River of Stars
Guy Gavriel Kay
A ROC BOOK

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CHAPTER I

Late autumn, early morning. It is cold, mist rising from the forest floor, sheathing the green bamboo trees in the grove, muffling sounds, hiding the Twelve Peaks to the east. The maple leaves on the way here are red and yellow on the ground, and falling. The temple bells from the edge of town seem distant when they ring, as if from another world.

There are tigers in the forests here, but they hunt at night, will not be hungry now, and this is a small grove. The villagers of Shengdu, though they fear them and the older ones make offerings to a tiger god at altars, still go into the woods by day when they need to, for firewood or to hunt, unless a man-eater is known to be about. At such times a primitive terror claims them all, and fields will go untilled, tea plants unharvested, until the beast is killed, which can take a great effort, and sometimes there are deaths.

The boy was alone in the bamboo grove on a morning swaddled in fog, a wan, weak hint of sun pushing between leaves: light trying to declare itself, not quite there. He was swinging a bamboo sword he'd made, and he was angry.

He'd been unhappy and aggrieved for two weeks now, having reasons entirely sufficient in his own mind, such as his life lying in ruins like a city sacked by barbarians.

At the moment, however, because he was inclined towards thinking in certain ways, he was attempting to decide whether anger made him better or worse with the bamboo sword. And would it be different with his bow?

The exercise he pursued here, one he'd invented for himself, was a test, training, discipline, not a child's diversion (he wasn't a child any more).

As best he could tell, no one knew he came to this grove. His brother certainly didn't, or he'd have followed to mock—and probably break the bamboo swords.

The challenge he'd set himself involved spinning and wheeling at speed, swinging the too-long (and also too-light) bamboo weapon as hard as he could, downstrokes and thrusts—without touching any of the trees surrounding him in the mist.

He'd been doing this here for two years now, wearing out—or breaking—an uncountable number of wooden swords. They lay scattered around him. He left them on the uneven ground to increase the challenge. Terrain for any real combat would have such obstacles.

The boy was big for his age, possibly too confident, and grimly, unshakably determined to be one of the great men of his day, restoring glory with his virtue to a diminished world.

He was also the second son of a records clerk in the sub-prefecture town of Shengdu, at the western margin of the Kitan empire in its Twelfth Dynasty—which pretty much eliminated the possibility of such ambition coming to fulfillment in the world as they knew it.

To this truth was now added the blunt, significant fact that the only teacher in their sub-prefecture had closed his private school, the Yingtan Mountain Academy, and left two weeks ago. He had set off east (there was nowhere to go, west) to find what might be his fortune, or at least a way to feed himself.

He'd told a handful of his pupils that he might become a ritual master, using arcane rites of the Sacred Path to deal with ghosts and spirits. He'd said that there were doctrines for this, that it was even a suggested life for those who'd taken the

examinations but not achieved *jinshi* status. Teacher Tuan had looked defensive, bitter, telling them this. He'd been drinking steadily those last weeks.

The boy hadn't known what to make of any of that. He knew there were ghosts and spirits, of course, hadn't realized his teacher knew anything about them. He wasn't sure if Tuan Lung really did, if he'd been joking with them, or just angry.

What he did know was that there was no way to pursue his own education any more, and without lessons and a good teacher (and a great deal more) you could never qualify for the prefecture civil service tests, let alone pass them. And without passing those first tests the never-spoken ambition of going to the capital for the *jinshi* examinations wasn't even worth a dreaming night.

As for these exercises in the wood, his fierce, bright dream of military prowess, of regaining honour and glory for Kitai . . . well, dreams were what happened when you slept. There was no path he could see that would now lead him to learning how to fight, lead men, live or even die for the glory of Kitai.

It was a bad time all around. There had been a tail-star in the spring sky and a summer drought had followed in the north. News came slowly to Szechen province, up the Great River or down through the mountains. A drought, added to war in the northwest, made for a hard year.

It had remained dry down here all winter. Usually Szechen was notorious for rain. In summertime the land steamed in the humidity, the leaves dripped rainwater endlessly, clothing and bedding never dried. The rain would ease in autumn and winter, but didn't ever cease—in a normal year.

This hadn't been such a year. The spring tea harvest had been dismal, desperate, and the fields for rice and vegetables were far too dry. This autumn's crops had been frighteningly sparse. There hadn't been any tax relief, either. The emperor needed money, there was a war. Teacher Tuan had had things to say about that, too, sometimes reckless things.

Teacher Tuan had always urged them to learn the record of history, but not be enslaved by it. He said that histories were written by those with motives for offering their account of events.

