dynasty of the east, it only fell a hundred and fifty years prior to the human Shang, and the old nobility too built a nation for themselves in their mountain heartland. The dynasty of Chang.

The Taoist sect of the east traces its lineage back to the ancients. Though then, they had not formed a system, the roots of the Taoist system still existed, and they also recorded a world history. Today, that history is hidden in forgotten books in the corners of sect libraries. Different from the western scholars, it encompassed past and future, listing five “calamities”: Lung-han, Ch’ih-ming, Shang-huang, K’ai-huang, and Yan-k’ang. Commentary: these are real Taoist eras.

One could say: Heaven began at Lung-han, thus the Age of Ancients belongs to it. The world was created in Lung-han, so the first part of the Age of Fire belongs to it. In the Lung-han world, the *Emperor of Stars* emerged and built a nation in the eastern continent, lasting countless myriad years. Today’s *Mountains of the*

²Also called “Huangsha” by the Yan people; *the Fallen Kingdom of Samakhan*

World Commentary: a vertical mountain range that separates the central continent in two, that separates the eastern land from the centre and west. In ancient times, the three planes [the material world, the elven world, and the deep dark] were one, and it used to be a great sea. Importantly, the west-centre-east *lands* are all part of one *continent*, the “Eastern Continent” mentioned is a distinct landmass separated by water. **were once a great ocean, the heavenly dragon *Spirit Eater* lived there, consuming magical energy and natural qi. At the era’s end, the God of Death rose in rebellion, wanting to usurp the Crimson Goddess’s place. The Spirit Eater fell under his demoiic aura and wreaked havoc on the mortal world. In the heavens, the Gods all raised arms against the God of Death, and ASYR’s servant the Emperor of Stars followed with an army of immortals.** Commentary: *hsien*, immortals in the Chinese sense. Asyr is the name of the mother-god of dragonkind, who is also called the Great Ancestor, or the Golden Emperor. She created the skies, and the sun and moon, and is treated with great reverence by all, thus her name is rendered differently. **They succeeded, and brought down the God of Death. The Emperor of Stars perished, and the Spirit Eater was executed by ASYR, the continent was broken, and split into three skies.**

The poem speaks of this time, when the broken world became whole, and the Sun and Moon rose, called the Crimson and White Sovereigns. Civilisation developed again, and the events of the past faded, it’s histories even less known. Thus; a *calamity* is an era, and an era is a *calamity*. It represents both the birth and final end.

The Moon lived in the east, and saw five emperors. The sun lived in the west, and saw seven kings. The former were the bygone immortals of the Star Emperor, who each governed for over ten thousand years, before rising to heaven and becoming sage-kings of the Great Jin. Commentary: Jin Hsien is an ancestor god of mankind, also called the Taoist Progenitor. At the end of Lung-han he took in the broken eastern half of the world, and split it with his younger brother Jin Chou. There were humans still alive in this part of the world, and Hsien built a the nation of Jin to govern them. After the God of Death fell, a torn remnant of his soul floated into Chou, turning him resentful and twisted; the brothers went from cooperation to war. “Sage-kings” are like the subordinate kings of the empire, each governing their part of the world. The latter were ESTIA’s seven children,³ sent down to rule the west for ten thousand years each, teaching the people in their strengths. They then rose back to heaven, and created the Heavenly Court, to judge the sins and virtues of the dead. At era’s end, a new stranger arrived, an malignant god from outer worlds, who called himself MOIRA, who titled himself as the official governing fate, the emissary of the so called *true creator*. Commentary: “*It might seem as if there would be a true Governor concerned in [the affairs of the world], but we do not find any trace [of his presence]*” such go the words of Chuang-tzu. For the many gods of the Celestial Sea, who was the true creator? Who else other than they; they who awoke with heaven and earth, who created the many planes? How could there be a higher power? The throne of the Stars was empty, Commentary: The Stars represent the future, the unknown, and has a deep connection with fate. **and he would usurp that role, and turn the worlds upon their head. Calamity rolled throughout, and the gods started fighting again, though in the end they made peace, for what reason is unknown. At this time over seven-tenths of the old culture was lost, the old histories forgotten again, thus it was called a calamity.**

Later then came the era of Shang-huang. It started with the many Miao, and continues to today. Commentary: The “many Miao” are the polities of the eastern land, before the dynasty of Yan took hold. They were nations of men, similar to our Zhou dynasty. The Yan, then, would be like the Qin. **NOW in the Shang-huang era, the descendant of the stars An would reclaim the throne, and MOIRA’s power would weaken, but he was like a heavenly emissary, unmovable, like the manifestation of fate itself.**

The numbers of fate are mysterious, but a beginning must have an end. The great cycle has been set, and two more calamities must befall. With two more

³Estia, mother of humanity, another ancestor god of Mankind, also called the Mother of Earth

calamities comes two more eras, before the islands on the Celestial Sea return to the sea itself, and sinks beneath the empty waves. The great Tao is cyclical.

Expanding:⁴ This chapter is taken from the Celestial Library. Comment: The greater god KLEIOS, also called Shang-tzu, or the scholarly Sage, manages the celestial library. He awoke with the heavens, and is the aspect of wisdom, how could he not have recorded such matters? The mortals though do not know of these mysteries; the Emperor of Stars may be able to guess, and the five emperors and seven kings may have some inkling. Unlike the following chapters, this is not from the lower realms, and not for the people of lower realms to read, but it provides an overarching context for the major events that happen. Indeed, mortals are not even aware that the three planes were once one whole, they assume that's how it has always been.

頌雨神 PRAISE TO THE RAIN GODS

Fortune born are the Gods of Rain, the Venerables of the Moon; they ride the wind and guide the rains, and protect the common people.

Each people have their gods. Dragons are born from the natural spirit of heaven and earth, the lords of all beasts and birds. The Golden God ASYR created day and night; the Diamond God XIRON sculpted mountains and rivers. ASYR gave life to birds and beasts; XIRON nurtured flowers and trees. ASYR brought rain, wind, and lightning; XIRON placed gold, jade, and mercury. And to rule their world, these gods created three races. To rule the heavens the *heaven-dragons*; primordial, are they, they anger and earth and sea switch place. To rule the earth the *earth-dragons*; mysterious, are they, they breathe and ley lines form. And to rule the mortals the *man-dragons*, what we know as the mortal mountain-folk.

Commentary: two winged four legged dragons. Heaven-earth-man should not be taken literally, but rather as part of the Heaven-earth-man Taoist trinity.

The ancient world was called the *original heaven*, where the wind and rains lashed without order, where the people suffered under nature. This was, as ASYR was the purest chaos, and XIRON was the purest order. The mountains and rivers were orderly in their arrangement; the wind and rain flowed without rest. Thus it was for countless years. The dark plane gathered demons, the elven realm built civilisation, the immortal path of the Great Jin was flourishing! Commentary: The material plane split at the end of lung-han, and the Taoist Progenitor Jin Hsien took the largest piece—the eastern half, the Star Venerable's land—and built the world of the Great Jin. Of the rest, west, centre, north: the western regions were damaged the most, and nothing remained, so the Elven Father Valaan took it and built a mirror world, a paradise for his remaining elven-kind. The north was taken by the human mother Estia, to build a prison, a cursed land of demons and ghosts, to imprison the remnants of the Death God's soul. As for the centre, that is the material plane of today. Only the material world was unable to advance. Only the dragons ruled the primordial skies.

However, XIRON pitied the mortal races, and wanted to calm the untameable sky, so he secretly bestowed his essence to a mortal dragon, who laid one egg; one egg hatched two children, and divine song filled the heavens. They became the Moon Venerables, Gods of Rain. Dragonkind has a poem, that recounts their

⁴Commentary comes in many levels: inline commentary for explaining text as-is, and “expanding” commentary which is written usually as an overall comment, conclusion, or in-world context in the book. Contrasting, inline commentary is written for an outside reader—you, for example, who do not live in the Celestial Sea and thus would not know the names.

legend:⁵

*zon dir asiir yiríns / Of grey sun-scorched earth,
a zon Xirónon krars / And of Xiron's grace,
zon esxín siak / Born from mortal hearth,
a zon idíks rekhár / Of the draconic race.*

*ahr yelvór genís / Two brothers were born,
ith hákros vath / In great mountains deep,
arúm san asái yirín / Eyes of burning dawn,
zaakos san thur xasáth / Scales of azure sea.*

*zon dir asiir yiríns / On the sun-scorched earth,
miirvúthos xyae komás / The flood-rains came fast,
nal thiaa komás khars / Bringing with them death,
a likhres tao yiríns / And famine as they passed.*

*árik likháins, árik kharatíns / People starved, people died,
ith hir kanai diskáie / In this chaotic world,
yelr nadéns thiaaron kastái / The twins watched their plight,
diskáia thiaa ankoníns / The chaos they try withstand.*

*ir zon xirónon krars / But from Xiron's grace,
gaimíns xána taníe / Rose divinity of Gods,
makára sinyarvíns / Magic interlaced,
yelvóron arkhái ithiin / Within the brothers' blood.*

*yelr nal vriae nadéns / They watched in distress,
kai diskáia dir thíravins / As chaos awashed the land,
a nal makára saa ayaan / And with magic they possessed,
kantii thiaa, saa laevíns / To guard them, they planned.*

*saa matáins tokái, vrakháie / They raised heads and roared,
tarxaal tao sára / A command to the sky,
tao miirvúthos evakháie / To the rains that lashed and poured,
sii áriae, a erváie / To fall gently from high.*

*a árik karomíns / And the people rejoiced,
vuthós erváie kamaas / Blessed with gentle rains,
ir gáda thiaa gardíns / But the prayers they voiced,
alaaron aráks saeraas / Met another's disdain.*

*Asiiron khimér kharáse / The wrath of Asyr Shai,
san dziireen vaivére / Was terror to behold,
enád has xir'rakhiin / All shall quake in fear,
dimúr tan-rekhán kínae / Afore the Empress of Gold!*

*khak tamiin yamarkhá / How dare they half blood,
khak tamiin tae'eroxána / How dare they half divine,
diathiin kháron kanái / Taint the world with mud,
parakín kháron xáeda / Scorn that of her design?*

*ir tao saa, takhaal dkhomás / But torment cannot come,
tao saa, saa xána ayaar / To those divine within,*

⁵The original text had a translation of it in Classical Chinese. Here we use the original eastern Draconic (italics) as well as english

*akái tao khar daet is / Though in her eyes scum,
 saa si atáne kath / They were still of kin.
 alaar timorík si maizíns / So another sentence dealt,
 si skazíns khiyáris / To be torn asunder,
 ith damak dai yir aranín / In Damak Dai, one dwelt,
 yir áeksirin mákris / One exiled far yonder.
 ithár iséryi gaimíns / So a balance rose,
 ithárer dir a sara / Between the earth and sky,
 ton vuthos yaan malán / Where rains gave repose,
 zon Xáion diskáia / From the chaos of Shai.*

The two gods were split, and only one moon hangs in the sky. To tame the rains and welcome the harvest, and keep back the demons of the night from harming mortal life.

歷公之子 THE SON OF DUKE LI

This story talks about the ancient Miao state of Nan Commentary: Nan is one of the polities of the pre-dynastic human Miao states. Duke Li is the last ruler of Miao. He was born near its end, a couple centuries before the great Yan conquered all under heaven.

