Kung Fu Panda: Temple of Heroes
by Empress_Imperia

Summary

The prequel to my Ember's Blaze series, this tells the story of Po's reunion with his birth father before Kung Fu Panda 3 as released. Just mere months after accepting Mr. Ping as his father, Po discovers that his biological father is still alive! The unexpected family reunion is short lived when a ruthless treasure hunter sets his sights on an ancient artifact hidden in a temple located right beneath the pandas' hideout, and Po and the Furious Five must race to stop a second panda genocide. PoXOC and CraneXViper.

Notes

As this was written before Kung Fu Panda 3's release and I have chosen to leave it unchanged, Li Shan will be known in this story as the OC Qiang.
Long ago in ancient China, there was once a thriving village. The pandas who lived there were peaceful farmers who spent their days gathering crops year after year.

But one day, a ruthless peacock attacked this village with the intent to destroy all the pandas. His soldiers nigh-effortlessly massacred the majority of the villagers, with the exception of several who managed to flee and hide within the surrounding forest. Once the peacock's soldiers had departed, the pandas emerged from their hiding places, homeless, cold and frightened. A simple farmer stood up as their leader, and brought them to a small forest hidden deep in a mountain range, where they could live in peace.

And so they lived in isolation, presumed dead by those in the outside world, unaware that something ancient and powerful lay beneath their feet…

"Woops!"

A little panda girl, no older than six years of age, toppled down the porch steps of her family's home, landing on the grassy ground with a soft thud.

"Su!" Her mother rushed out the house and crouched down beside her. "Are you alright?"

"I'm okay, mommy." Su quickly got to her feet to prove it. "I fall down all the time."

All the same, her mother spent three minutes checking her daughter's body for any cuts or bruises. Eventually she sighed in relief. Her daughter was alright after all.

"Be more careful in future." She patted the dirt off of Su's small dress. "Now go off and play."

"Okay mommy." Su ran off as her mother retreated back inside the house.

She didn't really feel like playing in the field today, so she headed off in the direction of the forest that surrounded the small farming village where she lived. She knew she shouldn't be doing this, but as long as she stayed within sight of the village, taking a little walk wasn't too bad.

And that was what Su did.

Taking care to keep the distant field where her father worked in view, Su went into the forest and began taking in the lovely greens, browns and yellows of the forest. It was a beautiful day. A very beautiful day indeed.

Su decided that just for today, she would walk a little farther into the forest. Not too far of course. Unlike other kids her age, she was well aware of how young and vulnerable she was, and knew better not to take risks.

Su stopped walking when a large rock blocked her path. She was about to turn around and go back in the direction of the village when she realized that the rock was actually a dragon statue, crumbled and cracked with age. Something yellow and shiny glinted in its mouth.

Su took a tentative step forward, and realized that the shiny object was a coin. A coin almost the size of her head. It looked pretty and harmless, so Su grabbed the coin and began to pull.
After two tugs, the stone teeth crumbled and the coin came free.

At that moment, Su heard her mother calling for her to return home for dinner. Tucking the coin into her dress, Su headed for home, leaving the stone dragon alone in the middle of the forest.
Aftermath

"BANG!"

"Three cheers for the Dragon Warrior!"

The citizens cheered as a bright scarlet explosion flashed above the harbor of Gongmen City.

Just sixteen hours ago, the evil peacock Lord Shen had been leading his armada through the city canals in what would have been the beginning of the end for all of China. Except that the Dragon Warrior, the Furious Five, the Grandmaster of the Jade Palace, and the remaining two members of the Masters Council had risen up to combat Shen's army. It was the Dragon Warrior alone who defeated the entire armada, performing the remarkable feat of redirecting the deadly and powerful cannonfire against Shen's own ships, reducing him and his army to carnage.

And now, more than half a day later, the celebrations were well underway. As fireworks lit the dark sky, in the streets below citizens cheered and danced to the uplifting folk music. The many buildings had been adorned roof to base with red and gold decorations.

In the city marketplace, a green tree viper with two white lotus head decorations twirled in the middle of the paving with a glimmering red ribbon, much to the awe of the watching citizens. At the front of the crowd, some small children attempted to copy the snake's graceful movements with their own ribbons.