He'd told them that Xinan, the capital of glorious dynasties, had held two million people once, and that only a hundred thousand or so lived there now, scattered among rubble. He'd said that Tagur, to the west of them here, across the passes, had been a rival empire long ago, fierce and dangerous, with magnificent horses, and that it was now only a cluster of scrabbling provinces and fortified religious retreats.

After school was done some days, sitting with his older students, he'd drink wine they poured respectfully for him and sing. He'd sing, "*Kingdoms have come, kingdoms have gone / Kitai endures forever . . .*"

The boy had asked his father about these matters once or twice, but his father was a cautious, thoughtful man and kept his counsel.

People were going to starve this coming winter, with nothing from the tea harvest to trade at the government offices for salt, rice, or grain from downriver. The state was supposed to keep granaries full, dole out measures in times of hardship, sometimes forgive taxes owed, but it was never enough, or done soon enough—not when the crops failed.

So this autumn there were no strings of cash, or illicit tea leaves kept back from the government monopoly to sell in the mountain passes to pay for a son's education, however clever and quick he was, however his father valued learning.

Reading skills and the brush strokes of calligraphy, poetry, memorizing the classics of the Cho Master and his disciples . . . however virtuous such things were, they did tend to be abandoned when starvation became a concern.

And this, in turn, meant no chance of a life for the scholar-teacher who had actually qualified for the examinations in the capital. Tuan Lung had taken the *jinshi* examinations twice in Hanjin, before giving up and coming home to the west (two or three months' journey, however you travelled) to found his own academy for boys looking to become clerks, with perhaps a legitimate *jinshi* candidate among the really exceptional.

With an academy here it was at least possible that someone might try the provincial test and perhaps, if he passed, the same imperial examination Lung had taken—perhaps even to succeed there and "enter the current," joining the great world of court and office—which he hadn't done, since he was back here in Szechen, wasn't he?

Or had been, until two weeks ago.

That abrupt departure was the source of the boy's anger and despair, from the day he bade his teacher farewell, watching him ride away from Shengdu on a black donkey with white feet, taking the dusty road towards the world.

The boy's name was Ren Daiyan. He'd been called Little Dai most of his life, was trying to make people stop using that name. His brother refused, laughing. Older brothers were like that, such was Daiyan's understanding of things.

It had begun raining this week, much too late, though if it continued there might be some faint promise for spring, for those who survived the winter that was coming.

Girl-children were being drowned at birth in the countryside, they'd learned in whispers. It was called *bathing the infant*. It was illegal (hadn't always been, Teacher Tuan had told them), but it happened, was one of the surest signs of what was in store.

Daiyan's father had told him that you knew it was truly bad when boys were also put into the river at birth. And at the very worst, he'd said, in times when there was no other food at all . . . he'd gestured with his hands, not finishing the thought.

Daiyan believed he knew what his father meant, but didn't ask. He didn't like thinking about it.

In fog and ground-mist, the early-morning air cool and damp, the breeze from the east, the boy slashed, spun, thrust in a bamboo wood. He imagined his brother receiving his blows, then barbarian Kislik with their shaved scalps and long, unbound fringe hair, in the war to the north.

His judgment as to the matter of what anger did to his blade skills, made before, confirmed this morning, was that it made him faster but less precise.

There were gains and losses in most things. Speed against control represented a difference to be adjusted for. It would be different with his bow, he decided. Precision was imperative there, though speed would also matter for an archer facing many foes. He was exceptionally good with a bow, though the sword had been by far the more honoured weapon in Kitai in the days (gone now) when fighting skills were respected. Barbarians like the Kislik or Xiaolu killed from horseback with arrows, then raced away like the cowards they were.

His brother didn't know he had a bow or he'd have claimed it for himself as Eldest Son. He would then, almost certainly, have broken it, or let it be ruined by dampness, since bows needed caring for, and Ren Tzu wasn't the caring-for sort.

It had been his teacher who had given the bow to Daiyan.

Tuan Lung had presented it to him one summer afternoon a little more than a year ago, alone, after classes were done for the day, unwrapping it from an undyed hemp cloth.

He'd also handed Daiyan a book that explained how to string it properly, care for it, make arrow shafts and heads. It marked a change in the world, in their Twelfth Dynasty, having books here. Teacher Tuan had said that many times: with block printing, even a sub-prefecture as remote as theirs could have information, printed poems, the works of the Master, if one could read.

It was what made a school such as his own possible.

It had been a private gift: the bow, a dozen iron arrowheads, the book. Daiyan knew enough to hide the bow, and then the arrows he began to make after reading the book. In the world of the Twelfth Dynasty, no honourable family would let a son become a soldier. He knew it; he knew it every moment he drew breath.

