

# *The Moon Crystal*

*by*

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## *Synopsis*

Not so long ago in glorious Valley lived a ruler griffin called Wing Li. He was well liked and respected by all within his committee. During the summer Han was lucky enough to get picked out of twenty other hopeful griffins to be his next young apprentice. It's now mid-October; Han has just finished work for the day and is looking forward to having some well-deserved time off. It's late in the evening and he gets a visit from Lin Xie the goshawk. Han has been ordered to return to his master at once for tomorrow will now be spent with all council leaders instead for, they have something very special to tell him, but what is it? And when Han is just about to leave, unexpectedly an un-welcomed griffin visits Wing Li, it's his elder brother Dao Chin, but why is he there?

## *Chosen*

There was still a feeling of summer in the air even though Autumn was well advanced. One could be excused for thinking it was late June rather than mid-October. Only the bright red and yellow leaves told the true tale. Han lay on his back, in the bracken, staring up at a clear blue sky, thinking how lucky that his work as apprentice to Wing Li, ruler of Valley allowed him so much free time. He had just passed his third birthday and had been chosen by Wing Li himself, out of twenty other hopefuls of a similar age. Han had been both pleased and relieved when Wing Li had chosen him for some of his friends were apprenticed to very strict masters. Han kept the council chamber clean. This did not take long, and when Wing Li made his daily inspection, he would smile and tell Han he was dismissed until the next day. If the weather was fine, Han always made for his favourite place on top of Dragon Hill. From there he could see all over in Valley to where the forbidding mountains stood out blackly against the sky, forming a natural barrier to the Dark Lands. Only a few from Valley had ever visited the Dark Lands, and they had brought back tales of a desolate land where few trees or plants grew, and the inhabitants were mainly criminals who had been banished from their own homelands.

Han saw that the sun was low in the sky and decided to make for home. As he rose to his feet a cry of "Keeya," caused him to look upward and jump in shock as Lin Xie the goshawk fell from the sky and landed on his left wing. "At last, I've found you," scolded the bird, "I've spent most of the afternoon looking for you, when I'd better things to do."

"What do you mean?" asked Han, annoyed by Lin Xie's attitude. "Wing Li orders that you attend him at his nest at once," came the reply.

"But I've finished work for the day!" Han complained.

“Wing Li told me I would not be needed until the day after tomorrow.” Lin Xie tossed his head impatiently, “I’m just a messenger, he snapped, “and I’ve delivered my message, whether or not you take notice of it is a matter for you to decide. However, I would not keep the master waiting if I were you.”

“Why---,” began Han, but Lin Xie had flown and was already just a speck high in the sky.

Han hurried towards the cluster of nests which lay below, wondering why the master had summoned him so late in the day. When he arrived, he noticed that a number of griffins enjoying the remaining of the autumn sun, for next month winter would sit in, and conditions would be hard.

Wing Li’s nest lay almost in the centre of the mountains. When Han landed on a nearby branch, his master was sitting and looking down onto the nearby trees. “You sent for me, mater?” Han asked.

Wing Li rose and turned to face his apprentice. “Ah, Han,” he smiled. “Now that you have proven yourself to be trustworthy and very hardworking, that all the other committee members would like to meet you at high noon tomorrow and to tell you something very important.”

Han asked, “Really, master? What’s that then?”

Wing Li replied, “Yes, really. There’s too much to explain right now. I’ll tell you all about it during our journey tomorrow. So, I’ll see you at sunrise?”

Han smiled, “Yes, of course, master!” as Han was just about to leave his master’s nest, they noticed someone who was sitting on a nearby branch. Wing Li drew a sharp breath, and Han could sense that he was worried.

“Dao Chin,” muttered Wing Li, “I never thought to see him here again.” Han saw that the stranger looked like his master in some ways, and guessed, rightly, that he must be the master’s brother.

Han asked, “Do you wish for me to stay, master?”

Wing Li replied, “No, that’s fine, you can go now, for Dao Chin and I have much to discuss.”

## *Stolen*

The following morning, Han was making his way to see Wing Li. But when he approached his nest, he was surprised to see his master fast asleep which had confused him somewhat for Wing Li was always an early riser. "I should wake him," he thought, and gave a loud cough. Wing Li didn't move, so Han called "Wake up, master." Wing Li was becoming concerned. He shook his master several times but there still no response. He could tell that Wing Li was alive, but fearing that he might be ill, decided to get help. He quickly flew to the nest of Chu Fung one of the councils' members and told him what had happened. Cu Fung wasted no time with going with Han to see Wing Li, stopping on the way to ask the local herbalist to visit also. The herbalist arrived shortly after Han and Chu Fung, and quickly examined Wing Li, when he had done so he turned to Han. "It looks like as if your master has taken or been given, some kind of drug."

"Will he recover?" asked Han.

The herbalist smiled, "Yes, and he should wake up anytime soon."

"But he doesn't even believe in taking anything to make him sleep...." protested Han.

Chu Fung turned to Han, "I'm sorry, for ruining your special day, but you must now go and tell the others of the council to come here at once."

Immediately after Han and the herbalist left Wing Li started coming round. Chu Fung then started talking to him and together they soon realised that the moon crystal was no longer present. Then suddenly all council members had gathered around the nest. "We have a crisis," Wing Li began, "yesterday my brother Dao Chin visited me, saying he wished to make peace. I trusted him, wrongly perhaps, and he betrayed me. Everyone, the moon crystal is missing, and it's certain that my brother has taken it. Their loss could be a disaster for all in this

province.”

“Can you not use your powers to overlook your brother, and discover if he has taken it, and where is he now?” asked Chu Fung.

Wing Li shook his head, “As you know without the moon crystal, I have no powers. My brother will have powers, though, and I’m sure he’ll use it to harm us.”

“What can he do?” asked Han.

Wing Li looked beyond the trees, “If you remember, we were rain making yesterday. And still, there’s no sign of rain yet.”

“Does that mean your brother is already wishing us ill?” gasped Chu Fung.

“It would appear so,” replied Wing Li, “we must all go our ways and enquire if anyone has seen any suspicious characters. Han, you take these woods, Chu Fung you head for Dao Chin’s town and the rest of us will go to Dragon Hill. Let us hurry.” Han was the first to leave the tree, he then found a suitable place to land and called several times for Jie, the panda, after a time Jie emerged from the bushes. “Were you calling me?” he asked.