Duke Li of Nan had a son named Ch'i. Ch'i was filial to his father and close to his people, and was loved by them. His father doted on him. A plague swept through the central plains, and Ch'i went out to aid his people. He returned ill, and neither physicians nor taoists could cure him. In autum, Ch'i died, and Duke Li cried for three days and three nights. He wished to bring his son back to life, and tried countless methods without success. So against heaven is it [resurrection], that immortals did not know it, and demons did not dare it. Thus the Duke walked eight thousand li to Yan The dragon kingdom of Yan, climbed the divine mountain Tai, and went to the deity's spring. Commentary: Tai is the name of the tallest mountain in the material plane. The Moon Venerable makes his throne there, and the eastern lands revere his mountain as divine. Within the mountain is a clear spring, where people say the rain god lives; it is quiet without ripple, and so deep one cannot see the floor. The poem goes:

A twenty mile peak, its spring eternal;
 On boundless lands below dragons and birds roam.
 A single clear drop in the spring of the world;
 Reflecting the Duke Li's grief and gloom.

He turned and entered the cave, seeing a clear pond, its diameter eight-and-eighty yards. The Duke prostrated himself afore it, saying: "Fortune born the God of Rain, o heavenly venerable that loves all beings; this lowly man pleads with you. This lowly man has a son, kind from birth, who loved his father and his people. My country suffered plague, and my son went to help my people, and

contracted undeserved illness. I would give everything I have, just for his life again.”

There was a long period of silence, before suddenly the wind started, and above the pond appeared a Tao Venerable, with kindly and auspicious features. His eyes were azure as the sea, and his gaze was sharp as a dragon’s. The venerable said: “What is dead cannot come back to life.”

The duke pleaded again, and he replied: “Your son’s virtue is such that he entered heaven. However, the laws of the world state that the departed cannot return. We may allow you to see him one last time, but you must not come close.”

The Duke assented. Thus, upon the pond was shown an image of Ch’i, sailing upon a lake, fishing contentedly, looking back at his father with a smile. The Duke forgot the god’s warning and approached; when he touched the pond, the picture broke. He gave a mournful scream, before dissolving like smoke.

The Duke did not heed the god’s warning, and his soul was shattered; the Kingdom of Nan without a ruler fell into chaos, and was subsumed by neighbouring polities. Commentary: Though the god of rain is a dragon, to men he appears as one, to be closer to his people and not frighten them, to sit as equals; for he takes all under heaven to be his children.

亡國薩瑪汗 THE FALLEN KINGDOM OF SAMAKHAN

The poem goes:

Nobles of a fallen realm fleeing golden steel,
They chose a Speaker to whom a hundred families kneel.
The kingdom of man escaped the dragon’s claw,
Split the empire eight-fold and royal titles did deal.
The western prince sought a noble bride,
He slew a dragon and brought its spoils with pride,
The Speaker, in fury, proclaimed the land must fall,
A thousand dragons’ wrath, who could survive?

Six hundred years ago the draconic dynasty fell, dragonkind’s rule of many myriad years came to a sudden end, and the histories turned over a new chapter. This story refers to “Huangsha” [or The Empire of Sun and Twisted Flax] in the central continent. It is the name of a kingdom, but also of a civilisation, such as Hua-hsia to China. It is also an exonym of the eastern continent, and not one it’s people used. In ancient times, the great powers of the world, including the dynasties of the east, Huangsha in the centre, and Ryvien in the west, were all ruled by dragons; the dragons were king. Today, humanity has taken the lands under heaven, and in the span of four hundred years the great empires fell, as humans, elves, dwarves, and all sorts of land-walking races built nations and dynasties.

Dragonkind suffered such, that eight in ten of their number died, the rest fled to the mountains of the northeast, to lick their wounds and bide their time. The human dynasty established itself, and rebuilt the kingdom in the sands. Under *Shaer Padeshkhan*⁶ eight countries bowed, Commentary: The capital of Huangsha, and its throne are translated to “King of the Hundred Kings”, the human kingdom never changed this. However, it’s lands reduced

⁶The Seat of the King of Kings

by half, and the kingdom itself was split into eight. Its most powerful Parsor, then Al Mahib, Khantorum, Qorom, Tsien'na, Ashralan, Lamytov, and Samakhan. The former kingdom's dragon clans built a country in the mountains, and elected the *Righteous Speaker*⁷ to govern the hundred families. Thus, it is called the House of the Righteous Speaker. Commentary: The Righteous speaker is called such, because he is the orthodox voice for dragonkind. He sits for a hundred years, and is elected from the masses. Unlike a king, he does not govern, but debates; he does not legislate, but guides; he does not rule dragonkind but works for their interest, mediates peace, and defends against outside enemies. Thus although not a country, it can be seen as one. The sand-people also call it Dragonshome. Furthermore, although mankind made their kingdom, that did not satisfy man's heart. The foundations of the kingdom shook many times, and their son-of-heaven changed easily, &c.

Let us speak of the northeastern kingdom of Samakhan. To the west, it bordered Tsien'na; to the east Dragonshome; to the south the wastelands; and to the north barbarians. It was criss-crossed by rivers and mountains, and under the old sky was prosperous! The treasures of the mountains were traded to the plains, and the grains of the plains to the mountains; it was the ancestral homes of many a dragon, and gold and silver flowed like water. However, after the great extermination of the dragons, and the liberation of mankind, this place turned from the centre to the periphery, it's fortunes failing.

When the human kingdom was three hundred years old, there was a prince of Samakhan, who wanted the hand of the princess of Khantorum, but was refused by the king. Samakhan was a small nation, its gold poor and mountains exhausted; Khantorum was twice its size, resources rich, how could it compare? His precious daughter was delicate and beautiful, how could he let her marry into a backwater? But, a prince was hard to refuse, so the King of Khantorum set a sky-high bride price just to pressure him.

After ten generations of wind and rain, and three royal families, the coffers of Samakhan were empty. A past famine had wiped out their treasury, and that bride-price was so high it could not be met. But the prince was no ordinary man, he was quick and shrewd, and sought his own destiny. Naturally, his gaze turned towards the northern dragon kingdom. When the draconic dynasty fell, their people fled to the mountains, bringing with them untold treasures. If mankind could overthrow dragonkind, then what's a kingdom against one dragon? There were many powerful mages and warriors in the kingdom, and if they succeeded, then their treasures would be like a mountain, the nation could be satisfied, and he could be wed!

Yet he did not think of the Righteous Speaker. Everyone knew this "lord" lived in his mountain fortress, never coming out; not guarding his borders, not involving himself in outside matters. So the prince picked twenty expert soldiers, and led them personally northwards, secretly observing the mountains for over forty days. They spotted a lone dragon, who made lair in the hinterlands, and did not see its clansmen, even less so it ever travelling to Dragonshome. One night they advanced, and moved with lightning, catching it unawares. And there was only blood sprayed in four directions; furious roars echoed; an evil fire which flashed for only a moment, before the world returned to silence, and the night fell back in. The dragon was dead, and whilst the prince's men were hurt, none had perished. They congratulated themselves, and each took huge amounts of treasure and fled back to human lands. The prince paid his bride-price, and the

⁷正音, lit. orthodox voice

King of Khantorium, seeing his quick wit, could only accept and wed his daughter to him. And the two of them were happy, &c.

But speaking of that dragon, he died with much grievance; his body was left exposed for months, and demonic and resentful energy gathered. One day, a distant relative came to visit—this dragon indeed had clansmen, just that they did not meet very often. He saw the ghastly sight, and was shook to the core. He immediately told his clan, and they, upon seeing how he was killed, came to the Righteous Speaker, and told him everything. The Speaker sent spies into human lands, and quickly learned of the heroic prince of Samakhan, who had killed a dragon! And taken the hand of a great kingdom's princess in marriage, so on, so on.

They returned to the Speaker, and this dragon lord in his fury and ire commanded: "Destroy Samakhan, raze its cities, kill its people, not young nor old must be spared. To right our laws, and to avenge this sin; and to warn the wretches in the human kingdoms, to never again dare to covet Dragonshome!"

He raised a flying army a thousand strong, and immediately headed south into Samakhan. However many treasures and artefacts the small country had, how could they stand against heaven's army? Parsor, as the heart of Huangsha, naturally could repel the Speaker's forces, but they were currently embroiled in a succession crisis and could not send soldiers to help. The Speaker himself had restraint; outside of Samakhan, not a blade of grass was harmed. Inside Samakhan, the land was razed to the ground. No matter man, woman, young, or old, all perished under dragon-fire.

When the new emperor finally took hold of Shaer Padeshkhan, and led an army there, the kingdom had already perished. Eight kingdoms became seven, and the Speaker had retreated to his mountains, and they were helpless to it.

Expanding: This story comes from the Outer Tales of Huangsha. Beyond the realm and in the western mountains is the Spirit Abyss, like an invisible chasm. **Commentary:** The compilation mentioned comes from stories told by merchant caravans that have come from the west, and became how the eastern lands saw this far-off place. The central and eastern continents are split down the middle by a huge mountain range, and within the mountains is a region where all magic fails, called the "Spirit Abyss". Only the northern plains can be traversed, though the road is tough, and few make the journey. All magic fails, and even dragonflight is hard, thus few cross them. Further west is a great desert, boundless like the sea. There is a great kingdom there, called Huangsha, "Emperor of Sands"—its name is obvious. It enfeoffs the desert realms, and is the hegemon of the centre.

天舞家 THE SKY-DANCER

The ancient House of Li had not reached the western regions, thus many tall tales came from there. **Commentary:** Li is a royal dynasty in the first age of dragonkind, that ruled for one thousand and two hundred years, the last dynasty of this age. Today, their descendants live on Pear Blossom Island in the eastern sea. The western reams is a region several thousand li across, with mountains to its south and frigid steppe to its north. Thus one need not cross mountains directly, and it becomes a place for traders from far lands. The western end of it suffers the effects of the spirit abyss, and east are many sheer passes, hence it developed its own culture different to both Li and Huangsha. Although the ancient Li dynasty was strong, it did not set sights on this backwater, thus the people of Li did not know much of it. **This is**

the record of someone living in the Damak valley during Li, who described a wanderer's experiences in the western realms.

Thousands of li to the west, far out of reach from the Yan kings' claw, sand drifts, and its mysteries are endless. Commentary: the Yan kings widely refer to the draconic dynasties of the central plains. An ancient city is there, with walls twenty feet high and six feet thick, built out of red sandstone. It lies north of the spring, on the lower reaches of a great river, and makes the sands its home. Commentary: the "spring" is the Spring of the Earth, the name of the lake at the foot of Mount Tai. North of here are the western regions, and though it is mostly desert, there is one river which flows into it, called the Hsin river. As for the people of Damak,⁸ they only hear of this place from travellers, those who wander the heavens alone. In our true tongue, we call this city *Asakhsid*, or Sandstone. Commentary: dragonkind often refers to their own kind with the word "chen", meaning "true", so true kind, and true tongue. The author of this record is a dragon.