The very thought would bring shame. The Kitan army was made up of peasant farmers who had no choice. Three men in a farming household? One went to the army. There might be a million soldiers, even more (since the empire was at war again), but ever since savage lessons learned more than three hundred years ago it was understood (*clearly* understood) that the court controlled the army, and a family's rise to any kind of status emerged only through the *jinshi* examinations and the civil service. To join the

army, to even think (or dream) of being a fighting man, if you had any sort of family pride, was to disgrace your ancestors.

That was, and had been for some time, the way of things in Kitai.

A military rebellion that had led to forty million dead, the destruction of their most glittering dynasty, the loss of large and lucrative parts of the empire . . . That could cause a shift in viewpoint.

Xinan, once the dazzling glory of the world, was a sad and diminished ruin. Teacher Tuan had told them about broken walls, broken-up streets, blocked and evil-smelling canals, fire-gutted houses, mansions never rebuilt, overgrown gardens and market squares, parks with weeds and wolves.

The imperial tombs near the city had been looted long ago.

Tuan Lung had been there. One visit was enough, he'd told them. There were angry ghosts in Xinan, the charred evidence of old burning, rubble and rubbish, animals in the streets. People living huddled in a city that had held the shining court of all the world.

So much of their own dynasty's nature, Teacher Tuan told them, flowed like a river from that rebellion long ago. Some moments could define not only their own age but what followed. The Silk Roads through the deserts were lost, cut off by barbarians.

No western treasures flowed to Kitai now, to the trading cities or the court in Hanjin. No legendary green-eyed, yellow-haired dancing girls bringing seductive music. No jade and ivory or exotic fruits, no wealth of silver coins brought by merchants to buy longed-for Kitan silk and carry it back west on camels through the sands.

This Twelfth Dynasty of Kitai under their radiant and glorious emperor did not rule and define the known world. Not any more.

Tuan Lung had taught this to that same handful of them (never in class). In Hanjin, at the court, they still claimed to do so, he said, and examination questions expected answers that said as much. *How does a wise minister use barbarians to control barbarians?*

Even when they carried wars to the Kislik, they never seemed to win them. Recruited farmers made for a large army but not a trained one, and there were never enough horses.

And if the twice-yearly tribute paid to the much more dangerous Xiaolu in the north was declared to be a *gift*, that didn't change what it really was, their teacher said, over his end-of-day wine. It was silver and silk spent to buy peace by an empire still rich, but also shrunken—in spirit as well as size.

Dangerous words. His students poured wine for him. "*We have lost our rivers and mountains*," he sang.

Ren Daiyan, fifteen years old, dreamed of glory at night, swung a bamboo sword in a wood at dawn, imagined himself the commander sent to win their lost lands back. The sort of thing that could only happen in a young man's imagining.

No one, Teacher Tuan said, played polo, perfecting their horsemanship, in the palace or parks of Hanjin the way they had once in Xinan's walled palace park or city meadows. Red- or vermillion-belted civil servants didn't pride themselves on their riding skills, or train with swords or bows, vying to best each other. They grew the nails on the little fingers of their left hands to show the world how much they disdained such things,

and they kept the army commanders firmly under their thumbs. They *chose* military leaders from their own cultured ranks.

It was when he'd first heard these things, the boy Daiyan remembered, that he'd begun coming to this grove when tasks and rain allowed, and cutting himself swords. He'd sworn a boy's oath that if he passed the examinations and arrived at court he'd never grow his little fingernail.

He read poetry, memorized the classics, discussed these with his father, who was gentle and wise and careful and had never been able even to dream of taking the examinations.

The boy understood that Teacher Tuan was a bitter man. He had seen it from the beginning of his time in the academy, a clerk's clever younger son being taught to write properly, learn the teachings of the Masters. Clever, diligent, a good brush stroke already. Perhaps a genuine candidate for the examinations. His father's dream for him. His mother's. So much pride, if a family had a son do that. It could set them on a road to fortune.

Daiyan understood this. He'd been an observant child. He still was, at the edge of leaving childhood behind. Later this same day, in fact, it would end.

After three or four cups of rice wine, their honourable teacher had sometimes begun reciting poems or singing sad songs about the Xiaolu's conquest of the Fourteen Prefectures two hundred years ago—*the Lost Fourteen*—the lands below the ruins of the Long Wall in the north. The wall was a meaningless thing now, he told his pupils, wolves running through it, sheep grazing back and forth. The songs he sang distilled a heart-torn longing. For there, in those lost lands, lay the surrendered soul of Kitai.

So the songs went, though they were dangerous.

