CHAPTER I

Amid the ten thousand noises and the jade-and-gold and the whirling dust of Xinan, he had often stayed awake all night among friends, drinking spiced wine in the North District with the courtesans.

They would listen to flute or *pipa* music and declaim poetry, test each other with jibes and quotes, sometimes find a private room with a scented, silken woman, before weaving unsteadily home after the dawn drums sounded curfew's end, to sleep away the day instead of studying.

Here in the mountains, alone in hard, clear air by the waters of Kuala Nor, far to the west of the imperial city, beyond the borders of the empire, even, Tai was in a narrow bed by darkfall, under the first brilliant stars, and awake at sunrise.

In spring and summer the birds woke him. This was a place where thousands upon thousands nested noisily: fishhawks and cormorants, wild geese and cranes. The geese made him think of friends far away. Wild geese were a symbol of absence: in poetry, in life. Cranes were fidelity, another matter.

In winter the cold was savage, it could take the breath away. The north wind when it blew was an assault, outdoors, and even through

the cabin walls. He slept under layers of fur and sheepskin, and no birds woke him at dawn from the icebound nesting grounds on the far side of the lake.

The ghosts were outside in all seasons, moonlit nights and dark, as soon as the sun went down.

Tai knew some of their voices now, the angry ones and the lost ones, and those in whose thin, stretched crying there was only pain.

They didn't frighten him, not any more. He'd thought he might die of terror in the beginning, alone in those first nights here with the dead.

He would look out through an unshuttered window on a spring or summer or autumn night, but he never went outside. Under moon or stars the world by the lake belonged to the ghosts, or so he had come to understand.

He had set himself a routine from the start, to deal with solitude and fear, and the enormity of where he was. Some holy men and hermits in their mountains and forests might deliberately act otherwise, going through days like leaves blown, defined by the absence of will or desire, but his was a different nature, and he wasn't holy.

He did begin each morning with the prayers for his father. He was still in the formal mourning period and his self-imposed task by this distant lake had everything to do with respect for his father's memory.

After the invocations, which he assumed his brothers were also performing in the home where they'd all been born, Tai would go out into the mountain meadow (shades of green dotted with wildflowers, or crunching underfoot with ice and snow) and—unless there was a storm—he would do his Kanlin exercises. No sword, then one sword, then both.

He would look at the cold waters of the lake, with the small isle in the middle of it, then up at the surrounding, snow-draped, stupefying mountains piled upon each other. Beyond the northern peaks the land sloped downwards for hundreds of *li* towards the long dunes of the killing deserts, with the Silk Roads running around either side of them, bringing so much wealth to the court, to the empire of Kitai. To his people.

In winter he fed and watered his small, shaggy horse in the shed built against his cabin. When the weather turned and the grass returned, he'd let the horse graze during the day. It was placid, wasn't about to run away. There was nowhere to run.

After his exercises, he would try to let stillness enter into him, a shedding of the chaos of life, ambition and aspiration: to make himself worthy of this chosen labour.

And then he would set to work burying the dead.

He'd never, from first arrival here, made any effort to separate Kitan from Taguran soldiers. They were tangled together, strewn or piled, skulls and white bones. Flesh gone to earth or to animals and carrion birds long since, or—for those of the most recent campaign—not so very long ago.

It had been a triumph, that last conflict, though bitterly hard-won. Forty thousand dead in one battle, almost as many Kitan as Taguran.

His father had been in that war, a general, honoured afterwards with a proud title, Left Side Commander of the Pacified West. Rewarded handsomely by the Son of Heaven for victory: a personal audience in the Hall of Brilliance in the Ta-Ming Palace when he returned back east, the purple sash presented, words of commendation spoken directly, a jade gift extended from the emperor's hand, only one intermediary.

His family were undeniably beneficiaries of what had happened by this lake. Tai's mother and Second Mother had burnt incense together, lit candles of thanksgiving to ancestors and gods.

But for General Shen Gao, the memory of the fighting here had been, until he'd died two years ago, a source of pride and sorrow intermingled, marking him forever after.

Too many men had lost their lives for a lake on the border of nowhere, one that would not, in the event, be held by either empire.

The treaty that had followed—affirmed with elaborate exchanges and rituals and, for the first time, a Kitan princess for the Taguran king—had established as much.

Hearing the number from that battle—*forty thousand dead*—Tai, when young, had been unable to even picture what it must have been like. That wasn't the case any more.

The lake and meadow lay between lonely forts, watched by both empires from days away—to the south for Tagur, east for Kitai. It was always silent here now, save for the sound of wind, the crying of birds in season, and the ghosts.

General Shen had spoken of sorrow and guilt only to his younger sons (never to the oldest). Such feelings in a commander could be seen as shameful, even treasonous, a denial of the emperor's wisdom, ruling with the mandate of heaven, unfailing, unable to fail or his throne and the empire would be at risk.

But the thoughts *had* been spoken, more than once, after Shen Gao's retirement to the family property on their south-flowing stream near the Wai River, usually after wine on a quiet day, with leaves or lotus blossoms falling in the water to drift downstream. And the memory of those words was the principal reason his second son was here for the mourning period, instead of at home.