It is said: the asura-kind live here, half man half demon, and have done so for countless myriad years. Even the bone-script and stone stele mention them, from accounts of wanderers, retellings by traders, and even emissaries to the ancient Yan court. In their desert language, they call their city *Alang Rak*, and their people the *Turik*. Their cities spread wide, west to *Hasthur*, *Suriha*, east past the hsin river. They have many settlements beyond the mountains, and are prolific traders. However, the city of Sandstone is the greatest, the mightiest. An ancient temple rises from its heart, with crimson dome and golden spire.

Once, a wanderer came to visit Damak, and was a guest at my manor. He talked about tales from far-off countries. He was an *khankain*, lit. *royal-born*. Dragonkind splits itself into two classes, *khankain* or royal-born are those born within civilisation (i.e. within the Empire), who subsume into the greater culture of the central plains. In contrast, *arakain* or wild-born are dragons born in the wilds, who live as "wild dragons", coming into contact or conflict with, but not playing a part in landed culture. born within the realm, but this up to make the open sky his home. Alone, he travelled across the world, west to the borders of Luzan, north to the tundra, but nothing he saw came close to Sandstone.

In human form, he roamed its streets for four-and-twenty days, blending into the local people. He walked colourful markets, busy squares, and quiet temples. Under the great bridges, the fierce river roared past. Though beautiful and stunning it was, it still certainly did not compare to our *Khanxanae*!⁹ Sandstone, as a centre of commerce, its markets were filled with goods from all corners of the world, from silks and pearls sold by Yan merchants, to crystal ornaments sold by barbarians. The latter travelled through months of hardship, coming from places more west than west, from nations almost seen as mythical. Legends say that there is also a great empire in the extremes of the west, who even could equal the Yan kings, yet no living being has travelled there.

He said: one night I was resting, sitting outside the market, watching the setting sun flash on the glazed tile pavement. A woman came past, her eyes red as flame, her features fine as those in the central plains. She asked me why I was sitting there. I replied that at this time, the earth was quietest, the sky was clearest, and dusk was when the stones of Sandstone were at their most brilliant. The woman smiled, and beckoned me to follow. We went through countless alleys, walking up the hill at the city centre, until we were at the gate of the grand

⁸T'ai-ch'uan province, draconic name *damak*; similarly Mount Tai's draconic name is *damak dai*.

⁹Khanxanae is the draconic name for the provincial seat of Damak, known in Chinese as Huang-kuan-ch'iao.

temple. Here I saw the great city unfurling in front of me, the red sun drowning it in brilliant haze, bright like the fires of ASYR.

Here, he laughed, and said: this person, she was not like the others, she seemed to see through me. Sitting outside the temple, she asked me: “For a sky-dancer like you, why would you walk amongst the mortals, and not soar through the skies?”

The traveller liked that name, “sky-dancer”, flowing like the wind, never landing for long, but the city of Sandstone still sits in his heart, whenever he feels unease he thinks of it, finding solace in the emperor of the sands, in the towers of crimson red. Tomorrow, this person will leave my manor, riding the wind away from Damak, going again north-west to that city.

呂昌王 PRINCE OF LYU-CH'ANG

Commentary: Lyu-ch'ang is a dragon dynasty that arose four thousand years into the second age of dragonkind, and ruled for about a thousand years. Hence anyone surnamed Lyu-ch'ang is a dragon. Emperor Chien-ying of Lyu-ch'ang had a younger brother, the Prince Yan, who governed Heng-huo. Commentary: the Chien-ying emperor is the last emperor of Lyu-ch'ang. Heng-huo city today is the seat of Huo-shan commandery, Yung-heng-huo. It sits in the centre of the southern plain, and backs onto the Huo-shan mountains. He had an only son, called Yin, and the people all called him young prince. Yin was kind-hearted and bright, and loved all things.

When he was young, he liked to roam the mountains. One day, he found a beast, with a dragon's head, lion's body, and deer's feet; exactly the *kirin*, that beast from fairy-tales, the bringer of fortune, laying right in front of him. This kirin was badly hurt, it's celestial blood staining the earth, on the edge of death. The young prince did not hesitate, but immediately gave it the medical pills he carried with him, and carried it all the way back to the prince's manor, to summon the physician to see him.

Several months later, the kirin finally awoke, and upon seeing the young prince thanked him for his grace. The kirin could speak human tongue, but its dialect was distant, as if coming from ancient times. It said that it came from the empire of the Great Jin, a plane in the outer heaven, where the Taoist Progenitor sat on the dargon throne, and true immortals governed the four directions. One day, he was walking the edge of heaven, and accidentally fell into a tear in the void. He was struck unconscious by the ethereal thunder of the void, and only woke up here.

He asked where he was, and the young prince said: “I do not know of the Great Jin beyond heaven, I only know of the Lyu-ch'ang court in the central plains. The heavens are high, and not easily reached by us in the mortal world.” The kirin knew of the material plane, and was silent for a long time, it's expression crestfallen and forlorn.

The young prince smiled and comforted it: “Brother Kirin, since you arrive to Lyu-ch'ang alive, you must be able to make it back. Brother's magic is much stronger than all the masters at my manor, please do not worry. Currently, brother is injured, and if you wouldn't mind, you can stay at our manor. Though we have not much to give, certainly far worse than your celestial home, my father is Prince, the people are my servants, thus we are safe, with bountiful food and

water, and the entirety of Huo-shan is our playground. When you have recovered, I promise to help brother to break through the void and return to your home.” The kirin felt deeply his kindness, and being curious at the customs of *man-dragons* Commentary: winged common dragons, for this expression see *Praise to the Rain Gods*. The Great Jin does not have any dragons of this kind. accepted. Thus every day Prince Yan’s house flourished, and every day Huo-shan gained fortune; the auspices of the kirin surrounded the prince’s family.

Though the kirin’s cultivation was deep, it was not yet grown, and became brothers with the young prince. They shared quarters, and roamed the mountains together.

In the Manor of Prince Yan was a golden core master¹⁰ and was a manor guard. Hearing that a kirin had arrived at the manor, a child of fortune, he suddenly felt greed, to tame it for his own use. In the dark of night he entered the young prince’s courtyard, and saw a kirin and a dragon sleeping soundly. He made magic and stole the kirin, escaping the manor. Not long after, the young prince startled awake, and was shocked to find his brother not present. He immediately told Prince Yan, and the prince gathered all his men, only to see one was missing. The cultivator masters all searched for him, and intercepted him at the border of the commandery, retrieving the kirin. The Prince, in anger, beheaded him in front of the manor.

When the young prince was grown, the kirin’s power had recovered, and could tear through space and travel across worlds. The young prince found a magical artefact, and gave it to him to help him navigate the outer heavens. The kirin profusely thanked the prince’s family, and left a scale for the young prince, saying: “For good luck and protection.” Before sprinting across auspicious clouds, tearing through the heavens, and wandered through the celestial sea. The young prince bade farewell with tears, hoping one day to reunite with him.

When the young prince had matured, his virtue and benevolence was ever more present. He managed the manor and governed the city, and his people were content at their professions, and Huo-shan grew rich. At that time, the emperor was enraptured in womanly charm, and neglected court matters; other provinces slowly decayed. One year there was drought, and the people had nought to eat, so their resentment grew. A human general named Su Hsieh rose up in Ch’ang-chou, proclaiming he could overthrow dragonkind, and give all under heaven to humanity. He established the Chou. The immortal sects all turned to the Chou, and Lyu-ch’ang armies crumbled. The Prince Yan fell at Wen, Commentary: city name. One commandery south east of Huo-shan. Ch’ang-chou commandery is in the far south-east, by the coast, thus the Zhou armies headed northwest. and the people of Huo-shan rallied around the young prince Yin to fight Chou. However, the armies of Su Hsieh was as fast as fire, and had already taken half under heaven; Huo-shan was surrounded on three sides without reprieve, unable to resist against overwhelming force. The young prince personally fought General Su, but was no match, and so for the lives of all common people in Huo-shan, agreed to give his head. General Su agreed, and spared his cities.

The next day, he built a platform at the market, and displayed the young prince to the public. The people were silent, not daring to shed tears for fear of offending the Chou army. When the young prince was about to be beheaded, he suddenly

¹⁰A cultivation rank, ranks go Refining Qi, Foundation Building, Golden Core, Nascent Soul, and Transforming Spirit. Golden core is already seen as elite, nascent soul cultivators are only a handful, and transforming force can usually be counted on one hand.

felt the kirin scale grow hot, and heard his old brother's voice: "I hear Yin's virtue in the mortal world is known widely, such a shame that your family faces such crisis. His Majesty is lacking a sage-king, and I rashly recommended you, brother. His Majesty would like to appoint you, what say you?"

The prince was shocked, and momentarily speechless, but as the executioner's blade fell, he shouted "I assent!". In an instant golden light filled the sky, and there was no more dragon under the executioner's blade. The people all thought he had become an immortal, and ascended.

Crossing the heavenly sea, he arrived in the Jin, and again met his brother kirin. Together they travelled to the great Jade Capital, and saw the divine emperor. He became a sage-king, and the immortal realm's ten kings were once again whole. Commentary: The human god Jin Hsien, also called the Taoist Progenitor, gathered the eastern half of the sky with his brother Jin Chou, and created a new world for humanity. Due to the god of death, the brothers split. The Great Jin occupied seven-tenths of the land; the Taoist Progenitor became the emperor upon high, and ten immortal sage-kings governed the ten directions. Underneath were ministers countless in number. Legends say that many divine beasts used to live in the eastern continent, and so were also taken to Jin; elsewhere they became nearly extinct, hence why Lyu-ch'ang never saw them. The "divine beasts" of the material plane then, were no more than dragons and demon-beasts, and hidden serpents deep in the sea. How could there be ch'i-lin and p'i-hsiu and their like?

骨符 BONE TALISMAN

In the period of Wen and Li, the world was not at peace, Commentary: Wen and Li were dynasties of the first age of dragonkind, each lasting about a thousand years. Between them were around two centuries of chaos, where three dynasties rose and fell, being the Jiang, Lyu, and Han. The Jiang fell after sixteen years; the Lyu did not last a hundred; and the height of the chaos was the An Wen Rebellion. The Lyu general An Wen rose in rebellion from the north, leading his *Mang-yen Army* southwards against the dragon clans. Fifty years of protracted war ended in T'ai-ch'uan, Commentary: in the western mountains, the ancestral home of the dragons, which rarely if ever fell to outside invaders. and he established the Han. Fourteen months later, the world under heaven again split, and after seven-and-thirty more years finally united under Li, who brought peace to the central plains. Oh! The fourteen-month Han, its legends are so vivid they rival the Long Conflict, forever to be recorded in the histories. Commentary: the Long Conflict was the period after the Li fell, lasting two millennia.

About the bone talisman, no one knows what it truly is, but there is one explanation: "studying unearthed texts, this is a treasure of the many Miao. Its lettering is not golden-claw, true seal, or similar; Commentary: golden-claw is the seal-script writing used by dragonkind. It has some "true form" within it, and hence the characters themselves contain a little magical energy. True seal is similar, being used by cultivation masters. and must be older. This would explain why it was difficult for the King of Yan to invade the Many Miao; otherwise how would the Miao resist the dragon army so?"