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Wang Fuyin, sub-prefect in that same town of Shengdu, Honglin prefecture, Szechen province, in the twenty-seventh year of the reign of Emperor Wenzong of the Twelfth Dynasty, was rendered more unhappy, later that morning, than he could express.

He was not diffident about expressing himself (unless he was reporting to the prefect, who was from a very good family and intimidated him). But the information that had just arrived was so unwelcome, and so unambiguous in what it demanded of him, that he was left speechless. There was no one around to abuse, in any case—which was, in fact, the essence of the problem.

When someone came to any *yamen* in Kitai from any village bringing an allegation of murder, the sequence of actions to be followed by the civil administration at that *yamen* was as detailed as anything could be in a famously rigid bureaucracy.

The sub-prefecture sheriff was to leave for the village in question with five bowmen to protect him and keep order in what might turn out to be an unruly location. He was to investigate and report. He was obliged to set out the same day if word reached the *yamen* before midday, or at dawn the next morning if otherwise. Bodies decomposed rapidly, suspects fled, evidence could disappear.

If the sheriff should be elsewhere engaged when such a message arrived (he was, today), the judicial magistrate was to go himself to investigate, with the five bowmen and within the same time constraints.

If the magistrate, for whatever reason, was also absent or indisposed (he was), the sub-prefect was tasked with the immediate journey and inquiry, including any inquest required.

That, alas, meant Wang Fuyin.

No lack of clarity in the regulations. Failure to comply could mean strokes with the heavy rod, demotion in rank, even dismissal from civil office if your superiors disliked you and were looking for an excuse.

Civil office was what you dreamed of after passing the *jinshi* examinations. Being given a sub-prefect's position, even in a far western wilderness, was a step, an important step on a road that might lead back to Hanjin, and power.

You didn't want to fail in something like this, or in anything. It was so easy to fail. You might pick the wrong faction to align with, or have the wrong friends at a viciously divided court. Sub-prefect Wang Fuyin had no friends at court yet, of course.

There were three clerks at the *yamen* this morning, filing, reading correspondence, adding up tax ledgers. Local men, all of them. And all of them would have seen a miserable, frightened peasant arrive on his donkey, muddy and wet, *before* midday, then heard him speak of a man slain in Guan Family Village—most of a day's long, awkward, *dangerous* ride east towards the Twelve Peaks.

Probably more than a day, Wang Fuyin thought: which meant staying overnight along the way in some sodden, flea- and rat-infested hovel without a floor, animals kept inside, a handful of bad rice for his meal, rancid wine or no wine, thin tea, while tigers and bandits roared in the cold night.

Well, bandits were unlikely to roar, Fuyin corrected himself (a fussy, precise man), but even so . . .

He looked at the pale, emerging sun. It had rained lightly overnight, third night in a row, thank the gods, but it was turning into a mild autumn day. It was also, undeniably, still morning, and the clerks would know the protocols.

The sheriff had gone north two days ago to deal with taxation arrears towards the hill passes. Sometimes a chancy exercise. He had taken eight bowmen. He was supposed to have five, but he was a cowardly man (in Wang Fuyin's view), and though he'd claim he was training the newer ones, he was just increasing his own protection. In addition to farmers unhappy about taxes, bandits in the west country were endemic. Bandits were everywhere in Kitai, really, and there were always more in times of hardship. There existed texts on how to deal with outlaws (Fuyin had read some on the long journey west). Since arriving, he'd decided the texts were useless. You needed soldiers and horses and good information. None of these were ever present.

Neither was the judicial magistrate, Wang Fuyin sometimes felt.

Having taken his own escort of five bowmen, their honourable magistrate was on his monthly three-day "retreat" at the nearby Five Thunder Abbey of the Sacred Path, seeking spiritual enlightenment.

It seemed that he had negotiated this privilege from the prefect (Wang Fuyin had no idea how) years before. What Fuyin knew, having arranged to know it, was that the magistrate's path to enlightenment consisted mainly of time spent among the women (or one particular woman) at the convent adjacent to the abbey.

Wang was extremely jealous. His wife, from a better family than his own and not shy about reminding him, had been deeply unhappy to be posted here. She'd made him aware of that on the journey, and on a daily basis since they'd arrived a year ago, her words like the tedious dripping of rainwater from the eaves of their small house.

The one singing-girl place in Shengdu was dismally unpalatable for a man who had known the best houses in the pleasure district of the capital. Wang Fuyin didn't make nearly enough money to afford a concubine, and had yet to figure out how to arrange his own spiritual retreats to the convent by the Five Thunder Abbey.

It was a hard life he lived.