Han nodded, “Yes, I believe you stay near this track quite often. Were you here yesterday? And if you were, did you see any strangers pass this way, in the air or on the ground?”

Jie thought for a while then said, “I saw no strangers, but the monkey Cizu did tell me that early this morning he was nearly hit by a low-flying griffin. He was asleep at the time - as usual.”

“Which way were they going?” asked Han.

“Don’t know,” replied the panda, “but I can go and find Cizu and ask him if you like.”

“No need for that,” came a voice from above, “I’m here,” and Cizu dropped from his branch and landed almost at Han’s feet. “I heard you. That old griffin nearly killed me! It’s getting so that you can’t take a nap anywhere these days. Mind you, I shouted after him and told him what I thought ....”

Han interrupted, "Yes, I'm sure it was quite frightening for you. Which way did he go?"

"Why towards the mountains," replied Cizu.

"And you saw him early this morning?"

"That's right, not long after sunrise. So, what's your interest in this bird?"

Quickly Han told how Wing Li's brother had stolen the moon crystal. "Thank you for that. I must go and tell what you saw," he said, and set off back towards Wing Li's nest.

When Han arrived Wing Li was surrounded by a crowd of council members who were still discussing the situation. Han gave his news, and everyone began talking at once. Wing Li held up his right wing for silence. "It's certain my brother is taking the moon crystal to the Dark Lands. We must ask for volunteers to go there and seek their return." There was silence, and everyone all looked at each other.

"Surely it would be dangerous for any of us to enter the Dark Lands," suggested Chu Fung, "you would be the obvious choice to go Wing Li; with your powers you would be able to overcome all dangers that are there."

Wing Li sighed, "As I have already explained, my powers have gone with the moon crystal. My brother has it. Is there nobody here who will go?" everyone looked at the floor without answering.

Han stepped forward, "I'm willing to try master," he said.

"That's out of the question," snapped Chu Fung, "You're just a youngster, what survival would you have in the Dark Lands on your own?"

"But I wouldn't be!" sniffed Han, "I have many friends in the woods. I'm sure they would be willing to go too."

Everyone laughed loudly except Wing Li, and when the laughter stopped, he said thoughtfully, "it might just work."

"That would be foolish!" protested Chu Fung. "What

chance would they stand against the perils of the Dark Lands and the evil power of Dao Chin?"

Wing Li shrugged, "Well, the larger animals could protect him from danger, that's how. Look, the way I see it, there's no other alternative," insisted Wing Li, "none of you are willing to undertake the task."

"Why don't we send our army to the Dark Lands and take back the crystal by force?" asked Chu Fung.

Wing Li shook his head, "It's been many years since we called on them for any purpose. Most of them are now too old and unpractised in war. They would be easily beaten by the forces of my brother's realm. Do not forget that they often raid our territory without meeting any resistance. I ask you to vote on the question, as to whether Han should go or not." Although some members were still uncertain, the vote was taken and was six to four in favour of Wing's suggestion. "Then it's been decided," said Wing then to Han he continued, "go and approach your friends. In the meantime, I'll speak with your parents. And if they agree you may set off tomorrow morning. Return here and I'll tell you of their decision."

"Yes master," replied Han, and made for the east.

## *Han's Quest*

Han could see no sign of Jie and Cizu when at the edge of the woods. He called out their names several times, but the panda and the monkey didn't appear. He flew farther into the trees until he came to a clearing and decided to land on a large willow tree. He looked in all directions still without success, but then a voice from behind him said, "Well, well, well, and look who it is."

Turning round Han replied, "Oh, hello, Wu, I'm so glad to see you. I've been looking for Jie and Cizu can you help me please?"

"Yes, I know where they are," replied the owl, "we'll meet you on the ground - won't be long," and flew off into the distance.

After a time, Wu appeared and perched in the willow tree, while Jie and Cizu approached Han from out of the bushes.

"I hear you were looking for me and Cizu?" asked Jie.

Quickly Han told of the theft of the moon crystal, and how he hoped to travel to the Dark Lands to try and retrieve it. "So, I was hoping that some if you might come with me to help."

Wu had listened carefully to Han's story and now puffed himself up importantly. "The loss of the moon crystal is something that will affect us all. It's our duty to help recover it. You Cizu and Jie, go and find as many animals of the woods as possible, and bring them here. I too, will do the same. Will you wait for us Han? We should not take long."

Han was left alone, and feeling a little tired, sat down with his back against a tree. He soon fell asleep and was awakened later by Cizu shaking him gently. He saw that the clearing was now full of animals of all kinds, whilst large numbers of birds were perched in the branches of a large oak tree, and gathered around the trunk were Jie,

Cizu, a red panda, a black bear, a lynx and a red deer. Soon afterwards a committee was formed, and Wu was voted as chairman. Han noted Lin Xie, the goshawk was perched alone in a tree on the far side of the clearing.

Wu cleared his throat, "Brothers and sisters," he began, "this meeting has been called to report something very serious. The moon crystal has been stolen by Wing Li's brother, Dao Chin, and it's thought that he has taken to the Dark Lands. As you know, the moon crystal is the very life of this province. Dao Chin will use it to wish us all harm."

"What do you expect us to do about it?" asked Su Yeng, the lynx.

"Well," she purred, "never let it be said that I went against the majority. You can count on me for support."

Wu looked pleased, "Then we can make plans. I suggest that Yarou and Shiyao travel with Han, the better to protect him. Jie you will need to travel ahead to spy out the land. Lin Xie and I will gather information and deliver messages by day and night. You, Cizu, will be responsible for gathering food for the party."

The monkey looked depressed, "That sounds like hard work I hope it doesn't interfere with my sleep." There was laughter all around and Yarou said, "You are the laziest creature I know, it's a wonder you have enough energy to breath."

"Don't class us the same as him," called a voice from a group of monkeys, "he's the exception, not the rule."

"Order, order," said Wu angrily, "this is not a laughing matter we still have much to discuss." When do you intend to start the journey, Han?"