You could argue that the general's quiet sadness had been wrong, misplaced. That the battle here had been in necessary defence of the empire. It was important to remember that it hadn't always been the armies of Kitai triumphing over the Tagurans. The kings of Tagur, on their distant, completely defended plateau, were hugely ambitious. Victory and savagery had gone both ways through a hundred and fifty years of fighting by Kuala Nor beyond Iron Gate Pass, which was, in itself, as isolated a fortress as the empire knew.

"A thousand miles of moonlight falling, east of Iron," Sima Zian, the Banished Immortal, had written. It wasn't literally true, but anyone who had ever been at Iron Gate Fortress knew what the poet meant.

And Tai was several days' ride west of the fort, beyond that last outpost of empire, with the dead: with the lost crying at night and the bones of over a hundred thousand soldiers, lying white in falling moonlight or under the sun. Sometimes, in bed in the mountain dark, he would belatedly realize that a voice whose cadences he knew

had fallen silent, and he would understand that he'd laid those bones to rest.

There were too many. It was beyond hope to ever finish this: it was a task for gods descending from the nine heavens, not for one man. But if you couldn't do everything, did that mean you did nothing?

For two years now, Shen Tai had offered what passed for his own answer to that, in memory of his father's voice asking quietly for another cup of wine, watching large, slow goldfish and drifting flowers in the pond.

The dead were everywhere here, even on the isle. There had been a fort there, a small one, rubble now. He'd tried to imagine the fighting sweeping that way. Boats swiftly built on the pebbled shore with wood from the slopes, the desperate, trapped defenders of one army or the other, depending on the year, firing last arrows at implacable enemies bringing death across the lake to them.

He had chosen to begin there two years ago, rowing the small craft he'd found and repaired; a spring day when the lake mirrored blue heaven and the mountains. The isle was a defined ground, limited, less overwhelming. In the mainland meadow and far into the pine woods the dead lay strewn as far as he could walk in a long day.

For a little more than half the year under this high, fierce sky he was able to dig, bury broken, rusted weapons with the bones. It was brutally hard work. He grew leathery, muscled, callused, ached at night, fell wearily into bed after washing in water warmed at his fire.

From late fall, through the winter, into early spring, the ground was frozen, impossible. You could break your heart trying to dig a grave.

In his first year the lake froze, he could walk across to the isle for a few weeks. The second winter was milder and it did not freeze over. Muffled in furs then, hooded and gloved in a white, hollow stillness, seeing the puffs of his mortal breath, feeling small against the towering, hostile vastness all around, Tai took the boat out on days when waves and weather allowed. He offered the dead to the dark waters with a prayer, that they might not lie lost any longer, unconsecrated,

on wind-scoured ground here by Kuala Nor's cold shore, among the wild animals and far from any home.

WAR HAD NOT BEEN CONTINUOUS. It never was, anywhere, and particularly not in a mountain bowl so remote, so difficult for sustained supply lines from either country, however belligerent or ambitious kings and emperors might be.

As a consequence, there had been cabins built by fishermen or by the herders who grazed sheep and goats in these high meadows, in the intervals when soldiers weren't dying here. Most of the cabins had been destroyed, a few had not. Tai lived in one of them, set north against a pine-treed slope—shelter from the worst winds. The cabin was almost a hundred years old. He had set about repairing it as best he could when he'd first come: roof, door and window frames, shutters, the stone chimney for the fire.

Then he'd had help, unexpected, unsolicited. The world could bring you poison in a jewelled cup, or surprising gifts. Sometimes you didn't know which of them it was. Someone he knew had written a poem around that thought.

He was lying awake now, middle of a spring night. There was a full moon shining, which meant that the Tagurans would be with him by late morning, a half dozen of them bringing supplies in a bullock cart down a slope from the south and around the lake's level shore to his cabin. The morning after the new moon was when his own people came from the east, through the ravine from Iron Gate.

It had taken a little time in the period after he'd arrived, but a routine had been arranged that let them each come to him without having to see the other. It was not part of his purpose to have men die because he was here. There was a peace now, signed, with gifts exchanged, and a princess, but such truths didn't always prevail when young, aggressive soldiers met in far-away places—and young men could start wars.

The two forts treated Tai like a holy hermit or a fool, choosing to live among the ghosts. They conducted a tacit, almost an amusing

warfare with each other through him, vying to offer more generosity every month, to be of greater aid.

Tai's own people had laid flooring in his cabin in the first summer, bringing cut and sanded planks in a cart. The Tagurans had taken over the chimney repair. Ink and pens and paper (requested) came from Iron Gate; wine had first come from the south. Both fortresses had men chop wood whenever they were here. Winter fur and sheepskin had been brought for his bedding, for clothes. He'd been given a goat for milk, and then a second one from the other side, and an eccentric-looking but very warm Taguran hat with flaps for the ears and a tie for knotting under his chin, the first autumn. The Iron Gate soldiers had built a small shed for his small horse.

He'd tried to stop this, but hadn't come close to persuading anyone, and eventually he'd understood: it wasn't about kindness to the madman, or even entirely about besting each other. The less time he spent on food, firewood, maintaining the cabin, the more he could devote to his task, which no one had ever done before, and which seemed—once they'd accepted why he was here—to matter to the Tagurans as much as to his own people.

You could find irony in this, Tai often thought. They might goad and kill each other, even now, if they chanced to arrive at the same time, and only a genuine fool would think the battles in the west were over for good, but the two empires would honour his laying the dead to rest—until there were newer ones.