The village messenger, he saw, had led his donkey to the water trough in the space in front of the *yamen* and was letting it drink. He was also drinking himself, head down beside the donkey's. Wang Fuyin kept his face impassive, fastidiously adjusted the sleeves and collar of his robe, and strode into the *yamen*.

"How many bowmen are still here?" he asked the senior clerk.

Ren Yuan stood up (his manners were very good) and bowed before replying. Local clerks were not "in the current," not true civil servants. As recently as twenty years ago, before the reforms, they'd been unpaid, reporting to *yamen* for two-year terms, drafted from among the two highest ranks of local farmers and villagers.

That had changed with the "New Policies" of Prime Minister Hang Dejin—over considerable opposition. And that had been just one part of a conflict at court that was still destroying and exiling people. In some ways, the subversive thought occasionally came to Wang Fuyin, it wasn't so bad to be out of the way in the west just now. One could drown in the current in Hanjin these days.

"Three bowmen are with us at the moment, honourable sir," his senior clerk said.

"Well, I need five," said the sub-prefect coldly.

"You are permitted to go with four. It is in the regulation. When necessity requires and so on. You just file a report."

That was his junior taxation clerk. He didn't stand up. Fuyin didn't like him.

"I know that," he said (he'd forgotten, actually). "But we only have three, so that doesn't help very much, does it, Lo Fong?"

The three clerks just looked at him. Pale sunlight came into the *yamen* through the open windows and doors. It had become a lovely autumn morning. Wang Fuyin felt like beating someone with a rod.

An idea came to him.

It was born of irritation and circumstance and the fact that Ren Yuan was standing directly in front of him at his desk, hands clasped, head diffidently lowered showing his grey hair, threadbare black cap, and simple hat pins.

"Ren Yuan," he said. "Where is your son?"

His clerk looked up, then quickly down again, but not before Sub-prefect Wang saw, pleasingly, apprehension. "Ren Tzu has accompanied Sheriff Lao, honourable sir."

"I know this." The clerk's older son was being trained as a guardsman. You needed strong young men with you to deal with collecting taxes. It was Fuyin himself who would have the final say as to whether Tzu was hired. The young man wasn't especially intelligent, but you didn't have to be for some tasks. The salaries paid to clerks, even under the New Policies, were small. One benefit attached, however, was the chance to have sons follow into the *yamen*. That was how things were done now.

"No," said Fuyin, musingly, "I mean your younger son. I can make use of him. What is his name. . . ?"

"Daiyan? He is only fifteen years, honourable sub-prefect. He is still a student."

"Not any more," said Fuyin sourly.

The local teacher, Tuan Lung, would be missed. He hadn't become a friend, but his presence in Shengdu had been . . . a benefit. Even Fuyin's wife had approved of him. Lung was educated, well mannered (if perhaps a little quick with irony). He knew history and poetry, had experience of Hanjin, obviously, and needed to be pleasingly deferential to the sub-prefect, since he'd failed the examinations twice and Fuyin had passed them, first attempt.

"Master Wang," said his chief clerk, bowing again, "it is my hope that my unworthy younger son be made a runner, and perhaps even a clerk in the *yamen* one day, yes. But I would not have dared to ask you until he is older . . . perhaps two years, or even three."

The other clerks were listening avidly. Events had certainly broken the tedium of a morning. A murder in Guan Family Village, and now this.

They employed four, sometimes five runners at the *yamen*—two were outside the door now, ready to sprint with messages through town. Ren Yuan's aspirations for his son were reasonable, and so was the timing he'd proposed. (He was a reasonable man.)

But that wasn't where the sub-prefect was going this unhappy morning, facing the prospect of a dismal ride and a bad night, with a dead body at the end of it.

"Yes, all that might happen," said Fuyin in his most judicious tone, "but right now I need him for something else. Can the boy stay on a horse?"

Ren Yuan blinked. He had a lined, long, anxious face. “A horse?” he repeated.

The sub-prefect shook his head wearily. “Yes. Send a runner for the boy. I want him immediately, with whatever he needs for the road. And his bow,” he added crisply. “He is to bring his bow.”

“His bow?” said the hapless father.

But his voice revealed two things. One, he knew exactly what the sub-prefect had in mind now. And two, he knew about the bow.

Wang Fuyin was aware of it because it was his duty to know such things. Information mattered. The father would have his own means of having learned what the boy doubtless thought was a secret.

If the sub-prefect had had a more effective half-smile, one that conveyed amusement and superiority, he’d have used it then. But his wife had told him that when he essayed such an expression he looked as if he were suffering from stomach distress. He contented himself with another small headshake.

“He’s been trying to make himself capable with the bow. I have no doubt you know it.” A thought struck him. “Indeed, I imagine Teacher Tuan will have informed you at the time of his desire to present the boy with such a gift.”