At the end of Lyu, An Wen rebelled, and many commanderies turned from the court. The Mang-yen army terrorised the central provinces. An Wen rose up in the northern border city of Pei-chao, and campaigned south-westwards. In an outer county of the capital was a man surnamed Sung, over sixty in age, who farmed for a living. The capital is in Tai-yuen commandery, in the west-central part of the empire. The Mang-yen army was closing in

on the captial, and his sons and grandsons had already escaped west, but old Sung did not follow.

One day whilst tilling, he saw something under his hoe. Looking closer, it was a bone, covered in mysterious writing, and so old one could not tell its age. He thought it curious and picked it up. He returned to his home and inspected it, seeing that it was rectangular, with ineffable symbols carved on it, like those of a Taoist talisman, so Song named it the bone talisman, and took it as a lucky charm. He carried it with him for a month, and played with it at night. Suddenly the talisman flashed with blinding light, and the old man was shocked to find that, in his hand was no longer a bone talisman, but a treasure-sword. Three feet of shining bronze, lightly landing in his palm, celestial characters seven carved on it, and though one could not read them, they would know what it said:

“Treasure Sword of Mien King Hsing’s Manor.” Commentary: Mien was one of the strongest polities in the ancient Miao. He wet outside and tested it on firewood, and though the old man was not a martial artist, as his heart moved his hand also moved, and the sword flashed forward, cleaving it in two. He then thought about it turning back to the bone talisman, and so it did. Pleased, he would often use the sword to cut firewood; one wave was enough to halve it, not requiring any strength at all.

When the Mang-yen army reached the capital, and besieged the city, old Sung paid it no mind, happy in his fields. A contingent of rebel soldiers came to his village, and gathered the thirty-something people, ordering them to give ten thousand *tou* of grain. How could they have that much? The village elder could not give it, and in anger the soldiers killed him, and proclaimed that should they not present the grain, they would be executed. Old Sung was a close friend of the village elder, and seeing his death was overcome with anger and grief. He wanted the soldiers dead, but none expected that the bone talisman suddenly rang out, and his hand was as if pulled: the sword was drawn, and soldiers fell. All were shocked, but all were joyous, but this great offence would surely see reprisal from the evil Mang-yen. Old song suggested that he lead the village east towards Ch’uan, T’ai-ch’uan the realm of the Lyu emperor. The people agreed.

The journey was several thousand li far, and they encountered many rebel brigades on the way. Old Sung used his treasure-sword to repel them, and they slowly reached the mountains of Ch’uan. Those who retreated reported that there was an old farmer, leading only commonfolk, but none could defeat the sword in his hand; he must be an immortal. Hence, they called him the treasure-sword immortal, and hearing his approach, they avoided him.

The House of Lyu retreated to Ch’uen, and guarded the passes with the Ma clan. Commentary: the silver-dragon Ma clan, who have been the lords of T’ai-ch’uan since ancient times. They heard of these stories, and wanted to invite this person, thus when one day word came that thirty-odd people arrived at Ch’iao, Commentary: T’ai-ch’uan is a large mountain valley, it’s mouth narrow and body wide. At its mouth the Ma clan built a fortress, with a wall several dozen li long, spanning the two sides, guarding the entirety of the vale alone. This city’s name is Ta-ch’iao, and the provincial seat of T’ai-ch’uen. Later renamed to Huang-kuan-ch’iao. their appearance like commonfolk, professing to be from the capital, His Majesty granted them audience. Old Song met the Lyu emperor, and recounted his experiences. The emperor summoned a master to spar with him, naming a golden core expert as his opponent. The old man’s heart was full of fear, but as soon as the treasure-sword revealed itself, their powers were equal. After several hundred blows the emperor called for rest, and praising him, asked for him to be a general. The old man thanked the emperor, settled his people, and joined the Lyu army.

The Mang-yen army was unstoppable; the allies of the Lyu house either surrendered or died, only the Ma clan of T'ai-ch'uan remained in the mountains. The rebel army reached Ch'uan, and set up camp, blocking Ch'iao from the east. But west of Ch'iao is mountain vale, with strong people and fertile lands, so they could not be broken so easily. Hence General An gathered all the surrendered cultivators, and advanced with both magic and martial, seeking to take Ch'iao by force. Old Song came with the Lyu army to meet them, and indeed the Mang-yen army could not overcome his treasure-sword; three times he slew enemy generals, and three times he forced back the enemy army. Golden Core or Nascent Soul, all perished under his hand. Commentary: Golden core is the third major rank, nascent soul is the fourth, already almost the highest level below immortality, with only transforming spirit between them. During that time, the only transforming spirit existant may have been An Wen himself; however powerful the bone talisman was, to slay nascent souls is still far-fetched. The Lyu emperor was greatly pleased, and rewarded the old man heavily.

They began to scheme on breaking the siege, but failed many times, the situation not changing for over a year. However strong the Mang-yen army was, the Lyu had old Song; however mystical the treasure-sword was, it could not alone defeat a Mang-yen army.

One day, old song woke, and felt an inauspicious feeling ni his heart. Not knowing its reason, he asked a Taoist to help, but did not receive an answer. The priest only said that there were vague dark clouds, and he should remain at home and rest, and not attempt major accomplishments. But how could he, when the Mang-yen army attacked again? As an important general of the Lyu army, old Sung could not but rally out. An Wen had many schemes, and secretly sent his cultivator army to hide beside, and with them ambushed and surrounded the Lyu army. The Lyu side became chaotic, and the gong was run sounding retreat. They fell into frenzied melle, and old Sung was just slashing out an escape path, mere yards away from the wall, when suddenly the bone talisman gave a mournful peal, like a mother losing her son, before the sword crumbled to dust. Old Sung was stunned, and was stabbed through the heart by an enemy general. The Lyu army scattered, and the Mang-yen army pursued and slaughtered; they broke the city wall and started razing the city, and Duke Ma quickly surrendered and presented the Lyu emperor. An Wen would then unite all under heaven, and proclaim himself Emperor, his dynasty the Han.

麗州郎 THE YOUTH FROM LI-CHOU

It is said that during the An Wen rebellion, nowhere escaped calamity. The Mang-yen army coursed north to south, and blood flew in their wake; the common people died in their myriads. However, one prefecture on the north plain, in Ho-tung, was not like so. Commentary: The eastern realm has three main flatlands, caled the northern, central, and southern plain. Ho-tung is a commandery on the northern plain, east of the Hei river. Ho-tung's land was flat, with few mountains, and was easy to travel. There was a forest south of Chang, A major city in the south of the commandery five hundred li wide, split into three counties, and combined formed Li-chou.¹¹ The An Wen rebellion was the peak of half a century of conflict; the Lyu general An Wen rose from Pei-chao, and

¹¹Chou / 州: Prefecture. So Li-chou prefecture would be a tautological name.

plundered the world. Chang north of Li-chou was half-destroyed, yet the people of Li-chou were unharmed. To the Lyu dynasty they performed their rites but did not subjugate to; to An Wen they paid their respects but did not surrender to. Though the Mang-yen army did not know how high is heaven nor how deep is the earth, though they did not care for the hearts of the common man, they never took Li-chow. Why so? Merely a prefecture, how could it keep its lands peaceful? That achievement was the doing of the so-called Youth of Li-chou. The royal archives of Lyu¹² recorded this, saying: Commentary: Lyu is a small kingdom to the north of Pei-chao. Today they do not submit to the human dynasty of Shang. They have kept their independence for over ten thousand years, and were the Marquis Protector of the North during the dynasty of Li.

“From Wen dynasty name or earlier, a cultivation sect had established itself in Li-chou, called the Li-chow Sword Sect. Its disciples were few and limited to the prefecture, and as they rarely ventured out, few knew of their existence.

“At the time of the Mang-yen rebellion, there was a sect leader who was unparalleled in ability, none could match his sword, and he could even battle across greater ranks. Commentary: such as a Golden Core matching a Nascent Soul At the perfected stage of Golden Core, he could kill Nascent Souls. Simultaneously, he was the Prefect of Li-chow, a minister of Lyu. He was young, with a youthful face, thus the people privately called him the Youth of Li-chou.

“Long ago, my ancestors lived on the borders of Lyu and Lan, with the great Lyu court to their south and the Lan barbarians to their north. Commentary: northwards are the cold steppes of Marakai, where barbarians live in tribes, who do not settle and practice agriculture. In aggregate they are called the many Lan. Today, they are united under the Ulan Khaganate, its breadth comparable even to the southern dynasty. In a flash, An Wen’s rebellion engulfed all under heaven, and my ancestors could not avoid the upheaval. When the Mang-yen army came to our ancestral castle, our clan—poor and with few allies, and close to the Han army An Wen established the Han, thus sometimes referred to as such—they quickly scattered. One ancestor-aunt escaped to the steppes of the many Lan, escaping the disaster of Mang-yen, but entering the calamity of Liao-lan!

“The northern Liao of Lan are born fierce and strong. Though they are human, their experts are numerous. This barbarian clan likes to hunt our dragonkinds and make clothes of our hides. This ancestor-aunt was pursued by one of their Nascent Soul experts, being chased for several months, entering the war-torn southern country’s Ho-tung, and all the way into Li-chou. Teetering on the edge of death was she, about to die with much resentment, when suddenly a sword-light like a rainbow soared from beyond the heavens, and stopped the Liao killer in his tracks.

“She saw a dark green cape, with crimson silk inside, the figure stepping across the sky with hands behind his back. A mere Golden Core, yet so easily stopping a Nascent Soul. He calmly made a salute, and shed his cape to reveal a fourth-rank official dress; red silk and silver fish belt. Sword in hand he did battle, and after a hundred blows neither side had the advantage. The Liao barbarian cultivated the element of metal, the swordsman wood; gold overcomes metal, and hence he was hard-pressed. Shortly, this ancestor-aunt heard his voice, ordinary were the words, yet she remembered them for life: ‘Miss, when the time is right, we ask for your true fire.’

“Another hundred blows later, the Liao barbarian made a misstep, and showed a momentary vulnerability. My ancestor-aunt thus exhaled her fire—fire overcoming metal—hence slaying him. Seeing the barbarian slain, he saluted

¹² 呂, *different* Lyu to the 律 Lyu that An Wen rebelled against, same Lyu as Lyu-chang.

again, introducing himself as Yang Yu-chun, courtesy name Chih-bi, Prefect of Li-chou. He gave my ancestor-aunt mystical medicine, and invited her to rest and recover in the forests of Li-chou. Due to the circumstances of wartime, Prefect Yang did not see her off, and knowing that she was not in danger bade farewell.

“Several decades later, the Han rose and fell, and the Li clan brought peace under heaven. My ancestor-aunt again visited Li-chou with an edict from the son of heaven. As our family made great contributions to the Li clan, we were enfeoffed as Marquis Protector of the North, and tasked with eradicating the Liao. Thus, she invited the Prefect to leave his forests, follow them in conquering Liao lands, and becoming our National Teacher. He could even be bestowed our clan name Lyu. Prefect Yang agreed. Today, the Li-chou Sword Sect still resides in Maraxai, Common name Tung-lai. Capital of Lyu. protecting our kingdom and teaching our people.”