In bed on a mild night he listened to the wind and the ghosts, awakened not by either of them (not any more) but by the brilliant white of the moon shining. He couldn't see the star of the Weaver Maid now, exiled from her mortal lover on the far side of the Sky River. It had been bright enough to show clearly in the window before, even with a full moon. He remembered a poem he'd liked when he was younger, built around an image of the moon carrying messages between the lovers across the River.

If he considered it now it seemed contrived, a showy conceit. Many celebrated verses from early in this Ninth Dynasty were like

that if you looked closely at their elaborate verbal brocades. There was some sadness in how that could happen, Tai thought: falling out of love with something that had shaped you. Or even people who had? But if you didn't change at least a little, where were the passages of a life? Didn't learning, changing, sometimes mean letting go of what had once been seen as true?

It was very bright in the room. Almost enough to pull him from bed to window to look out on the tall grass, at what silver did to green, but he was tired. He was always tired at the end of a day, and he never went out from the cabin at night. He didn't fear the ghosts any more—they saw him as an emissary by now, he'd decided, not an intruder from the living—but he left them the world after the sun went down.

In winter he had to swing the rebuilt shutters closed, block chinks in the walls as best he could with cloth and sheepskin against the winds and snow. The cabin would become smoky, lit by the fire and candles, or one of his two lamps if he was struggling to write poetry. He warmed wine on a brazier (this, also, from the Tagurans).

When spring came he opened the shutters, let in the sun, or starlight and the moon, and then the sound of birds at dawn.

On first awakening tonight he had been disoriented, confused, tangled in a last dream. He'd thought it was still winter, that the brilliant silver he saw was ice or frost gleaming. He had smiled after a moment, returning to awareness, wry and amused. He had a friend in Xinan who would have cherished this moment. It wasn't often that you lived the imagery of well-known lines.

Before my bed the light is so bright
it looks like a layer of frost.
Lifting my head I gaze at the moon,
lying back down I think of home.

But maybe he was wrong. Maybe if a poem was true enough then sooner or later some of those who read it *would* live the image just as he was living it now. Or maybe some readers had the image before

they even came to the poem and found it waiting for them there, an affirmation? The poet offering words for thoughts they'd held already.

And sometimes poetry gave you new, dangerous ideas. Sometimes men were exiled, or killed, for what they wrote. You could mask a dangerous comment by setting a poem in the First or Third Dynasty, hundreds of years ago. Sometimes that convention worked, but not always. The senior mandarins of the civil service were not fools.

Lying back down I think of home. Home was the property near the Wai, where his father was buried in their orchard with both his parents and the three children who had not survived to adulthood. Where Tai's mother and Shen Gao's concubine, the woman they called Second Mother, still lived, where his two brothers were also nearing the end of mourning—the older one would be returning to the capital soon.

He wasn't sure where his sister was. Women had only ninety days of mourning. Li-Mei was probably back with the empress, wherever she was. The empress might not be at court. Her time in the Ta-Ming had been rumoured to be ending, even two years ago. Someone else was in the palace now with Emperor Taizu. Someone shining like a gem.

There were many who disapproved. There was no one, as far as Tai knew, who had said as much, openly, before Tai had left to go home and then come here.

He found his thoughts drifting back to Xinan, from memories of the family compound by the stream, where the paulownia leaves fell along the path from the front gate all at once, in one autumn night each year. Where peaches and plums and apricots grew in the orchard (flowers red in spring), and you could smell the charcoal burning at the forest's edge, see smoke from village hearths beyond the chestnut and mulberry trees.

No, now he was remembering the capital instead: all glitter and colour and noise, where violent life, in all its world-dust and world-fury, was happening, unfolding, would be *erupting*, even now, in the

middle of night, assaulting the senses moment by moment. Two million people. The centre of the world, under heaven.

It wouldn't be dark there. Not in Xinan. The lights of men could almost hide moonlight. There would be torches and lanterns, fixed, or carried in bamboo frames, or suspended from the litters borne through the streets, carrying the high-born and the powerful. There'd be red candles in upper windows, and lamps hanging from flower-decked balconies in the North District. White lights in the palace and wide, shallow oil lamps on pillars twice the height of a man in courtyards there, burning all night long.

There would be music and glory, heartbreak and heart's ease, and knives or swords drawn sometimes in the lanes and alleys. And come morning, power and passion and death all over again, jostling each other in the two great, deafening markets, in wine shops and study halls, twisted streets (shaped for furtive love, or murder) and stunningly wide ones. In bedrooms and courtyards, elaborate private gardens and flower-filled public parks where willows drooped over streams and the deep-dredged artificial lakes.

He remembered Long Lake Park, south of the rammed-earth city walls, remembered with whom he'd been there last, in peach-blossom time, before his father died, on one of the three days each month she was allowed out of the North District. Eighth, eighteenth, twenty-eighth. She was a long way off.

Wild geese were the emblems of separation.

He thought of the Ta-Ming, the whole palace complex north of the city walls, of the Son of Heaven, no longer young, and of those with him and around him there: eunuchs, and nine ranks of mandarins, Tai's older brother one of them, princes and alchemists and army leaders, and the one almost surely lying with him tonight under this moon, who *was* young, and almost unbearably beautiful, and had changed the empire.