Another shrewd guess, confirmed by the father’s expression. The distress of the day was not altered, but small pleasures could be extracted, including his clerk’s apprehension. Well, really! If Ren Yuan thought the journey unsafe for his son, what did that suggest it might be for his superior? One could grow indignant!

Wang Fuyin decided to be indulgent. “Come, come,” he said. “It will be a useful experience for him, and I *do* need a fourth bowman.” He turned to the third clerk. “Send a runner for the boy. What is his name again?”

“Daiyan,” said the father, quietly.

“Find Ren Daiyan, wherever he might be. Tell him he’s needed at the *yamen*, and to bring the bow Teacher Tuan gave him.” The sub-prefect allowed himself a half-smile, after all. “And arrows, of course.”

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His heart had begun pounding from the moment the runner from the *yamen* found him coming back across the fields from the bamboo grove.

It wasn’t fear of the journey. At fifteen you didn’t *fear* an opportunity like this: riding out of town, a temporary bowman guarding the honourable sub-prefect, keeping order for the emperor. How could you be afraid of that?

No, his fear had been a boy’s: that his parents would disapprove of what he’d been doing, be angered by his keeping a secret—the times with the bow, firing at targets, making arrows, mornings with bamboo swords.

Turned out, they’d known all along.

It seemed that Teacher Tuan had spoken to them beforehand about the gift. He had explained it as a way of channelling Daiyan’s independence and energy, guiding his spirit to balance, building confidence . . . that these things might matter as he pursued his studies towards the examinations, maybe Hanjin, the court.

His mother had told him this at home when he came hurrying back with the runner, who waited outside. She spoke so quickly Daiyan barely had time to absorb it all. Both his parents knew about his morning forest rituals? Well, you needed to go off and be alone somewhere to think about that. Such information could change the world, your sense of it.

And it seemed the sub-prefect knew about all this, too. And had summoned Daiyan—by name!—to guard him on a journey to one of the villages. To deal with a murder!

Could the Queen Mother of the West be turning her face towards him, after all? Could he be worthy of such good fortune?

His mother had been as efficient as ever. She masked feelings with brisk motions. She packed him a satchel of food and cold tea and a change of clothing (his father's, in fact, they were of a size now) lest he embarrass them among strangers and the sub-prefect. Her expression did not change—not in front of the waiting runner—when Daiyan came back from fetching his bow and quiver from their hiding place in the shed. He took the satchel from her hands. He bowed twice. She bowed back, briskly. He said goodbye.

"Bring honour to your family," she said, as she always did.

He hesitated, looking at her. She reached up then and did something she used to do when he was younger: tugged at his hair, not hard enough to hurt or dislodge the hairpins, but touching him. He went out. He looked back and saw her in their doorway as he went off with the runner.

His father, at the *yamen* when they arrived, looked afraid.

Daiyan wasn't sure why, it wasn't so far they were going, only to Guan Village. They would be there before sundown almost certainly. But Daiyan's father was a man who could look pleased or concerned at times when people around him showed entirely different moods. It was puzzling to a boy, always had been.

The sub-prefect was not happy. He was visibly angry, in fact. Wang Fuyin was plump, a lazy man (everyone knew that), and would be displeased because he was forced to make this trip himself, instead of sending the sheriff or magistrate and waiting in comfort for their report.

It wasn't a reason for his father to look so distressed, or be working to try to hide it. Ren Yuan wasn't good at concealing his emotions or his thoughts. His gentleness wasn't always an asset, either, his younger son had long ago decided.

He loved him for it, though.

Mid-afternoon, hint of a colder wind. They were riding into it, east out of Shengdu towards the world. The river was out of sight on their right, though they could sense it now beyond the forest, a presence in changed birdsong, different birds flying. There was a steady shrieking of gibbons from the steep slopes north of the road.

There were nightingales in these woods. Daiyan's brother had come here hunting them. In Hanjin, at the court, they wanted nightingales for some enormous garden the emperor was building. Officials paid considerable sums for them. It was folly, of course. How could a caged bird survive the journey from Szechen? They'd have to go downriver through the gorges, then by imperial courier north. If the couriers rode fast . . . the very idea of a birdcage bouncing by a saddle was sad and amusing, both. Daiyan liked

nightingales. Some complained they kept you awake at night, but he didn't mind that when they sang.

In the distance ahead, with the mist gone and the day bright, the Twelve Peaks loomed. There were only eleven, of course. Daiyan had long ago given up counting the different explanations for this. The peaks were holy, in both the teachings of the Cho Master and those of the Sacred Path. Daiyan had never been this close to them. He'd never been this far from Shengdu—and wasn't that a sad thought, that someone at fifteen had never been more than a few hours' ride from his town? He'd never ridden a horse this far. That was an adventure in itself.