There is a poem that reads:

Hundred-li of azure forest no waste in sight,
The peace of three counties under one sword-light.
When the fires of war surge who could escape?
But not for the sage-sword, the Youth of Li-chou bright.

Perhaps that could corroborate.

魔誘 A DEMON'S OFFER

At the start of the *Long Conflict*, the human K'ang family conquered half under heaven, and proclaimed the T'ang dynasty, to last five-and-fifty years. This story talks about an official at the end of the T'ang, who made a deal with a demon that caused the T'ang much danger, and his family calamity.

Commentary: A hundred and nineteen years after Li fell, many warlords rose, each lord of a region, each falling after only a few years. The human K'ang Ssu, from T'ang-chou in Yun-t'ung Commandery, rose up and succeeded in his campaign, establishing his capital in the major city of Ch'ang-kuan in the south-west, on the Hsuen river, with his dynasty name as T'ang. He was emperor over eleven commanderies in the west, and his dynasty lasted fifty five years, with three emperors.

During the Long Conflict, when the K'ang-T'ang ruled the west, there was a scholar from Chu-chang, called Ku Tz'u, courtesy name Tzu-lien, who studied at Jin-liu academy. Commentary: A famous academy in the Chu-chang provincial seat of Jinliu. He was well-read in the histories and classics, but had yet to successfully pass the Hsiu-tz'ai¹³ examination, as well as using up all his family wealth.

It was two months from the spring examinations, and Tz'u strained to think how he could pass. One night he heard a sound at his ear: “I am a master from Seven-Flame Palace. I've seen sir's struggle, and could not help but sympathise; I know sir's talent, and it is only a shame that time and time again the exam questions have not been kind.”

Tz'u leapt up, shouting in shock: “Who is it?”

¹³Xiucan, first level imperial examination rank

He saw before the desk the shadow of a warlock appearing, his body covered in black brocade, demonic fire in his eyes, sinister to the extreme. Tz'u hastily retreated, but heard him say in a kindly tone: "Please forgive this poor Taoist's lack of manners, but alas, I would not know how to talk with sir otherwise. The outer world resents me, yet I have not offended anyone. Hence I could not but come see sir in the night, I just hope sir hears my words. If you do not like them, I will happily leave."

Tz'u wanted to scream "demon" and flee, but hearing his words hesitated, finally saying: "You are a demon? What does a demon have to do with me?"

That warlock bowed: "Indeed, outsiders call me 'demon', but are not all paths the Tao? The demonic path can also work the same magic, so I hope sir does not mind. The reason I came is because I wanted to help you. This poor Taoist knows that for ten years sir has not become a Hsiu-tz'ai, and I promise, using my sect's magic, to help sir pass this year's spring examination, then three years become a Jin-shih¹⁴, five years a great minister, important throughout the great T'ang. How say you?"

Tz'u did not speak for a long time, but ultimately did not escape, saying: "You would help me for free?"

As expected, the demon warlock laughed, shaking his head: "Under heaven, what is truly free? I only wish to take three promises. If this year you do not become a Hsiu-tz'ai, three years not Jin-shih, and five not a great minister, then you may take me as useless, and naturally not repay them."

Tz'u thought for a while longer, considering it in detail. He thought that the T'ang controlled half under heaven, to be its minister would beget a luxurious salary. Even though he knew this was a demon, he still found it difficult to resist, finally agreeing. He saw the demon smile evilly, saying: "Excellent. Please rest, sir, do not stay up studying, look after your health. Come the spring examinations, this poor Taoist will naturally come to your aid." And he dissolved into the shadows.

Tz'u followed his advice, and focused on his health. The night before the spring examinations, the demon warlock came again, and gave him a bead, saying: "This is called the hundred-talents pearl, it concentrates the talent and knowledge of a hundred scholars. If sir eats this, you shall not fear any question."

Tz'u obeyed him. When the bead entered his stomach, his vision shifted, becoming blurry, and knowledge like coursing tides rushed into his mind. The next day, he went to the examination, and stayed for three days. Finally returning, his energy was spent, but his mood was soaring. The warlock sat by the table, asking: "How was it?" Tz'u replied that it was good, and he would surely pass this test. As expected, he received the title of An-shou¹⁵, and prepared for the Ju-ren examination. On the night before the examination the warlock came again and gave him a bead, called the thousand-talents pearl, and told him to swallow it like before. And he achieved the title of Jieh-yuen¹⁶, his peers were all shocked by his advancement.

He then went to the Tang capital of Ch'ang-lin for the Jin-shih examination, Commentary: Ch'ang-lin is an alternate name for Ch'ang-kuan, both names were used at that time. and lived in the capital for two years. Three years later, at spring, the warlock visited him

¹⁴Third and highest rank of the imperial examination

¹⁵The highest scorer in the county exam (the first stage Xiucai exam)

¹⁶Jieyuan, first place in the provincial examination (second stage Juren exam)

again, saying: "This time this poor Taoist will give sir a myriad-talent pearl, but this alone may not be sufficient to pass the examinations. Hence, I brewed a broth for you, called the poet's broth. Though it is bitter and astringent, please drink it."

Tz'u followed his instructions. The broth indeed had a strange taste, like meat but unlike meat, also like ash, and was as thick as glue. With great difficulty Tz'u consumed it, before swallowing the myriad-talent pearl and sleeping. That night, his stomach hurt terribly, and he dreamed his deeds had been discovered, and he would be executed. When he awoke though, he was healthy and unhurt. He went to the palace for the examination, and in surprise, received the rank of Chuang-yuen¹⁷, first within the great T'ang. He then gained employment in the Ministry of Revenue, and was favoured by the T'ang emperor. Indeed, two years later, he was made Minister, became a prominent official, was granted a luxurious salary, and the Ku family flourished.

Five years after he became minister, the warlock came again to visit, saying: "Has this poor Taoist kept his word?" Tz'u felt trepidatious, but replied: "You have."

The warlock then said: "I have come to ask for my first promise." Tz'u replied: "What is it?" The warlock said: "I would like sir to find a child, not more than six years of age, and offer it to this poor Taoist. Its family and origin are not important, merely its age."

Tz'u said with caution: "What does master want with him?" The warlock replied: "That is not sir's matter to worry about. Please act hastily, I would like this to be done within six months. Otherwise, great calamity will befall you!" and faded into the shadows. Tz'u's face was ugly, but since he had promised this demon, he could not go against him, so as a minister he secretly bribed the officials around him, and a few months later retrieved a child from the Ministry of Law, a commoner in origin. He made a sacrifice and offered the child to the demon warlock, and felt great guilt about it for several months, having nightmares, before ultimately forgetting the matter.

He leveraged court relations, forming a clique, and eventually becoming Prime Minister. The demon visited him again, and said: "I have come to ask for my second promise." Tz'u assented.

The demon said: "Violate Princess Chien-ching, and accuse the General Protector of the East of it; cause the execution of his family. This poor daoist will give sir a medicine, that can transform your body."

Tz'u started: "The General Protector is a vital general of the T'ang, a man of great justice, who upholds the orthodox path. Under heaven, few are as brave as he, few are as just as he!"

The demon said: "A proper man keeps his word. You surely want your family safe?" Tz'u could not but assent and follow his instruction.

Hence, he used his confidantes, to arrange meetings between the General Protector of the East and Princess Chien-ching, slowly building opportunity. At one great banquet, when all were drunk, Tz'u knocked the General Protector unconscious somewhere out of sight, and dragged him back to his quarters. He then turned into the general, feigning drunkenness, and in the dark of night invited the princess for a private conversation. There, he humiliated her, and left her on the dust, escaping himself.

¹⁷Zhuangyuan, first place in the palace examination (final stage Jinshi exam)

The next day the great T'ang was in uproar; Princess Chien-ching accused the General Protector of the East of grave crime. The physicians examined her, and she was indeed no longer virgin. Though the general protested heavily, there was no evidence to the contrary, and he was sentenced to three familial executions by the enraged T'ang emperor.¹⁸ Tz'u was remorseful for a long time, and struggled to sleep. The K'ang T'ang, without its great general, started to lose grasp of its eastern border. Commentary: The T'ang royal family ruled half under heaven from Ch'ang-kuan, but there were dragon kingdoms to the east and west, and barbarians to the north. The west was mountainous, and they could build fortresses to protect the hills, but the east was a vast grassland with not much for defences. Thus with the General Protector of the East gone, the great T'ang was on borrowed time.

Tz'u had a son, who was now twelve, and a daughter, who was now nine, and could not conceive any more children. This time the demon visited again, and said: "I have come to ask for my third promise, and will never visit again."

Tz'u angrily berated him: "You vile demon, begone!" But the demon merely laughed, saying: "A promise must be kept. Otherwise, your calamity shall overflow the heavens, and I need not lift one finger. I will not waste words, offer me your eldest son Ku Che."

Tz'u screamed no, drew the sabre by his side, and attacked the demon, however his body was like a shadow, and could not be touched. The demon laughed heartily: "If in three months it is not done, calamity will befall your family." And dissolved into the night.

Tz'u left, and headed to a Taoist monastery, asking for help from the priests there. The monastery took him in, and asked an elder to remove the demons within him. To do so, they must search his heart, thus he consented. In a moment, it was done, and he felt as if a great weight was lifted off his shoulders, but the Taoists would not let Tz'u leave. When they searched his heart, they found his doings, and had already reported them to the court. The T'ang emperor, so furious was he, that he caught a heart-disease and perished, but in his dying breath ordered for Tz'u to face the highest punishment in the land, that of nine familial exterminations. How sinister was the demon, that all fell into place, thus demons could not be leveraged for one's own gain.

靈間一綫天 THE ELVEN ONE-LINE SKY

Commentary: The Elven Plane is the homeland of the Elves. When the ancient continent split, VALAAN father of the Elves took the western sky, and due to its destroyed nature, remade it in the image of the central continent. Thus the seas and land mirror those of the material plane, and their links are extremely close; many stories exist of plane-travellers between the worlds. Initially, there was no sun nor moon, so VALAAN let his son and daughter, the gods of summer and winter, make their throne in the southern and northern heavens. Thus in the south there is light, in the north darkness, and between an eternal twilight. Lush forests cover the lands, and it is also called the *Twilight Vale*. The gods of summer and winter are called CERU and MARI.

It is said that if you travel thousands of li through the southern sea of the Elven plane, there is a land there, called Nan-k'ai, where the five elements are indistinct, heaven and earth are blurred, emptiness and solidness are unsplit. Here, sky and earth split into two, above is *yang*, below is *yin*, and heavenly wind

¹⁸Three familial executions: your father's family (i.e. your family), your mother's family, and your wife's family

fiercely swirls at their meeting; a place difficult to survive. Elvenkind call this the *One-line Sky*.

It is also said, that past the one-line sky, you would reach the kingdom of the Sun, where five suns burn brightly, and it is eternally summer. Commentary: it is connected to the divine realm of CERU. Between the kingdom of the Sun and the one-line sky is another realm, its king the divine dragon sea leviathan, The so-called ASYR's first children. the manifestation of heavenly tribulation, the master of all things, equal to the immortal celestials; the histories call him the Gatekeeper, *Taiantor*.