Tai had aspired to be one of those civil servants with access to palace and court, swimming "within the current," as the phrase went. He had studied a full year in the capital (between encounters with courtesans and wine-cup friends), had been on the brink of

writing the three-day exams for the imperial service, the test that determined your future.

Then his father had died by their quiet stream, and two and a half years of official mourning came, and went from you like a rainwind down a river.

A man was lashed—twenty with the heavy rod—for failing to perform the withdrawal and rituals due to parents when they died.

You could say (some would say) he *had* failed in the rites by being here in the mountains and not at home, but he'd spoken with the sub-prefect before riding this long way west, and had received permission. He was also—overwhelmingly—still withdrawn from society, from anything that could be called ambition or worldliness.

There was some risk in what he'd done. There was always danger when it came to what might be whispered at the Ministry of Rites, which supervised the examinations. Eliminating a rival, one way or another, was as basic a tactic as there was, but Tai thought he had protected himself.

You could never truly know, of course. Not in Xinan. Ministers were appointed and exiled, generals and military governors promoted, then demoted or ordered to kill themselves, and the court had been changing swiftly in the time before he'd left. But Tai hadn't *had* a position yet. It wasn't as if he'd risked anything in the way of office or rank. And he thought he could survive the whipping rod, if it came to that.

He tried to decide now, in a moonlit cabin, wrapped in solitude like a silkworm during its fourth sleep, how much he really missed the capital. If he was ready to go back, resume all as before. Or if it was time for yet another change.

He knew what people would say if he did make a change, what was already said about General Shen's second son. First Son Liu was known and understood, his ambition and achievement fitting a pattern. The third son was still young, little more than a child. It was Tai, the second, who raised more questions than anything else.

Mourning would be formally over at the seventh month's full moon. He would have completed the rites, in his own fashion. He could resume his studies, prepare for the next set of examinations. That was what men did. Scholars wrote the civil service tests five times, ten, more. Some died without ever passing them. Forty to sixty men succeeded each year, of the thousands who began the process with the preliminary tests in their own prefectures. The final examination was begun in the presence of the emperor himself, in his white robe and black hat and the yellow belt of highest ceremony: an elaborate passage of initiation—with bribery and corruption in the process, as always in Xinan. How could it be otherwise?

The capital seemed to have entered his silvered cabin now, driving sleep farther away with memories of a brawling, buffeting tumult that never wholly stopped at any hour. Vendors and buyers shouting in the markets, beggars and tumblers and fortune tellers, hired mourners following a funeral with their hair unbound, horses and carts rumbling through dark and day, the muscled bearers of sedan chairs screaming at pedestrians to make way, whipping them aside with bamboo rods. The Gold Bird Guards with their own whipping rods at every major intersection, clearing the streets when darkfall came.

Small shops in each ward, open all night long. The Night Soil Gatherers passing with their plaintive warning cry. Logs bumping and rolling through Xinan's outer walls into the huge pond by the East Market where they were bought and sold at sunrise. Morning beatings and executions in the two market squares. More street performers after the decapitations, while good crowds were still gathered. Bells tolling the watch-hours by day and through the night, and the long roll of drums that locked the walls and all the ward gates at sundown and opened them at dawn. Spring flowers in the parks, summer fruit, autumn leaves, the yellow dust that was everywhere, blowing down from the steppes. The dust of the world. Jade-and-gold. Xinan.

He heard and saw and almost caught the smells of it, as a remembered chaos and cacophony of the soul, then he pushed it back and

away in the moonlight, listening again to the ghosts outside, the crying he'd had to learn to live with here, or go mad.

In silver light he looked over at his low writing table, the ink-block and paper, the woven mat in front of it. His swords were against the wall beside it. The scent of the pine trees came through the open windows with the night wind. Cicadas whirring, a duet with the dead.

He had come to Kuala Nor on impulse, to honour his father's sorrow. He had stayed for himself just as much, working every day to offer what release he could to however small a number of those unburied here. One man's labour, not an immortal, not holy.

Two years had passed, seasons wheeling, and the stars. He didn't know how he would feel when he returned to the crash and tumble of the capital. That was the honest thought.

He did know which people he had missed. He saw one of them in the eye of his mind, could almost hear her voice, too vividly to allow sleep to return, remembering the last time he'd lain with her.

"And if someone should take me from here when you are gone? If someone should ask me … should propose to make me his personal courtesan, or even a concubine?"

He'd known who *someone* was, of course.

He had taken her hand, with its long, gold-painted fingernails and jewelled rings, and placed it on his bare chest, so she could feel his heart.

She'd laughed, a little bitterly. "No! You always do this, Tai. Your heart never changes its beating. It tells me nothing."

In the North District where they were—an upstairs room in the Pavilion of Moonlight Pleasure House—she was called Spring Rain. He didn't know her real name. You never asked the real names. It was considered ill-bred.

Speaking slowly, because this was difficult, he'd said, "Two years is a long time, Rain. I know it. Much happens in the life of a man, or a woman. It is—"

She had moved her hand to cover his mouth, not gently. She wasn't always gentle with him. "No, again. Listen to me. If you begin

to speak of the Path, or the balanced wisdom of life's long flowing, Tai, I will take a fruit knife to your manhood. I thought you might wish to know this before you went on."