"Tomorrow morning," he answered, "that is, if my parents approve me going. I've got to go and tell Wing Li of their decision."

"Then do so," ordered Wu, "and if Han can go then all of those who will be travelling with him, I suggest you meet here at sunrise tomorrow." He continued to all the assembly, "Those of who are not making the journey, do

all you can to help those who are. Spy out the land and get word to the travellers of anything you see or hear that may be of importance. Now, I declare the meeting closed.”

Han hurried back to Wing Li, and reported, “I shall have help from my friends of the woods. Some of them are travelling with me.”

His master nodded, “That is good news. I suggest you go home now. It only remains for me to wish you good fortune. Take care Han.”

“Goodbye master,” replied Han, and made for home. He found that his father was pleased to hear of his venture, but his mother a little tearful. “Just don’t take any chances son,” she pleaded, “you are still very young.”

“Nonsense,” interrupted his father, “he’s being very brave, I’m so proud of you, son.” Han went to bed feeling too excited to sleep and laid for a long time listening to the sounds of the night.

## *Long Journey Ahead*

Very early the next morning Han said goodbye to his parents and made his way to the woods. Yarou, Shiyao and Cizu were waiting at the meeting place. "You're looking very sad," Han said to the monkey. "What's the matter?"

"This is far too early for me," replied Cizu miserably, "I need a lot of sleep as you well know."

"Humph," replied Yarou, "it'll do you good to be up and about for once, the same as the rest of us."

"Don't let's waste time," Shiyao interrupted, "we have a long journey ahead. Cizu, we should reach the pool and waterfall at the western edge of the woods by midday. We'll stop and eat there. Just make sure you're there before us with food. Now, let us be off."

Cizu watched his three companions until they disappeared amongst the trees, and deciding that he had plenty of time, settled down to catch up on his sleep.

Han and his friends made good progress until they reached a rope bridge. Suddenly, two large wolves came out of the undergrowth and stood blocking the travellers' way. "Let us pass please," said Shiyao nervously.

The wolves smiled at each other. "That's not possible," one replied.

"Why are you doing this?" enquired Han, "we mean you no harm."

"Our master, Dao Chin is all powerful!" replied the wolf, "and by his powers knows the reason for your journey to the Dark Lands. We are here to make sure you never complete it."

Shiyao backed away, "Go behind me, and get yourself high up onto that tree," he ordered Han. Han hastened to obey. Snarling, the wolves ran in to attack, but were driven off by the deer's large antlers. For some time, the battle continued, and Han could see that his friend was

beginning to tire. "Yarou" he shouted, "where are you? We need you." A rustling above caused him to look up and he saw that a dove was seated in a lower branch of the trees. "Can I be of assistance?" cooed the bird.

"Please," replied Han, "our friend Yarou the black bear is some distance behind us. Could you get word to him that Shiyao and I are in danger and need his help."

"I'm on my way," said the dove and flew off.

Before long, it sighted Yarou and quickly delivered Han's message. The bear ran fast as he could and soon heard the snarls of the wolves from ahead. When he reached the scene of the battle, Shiyao had gone down on his forelegs, and it seemed that at any moment his attackers would overcome him. Yarou joined the battle, and a few swipes of his strong paws soon caused the wolves to retreat. As they ran off, one turned and shouted, "You may have won this time, but there are others who will come. You'll never reach the Dark Lands."

"Are you both ok?" Yarou asked. Han and Shiyao nodded.

"Thanks to you," smiled Han, "you arrived just in time."

"Then let us go on," said the bear, "we're not too far from the pool and waterfall, we can stop and rest there. Perhaps Cizu has already arrived."

A short time travelling brought them to their destination, but there was no sign of Cizu. They waited for some time and decided to gather their own food, as there was plenty of fruit growing nearby, and fresh grass and foliage for Shiyao. Yarou found honey in a hollow tree, so no one went hungry. When they were resting after the meal, Cizu came swinging through the trees. "Where have you been?" scolded Yarou, "we would have gone hungry if we hadn't been lucky enough to find food here." The monkey looked at the ground, "I'm sorry," he said, "I fell asleep and when I woke up, it was late. I hurried as fast as I could."

Yarou was very angry, "You really are a useless

creature,” he growled, “I’ve a good mind to report your conduct to the council when we arrive back home. I’ve no doubt you’ll be expelled.”

“Don’t be hasty, Yarou,” said Shiyao, “Cizu has made one mistake. I’m sure he’ll make sure nothing like this happens again.”

Cizu nodded eagerly, “Oh yes, I promise. Please don’t report me, Yarou.”

“Very well,” grumbled the bear, “but just you make sure you’re on your best behaviour in future.” When they had eaten the party moved off, having decided to camp that night in the willow grove at the lower slopes of the hills.

“I promise I’ll be there before you,” said Cizu, anxious to make amends, and swung through the trees in haste.

As they got deeper into the wood, the bushes became thicker, and they found it difficult to keep going. By now the track had disappeared completely, so Han climbed a tree to see what lay ahead. “We’ll be clear of the bush soon,” he reported.

When the travellers eventually made it through the thick undergrowth, they were all relieved to see open ground ahead of them. “Ha! Come on,” laughed Han, and stepped forward onto the bright green grass. Almost at once, the ground beneath him gave way, and he sank up to his armpits in mud. The whole area ahead was a huge marsh. Between them, Shiyao and Yarou managed to rescue him, and Han did as best he could to clean the mud from his clothes. “I can’t see any way round this marsh,” said Shiyao, “and our way lies straight ahead. It seems we’ll have to retrace our steps and try to find another way.”

“But that will take time, and we won’t reach our destination by nightfall,” grumbled Yarou.

“Maybe I can help,” came a voice from behind them. The travellers turned around but could see no one. “Who are you, and where are you?” roared the bear,

looking very fierce.

“Just in front of you,” replied the voice, “can’t you see me?”

Han looked carefully and finally made out a pig’s face peering at him from the bushes. Its colour made it difficult to see amongst all the undergrowth.

“Ah, I see you,” said Han, “did you say you could help us to find a way through this marsh?”

The pig moved a little further out of the bushes, “I’m worried about the bear, do you think he’ll eat me?”

“No, I’m sure he won’t, will you Yarou?” replied Han.