On the southern coast of the continent of Halvanai Commentary: Halvanai, *Tien-yuen*, meaning "the origin of heaven", corresponds to the eastern lands of the material plane where the great Shang dynasty reigns. sits the elven realm of Huaiyuen, who ruled the continent with the realms of Fungyuen and Nanlung, with seven smaller polities as their vassals. Together they are called the Three Realms and Seven Lands. Commentary: of the polities of Halvanai, the three large ones are called realms, the seven small ones are called lands. Of the realms, Fungyuen sits to the northeast, Huaiyuen sits to the southeast, and Nanlung sits in the west. In Wang-yang city in Huaiyuen, there was a merchant in the sea trade, surnamed Ma, given name Tse-chin, originally from a minor branch of the northern Fungyuen royal family, but due to a clan split, he was stripped of his Fung surname Commentary: in the elven kingdoms, it is forbidden to share a surname with the royal family if you are not of them; specifically Fung, Huai, and Nanlung. When a royal family prunes its tree, it will strip surnames and drive people from their country—not necessarily preventing them from returning, just never from living in the same realm again. and exiled to the far south, making a living from shipping southern goods northwards.

Tse-chin had been a merchant for many years, and was well-versed in histories and legends, naturally he knew of the Nan-k'ai one-line sky. Constantly, he wished to probe its mysteries, and slowly growing tired of his trade, gathered his family one day and informed them of his intention to find a group and adventure into the one-line sky.

Elves, since ancient times, were afraid of water; in the dark depths of the sea, dangers innumerable abound, For details, see *The Ocean Leviathan, Hsuenyang* so his family refused. Tse-chin asked again and again, and was refused again and again. His family did not want him exploring the deep seas; no one who went had returned, how was a single Tse-chin going to break this trend? Hence he did not journey out, but rather secretly saved silver, and searched for those who liked adventure.

Elves were born connected to the primordial energy of heaven and earth, and had lifespans of a thousand years. Tse-chin continued to ply his trade for several decades more, and finally bought a sloop, finding twenty people to venture with him. One night, he left a letter at home, and went to the port, boarding the sloop with his comrades and sailed forth.

They sailed south for a hundred days, not seeing land; but one day they saw ahead of them in the distance, the sky becoming stark white. Reaching it, they saw the sea dark and black, and between sky and sea a swirling mass of grey, as if violent winds were howling. This was indeed, the meeting of yin and yang, the extremes of heaven and earth, the far-away Nan-k'ai One-line sky!

In his party were two Taoist priests, brothers from the same sect, well versed in immortal arts. The elder was called T'e-luo Ke, and the younger Yu Sih. They had already set up a mystical formation inside the boat, and raising their spirits, preparing their magical instruments, told all those on the ship with magic to help. Together with full power they sailed towards the end of heaven and earth, to cross the one-line sky:

Yin and Yang indistinct, light and dark twisting;
Foaming seas crashed, the heavens a-shaking.
A lone leaf riding on wind and wave,
Praying that one day they'll see dawn shining.

Within the one-line sky, heavenly winds battered the small sloop furiously, like a thousand swords. The sloop, however, was rather well built, and with the formation's support was not broken. The division between water and air became indistinct, and the little boat rose on the wind, following the current, slowly travelling southwards. Another hundred days later, their spirit jade was near depleted, Commentary: spirit jade refers to precious stones that contain magical energy. They are used to provide energy to magical formations, implements, &c. and everyone discussed turning back north. Tse-chin agreed with them, so they turned their boat back. However, the heavenly winds flowed southwards, like a whirlpool incessant; their northern journey was slow, and even after a hundred days they had not escaped. Not knowing north, south, east, nor west, the people were starting to worry.

Suddenly, the skies shook, the heavenly winds rolled; the heavens turned from white to black, the seas turned from black to white. Within the grey winds rose a dragon's head, so large that it covered three tenths of the sky, so long that one did not know how many myriad li its body was. They could not see its body, nor see its tail. Its majesty made common men tremble. Undoubtedly, this was the divine dragon, the heavenly leviathan, the King of Nan-k'ai!

Seeing him, all on the boat screamed in fright. Ke was the most adept at magic, and on the sight of danger immediately fled. Sih followed him. Tse-chin desperately turned the boat around, not worrying about the formation becoming unstable, only worrying about fleeing. Seeing the two Taoists leave them behind, everyone else could only help Tse-chin. The sloop's formation was able to propel, but it was still slower than the two Taoists.

From the wind, a gargantuan claw reached out, flashing through the heavens, black lightning surrounding it, Commentary: heaven-dragons can innately control heavenly lightning, far mightier than normal lightning. and struck Ke and Sih. Ke quickly gathered his magic to block the blow, being flung a thousand yards out, bleeding from all seven orifices, but still alive. Sih however was caught, black lightning freezing his body, and was sent into the heavenly dragon's maw. One bite and he was no more. Ke fled without his brother, disappearing within the winds. On the sloop, all were stunned, and using all their magic tried their best to move, but in the next instant the claw struck the boat, breaking it into a hundred pieces. Heavenly wind cut the body, the weaker were cut into mincemeat, and the stronger were, like Sih, consumed.

Ke escaped with heavy wounds. After a hundred days and over half his life, he finally escaped Nan-k'ai. Seeing the twilight sky and dark blue water, he finally felt safe. Weeping for his lost brother, he returned to the continent alone. He then recounted this to his friends, recorded this in books, and informed the Ma family of Tse-chin's fate. Because of this journey he gained quite a bit of fame, but grew a deep fear of the ocean, and moved far away to the midlands of Nanlung.

Commentary: Nanlung is a landlocked realm.

玄陽海蛟 THE OCEAN LEVIATHAN HSUENYANG

The poem goes:

Thunder cracks the sky and tempests fray,
Lightning rends the waters, peaks give way.
Dark clouds scatter, his might weighs the sea;
For the tyrant Hsuenyang, virtue never held sway.

It is said that the ancestor mother of dragonkind, the Golden God ASYR birthed three children, three dragon-kinds. The eldest was heaven, the second earth, and the third man. Heaven: born from the void, a spirit of the empty ocean. A mighty serpent-dragon, divine might overflowing. So long, one did not know how many thousand li; one sees a divine dragon's head but not its tail. Earth: born from the material, a soul of magma. A graceful serpent-wyrm, its earth-spirit mysterious. Long a hundred li, it makes ley lines its home, hidden and unseen. Man: born from the mountains, four legged, two winged; the weakest of the three, but the most numerous. Though born the most ordinary, they were agile of thought; though their lifespan was limited, because of this they had will; entering human culture, becoming human kings, and ruling all under heaven.

Back on the heaven-dragons, they were born in the deep sea, formed from lightning and rain, seeing immortals as equals. Their majesty suppressed all directions, and non under heaven could match them. Their power came from heaven's secrets; they are manifestations of heavenly tribulation. So how could one world contain many? Thus a saying goes: "one dragon rules one sea, one sea has no two dragons." Another saying goes: "they are the rulers of birds and beasts, the favoured of heaven." Heaven-dragons have boundless life, and interfere little with the mortal world, preferring to stay hidden, enjoying the great Tao alone, with few knowing of their presence.

But every rule has its exceptions, and the exception is *Hsuenyang*. Also called Hsuenyang, King of the Sea, the lord of the eastern Chien ocean in the elven plane. Commentary: East of the continent of Halvanai, mirroring the eastern sea in the material plane. He was not hidden, but prominent, establishing a power of his own, ruling tens of thousands of li, taking the ocean's human-dragons as his servants. The people of the continent called it the House of Hsuenyang. Even united, the three realms and seven lands of Halvanai could not overcome it.

King Hsuenyang was capricious and unpredictable, and was tyrannical without rest, hence the elves of the continent fear the sea, not daring to travel far from the continent. There were relatively few human-dragons winged dragons on the continent, far fewer than the human realm, as this race almost all lived under Hsuenyang, being his servants and slaves.

O, this Hsuenyang, his palaces thousand yards tall, for his enjoyment alone. His consorts are in the hundreds, for him to play and bed; his guards in the thousands, to oppress and punish his people; and underneath slaves in their myriads, gathering treasures and making offerings, living as lesser beings, eking out an existence.

Heaven-dragons naturally exuded divine majesty, a might that could suppress all dragons; they fear when they hear of him, and cannot move when they see

him. To gain his favour is like gaining the favour of heaven, to gain his ire is like receiving punishment from heaven. Black lightning crackles, unnaturally fierce and devastating; all who disobey him are caught and tortured with it—a torture worse than death. His laws are strict and unyielding, and so easy to overstep; a small transgression is made a large one, a small mistake is punished heavily. Thus he is called a tyrant.

Entering his house is easy, leaving is hard; those who escape commit great betrayal, and none were not pursued. Elves who come to the House of Hsuenyang would often fall fate to unexpected circumstances, few returned alive. The tyrant knew all manner of magicks; even if escapees would flee to the ends of heaven and earth, they could not hide from him. Hence if a slave of Hsuenyang escapes onto land, Hsuenyang's soldiers must follow. They care not for elven lives, killing and slaughtering a they please, not relenting until they have taken that escaped slave. The elven kings resent them, and so also kill Hsuenyang's soldiers, hence the land and sea were not at peace. It is only fortunate then, that the foundations of the three realms and seven lands were strong and deep, with ancient magicks at their core; Hsuenyang's army would still struggle to defeat them, hence whilst small conflicts were many, large ones were few.

翼奴 WINGED SLAVE

A poem reads:

Mighty be the Dragon Court of myriad years,
A thousand families serving one alone.
Under twilight skies there is no dragon shadow,
All are winged slaves under Hsuenyang's throne.

Commentary: The Dragon Court refers to the draconic dynasty of the material plane. The twilight refers to the elven plane. "Winged slave" can be taken literally.

In the twilight realm, on the eastern coast of Fungyuen there was a fisherman, who lived with his wife, son, and daughter in a small house, living a life of poverty. One day, the fisherman was out at sea, and the wife was walking along the beach. She saw a figure lying up ahead, and called out to ask if they were unarmed. Not receiving a response, she came closer, only to see it was an old man. He was unconscious, wounds covered his body, but not yet dead.

Shocked, the wife called for her son to help carry the old man back to their house, for her daughter to treat him with medicine. A few hours later, the old man awoke, and the fisherman wife explained what had happened. The old man was stunned for a moment, before kneeling with tears, saying: "Madam has saved this slave's life, this slave gives myriad thanks! I must repay your kindness with a thousand pieces of gold." His voice suddenly turned panicked: "Madam is in danger! Grave danger! Please tell me, where are the Taoist sects? If you do not, then both you and I will die!"

The wife was startled at this and tried to pull back, but the old man grabbed her sleeve, thus she said in fright: "To the northwest beyond the town is An-ya mountain, there is a temple there, it must reach the Taoist sects."

The old man thanked her repeatedly and made to leave. Before he left, he said: "Fly, fly! Today if you do not flee, I do not know if we can meet again alive."

When the husband returned home, the wife told him about the matter. The husband lamented his strangeness, but dismissed him as mentally insane. After all, if they were to run, where would they run to?