He remembered the silk of her voice, the devastating sweetness with which she could say such things. He had kissed the palm held against his mouth, then said, softly, as she moved it a little away, "You must do what seems best to you, for your life. I do not want you to be one of those women waiting at a window above jade stairs in the night. Let someone else live those poems. My intention is to go back to my family's estate, observe the rites for my father, then return. I can tell you that."

He had not lied. It had been his intention.

Things had fallen out otherwise. What man would dare believe that all he planned might come to pass? Not even the emperor, with the mandate of heaven, could make that so.

He had no idea what had happened to her, if *someone* had indeed taken her from the courtesans' quarter, claimed her for his own behind the stone walls of an aristocrat's city mansion in what was almost certainly a better life. No letters came west of Iron Gate Pass, because he had not written any.

It didn't have to be a case of one extreme or the other, he finally thought: not Xinan set against this beyond-all-borders solitude. The Path's long tale of wisdom taught balancing, did it not? The two halves of a man's soul, of his inward life. You balanced couplets in a formal verse, elements in a painting—river, cliff, heron, fishing boat—thick and thin brush strokes in calligraphy, stones and trees and water in a garden, shifting patterns in your own days.

He could go back home to their stream, for example, instead of to the capital, when he left here. Could live there and write, marry someone his mother and Second Mother chose for him, cultivate their garden, the orchard—spring flowers, summer fruit—receive visitors and pay visits, grow old and white-bearded in calm but not solitude. Watch the paulownia leaves when they fell, the goldfish in the pond. Remember his father doing so. He might even, one day, be thought a sage. The idea made him smile, in moonlight.

He could travel, east down the Wai, or on the Great River itself through the gorges to the sea and then back: the boatmen poling against the current, or towing the boats west with thick ropes along slippery paths cut into the cliffs when they came to the wild gorges again.

He might go even farther south, where the empire became different and strange: lands where rice was grown in water and there were elephants and gibbons, mandrills, rosewood forests, camphor trees, pearls in the sea for those who could dive for them, and where tigers with yellow eyes killed men in the jungles of the dark.

He had an honoured lineage. His father's name offered a doorway through which Tai could walk and find a welcome among prefects and taxation officers and even military governors throughout Kitai. In truth, First Brother's name might be even more useful by now, though that had its own complexities.

But all of this was possible. He could travel and think, visit temples and pavilions, pagodas in misty hills, mountain shrines, write as he travelled. He could do it just as the master poet whose lines he had awakened with had done, was probably still doing somewhere. Though honesty (and irony) compelled the additional thought that Sima Zian seemed to have done as much drinking as anything else through his years on the boats and roads, in the mountains and temples and bamboo groves.

There was that, too, wasn't there? Good wine, late-night fellowship. Music. Not to be dismissed or despised.

Tai fell asleep on that thought, and with the sudden, fervent hope that the Tagurans had remembered to bring wine. He had almost finished what his own people had delivered two weeks ago. The long summer twilight gave a man more time to drink before going to bed with the sun.

He slept, and dreamed of the woman with her hand on his heart that last night, then over his mouth, her shaped and painted moth-eyebrows, green eyes, red mouth, candlelight, jade pins pulled slowly one by one from golden hair, and the scent she wore.

THE BIRDS WOKE HIM from the far end of the lake.

He had attempted a formal six-line poem several nights ago, their strident morning noise compared to opening hour at the two markets in Xinan, but hadn't been able to make the parallel construction hold in the final couplet. His technical skills as a poet were probably above average, good enough for the verse component of the examinations, but not likely, in his own judgment, to produce something enduring.

One of the results of two years alone had been his coming to think this, most of the time.

He dressed and built a fire, washed himself and tied back his hair while boiling water for tea. He glanced in the bronze mirror he'd been given and thought about taking a blade to his cheeks and chin, but decided against such self-abuse this morning. The Tagurans could deal with him unshaven. There was no real reason to even tie his hair but he felt like a steppes barbarian when he left it on his shoulders. He had memories of that, of them.

Before drinking or eating, while the tea leaves were steeping, he stood at the eastern window and spoke the prayer to his father's spirit in the direction of sunrise.

Whenever he did this, he summoned and held a memory of Shen Gao feeding bread to the wild ducks in their stream. He didn't know why that was his remembrance-image, but it was. Perhaps the tranquility of it, in a life that had not been tranquil.

He prepared and drank his tea, ate some salt-dried meat and milled grain in hot water sweetened with clover honey, then he claimed his peasant-farmer straw hat from a nail by the door and pulled on his boots. The summer boots were almost new, a gift from Iron Gate, replacing the worn-out pair he'd had.

They had noticed that. They observed him closely whenever they came, Tai had come to understand. He had also realized, during the first hard winter, that he'd almost certainly have died here without the help of the two forts. You could live entirely alone in some mountains in some seasons—it was a legend-dream of the hermit-poet—but not

at Kuala Nor in winter, not this high up and remote when the snows come and the north wind blew.

The supplies, at new and full moon without fail, had kept him alive—and had arrived only through extreme effort several times, when wild storms had bowled down to blast the frozen meadow and lake.

He milked the two goats, took the pail inside and covered it for later. He claimed his two swords and went back out and did his Kanlin routines.