Their pace was faster than he'd expected it to be. The sub-prefect clearly hated his mount. Hated all horses, most likely, but even though he'd selected a mare with a placid gait and a wide back, he'd grown even more obviously unhappy from the moment they'd left the town behind. A man who preferred city streets to a country path, as the phrase went.

Wang Fuyin was constantly looking around, left and right, behind them. He startled at the gibbons when they grew loud, though the cries were almost constant and should have been unsurprising by now. They were sad, eerie sounds. Daiyan had to admit that. Gibbons could warn you of a tiger, though. They were important that way. They were also meat in a famine, but hard to catch.

The sub-prefect insisted on stops to allow him to step down and stretch. Then, standing on the road, he'd seem to become aware that they were alone in wilderness, himself and only four guards, with the Guan Village farmer somewhere behind them on

his donkey. Wang Fujin would order one of them to help him back on his horse (he was not agile) and they'd set off again.

He made his feelings clear: he didn't like being out here listening to wild animals shrieking and he didn't want to remain out here any longer than necessary. Their pace was quick. Guan Family Village wasn't going to offer much of anything, but it had to be better than a lonely autumn path between cliff and forest with the day soon waning.

The farmer had dropped far behind. Didn't matter. They did know where the village was, and it wasn't as if a sub-prefect could be expected to wait for a villager on a donkey. There was a dead man ahead of them—and who knew what lay between where they were and that body?

Then, rounding a curve in the path, the sun behind them, they saw, all of them saw, one thing—or several—that lay between. Stood between, more accurately.

Four men stepped out of the forest on the right side of the road. There was no obvious way in or out, they were just suddenly there, on the path ahead of them. Blocking it.

Three of them held drawn swords, Daiyan saw. One carried a staff, thick as a fist. They were roughly dressed in drawstring trousers and tunics, one was barefoot. Two were extremely big men. All looked capable of handling themselves in a fight—or anything else out here. They were absolutely silent.

And there was no doubt as to what they were.

His heart was steady, which was interesting. Daiyan felt strangely calm. He heard the gibbons above them. They seemed louder, as if agitated. Maybe they were. The birds were quiet.

The sub-prefect exclaimed in anger and fear, threw up a hand to halt their progress. They stopped about twenty paces from the outlaws blocking their way. They were outlaws, of course they were. And reckless, to be accosting a party of five, mounted. On that thought, Daiyan turned around.

Three more in the road behind them. Same distance away. All with swords there.

They could try to break through, he thought. These men were on foot. They could gallop right at the outlaws in front, and perhaps . . .

That wasn't going to happen. Not with Sub-prefect Wang Fuyin as one of the riders. He would be who the bandits had come for, Daiyan thought: a sub-prefect could fetch a considerable ransom. Daiyan and the other three guards were unimportant.

Which meant they weren't worth leaving alive.

As best he was able to reconstruct the moments that followed, thinking back, it was on that thought that he moved. It wasn't a worked-out, deliberate thing; he couldn't say any planning or calculation went into what happened. It was a little frightening, in truth.

He had drawn his bow, slotted an arrow, and killed the first man in front of them before he could really say he was aware of what he was doing. His first death, first man sent through the tall doors into night. First ghost.

The second arrow was loosed, a second man died before anyone had reacted to the first. At that point one of the outlaws cried out. Daiyan's third arrow was already flying, also aimed ahead of them. (Speed mattered for archers. He remembered thinking that in the woods this morning, a lifetime ago.)

One man was left standing in front of them after that arrow struck. Later, Daiyan would shape (and teach) ideas about how you dealt with a divided set of enemies, whether a handful or an army, but he was doing it properly that morning by instinct.

There came another shout—behind him. But he killed the fourth man in front before turning his horse with his knees, drawing another arrow, and shooting the foremost of those who had decided to charge towards them. Take down the nearest first, he would later teach.

That man died about ten paces away, sword still in hand for a moment, then falling to the path. The arrow was in his chest. They didn't have much in the way of armour, these outlaws. Daiyan didn't remember *noting* that, but he probably had. Otherwise he might have aimed for their faces.

The other two bandits faltered, seeing they were suddenly in a bad circumstance. Faltering wasn't the best course of action. Daiyan shot the sixth man just as he broke stride and was starting to turn away to the woods. Not as precise an arrow; it caught the outlaw in the thigh. He went down screaming, high, oddly shrill.

The last one was running back to the forest. He died at the edge of the trees.