Three days later, the old man had not returned, and the fisherman family had begun to forget about him. That day, the wind howled and rain lashed, and the seas were dark and rough. Hence, the fisherman stayed at home. Suddenly, his roof shook and collapsed, tiles flying in all directions; he only saw under the grey clouds above two black dragons, claws unsheathed and fangs bared, descend into the house. One dragon grabbed the wife and children, pinning them to the floor; the other struck the fisherman, causing him to crash into the wall, half his life spent in an instant. He then pressed his sharp claws against the fisherman's neck, growling: "Where did the winged slave go?"

The fisherman's entire body was in pain, and hearing his wife and children cry out in terror, stammered: "This poor man does not know what a winged slave is!"

The black dragon darted forwards, biting off his arm. Blood sprayed in all directions, and the fisherman cried out in pain. He heard the dragon say: "Lies! His Majesty sees all; that wretch certainly passed by here, and you dare protest?"

The fisherman said: "Please, sir, this poor man is but a commoner, I do not know of any winged slave!"

The dragon laughed sinisterly, and told his companion: "Kill his wife and children first, let us see if he does not talk." The other dragon opened its maw, about to eat the little girl, when suddenly the sky was filled with purple light, forming a magical array. The dragons roared with surprise: "Fungyuen Taoists!" and prepared to make battle, but the array had already formed. Hundreds upon thousands of spirit swords, burning with heavenly fire, descended, piercing through the two dragons, and turning them to ash. They could see far in the sky, eight Taoist priests landing. Following them was the old man.

Running into the ruined house, the old man saw the broken state of the fisherman, and went to try save him, but the man had already passed. Crying, he prostrated himself in front of the wife, saying: "Madam has shown me endless grace, yet this slave has brought calamity upon your family; this sin could not be repaid even in death. In truth this slave is a dragon from the east sea, serving under the King Hsuenyang. The king is tyrannical, and this slave could not but escape, and ask for protection from your esteemed elven clans."

The wife was numb and speechless. At that time, a Taoist entered, and informed them they must move inland, and never return to the coast. The old man then said: "I plead with Madam, allow this slave to serve your family, to act on your bidding, just to being to repay my debt. This slave is only around three hundred years of age, and can serve you for many more centuries."

The wife finally assented. Thus, the old man revealed his true form and kowtowed again, and followed the family inland, loyally serving her family, never overstepping nor dissenting, protecting her son and daughter, and managing her family wealth. The family slowly started to gain riches, and in a mere few centuries became a prominent household. The son became a high minister, and the daughter married into a wealthy family. Though she had lost her husband, she was glad to have a dragon attendant. The Fungyuen Kingdom exchanged a few more battles with the House of Hsuenyang, before finally laying down arms.

When dragons escape Hsuenyang's claw, the tyrant king always sends his guards to give chase. When they encounter people on the continent, death follows in their wake. The elves deeply hate the tyrant king, and also know little of goings-on in the sea, so are more than happy to accept escapees.

Commentary: Dragons, as spirit-beasts of heaven and earth, are born with the ability to shapeshift into all things, without any flaw. Only in death does their magic dissipate.

獸潮 BEAST TIDE

A wild history states: "In ancient times, a great calamity broke the world. The western half of heaven was taken by the elven father VALAAN, and made into a home for the Elves in the image of the human realm. Later, the human realm experienced many changes and eras, but the elven plane was quiet. Thus whilst it is said that the elven and human realms have the same geography, it is merely that the lands and seas match; the land itself is nothing like that of the material plane."

As for the eastern half of heaven, there is Huangsha, west of the abyss; and the great Chou, east of the abyss. Commentary: The abyss refers to the Spirit Abyss. When the *Spirit Eater* fell, it was created, and split the material plain into east and west. For more details, see stories like *the Sky Dancer*. The Chou is the dynasty that ended the era of Long Conflict, and united the continent once more. It was a mighty dragon-dynasty, ruling for nearly four thousand years, and existed six to seven thousand years before the present.

This tale is written from that time. The western mountains are sacred, though qi is consumed and magic fails, sagely beings still live there; atop the divine mountain Tai perches the MOON, within the abyss is the Buddha, and in the rainforests they still worship old gods. Commentary: The "western mountains" are called as such because the writer is from the east. Within the spirit abyss is the Kingdom of Luzan, the home of the Buddhist religion. Their holy mountain is Siumangka, or Ch'ang-tien, where the first Buddha received the Tao. Though a Buddha is not a god, they have the power of transforming spirit, and can live for several thousand years, thus they are praised as sages. Luzan's religion is a mixture of the Theravada and Vajrayana traditions. Towards the time of the Ta-li emperor of Chang, the Buddha was nearing the end of his life, the four Arhats were beginning to stir. The Arhat of the East, who lived in the lands of Chang, comprehended the Mahayana path and spread it amongst the Chang people. The Imperial Academy of Ta-li studying the principles of *li* created new mechanisms. They declared war on Luzan, sailing over the spirit abyss, and annexed the country into their dynasty, changing the state religion to Mahayana. The elven realm, indeed, has mountains there, so tall they reach the heavens. But are they safe? Are they auspicious? Most certainly not! The formal name of these mountains is K'un-wu, Commentary: The topographical geography of the elven realm generally matches that of the human one. The human realm calls this place the "western mountains", the elven realm calls it K'un-wu. To its east, the elves of Halvanai call it casually the "Demon mountains." Why is that? It is because these mountains hide primeval ancient magicks, because they hide dark beasts from beyond the sky. Our western mountains may not be crossed, but their K'un-wu cannot be entered; on our western mountains immortals build their mansions, but for their K'un-wu Taoist sects seal its land.

The great plains of the elven realm are split into the Three Realms and Seven Lands—three kingdoms, and seven princeley polities. Together they are allied. The three realms occupy the heartland; the north is called Fung, the south is called Huai, and the west is called Nanlung. The seven lands occupy the marches; called Wan, Hsu, Ch'ih, Kung, Hsiao, Ch'iao, and Kuan. Nanlung in the west directly faces the K'un-wu foothills, and have long suffered from it. Thus its people are fearsome, praising martial ability above all. Its population is not comparable to the south or north, but its immortal sects are more than those

combined. Because dark beasts often ravage the countryside, its people could not live, and so in the past they emptied their treasuries, even asking Fung and Huai for aid, to build a three-layered celestial wall, called the Diamond Wall.¹⁹ North it crosses Wan to the city of Pei-ying, south it reaches Kuan to the city of Nan-kang. Commentary: to the north of the “eastern lands” in the human realm, is the continent of Marakai (ever winter), whilst to the south is the Endless Ocean. In the elven realm, to the north is the untamed “Wild North”, and to the south is the ocean of Nan-k'ai. Pei-ying is situated at the boundary between K'un-wu and the Wild North, whilst Nan-kang is on the coast in the south, both the very corners of civilisation. A celestial wall, three hundred yards tall; a divine serpent stretching a myriad li. Forever parting K'un-wu, and bringing peace to the lands of elf; blocking the dark beasts so the country can flourish. Oh mighty is it! Grand is it! And elvenkind are safe with it.

Within the last five millennia of Nanlung's history, the Diamond Wall has only ever broken once, and that only two of three walls. It has never been breached entirely. That was due to the demon-beast tide calamity four thousand years ago. What is a demon-beast tide? To explain, one must first elucidate on what the beast tide is. North of the three realms, winter is king; with frozen lands and ice-forests, it is the home of primordial beasts. Hence it is called the Wild North. A land of true wilderness, yao-beasts are countless in number. Every sixty years, or many cycles of sixty, the northern yao will become restless, and invade elven lands in great numbers, slaughtering and eating the common people. People in the north congregate in cities with tall walls and heavy fortifications, with immortal sects guarding them, protecting their kin. Beast tides can be large or small; small tides are easy to control, and good practice for disciples; large tides are national disasters, the northern lands fall into danger. The elven scholars do not know of its cause.

Returning to the question, a large beast tide is a country-collapsing calamity, and it can simultaneously excite the dark beasts of K'un-wu to attack the west as well, something that could destroy the foundations of elvenkind, slaughtering dukes and killing kings—that is a demon-beast tide.

Long ago when the great Li ruled the human world, a beast tide engulfed the elven realms. So big was this tide, that it stretched forty thousand li, breaking city after city in Fungyuen, and nearly destroying the lands of Kung, Hsu, and Wan. And at the height of the beast tide, it roused the demons of K'un-wu to attack eastwards into Nanlung. The Diamond Wall in Wan broke within ten days, and the Nanlung King perished. The King of Huai personally came to support the western kingdom, leading his armies into the fray, however so overwhelming was their might that the King of Huai could not push the demons back. The King of Fung in the north could not come to their aid, and so the King of Huai, with no choice left, started the plane-spanning great formation, bitterly begging the human realm's Li Emperor. The Emperor of Li agreed, and invited our immortal sects to descend on the elven realm. They saw immortal masters, uncountable, their swords like rain; the dragon-army blotting the sky, the heavens resplendent; with the Li dynasty's great army there, the elves finally managed to drive the demons back through the Diamond Wall. And the Li clan themselves must have gained much from the transaction.

¹⁹“Diamond” here refers to Sanskrit *vajra* (Chinese 金剛)

青焰天子 MASTER CH'ING-YEN

Ch'ing-yen Tzu,²⁰ or the Ch'ing-yen “Son of Heaven”, was an immortal master during the time of Yan. He created his own technique—the Azure Flame Art. He was a dragon of the blue-scaled clans. Blue-scaled dragons share affinity with metal, but Ch'ing-yen was different, as his spirit roots were nought but roaring flame. He was not adept at metal-related arts, thus he did not follow his ancestors, and practiced the path of fire alone. Commentary: Everyone has five roots, corresponding to the five elements. They can be hidden or prominent; they can be mixed or clear. If they are hidden, then they cannot connect with the world, and one has no path in cultivation. If they are mixed, then it is difficult to specialise, so magic becomes difficult. Hence, when five elements are all prominent, we call it mixed, and it is suited for martial arts; when one or two elements are prominent, we call it clear, and it is suited for magic. Human-dragons usually have one or two roots prominent, thus they have great ability for magic. These roots are determined by their scale colours, divided by their clans. But due to inter-marrying, there can be mutations, such as having mixed roots; or there can be those like Ch'ing-yen Tzu, who were naturally born different; the luck gifted to them by heaven. His aptitude was so high, that he could be a master within a generation. Legends say that he attained the Tao during Refining Qi, and saw a vast divine art that stretched from mortal body to immortal celestial, so he went into seclusion to pursue it. Even though his art was mystical, due to this he stayed at Refining Qi for a full two hundred years. Commentary: the immortal path has five stages: Refining Qi, Foundation Building, Golden Core, Nascent Soul, and Transforming Spirit. Above that is an immortal. Each stage increases one's life and one's power, but as the favoured of heaven and earth, dragons' lifespans already reach the limit, a full thousand years. Hence they do not fear early death.

This stagnation however was mocked by his fellow dragons. As spirit beasts born from heaven and earth, receiving the grace of heaven alone, which cultivator of theirs would not advance after a full two centuries? To not build foundation by sixty was inferior; not form a golden core by two hundred was to have no future. For cultivators from dragonkind, very few would have not built foundation by two hundred years, thus they dismissed Ch'ing-yen Tzu as insignificant, as ordinary. What they did not know is that when Ch'ing-yen Tzu perfected his magic, he progressed at lightning speed. Not a hundred years later he had leapt through the heavenly gate; forming a golden core in fifty years and birthing a nascent soul in another fifty, with only transforming spirit far away.