“Humph, perhaps under different circumstances,” growled Yarou, “but at the moment I’ve too much on my mind to think of eating anyone, come out pig, you have my word that I won’t harm you.”

Slowly the pig emerged fully but still kept a wary eye on Yarou. “I know of a path through the marsh,” it said, “I often use it myself, for I am hunted from here and from the Dark Lands. Only this day I escaped from two wolves who passed this way.”

“Is the path known to anyone else?” asked Shiyao.

“Not as far as I know,” replied the pig. “Anyhow, if you want me to guide you, we must leave at once. Time’s getting on, and we must make the journey before dark.”

“What about Cizu?” asked Han, “who will show him the way?”

“Who’s Cizu?” enquired the pig. Han explained. “Just a moment then,” replied their guide, and gave a couple of loud grunts. As if by magic, a squirrel arrived in the lover branches of a nearby tree. “Were you calling me?”

The pig replied that the monkey would soon arrive and that he was travelling to the same place as the party. “I’m guiding them by my private path, perhaps you can direct him to the willow grove through the trees.”

“Of course,” said the squirrel.

“Your monkey friend will travel through the trees

quicker than we will on foot,” continued the pig, “so he should arrive at the willow grove before us.”

“Huh! I’ll believe that when I see it,” growled Yarou.

They set off and followed the pig, who took a roundabout route through the bushes until the path was reached. “Follow me in single file,” he ordered, “be careful not to step from the path; it’s not very wide and you’ll end up in the marsh.”

The journey took some time and when they reached the other side, the sun was low in the sky. “Do you know your way from here?” asked the pig, “if so, I’ll be off and find some shelter for the night.”

“Thanks for your help,” said Yarou, “and I promise that if we meet at a later date, I won’t eat you. My name is Yarou, what’s yours?”

“I don’t have a name,” replied the pig sadly, “but some call me One Ear because of my unfortunate injury.”

“Oh, oh yes,” began Yarou, “and I’ll ask all my family to leave you alone should they chance to meet you.”

“You’re very kind,” said One Ear, “and now goodbye to you all.” He was gone into the undergrowth without a sound.

“Let us be going also,” said Shiyao, “we must reach the willow grove before nightfall.” They found a track to lead them to their destination, and within a short time had arrived. “Look who’s here,” grunted Yarou, pointing at Cizu who was sitting under a tree. “How did you manage to get through a whole afternoon without any sleep?” he sneered.

Cizu looked hurt, “I made one mistake, am I going to hear about it for the rest of my life? Look, I’ve got food, and I’ve even prepared somewhere for us to sleep.” He pointed to a rough shelter made from branches. “Hmm, let’s hope you keep up the good work,” begged Yarou.

“Forget your quarrel,” interrupted Shiyao, “we must be as one. Let us eat and then sleep. We must take turns to

stand guard during the night. I will take first turn, and the rest of you can make your own arrangements.” They settled down to eat, and afterwards Han, Cizu and Yarou made themselves comfortable in the shelter. Shiyao stood outside, hardly visible in the gathering dusk. It had been a long day, and Han fell asleep almost immediately.

## *Su Yeng's Proposal*

Su Yeng the lynx had followed Han and his companions for most of the morning. She had watched their battle with the wolves and when that was over, she had made her way to be involved in the recovery of the moon crystal and had already a plan in mind; but being the crafty creature she was, didn't want to carry it through by herself. For if things went wrong, she needed someone she could blame. What she wanted was a partner, or even partners.

The sound of someone approaching interrupted her thoughts, and peering from the bushes, she saw Jie the panda and Quishan the red panda coming towards her. She lay quietly and waited until they stopped nearby.

"Well, so far we've seen nothing worth reporting," Jie was saying, "maybe Han and the others won't have any trouble getting to the Dark Lands."

Quishan examined his left forepaw, which was badly hurt. "Do you think rest here a little longer? I've injured my paw and it's very painful," he said.

"Hmm, that does look nasty," answered Jie, "tell you what, you stay here. I'll carry on and wait for you at our meeting place with Lin Xie. Join me when you feel able. I'll just wait there until you arrive."

"Oh, thank you," replied Quishan, "I'll try not to keep you waiting long."

Jie left, and when he was out of sight, Su Yeng crept out of her hiding place and appeared before Quishan. He was very frightened and started to climb a tree. "Don't be afraid, I mean you no harm," said Su Yeng. Quishan hesitated and then slowly made his way down. "I couldn't help overhearing your conversation with Jie," the lynx continued, "I agree with you, the whole thing is rather boring. As I said at the meeting, I don't think any of us should be involved. Dao Chin will take terrible revenge on anyone who goes against him. I, for one, am going to

take action to protect myself.”

“And what might that be?” asked Quishan.

“I’ve got cousins who live in the Dark Lands. I intend to go to them and tell them that I know the way Han and his companions will take. I will follow their every move and pass this information on to Dao Chin. In return for a guarantee of my safety,” said Su Yeng.

“That’s all very well,” replied Quishan, “but surely Dao Chin with his powers will know where Han’s party is at any time.”

“That may well be so,” answered Su Yeng, “but the information can be quickly relayed by my cousins to all those from the Dark Lands who are involved.” Su Yeng could see that Quishan was undecided what to do. “Why don’t you join me.”

“But I don’t want to be a traitor,” moaned Quishan, “what will all my friends think of me?”

“Look here,” insisted Su Yeng, “that griffin and his companions don’t stand a chance of succeeding. You’ll be doing them a favour and possibly save them all kinds of unpleasantness.”

“Quishan nodded, “All right, I’ll go with you.”

“Come along then,” replied Su Yeng, “if we hurry, we’ll reach the border with the Dark Lands before nightfall, and hopefully I’ll be able to contact my cousins.”

They made good progress and well before dusk had arrived at the border. Quishan was nervous, for what he could see of the Dark Lands looked very forbidding. “Do we really have to go across there?” he asked nodding in the direction.

“You don’t at present,” answered Su Yeng, “you hide amongst those rocks. I’ll cross the border and try to find my cousins. Wait here until I return.”