The whole thing lasted only moments. A blur and a flash, gibbons shrieking all through. The extreme strangeness of how time could be so slow that he could still see (and would remember) individual gestures, expressions, and yet also be so impossibly fast.

Daiyan assumed he had been breathing through it all—breathing was important in archery—but couldn't say that he had been. Nor had he been aware of movement, anything at all, from the sub-prefect or the other guards. Not after Wang Fuyin's first

outraged, frightened cry. He'd put arrows in seven men, himself. But that was too easy a way to say it. Men had been living and were dead. He'd killed them. You could divide your own life with something like that, Ren Daiyan thought.

You'd never killed anyone. Then you had.

It is well known, inevitable, that legends take shape around the early lives of those who become celebrated or notorious. The stories can grow fanciful, gather luridly exaggerated details: that is what a legend is. A hundred men killed single-handedly. An enemy city, walls three times a man's height, scaled by night, alone. An immortal poem written by a supernaturally gifted child with his father's ink and brush. An imperial princess seduced in a courtyard of the palace beside a fountain, then pining away for love.

In the matter of Ren Daiyan and his first encounter with outlaws on a path east of Shengdu one autumn day—the day he left home and changed his life—the tale retained considerable accuracy.

That was because Sub-prefect Wang Fuyin, later to become a figure of note himself, recorded the incident in an official dispatch while reporting also his own successful investigation, arrest, and execution of a murderer in a nearby village.

Sub-prefect Wang went into some detail as to how he had conducted this investigation. It was ingenious, and he was commended for it. That successful inquiry, in fact, would set Wang Fuyin on his own altered path. He became, by his own account, a changed man from that day, with new purpose and direction.

He retold the story of the outlaws and Ren Daiyan in his late-in-life memoirs, drawing upon his early writings (copies carefully kept) from those days when he'd just begun his career, in remote Szechen.

He was as particular and precise in old age as he had been when young, and he prided himself all his life on his strong prose (and calligraphy). The number of outlaws in his memoir remained seven. Ren Daiyan was always fifteen years of age (not twelve, as in some versions). Wang Fuyin even wrote that one of the bandits was only wounded by Daiyan. Another of their bowmen had leaped—dramatically—from his horse to dispatch that seventh man where he lay on the ground.

Fuyin, white-haired at the time of this writing, allowed himself a hint of irony in describing that last "courageous" action. He was well known by then for wit, for clear exposition, for his books on judicial investigation (which had become texts for all magistrates in Kitai), and for being a survivor of the chaos of their time.

There were not many such survivors among those who had been at or near the centre of power in those days. It had taken skill, tact, an ability to choose friends well, and a great deal of luck.

Luck was always part of it, one way or another.

Daiyan was aware, immediately, that his life had just changed. What followed on that lonely path between forest and cliffs felt destined, necessary, not truly a matter of choosing. It was more as if the choice had been made for him, he was only the agency of its working.

He got down from his horse. He walked over and took his arrows from the bodies of the slain men. The sun was west, shining along the path, under-lighting clouds. A wind was blowing. He remembered feeling chilled, and thinking that might be a reaction to what had just happened.

You'd never killed anyone. Then you had.

He took the arrows from the men behind them first. One of them right next to the trees. Then he went and pulled out four from the outlaws on the road ahead, the ones they'd seen first. Without giving it a great deal of thought, he turned over the body of the largest man and he took the two crossed swords and their leather scabbards from that man's back.

The swords felt very heavy. He'd been working with bamboo, after all. Earlier today. This same morning. A boy in a grove. He placed the twinned scabbards on his back, removing his quiver to do so then putting the quiver back on and adjusting it and the bow, finding positions for them, balancing himself with the new weight of the swords. It was going to take time to get used to this, he thought, standing in the roadway in the wind, the sun beginning to go down.

Looking back, he realized that he'd already understood, by then, what had happened to him in that place, in those moments.

It had something to do with how easy it had been. How effortless, intuitive: the decision made, then the sequence of movements. Understanding exactly where to shoot first, and next, and next. They were alive, and menacing, those men. They were dead. And how brief the time elapsed. That felt strange. How sharp a rent a handful of moments made in the fabric of a life. This—this world of bow and swords—this was meant to be

his element, these moments had shown him that, and he needed to enter a place where he could pursue mastery. You had your dreams. A boy's dreams, and then . . .

Birdsong was resuming. The gibbons had never stopped.

He looked back once, he remembered, towards Shengdu, to where his parents were, and then he left his life behind, walking into the woods, entering among the dark trees (darker than his own bamboo grove) exactly where the outlaws had emerged in front of them, so little time ago.