He put the swords away and then, outside again, stood a moment in almost-summer sunshine listening to the shrieking racket of birds, watching them wheel and cry above the lake, which was blue and beautiful in morning light and gave no least hint at all of winter ice, or of how many dead men were here around its shores.

Until you looked away from birds and water to the tall grass of the meadow, and then you saw the bones in the clear light, everywhere. Tai could see his mounds, where he was burying them, west of the cabin, north against the pines. Three long rows of deep graves now.

He turned to claim his shovel and go to work. It was why he was here.

His eye was caught by a glint to the south: sunlight catching armour halfway along the last turning of the last slope down. Looking more narrowly he saw that the Tagurans were early today, or—he checked the sun again—that he was moving slowly himself, after a moon-white, waking night.

He watched them descend with the bullock and the heavy-wheeled cart. He wondered if Bytsan was leading the supply party himself this morning. He found himself hoping so.

Was it wrong to anticipate the arrival of a man whose soldiers would rape his sister and both mothers and joyfully sack and burn the family compound during any incursion into Kitai?

Men changed during wars or conflict, sometimes beyond recognition. Tai had seen it in himself, on the steppes beyond the Long

Wall among the nomads. Men changed, not always in ways you liked to recall, though courage seen was worth remembering.

He didn't think Bytsan would grow savage, but he didn't know. And he could easily imagine the opposite about some of the Tagurans who had come here through two years, arriving armoured and armed, as if to the stern drums of a battlefield, not bringing supplies to a solitary fool.

They were not simple, easily sorted encounters, the ones he had with the warriors of the Empire of the Plateau when they came down to him.

It *was* Bytsan he saw, as the Tagurans reached the meadow and began circling the lake. The captain trotted his bay-coloured Sardian horse forward. The animal was magnificent, breathtaking. They all were, those far-western horses. The captain had the only one in his company. Heavenly Horses they called them in Tai's own land. Legends said that they sweated blood.

The Tagurans traded for them with Sardia, beyond where the divided Silk Roads became one again in the west, after the deserts. There, through yet more harsh mountain passes, lay the deep, lush breeding grounds of these horses, and Tai's people longed for them with a passion that had influenced imperial policy, warfare, and poetry for centuries.

Horses mattered, a great deal. They were why the emperor, Serene Lord of the Five Directions and the Five Holy Mountains, was steadily engaged with the Bogü nomads, supporting chosen leaders among the *kumiss*-drinking yurt-dwellers north of the Wall, in exchange for a supply of their horses, however inferior they might be to the ones from Sardia. Neither the loess-laden soil in northern Kitai nor the jungles and rice-lands of the south would permit the grazing and breeding of horses of any real quality.

It was a Kitan tragedy, had been for a thousand years.

Many things came to Xinan along the guarded Silk Roads in this Ninth Dynasty, making it wealthy beyond description, but horses from Sardia were not among them. They could not endure that long desert journey. Women came east, musicians and dancers. Jade and

alabaster and gems came, amber, aromatics, powdered rhinoceros horn for the alchemists. Talking birds, spices and food, swords and ivory and so much else, but not the Heavenly Horses.

So Kitai had had to find other ways to get the best mounts they could—because you could win a war with cavalry, all else being equal, and when the Tagurans had too many of these horses (being at peace with the Sardians now, trading with them) all else was not equal.

Tai bowed twice in greeting as Bytsan reined up—right fist in left palm. He had acquaintances—and an older brother—who would have judged it a humiliation had they seen him bow so formally to a Taguran. On the other hand, they hadn't had their lives guarded and preserved by this man and the steady arrival of supplies every full moon for almost two years.

Bytsan's blue tattoos showed in the sunlight, on both cheeks and the left side of his neck above the collar of his tunic. He dismounted, bowed, also twice, closed fist in palm, adopting the Kitan gesture.

He smiled briefly. "Before you ask, yes, I brought wine."

He spoke Kitan, most Tagurans did. It was the language of trade in all directions now, when men were not killing each other. It was believed, in Kitai, that the gods spoke Kitan in the nine heavens, had taught it to the original Father of Emperors as he stood, head bowed on Dragon Mountain in the past-that-lay-behind.

"You knew I would ask?" Tai felt rueful, a little exposed.

"Longer twilights. What else can a man do? The cup is a companion, we sing. It goes well?"

"It goes well. The moonlight kept me awake, I am slow to begin this morning."

They knew his routine, the query had not been idle.

"Just the moon?"

Tai's own people asked variants of that question every time they came. Curiosity—and fear. Very brave men, including this one, had told him directly they could not have done what he was doing here, with the dead unburied, and angry.

Tai nodded. "The moon. And some memories."

He glanced past the captain and saw a young, fully armoured soldier ride up. Not one of the ones he knew. This man did not dismount, stared down at Tai. He had only one tattoo, wore an unnecessary helmet, did not smile.

"Gnam, take an axe from by the cabin, help Adar chop firewood."

"Why?"

Tai blinked. He looked at the Taguran captain.

Bytsan's expression did not change, nor did he glance back at the soldier on the horse behind him. "Because that is what we do here. And because if you do not I will take your horse and weapons, remove your boots, and let you walk back through all the passes alone among the mountain cats."