A black crested crane wearing a wide rice hat clapped the loudest amongst the surrounding crowd.

"Wow, Viper!" Master Crane gaped at the wonderful display. "You weren't kidding when you said you were the greatest ribbon dancer in your village!"

Viper smiled as she twirled the ribbon high above her head like a shimmering crimson vortex.

"How's your wing?" She asked as she continued to dance for the audience.

"Much better, thanks for asking." Crane spoke. "It didn't hurt so much during the battle."

"That was pretty obvious, judging from your perfect performance of the Wings of Justice technique." Viper chortled. "Speaking of which… I know now that Po and Monkey weren't kidding when they mentioned that you 'ka-caw'!"

Crane went bright red, so red that it showed through his feathers, and scowled. She just had to bring that up, didn't she?

"It was a one time thing!" He exclaimed. The redness did not fade from his cheeks. "Please… no jokes when we get back home, okay?"

"Okay, then." Viper laughed as she lifted her entire body through a loop in the twirling ribbon. The audience clapped loudly at this remarkable feat, and the small children got themselves tangled up in their ribbons.

Meanwhile, in a tavern at the borders of Gongmen harbor, a golden langur monkey and a praying mantis sat at the bar sipping from pints of rice wine.

"Uh… what a day." Monkey groaned as he rubbed a bruise on his shoulder, inflicted during the
battle against Shen's soldiers. He had worse injuries of course: a cracked rib or two had been tightly wrapped before he could be allowed to attend the celebrations.

"You said it, buddy." Mantis replied, absentmindedly attempting to straighten a crooked antennae.

"I hope I never see another cannon again." Monkey took another sip, and then was sucking on nothing. "Fill her up!" He called to the bartender.

"Anything for the heroes of Gongmen City." The bartender called back. He almost knocked over a waitress in his rush to complete the task.

"That's gonna be a problem." Mantis replied, his mouth as thin as a noodle strand. "Once the celebrations are over, we're going to have to help the citizens fish the debris from the ships from the lake, so they don't cause any shipwrecks. Chances are there's going to be a few cannons that'll have to be pulled up."

Monkey groaned, and took a huge gulp of the wine.

"Brilliant." He muttered.

"Hey, it's not so bad." Said Mantis. "At least this time, the cannons won't be firing at us."

"You got a good point there… except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"I'll still have to look at them!"

Mantis rolled his eyes and inwardly decided that it would be pointless continuing the conversation any longer.

"Whatever…"

He grabbed a bowl of nuts and started nibbling.

On the other side of the city, Masters Storming Ox and Croc stared at the mess of wood and metal that had once been the Tower of Sacred Flame. Workers were climbing across the carnage, collecting the smaller bits of debris in what would be the beginning of three long days of cleaning up. Once the debris was completely cleaned, there was the process of locating the original schematics of the building, and then acquiring the necessary resources for rebuilding the tower in all its former glory.

"I can't believe this…" Ox breathed. His ears dangled limply on both sides of his head. "It's unbelievable that Shen would destroy his ancestral home."

"Hey, it's not that unbelievable." Croc replied. His nostrils caught the slight hint of smoke that still lingered in the night air. "From what I've heard, that peacock really had it in for his parents."

They stared at the wreckage in silence for some time before either of them spoke again.

"So what happens now?" Ox asked quietly, ignoring the fact that he was actually looking to Croc for answers.

"I guess that the tower will get rebuilt." Croc said after a few seconds, not taking his eyes off the destruction. "And then there will have to be a decision made over who will be the new leader of the council."
"I still can't believe Rhino's gone..." Ox pinched the bridge of his nose as the sorrow he had pushed aside before the battle washed over him full force. "He had always seemed so... invincible. If I hadn't lost my temper and leapt recklessly at that peacock..."

"Neither of us could have foreseen what Shen's weapon would do." Croc's tone was stern, yet he put a comforting hand on his friend's shoulder. "Do not blame yourself."

Ox nodded silently, and held up Thundering Rhino's wind hammer, which had miraculously survived the destruction of the tower and had been recovered only minutes before.