Quishan didn’t like the idea of being left alone, but he did as Su Yeng told him, and made his way to the rocks. Su Yeng crossed over to the Dark Lands. Even in the gathering dusk it looked a dangerous place, the trees and rocks took on all kinds of frightening shapes. As she

made her way, she gave the call of her tribe. "I'm of the Yeng I come in peace." She walked for some distance, when suddenly it seemed from nowhere, several lynxes who was obviously the leader. "I'm Su Yeng, and I come from the province of Wing Li," she answered.

"Then we must kill you," snarled the leader, "For such is the fate of anyone who is of that province."

"Wait!" shouted Su Yeng, "my name tells you that I am of your tribe. What I have to say will, I'm sure, be of great service to your ruler, Dao Chin."

"Speak then," said the leader, "but we may yet still kill you."

"I come to offer my services," began Su Yeng, "I know the movements of the party that is invading your ground, and that they intend to recover the moon crystal and return it to Wing Li. I did not support this invasion from the start, and said as much in council, but I was outvoted. I can be of great use to you, for I can tell you at any time where the invaders are, and what way they will travel. Oh yes, I know Dao Chin will know all this, but you could quickly pass any information I give you to comrades, it will save your ruler from doing so."

The leader looked at Su Yeng slyly. "If you mean what you say, then perhaps Dao Chin will be interested. We will get a message to him and await his reply." The leader gave several loud calls, and Su Yeng was surprised when Lin Xie the goshawk came in answer. "Yes, it's me," smiled Lin Xie, "I've always supported the right side. I told Dao Chin where and how the moon crystal was kept, and how he could best acquire it. Why are you here, Su Yeng?" Briefly, the lynx told him.

"I've never trusted you, and I don't trust you now," said Lin Xie. He then turned and asked the leader, "What do you want of me?" The leader explained. "Very well," said Lin Xie, "I'll leave now."

When the goshawk had left Su Yeng remembered Quishan. "I have a companion," she said, "he is waiting for me amongst those rocks." Two lynxes immediately

ran off and returned shortly with Quishan between them. The red panda was very frightened and wished he hadn't listened to Su Yeng. He longed to be back in his own territory with Jie.

Within a short time, Lin Xie had arrived at Dao Chin's nest. Dao Chin was in a good mood. "Well, well, my favourite traitor," he sneered, "what can I do for you?" Quickly Lin Xie told of Su Yeng's proposal. Dao Chin thought for a while, and finally agreed, "Yes, another defector from my brother's realm will do no harm. I leave it to you to see that any information is passed on. I suppose your relations who live here in the Dark Lands will be involved?"

"Yes," replied Lin Xie, "as you can see conditions in the Dark Lands have already improved only this small party in an attempt to take back the moon crystal? Is he not planning a full-scale invasion?"

Lin Xie laughed, "As you know Wing Li's army is both outdated and unpractised. He is unable to raise enough troops to cause you any problems."

"Then be off with you," waved Dao Chin, "be certain that Han and his companions are watched at all times. You may tell your friends that they may have some sport with them, but I don't want them harmed. Once they reach the rope bridge, I will be able to deal with them myself."

"As you wish," smiled Lin Xie and flew off.

When he arrived back, he saw that the lynx including Su Yeng were sitting in a circle taunting the red panda. "Enough of this nonsense," he ordered, "I come from Dao Chin, he has accepted your offer. He orders that you spread the news that the invaders are camped by the willow grove on the other side of the border. Make sure they take the longer route to Dao Chin. You must go now. I will contact my relatives. Su Yeng, keep the red panda with you, and watch him closely, I don't trust him." Within a short time, everyone had gone, and only the rocks remained.

## *Outnumbered*

Yarou was standing guard at the willow grove. He had seen or heard nothing, only the night sounds you would expect. Nevertheless, he was uneasy, for throughout his period of guard duty, he felt that he and his companions were being watched. By whom he didn't know, but he decided not to show his concern. "Let whoever they are think I haven't noticed anything," he thought. He looked into the sky and saw the glimmer of approaching dawn. It was time to wake Cizu for his turn at guard. Yarou prodded the monkey with his foot, "Come on, wake up, you're on guard now," he growled. Cizu blinked sleepily. "But it's still dark," he protested, "I don't normally get up until sunrise at the earliest."

"Well, things aren't normal," snapped Yarou, "listen carefully," he continued, "and act as if we're just passing the time of day." Quickly he told Cizu of his suspicions. In spite of his faults, Cizu was quite a brave creature, and he showed no fear. "I agree with you," he yawned, "let's not give them the satisfaction of knowing they've got us worried. Anyway, it's your turn to sleep. Go on, off you go, I'll be fine."

Yarou shook his head, "No, I won't bother." He replied, "It's nearly daylight, and Han and Shiyao will soon be awake. I'll stay and keep you company."

Han and Shiyao awoke soon after sunrise, and Yarou and Cizu lost no time in telling them the news. Shiyao was pleased. "That was very clever of you both not to give any sign that you suspected being watched. Let's keep it that way. Anyway, I'm expecting Lin Xie shortly. We'll tell him to get the news to all our friends, and they'll make sure we get their support."

After they had eaten, Lin Xie arrived and was told of the party's suspicions. "Are you sure it's not your imagination?" asked the goshawk, "this type of countryside is always very eerie, and makes you think that

something is hiding behind every tree and rock."

"No, we're sure it's a fact," replied Shiyao, "so you make sure our friends know this."

"Leave it to me," said Lin Xie, "by the way, I'll have to tell them how far you intend to travel today, and where you hope to spend the night."

"I've no idea at present," answered Shiyao, "I suggest that you and the birds keep close to us and pass the news back to the others."

"Agreed," said Lin Xie, "may I also suggest that you take the low route. I know it's longer than the high route, but you'll save yourselves a hard climb."

"I don't agree," replied Shiyao, "there's too many places along the low route where we could be ambushed. We'll take the high route, I admit it's a tough climb, but you can see if anyone is following you from up there."

"As you wish," replied Lin Xie, "and now, if you'll excuse me, I'll be on my way."

Lin Xie flew off and made straight for the Dark Lands. There he told his relations of the route Han, and his companions would be taking. "Dao Chin wants them to take the low route, but they insist on using the high route. I tried hard to persuade them otherwise, but with no success," he replied, "can you think of anything that can be done to ensure they go the low route?" the leader, a large hawk named Xiang thought for a while. "Where were the invaders when you left them? How long do you think it will take them to reach the approaches to the high route?" he asked.