It was said quietly. There was a silence. Tai realized, with a kind of dismay, how unaccustomed he'd become to such exchanges, a sudden tension rising. *This is the way the world is*, he told himself. *Learn it again. Start now. This is what you will find when you return.*

Casually, so as not to shame the captain or the young soldier, he turned and looked across the lake towards the birds. Grey herons, terns, a golden eagle very high.

The young man—he was big, well-made—was still on his horse. He said, "This one cannot chop wood?"

"I believe he can, since he has been digging graves for our dead for two years now."

"Ours, or his own? While he despoils our soldiers' bones?"

Bytsan laughed.

Tai turned quickly back, he couldn't help himself. He felt something returning after a long time. He knew it for what it was: anger had been a part of him, too readily, as far back as he could remember. A second brother's portion? Some might say that was it.

He said, as levelly as he could, "I should be grateful if you'd look around and tell me which of the bones here is one of yours, if I should feel inclined to despoil it."

A different silence. There were many kinds of stillness, Tai thought, inconsequentially.

"Gnam, you are a great fool. Get the axe and chop wood. Do it now."

This time Bytsan did look at his soldier, and this time the other man swung himself down—not hurrying, but not disobeying, either. The bullock had pulled the cart up. There were four other men. Tai knew three of them, exchanged nods with those.

The one called Adar, wearing a belted, dark-red tunic over loose brown trousers, no armour, walked with Gnam towards the cabin, leading their horses. The others, knowing their routine here, guided the cart forward and began unloading supplies into the cabin. They moved briskly, they always did. Unload, stack, do whatever else, including cleaning out the small stable, get back up the slope and away.

The fear of being here after dark.

"Careful with his wine!" Bytsan called. "I don't want to hear a Kitan weeping. The sound's too unpleasant."

Tai smiled crookedly, the soldiers laughed.

The *chunk* of axes came from the side of the cabin, carrying in mountain air. Bytsan gestured. Tai walked off with him. They stepped through tall grass, over bones and around them. Tai avoided a skull, instinct by now.

Butterflies were everywhere, all colours, and grasshoppers startled at their feet, springing high and away in all directions. They heard the drone of bees among the meadow flowers. Here and there the metal of a rusted blade could be seen, even on the grey sand at the water's edge. You needed to be careful where you stepped. There were pink stones in the sand. The birds were raucous, wheeling and swooping, breaking the surface of the lake for fish.

"Water's still cold?" Bytsan asked after a moment.

They stood by the lake. The air was very clear, they could see crags on the mountains, cranes on the isle, in the ruined fortress there.

"Always."

"A storm in the pass five nights ago. You get it down here?"

Tai shook his head. "Some rain. Must have blown off east."

Bytsan bent and picked up a handful of stones. He began throwing them at birds.

"Sun's hot," he said eventually. "I can see why you wear that thing on your head, though it makes you look like an old man and a peasant."

"Both?"

The Taguran grinned. "Both." He threw another stone. He said, "You'll be leaving?"

"Soon. Midsummer moon ends our mourning period."

Bytsan nodded. "That's what I wrote them."

"Wrote them?"

"Court. In Rygyal."

Tai stared at him. "They know about me?"

Bytsan nodded again. "They know from me. Of course they do."

Tai thought about it. "I don't think Iron Gate's sending messages back that someone's burying the dead at Kuala Nor, but I may be wrong."

The other man shrugged. "You probably are. Everything's tracked and weighed these days. Peacetime's for the calculating ones at any court. There were some at Rygyal who saw your coming here as Kitan arrogance. They wanted you killed."

That, Tai hadn't known either. "Like that fellow back there?"

The two axes were chopping steadily, each one a thin, clean sound in the distance. "Gnam? He's just young. Wants to make a name."

"Kill an enemy right away?"

"Get it over with. Like your first woman."

The two of them exchanged a brief smile. Both were relatively young men, still. Neither felt that way.

Bytsan said, after a moment, "I was instructed that you were not to be killed."

Tai snorted. "I am grateful to hear it."

Bytsan cleared his throat. He seemed awkward suddenly. "There is a gift, instead, a recognition."

Tai stared again. "A gift? From the Taguran court?"

"No, from the rabbit in the moon." Bytsan grimaced. "Yes, of course, from the court. Well, from one person there, with permission."

"Permission?"

The grimace became a grin. The Taguran was sunburned, square-jawed, had one missing lower tooth. "You are slow this morning."

Tai said, "This is unexpected, that's all. What person?"

"See for yourself. I have a letter."

Bytsan reached into a pocket in his tunic and retrieved a pale-yellow scroll. Tai saw the Taguran royal seal: a lion's head, in red.

He broke the wax, unrolled the letter, read the contents, which were not lengthy, and so learned what they were giving to him and doing to him, for his time here among the dead.

It became something of an exercise to breathe.

Thoughts began arriving too swiftly, uncontrolled, disconnected, a swirling like a sandstorm. This could define his life—or have him killed before he ever got home to the family estate, let alone to Xinan.

He swallowed hard. Looked away at the mountains ranged and piled around them, rising up and farther up, the blue lake ringed in majesty. In the teachings of the Path, mountains meant compassion, water was wisdom. The peaks didn't alter, Tai thought.

What men did beneath their gaze could change more swiftly than one could ever hope to understand.

He said it. "I don't understand."