Ch'ing-yen Tzu had a rash and irritable personality, unpredictable in mood. He took many concubines but never made a family; he fathered many mixed-blood children, but never passed down his family line; his clansmen criticised him as an unfilial son. He did not make friends with others on the path, rather belittling and pushing them away; he gained the resentment of all under heaven, but alas, a Nascent Soul is not someone one could easily offend.

Above nascent soul, and below a true immortal, is only the stage of transforming spirit. So high was this rank that there may not be one in a myriad, all the masters could be counted on one hand. In the time of Yan, there were only two transforming spirit masters: The lord of Kin-hwa Mountain in the northeast, Ou-yang K'un; and the emperor of the central plains, the First Emperor of Yan. A hundred years later, Ch'ing-yen Tzu also attained transforming spirit; so majestic were the heavenly signs upon his advancement, that none did not see them. His name resounded across the land.

The Emperor of Yan invited him to be a guest elder, but he refused; powers from the outer seas extended offers, but he ignored them; Commentary: This was before the second-generation Star Venerable ascended the throne. any bold and reckless person who

²⁰Ch'ing-yen: *Azure Flame*. Tzu: honorific, similar to “Master”, c.f. Sun Tzu

dared to challenge him, he killed; anyone who did not obey or bow to him, he killed also. In his heart was only the thirst to attain immortality.

He searched all across the world for opportunities, and once had an altercation with a junior. In a fit of rage, he killed him; it was only unfortunate that this junior was named K'e, surnamed Ou-yang, exactly the grandson of the great master of the Kin-hwa Mountains, Ou-yang K'un! This grandmaster was mere inches from ascension, even stronger than the Yan Emperor, and naturally stronger than Ch'ing-yen. Hearing that his grandson was killed, his anger shook the nine heavens; he descended his mountain to seek revenge. Ch'ing-yen could not best him, and so he fled, but the world had its limits, and within a year K'un had caught up. They battled on the frozen plains of the Lan tribes, each using their most divine arts, enough to destroy this part of heaven and earth; they turned ice to fire, cleft abyssal rifts in the ground, and turned this place into a dead land. Ch'ing-yen Tzu fell there.

It is said that even though Ou-yang K'un gained the Azure Flame art, he never obtained Ch'ing-yen Tzu's heavenly treasure, the Azure Flame Fan. This fan was said to turn yin-yang on its head, nine layers of true fire breaking three heavens. It was lost, and never found again.

理術 NATURALISM

The Tao-te-ching states: one births two, two births three, three births all things. Thus all things are birthed from the Tao, move according to the Tao; the many deities are born from the Tao and built heaven and earth with it. Thus knowing the true principles of things, their *li*, one can use them for their own advantage. The qi practitioners under heaven walk against the tide, pursuing their craft to the extreme, pursuing their Tao to the truest. Hence, it is called "walking against heaven". How difficult is the path of founding masters? Take the progenitors of the sword path, the talisman path, so long ago did they live that their names are forgotten; surely a prodigy of a million years, unbeaten across the land.

As the Yin weakened, the Earl of Shang rose up in rebellion. The Chang clan of Sih-hsia gathered the dragon-lords and fought bitterly with human armies, Commentary: Yin is the last dynasty of the second age of dragonkind. It fell to the human dynasty of Shang—see the commentary in *The World Eras*. The Yin empress, Chang Yu-jiao, was butchered by the Earl; her cousin Yu-jing lead dragonkind to resist the human army. However, the immortal sects backed Shang, and Chang could not best them, so they retreated into the western mountains of Damak. retreating to the western mountain vales of Damak and established Chang. They crowned Marquis Chang as emperor, and his era name was Hsin-tai. They made peace with the Shang, and thus it was for over a century.

Hsin-tai had two sons, the crown prince Chang P'ing, the second prince Chang T'ai. The former was a lecher, who whored in the brothels; the latter was raptured by arcane studies; neither cared for governance. Hence they received the nicknames "Licentious Dragon" and "Mad Dragon". Hsin-tai worried about them daily.

As for the second prince, even though he was insane and unorthodox, even though the people were frightened of him, he was a prodigy of a myriad

generations. His intelligence was unmatched, and his drive unbeaten. For him, the so-called arcane studies were actually the principle of material things.

Practitioners of the great Tao today seek mystical treasures, gather spiritual energy to transform their bodies, and use qi to control matter. Lonely, are they, seeing all things as straw dogs,²¹ seeing the ordinary as no more than dust. But Chang T'ai was different; those immortals upon high only care for spiritual materials, but T'ai alone had his heart set on ordinary matter. As if all things are born from the Tao, then all things can perfect it; hence he investigated the true principles of ordinary things. He called this study *li*, and established an academy in T'ien-jing, Commentary: The provincial seat of Damak, Huang-kuan-ch'iao, was renamed to T'ien-jing seeking talent from all directions, not discriminating on old or young, race or creed; as long as one had the drive to study, all were accepted. Thus, the Imperial Academy was established. Commentary: the academy was called the Imperial Academy. It was effectively the birth of a new sect, and new branch of cultivation. Whilst it shares a name with the confucian institution the Kuo-tzu-jien, it has nothing to do with it.

Hsin-tai had ruled for over a hundred and sixty years, and the crown prince was devolving by the day. The second prince was shut into his academy.

Within the spirit abyss of the western mountains, was the Buddhist Kingdom of Luzan, which was untouched by the powers of the central plains, due to its position in the abyss. It birthed its own religion, and created its own system. The Bodhisattva sat in his golden tower, and Arhats enlightened all directions.

Commentary: The Buddha gained enlightenment on Mount Siumangka, and set down roots deep within the spirit abyss. Just like an ocean has islands, the spirit abyss has regions which do not consume magic. Luzan is built there, with its capital in one of those regions where qi can still be cultivated. Hence, the immortal sects of the eastern lands find it difficult to invade, and so the Buddhists could develop and flourish. The Buddha is not a god; he has not the lifespan of a god, living between one thousand to three thousand years. The Bodhisattva was reaching the end of his life, and simultaneously the Arhat of the East in Chang, walking amongst its common people, suddenly gained enlightenment, attaining his Tao, discovering the principles of Mahayana. He thus became opposed to those inside the mountains.

The Chang wanted to use this opportunity to subjugate the abyss's interior. Fortunately, the Imperial Academy suddenly produced a most marvellous product, called gunpowder, and cast muskets and cannons. Its power matched a qi refiner, Commentary: the first stage of cultivation is called Refining Qi. Its powers are certainly mystical, but not particularly strong. The danger of fire-muskets and lead shot was also not small, and so mortal men could finally fight against cultivators. They also created flying ships, using light gas to hold a boat in the air, without any magic. It could be sailed through the wind, and so could cross the abyss and reach the Luzan capital. Commentary: the reason why Luzan had not fallen was because it was exceptionally difficult to reach. If the immortal sects could send flying armies over the spirit abyss, they would have taken it long ago for the central plains. However, they could not fly, and the mountains themselves were dangerous, so the effort was not worth the reward.

Hsin-tai was overjoyed, and immediately demoted the crown prince P'ing and raised T'ai. He placed a thousand dragon-soldiers under his command, and they soared over the mountains. Catching the buddhist kingdoms by surprise, they routed the Luzanese troops, suppressed the Bodhisattva, killed Vajras, and placed the Arhat of the East on the holy seat. Luzan was taken into the Chang empire.

To use non-magic to suppress magic, so easily pass the spirit abyss, his actions stunned the scholars and talents of the world. The name Crown Prince Chang T'ai spread tens of thousands of li. Thus the study of *li* became an

²¹Sacrificial straw dogs—see Zhuangzi

orthodox path, its art—*Naturalism*—established, and the Imperial Academy gained the recognition of the immortal sects; the crown prince gained the fear of immortal masters. They were recorded as a powerful sect, and naturalism flourished in the world. Commentary: A mere few decades later, Hsin-tai abdicated the throne, giving it to Chang Tai, who proclaimed his era year as Ta-li, “great principle”. He would be recorded in history as one of the most resplendent figures in the great Chang.

遺仙 BYGONE IMMORTALS

It is said that the ancients called the stars “bygone immortals.” Once, I rode the wind to the eastern sea, alone walking through endless azure, afar observing the cities at the edge of the sky. Because my core had formed, I had come travelling for opportunity.

On the boundless waves, islands were scattered like shattered stars; on lonely isles, secrets countless were hidden. The people were strong, lands were few, and the immortal sects fought often. And far to the southeast, was the demonic Abyssal House, staring greedily at the other stars. Commentary: The many islands of the eastern ocean are not ruled by kings and emperors, but governed by cultivation sects. The Abyssal House is a power in the far seas to the southwest, the leading demonic sect in the sea. When the second generation Star Venerable reclaimed the throne, Her House stamped out their arrogance, but did not destroy them completely—the reason is unknown. This tale is from many thousand years before the emperor returned; a time when demonic sects sowed chaos on the waves, and long fought bitterly with the orthodox sects. The people suffered under their violence. Many times I avoided danger, and once came across an island, about ten li across, abounding with grasses and trees; a place without sign of life, seemingly a dormant volcano island.

In unknown lands, danger is everywhere, one wrong step could be fatal. So cautiously did I explore it, and found an ancient ruin. It must have been myriads of years old, and yet was not ground down by the all-powerful skies—it could be nought but the work of an immortal. Yet, I did not see any of the trappings of a cave-manor. Looking at it from afar, it seemed to be a temple, its four walls long gone, with only a few feet remaining. The main room had no roof, and the idol had long since disappeared, but in its centre rose a stone stele, like it was newly carved. Nervously, I approached, not daring to get close, I barely read it from afar. It said:

Hallowed be the myriad stars! Abounding be His heaven!
His light blankets the iron waters, the king of light and dark.
The bygone immortals weep, and your disciple prays,
The Star-whispers are maddening, the deep river fades.
Your speech is like the Tao, truth hiding heaven’s secrets;
Your disciple is afraid, he sees the end approaching.
The bygone immortals sigh, and myriad omens appear,
The Star gaze is like an abyss, your disciple cannot rise.
Hallowed by the myriad stars! Immesurable be His words!
I raise a stele and bow, give my life to record these.

Looking below the epitaph, my vision spun and I wanted to vomit, cold sweat ran down my back. Unhallowed was it, inauspicious was it! Like demons and ghosts

were staring at me. I dared not look further, much less to remember; I immediately left it, and returned back to the continent.

This is part of a miscellaneous collection in the Tai-chen Sect of the east sea.

Commentary: Tai-chen sect is one of the nine allied Orthodox sects. Its strength is middling. When the Star Venerable returned, the nine allied sects became Her subordinates. The ancient Emperor of Stars sat in the eastern continent, and then his continent split, leaving only a boundless ocean. A few remaining descendants of the Star kingdom would raise steles in praise, still faithful to their old emperor. As time went on, the people disappeared, but their ruins remained, and occasionally travellers would stumble across them, and record their experiences down. The original stars were sinister, His disciples also; these ruins hide ancient magicks, abtruse beyond comprehension, dangerous beyond measure.