"They were still at the willow grove," replied Lin Xie, "and I think they'll not arrive at their destination until well after midday."

"Then we have time," said Xiang, and he ordered his flock, "get news to all the larger creatures of our province. Tell them to go to the cliffs above the high route the high route and send down rocks and boulders to block their way. They must not harm the party, only make sure they are unable to use the route, go now." All the birds flew off

to obey.

Meanwhile Han and his companions were making slow progress through the undergrowth. They knew they were being followed but gave no sign of this. They stopped for a while near a spring and then started their journey again. It was well past midday when they reached the entrance to the high route, and they stared in disbelief at the huge mass of fallen rock that barred their way. "Oh dear, just our luck," sighed Shiyao, "wait here, I'll go and see if we can find a way over the rockfall."

He picked his way carefully up the mound, when a shout from Yarou startled him. "Look out Shiyao." He looked upwards and saw a large boulder falling towards him. He retreated as a hail of rocks and boulders rained down from above. From a safe distance the friends could see the enemy on the cliff top as they sent down further missiles. Finally, when all was quiet Shiyao said, "Well, there's nothing else we can do except to take the low route."

"How did they know where we would be?" asked Han. "We've been followed ever since we started this journey," answered Shiyao, "and word gets around. Come on, let's go." The friends hurried along and when they reached the shelter of the trees, were shocked to find Cizu lying down by the track. "Oh, it looks like Cizu's asleep," said Yarou.

"No, I'm not," replied Cizu, "Oh, Han, Shiyao I'm so glad to see you here. I've been playing dead. I was attacked by the monkeys from the other side," replied Cizu, "they just appeared suddenly."

"But why did none of our friends come to help you?" persisted Yarou, "they're supposed to be keeping close to us at all times."

"It wasn't their fault," said Cizu, "Wu was here a while ago, and he told me that Dao Chin's allies have cut us off from our friends. Even now I expect our enemies are close by, enjoying my discomfort."

Yarou was very angry. "Let's challenge them, let's stay and fight," he growled.

"Be sensible," replied Shiyao, "look we're outnumbered and would stand no chance. We'll just have to make for the low route as planned."

"I'll have my way eventually," snarled Yarou, "and if you're listening, don't think you won't have to face me. My time will come."

When they finally reached their destination, it was late afternoon. "So, where shall we sleep tonight?" asked Han.

Shiyao looked at the sun, "if we hurry, we can reach the entrance to the low route. I remember there's water nearby and a large cave in which we can shelter."

"Why don't I go ahead and gather food and bedding?" asked Cizu.

"That's a good idea, but I think we should do it instead. Look, you've just been attacked, so why don't you rest up against this rock here for a while," replied Han.

"Oh, OK," yawned Cizu.

"We'll see you later," replied Shiyao.

A short time later Su Yeng suddenly appeared as if from nowhere awaking Cizu from his sleep. "What are you doing here?" Cizu enquired, "Just following instructions," replied the lynx, "I've shadowed you for most of the day."

"Then why didn't you help when those monkeys attacked me?" asked Cizu.

"I intended to, but the enemy numbered too many, I couldn't have tackled them all by myself," replied Su Yeng. "Are you travelling any further today?"

"No, we are staying here overnight. We'll be sleeping in that cave behind you," answered Cizu, "Han and Shiyao should be gathering food and bedding."

"I know of some trees nearby which bear a most delicious fruit, something like apples. I can go and get some for you, if you'd like?" asked Su Yeng.

"You're very kind," replied Cizu, "it'll be a great help, I'm very tired after all that's happened today."

Within a short time, a handful of apples had been gathered and placed on the ground, "There you go, I'll be leaving you now," said Su Yeng.

"Thank you for your help," replied Cizu, "I'm very grateful".

"Goodbye," purred Su Yeng as she disappeared amongst the trees.

She moved quickly and soon came to a clearing where Quishan awaited her. "I'm so glad you've come back," he said, "I've been very nervous waiting here on my own. Where have you been?"

"Visiting Cizu," replied Su Yeng, "he's waiting near the large cave for Han and his companions. I helped him to collect some apples."

"But I thought that Han and his friends were now our enemies," said Quishan, "why did you help them?"

"I've got my reasons," answered Su Yeng, "nothing for you to worry about. Now, let us go, I've got to visit some friends."

Quishan was puzzled but followed Su Yeng through the undergrowth. When they reached a small lake, Su Yeng told him to stay out of sight behind a large tree, then she walked to a huge mound of rocks by the lakeside and called several times. Quishan was alarmed when several snakes appeared from the mound. Su Yeng didn't seem worried, and Quishan heard her say, "Who is the leader amongst you?" A huge Python reared up; it stood as high as a tall man. "I give the orders here," it hissed, "who are you, and what do you want? Answer quickly, before my friends become impatient."

"I'm Su Yeng," replied the lynx, "I'm on your side, you may check with Dao Chin if you wish."

"I've heard of you," replied the snake, "what is your business here?"

"I've followed the invaders for most of today," continued Su Yeng, "and I know where they will spend the

night.”

“How does that concern us?” asked the snake irritably.

“There is one of the invaders who is likely to cause trouble,” continued Su Yeng.

“I already spoken to Cizu the monkey. He trusts me, and I offered to help by gathering food. I collected apples nearby; it is not widely known that this fruit if eaten in large amounts causes heavy sleep.”

“So, the invaders will eat and sleep heavily,” said the snake, “but I still don’t see how this concern us.”

“As I started to tell you,” Su Yeng replied.” The bear is our greatest worry. It’s my intention to have him killed while he sleeps. Oh yes, I know I could get my relations to attack, but there’s always the chance he might awaken. What’s needed is a silent attack, and who would be better to do so than you and your friends. If you all bite the bear, the poison you put into him will make certain he’ll never awake.”

The snake looked at Su Yeng with admiration and said, “What a fiendish plan. You certainly live up to your reputation an evil schemer. But what of Dao Chin? His orders are that none of the invaders should be harmed?”