Bytsan made no reply. Tai looked down at the letter and read the name at the bottom again.

One person there, with permission.

One person. The White Jade Princess Cheng-wan: seventeenth daughter of the revered and exalted Emperor Taizu. Sent west to a foreign land twenty years ago from her own bright, glittering world. Sent with her *pipa* and flute, a handful of attendants and escorts, and a Taguran honour guard, to become the first imperial bride ever granted by Kitai to Tagur, to be one of the wives of Sangrama the Lion, in his high, holy city of Rygyal.

She had been part of the treaty that followed the last campaign here at Kuala Nor. An emblem in her young person (she'd been fourteen that year) of how savage—and inconclusive—the fighting had been, and how important it was that it end. A slender, graceful token of peace enduring between two empires. As if it would endure, as if it ever had, as if one girl's body and life could ensure such a thing.

There had been a fall of poems like flower petals in Kitai that autumn, pitying her in parallel lines and rhyme: married to a distant horizon, fallen from heaven, lost to the civilized world (of parallel lines and rhyme) beyond snowbound mountain barriers, among barbarians on their harsh plateau.

It had been the literary fashion for that time, an easy theme, until one poet was arrested and beaten with the heavy rod in the square before the palace—and nearly died of it—for a verse suggesting this was not only lamentable, but a wrong done to her.

You didn't say *that*.

Sorrow was one thing—polite, cultured regret for a young life changing as she left the glory of the world—but you never offered the view that anything the Ta-Ming Palace did, ever, might be mistaken. That was a denial of the rightly fulfilled, fully compassed mandate of heaven. Princesses were coinage in the world, what else could they be? How else serve the empire, justify their birth?

Tai was still staring at the words on the pale-yellow paper, struggling to bring spiralling thoughts to what one might call order. Bytsan was quiet, allowing him to deal with this, or try.

You gave a man one of the Sardian horses to reward him greatly. You gave him four or five of those glories to exalt him above his fellows, propel him towards rank—and earn him the jealousy, possibly mortal, of those who rode the smaller horses of the steppes.

The Princess Cheng-wan, a royal consort of Tagur now through twenty years of peace, had just bestowed upon him, *with permission*, two hundred and fifty of the dragon horses.

That was the number. Tai read it one more time.

It was in the scroll he held, recorded in Kitan, in a Taguran scribe's thin but careful calligraphy. Two hundred and fifty Heavenly

Horses. Given him in his own right, and to no one else. Not a gift for the Ta-Ming Palace, the emperor. Not that. Presented to Shen Tai, second son of the General Shen Gao, once Left Side Commander of the Pacified West.

His own, to use or dispose of as he judged best, the letter read, in royal recognition from Rygyal of courage and piety, and honour done the dead of Kuala Nor.

"You know what this says?" His own voice sounded odd to Tai.

The captain nodded.

"They will kill me for these," Tai said. "They will tear me apart to claim those horses before I get near the court."

"I know," said Bytsan calmly.

Tai looked at him. The other man's dark-brown eyes were impossible to read. "You *know*?"

"Well, it seems likely enough. It is a large gift."

A large gift.

Tai laughed, a little breathlessly. He shook his head in disbelief. "In the name of all nine heavens, I can't just ride through Iron Gate Pass with two hundred and fifty—"

"I know," the Taguran interrupted. "I know you can't. I made some suggestions when they told me what they wished to do."

"You did?"

Bytsan nodded. "Hardly a gift if you're … accidentally killed on the way east and the horses are dispersed, or claimed by someone else."

"No, it isn't, is it? Hardly a gift!" Tai heard his voice rising. Such a simple life he'd been living, until moments ago. "And the Ta-Ming was a brawl of factions when I left. I am sure it is worse now!"

"I am sure you are right."

"Oh? Really? What do you know about it?" The other man, he decided, seemed irritatingly at ease.

Bytsan gave him a glance. "Little enough, in the small fort I am honoured to command for my king. I was only agreeing with you." He paused. "Do you want to hear what I suggested, or not?"

Tai looked down. He felt embarrassed. He nodded his head. For no reason he knew, he took off his straw hat, standing in the high, bright sun. The axes continued in the distance.

Bytsan told him what he'd written to his own court, and what had been decreed in response to that. It seemed to have cost the other man his position at the fortress in the pass above, in order to implement his own proposal. Tai didn't know if that meant a promotion or not.

It might, Tai understood, keep *him* alive. For a time, at least. He cleared his throat, trying to think what to say.

"You realize," Bytsan spoke with a pride he could not conceal, "that this is Sangrama's gift. The king's generosity. Our Kitan princess might have asked him for it, it is her name on that letter, but it is the Lion who sends you this."

Tai looked at him. He said, quietly, "I understand. It is an honour that the Lion of Rygyal even knows my name."

Bytsan flushed. After the briefest hesitation, he bowed.

Two hundred and fifty Sardian horses, Tai was thinking, from within the sandstorm of his forever-altered life. Being brought by him to a court, an empire, that gloried in every single dragon steed that had ever reached them from the west. That dreamed of those horses with so fierce a longing, shaping porcelain and jade and ivory in their image, linking poets' words to the thunder of mythic hooves.

The world could bring you poison in a jewelled cup, or surprising gifts. Sometimes you didn't know which of them it was.