"We should find a place to put this." He said, running a hoof over the blackened dent in the stone.

Croc nodded, and together the two comrades departed the scene of their friend's death.

In Gongmen Infirmary, Master Tigress sulked in her chair as a pig wrapped linen bandages round her torso, professionally keeping his eyes from straying to her chest area.

"I still don't see why this is necessary." She muttered, golden eyes narrowed in displeasure, ready to floor the pig if he looked anywhere but her midriff.

"You have three cracked ribs." Said the Soothsayer, who was sitting in a chair in one corner of the room, sipping from a tiny green teacuo. "You should be fortunate that the cannon didn't give you any other internal injuries, or you would never be allowed to leave the infirmary tonight."

Tigress sighed, defeated. The old goat was right. She should be thankful that she could still attend tonight's celebrations despite her injuries.

"Almost done..." the pig tied the two ends of the bandage together and patted it to ensure that it was tight enough. "We'll just get you some pain-relief tonic and then you can go."

Tigress nodded, and the pig left the room to retrieve said tonic.

The second the door closed, Tigress lifted her chair, set it down in front of the Soothsayer, and sat face to face with her.

"May I ask what you're doing here?" She asked, slightly hoping that her tone did not sound too accusatory.

"I did make quite the unexpected appearance, didn't I? I apologize." Said the Soothsayer with a small smile and a chuckle. She sipped the last of her tea and set it down on the little table next to her "I'm here because the Dragon Warrior is in turmoil."

Tigress frowned. Po, the cheery, powerful Dragon Warrior in turmoil? That sounded odd, even to her.

"I thought he had achieved inner peace." She said.

"He has." Said the Soothsayer. "I am talking about the grief he feels for the loss of his people."

"His people?"

The Soothsayer removed her small glasses, wiped them with a silken purple cloth, and set them back on the bridge of her nose before continuing.

"Nearly thirty years ago, the village where Po used to live was completely destroyed by Shen and his army."
Tigress's eyes widened. Her heart skipped a beat.

"At this point, it would appear that Po is the last surviving panda. Though he is at peace with the loss of his parents, the fact that he is seemingly the last of his kind is sure to be devastating for him."

Tigress gripped the edges of her seat hard enough to splinter them. She had never known. She had always thought that Po had always lived a comfortable life in the Valley of Peace, never considered that perhaps he had also suffered like she did. Was she really that naive?

"I understand…" Tigress said thickly. But did she really? "And what does this have to do with me?"

"Out of everyone, you are the closest to him." Said the Soothsayer bluntly. "You are so different from him, and yet you and Po have so much in common. You are both orphaned. You both strived all your life for a seemingly unattainable dream. Only you can help him cope with such a terrible loss."

Tigress didn't reply.

"That is all I have to say." The Soothsayer got up from her chair as the pig reentered the room. "Good day, Tigress, and I hope you enjoy the celebrations."

She disappeared through the door, leaving the feline alone with her thoughts.

On the roof of one of the taller buildings, a giant panda stared up at the fireworks with an expression of deep sadness.

It was strange. He had just saved the entire country from a psychotic peacock, achieving inner peace in the process, and yet all he felt right now was overwhelming sadness.

Why? He thought as blue and emerald explosions lit up the night sky. Why is my heart aching so much on one of the greatest nights of my life? I hope I'm not coming down with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, 'cause that would be a real bum-

"What is the matter, Po?"

"GAAAAAAH!"

Po jumped two feet in the air, nearly falling from the roof in the process. An elderly red panda in a beautiful jade green robe had just materialized next to him.

"Master Shifu! Don't do that!" Po exclaimed as he put a paw over his racing heart. "You almost gave me a heart attack!"

"I do that a lot, don't I?" Shifu replied indifferently. "You haven't answered my question. What is the matter?"

Po leant backwards, stabilizing himself with his hands, as he continued to look up at the fireworks. He sighed, remembering a similar question from a currently deceased elderly but wise tortoise.

"I don't know." He eventually said. "For some reason, I'm feeling like a hole is punched through my chest, when I should be celebrating one of the most awesome nights of my life. What's the deal with that?"