“Leave Dao Chin to me,” said Su Yeng, “I’ve got his confidence, and when I tell him of our plan he’ll most certainly agree.”

“Oh, very well,” replied the snake, “we’ll attack tonight.”

From his hiding place Quishan had overheard everything. “What am I doing joining up with such villains,” he thought, “I must go to Han and his friends and warn them.” He ran quickly, stopping every now and then to see if Su Yeng was following him. He lost his way several times and it was getting dark by the time he had arrived. Shiyao was standing outside the cave entrance, and when he saw Quishan approaching shook his antlers in warning. “Come no closer,” he ordered, “who are you, and what are you doing here?”

"Oh, please listen to me," begged Quishan, "I've come to warn you of great danger."

"Speak then," said Shiyao, "but keep your distance." Quishan quickly related all that Su Yeng had spoken of with the snakes. When he had finished Shiyao nodded. "It was brave of you to bring that warning. The others have eaten, but I've not. "Look, you go into the cave, and I'll roll a boulder across the entrance. It'll at least give you a little protection. Stay in the cave whatever happens."

"What are you going to do?" asked Quishan, "I'm visiting my relations," replied Shiyao, "I know that they're nearby and I'm sure they'll help us."

When the boulder had been placed, Shiyao left. He was well able to travel by night, and it didn't take long to reach the place where his relations were grazing. The leader, a stag named Xio Peng, listened with interest to Shiyao. "So, these snakes are going to attack your friend tonight. Do you know when, and from what direction they'll come?" he asked.

"They'll be coming in from the west," replied Shiyao, "but exactly when I don't know."

"Then we must post guards to tell us when. Where are the night birds?"

"I'm here," said Wu flying down from a nearby tree, "and the nightingales are, also. Come friends," he called, "no one will do you harm." Cautiously the nightingales joined Wu.

"Have you heard all that has been said?" asked Peng. The birds nodded. "Then let us waste no more time," he continued, "we need you to scout ahead and pass back the news when the snakes move. The deer, under my control, will form a half circle in front of the cave. At my signal, we will stampede. It's not my intention to harm any of the snakes, just to drive them back whence they came."

Wu approved. "That is good thinking Xio Peng. Come, birds let us be gone."

Within a shot time no birds were left, "We must go now," said Xio Peng, and the deer, including Shiyao,

moved silently away.

Back at the cave, the friends were sleeping soundly and failed to hear the deer as they took up their positions. For some time, all was quiet, until Wu suddenly swooped down. "The snakes are moving," he told Xio Peng, "they're coming up the track from the Dark lands."

"Right," said Xio Peng. "Move out everyone, when I lift my head, begin your run." Slowly at first the deer moved, then at Xio Peng's signal broke into a run. The noise of their hooves sounded like thunder, and the approaching snakes soon realised what was happening and hastened to avoid the stampede. Within a short time, they had all gone.

Su Yeng watched from her perch in a tree. She had realised some time earlier that Quishan had deserted but thought it of little importance. After all, what trouble could such a nervous creature cause. Now she had little doubt that in some way Quishan was behind what she had just witnessed. She decided to put some distance between herself and the snakes.

Meanwhile, the snakes' leader was resting his bruised body back in his lair. "Just wait until I see that Su Yeng," he hissed, "I'll have something to say about her brilliant ideas."

## *Captured*

Han approached Shiyao and Yarou, "So, how did you get caught, then?"

"We crossed the ford as arranged," answered the deer, "Cizu was on my back as he dislikes water. We were surrounded by guards. There were trees all along the riverbank, and we stood close to a large oak. I shouted to Cizu to jump for the lower branches. He did so and made off, swinging through the trees. As far as I know he is still at liberty."

"I thought this cave was used as a military training base of some kind?" enquired Han.

"Yes, once many moons ago, but now it's used as a prison," sighed Shiyao.

"So, what happens here?"

"Many are taken away each day, I'm told, but to where, I don't know," replied Shiyao.

Han and Yarou became very downhearted. "Come on, cheer up," urged Shiyao, "the birds know where we are, and will take the news back to friends. I'm sure they'll do their best to get us out."

Wu, was at that time, holding a meeting in the forest on the other side of the river. "It appears that the raiding party have all been arrested," he reported. "What can we do to help them?" asked a bear.

"It's difficult," replied Wu, "the ford and all approaches to Valley were heavy guarded, and Dao Chin will be expecting a rescue attempt."

Wu was interrupted by a number of small birds. "What do you want?" he asked irritably.

"The monkey Cizu is free, and is being guided here by our flock," replied a sparrow, "he should be here soon, together with Jie, the panda."

Within a short time, Cizu and Jie arrived, and were welcomed by all. "What can you tell us?" asked Wu.

“Well,” began Cizu, “I crossed the ford with Shiyao and Yarou. We were confronted with guards almost as soon as we reached the other side. I was riding on Shiyao’s back and was able to jump into a tree. From there I made my way through the trees, only coming down to ground when I was certain I wasn’t being followed.”

“Did you see what happened to your companions?” asked Wu.

Cizu shook his head, “I was too intent on making my escape, and can only assume they were taken to Valley.”

“I see,” said Wu, “continue your story, please.”

“I found myself back in the forest,” said Cizu, “and decided to rest before trying to find my way back to you. As I rested, I heard my name called and was surprised when Jie appeared before me. Go on Jie, tell your story, now.”

Jie looked nervously around, “It all began,” he said, “when Quishan and I were patrolling the forest earlier, I was anxious to get to where we had arranged to meet Lin Xie, but Quishan had injured a paw. We agreed that I should go on to the meeting place and wait for Quishan to join me there when he had rested. Well, I decided to go on alone and try to find my way to you. After a while I realised, I was lost. I called out several times, but no one answered. Suddenly I realised that I was travelling a long a track, very overgrown, but still noticeable. I decided to follow it knowing that it must lead somewhere.”

“Didn’t you know in what direction you were travelling? Asked the bear.

Jie shook his head, “No, I’m not very good at directions,” he answered.

“You really are hopeless,” the bear sneered.

Wu interrupted, “Carry on with your story Jie.”

The panda continued, “Eventually I came to a river, and for some distance I followed the bank. Suddenly, as I rounded a bend, I saw the was spanned by a rope bridge. It looked shaky, but I decided to cross it. When I reached the other side, I saw lights in the distance. I realised that I

was in the Dark Lands, and that the lights I could see were those of Dao Chin's town. I was too scared to investigate, as it was getting dark, so I took shelter where I was, intending to cross back over when it got light. I was about to leave on the following morning, when Cizu arrived, and we agreed to travel together and try to find you."

Wu stayed silent for a while, then said, "I remember being told of an old route to the town. It's long been disused. I've no doubt that it's the one you found, Jie. Could you find your way back to it?"

"I don't think so," stammered the panda.

"I could," called Cizu, "I've got a good memory for directions."

"Good," replied Wu, "I think it may be possible for us to enter the town undetected and attempt to rescue our friends. Do you know where they're being held?" he asked the birds.

A dove answered, "Yes, they're being held in a disused military training cave on the eastern side."

"Ah, yes, I know of it," nodded Wu, "but I believe the entrance is high up, isn't it?"

"Yes," replied the dove.

"So, the problem will be scaling the walls," mused Wu, "I think there will be no difficulty in getting to there if we used the old route."

Cizu spoke up, "We monkeys are the obvious choice to climb the walls. Is it known how the guards are positioned inside?"

"After midnight two guards are posted by the entrance," replied the dove. "Oh, and there's the neighbourhood patrol constant changeovers to think about, too."

"What do you have in mind, Cizu?" asked Wu.

Cizu replied, "So, if we monkeys were to climb the walls, we should be able to overpower the entrance guards. Then we can let you in."

Wu suggested, "Well, the birds will be able tell you where the neighbourhood patrol is, and I'm sure a number

of you will be able to deal with them. The rest can attend to rescuing our friends.”

“There is one problem,” said the bear, “Dao Chin has the moon crystal. He could use it to overlook our every move, and what if he uses it to aid his troops in battle against us?”

Wu replied, “Yes, it’s true that Dao Chin could use it against us. But remember also that we are in the moon’s first quarter, a time when the power of the crystal is at its lowest.”

After some discussion it was agreed to make for the riverbank and the long-forgotten route to the Dark Lands. The crossing would be made just before twilight, so they could take all day to travel. Wu suggested, “Right, keep with your own species, and in as small numbers as possible. Dao Chin will have his spies out, and we don’t want to let them see any large movements of animals otherwise we shall lose the chance of surprise.”

The journey took most of the day, and the animals travelled in small groups. The birds kept watch and reported several times that Dao Chin’s troops were not in the area. By early evening, nearly everyone was hidden in trees near the rope bridge. Shortly just before twilight the crossing then began. In ones and twos, the animals gained the far side of the river. When all was ready, they set off through the undergrowth. The birds reported that a small lane entering the rear to Dao Chin’s town was unguarded and guided them there. They hid amongst the darkened bushes until all were present, and then quietly set off. Cizu and the remaining monkeys were guided to the cave wall and once told that no guards were near quickly climbed up it. Luckily, using the tree shadows nobody saw them, and when they arrived, they could see only two guards walking away from them. So, quickly they headed for the entrance. Once inside the two guards were found to be asleep, so both were knocked out quickly, and those waiting outside entered. The birds had found the neighbourhood patrol, and bears and monkeys soon

captured it. The exercise had been carried so quietly that the prisoners heard nothing. They were awoken and joined the invaders. Han and Yarou set off with a small party to Dao Chin's nest. "There's bound to be guards there, so take care," cautioned Wu.

When they arrived at the nest, the two guards were soon overpowered. The noise had awoken Dao Chin, "What's going on here? What's happened to my guards?"

"You know why we're here," answered Han, "the moon crystal must be returned to Wing Li. All your prisoners have been freed and have joined us. Give us the crystal now!"

Dao Chin shrugged, "You may have knocked out a few lazy old guards. But do you honestly think you rabble stand any chance against my massive army? It'll only be a matter of time before they win this battle. You're in no position to demand the crystal or anything else."

"You're forgetting one thing," said Yarou, "we hold you hostage."

Dao Chin shrugged, "Do you honestly think I kept it here?" getting up and opening his wings. "Go on take a good look! I'm off now! Bye, bye, byeeeee!!!!!"

Wing Li said, "Han, Han, you need to wake up!"

Han slowly opened his eyes, "Wing Li? What are you doing here?"

Wing Li replied, "So, as you hadn't come to me earlier, I thought I'd better come and check up on you instead."

Sitting up, Han yawned, "Oh, I'm so, sorry... I must've overslept please forgive me, master."

Wing Li sighed, "That's alright. So, when I arrived you were sleeping you were being very restless and kept on repeating the word bye for some reason."

Han said, "Really? Oh yes! I can remember it all now. Let's see. Yes, that's right, so I dreamt that you owned the moon crystal which had special powers."

Wing Li asked, "Hmmm, will that be good or bad?"

Han said, "It's only used for good works, such as

growing crops, controlling the weather and even for construction projects. Your brother was there! Master!"

Wing Li asked, "What was he doing?"

Han sighed, "Well, master. Just like yesterday evening he had visited you, and you offered for him to stay over which became your downfall, because in the following morning I had found you all drugged up and he had taken the moon crystal to use it against our beloved community. You then asked me with my parents' permission and a few of my friends to go and get it back from Dao Chin's town which is in the Dark Lands."

Wing Li smiled, "Wow! I wish I could dream up places like that. So, what happened next then?"

Han replied, "Well, together we worked really hard, and we got ourselves into many dangerous situations, we had battles with wolves, a lot of us got imprisoned, then got released, and afterwards we still had to go and look for your brother."

Wing Li asked, "Did you find him, then?"

Han replied, "Yes, master. But he didn't have it with him, then he suddenly just flew away; and that's when you arrived. So, master, did you make up, then?"

Wing Li sighed, "Yes, we did. We're all well and good now, thanks for asking. At least you're not ill that was all I was worried about. Anyway, we've got a very busy day of celebration ahead, and don't worry as there will be plenty of food for us to eat, so, shall we?"

Han replied, "Yes, of course! Because I'm absolutely starving!" they both laughed and flew off far into the distance.

Somewhere deep in a hidden cave lies the moon crystal still yet to be discovered.....

*The End*