"I'm not sure." Said Shifu, as he wiped the soot from last night's cannon fire off of his staff. "But I
believe that you may figure it out sooner or later. Why don't you tell me what happened after you were shot by the cannon." Shifu tried not to falter at mentioning the horrible moment he had envisioned during his meditation.

The largest firework yet briefly turned the black sky golden as Po hesitated before answering.

"After I got shot into the river… the Soothsayer rescued me and brought me to this old deserted village. It soon turned out that it was the village where I was born…” Po suddenly stopped talking and bit his lip.

"Go on." Shifu urged him gently.

"When I was a baby, the village was attacked by Lord Shen and his wolves." Po bit his lip harder as the memories he had once repressed again came to the forefront of his mind. "I was the last survivor." Even at thirty years old, the memories were still vivid. He could still remember the screams of the fleeing pandas and the howls of the wolves who had slaughtered them… his birth father stepping in between his infant son and the attacking wolves and striking the Boss Wolf in the eye with a rake… his mother hiding her child in a radish basket and running up the snowy hill to her death…

Po suddenly realized that his cheeks were stained with tears. He could feel them dampening his facial fur.

"It's because I'm the last of my kind, isn't it?" Po spoke with a quivering lip. "That's why I'm upset." It was a while before Shifu answered.

"It is indeed a lonely feeling, to be the last of your species." Shifu said quietly, and for a split second Po thought there was slight sadness in the red panda's tone. "I myself have not seen another red panda other than my father."

"Really?" Po blinked through his tears, which he hurriedly wiped off.

"Really. But that doesn't necessarily mean that I and my father are the last of our kind." Shifu stood up and faced his student directly. "And just because one village was massacred, that doesn't mean that you are the last of your kind. You must hold out hope that there are still pandas out there in the world aside from you."

Po looked up, his lip no longer shaking.

"You really mean that?" He asked.

"Yes, I do." Shifu smiled. "Now wipe that ridiculous frown off your face and enjoy the fireworks."

Po grinned back, and then Shifu leapt off the roof and disappeared.

A minute later, a striped feline appeared in his place.

"Tigress!" Po's grin widened and politely gestured for her to sit beside him. "How are you feeling?"

"Just a couple of cracked ribs." Tigress sat down beside the panda with a smile. "The healer said I could attend the celebrations so long as I don't over-exert myself."

"Thank god…” Po breathed. "You gave us all one heck of a scare when you collapsed at the docks this morning."
"Sorry about that. I hadn't realized just how much damage the cannon did to me."

"Speaking of which…" Po adjusted himself so that he was directly facing Tigress, his grin gone from his face. He had pushed it aside when it had become clear that Tigress needed medical attention, but now that she was out of danger, he had to know. "Why did you push me out the way just before Shen lit the fuse?"

To his surprise, Tigress didn't answer. Instead, she bit her lip and rubbed the back of her neck.

"Why did you push me out the way?" Po asked again, keeping his tone gentle.

"I already told you…" Tigress finally spoke in a tiny voice. Was it his imagination, or did she seem unsure, as if she herself didn't know what the answer was? "It's because I can't watch my friend be killed."

Po nodded, deciding to leave it at that.

The two friends looked up at the sky, where the fireworks lighting up the sky steadily increased in number, increasing the entertainment.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Tigress whispered as a scarlet firework exploded overhead.

"Like you…"

"Huh?"

"Like your super awesome kung fu moves!" Po said quickly, turning bright red. "They were so beautiful and graceful when we were fighting last night!"

"Oh…" Tigress smirked. Po would always be the child-like fan boy, no matter how many cannonballs he redirected.

*Where the heck did that come from?* Po thought, his cheeks still burning.

"Hey, I hear that Viper's displaying her ribbon dancing in the city marketplace." Po eventually said, his cheeks still crimson. "Wanna go see?"

"Sure, I would love to." Tigress replied, one of the corners of her mouth curled up slightly.

*Shifu's right*, Po thought as he and Tigress climbed down from the roof. *I should stop despairing over my old family and hold out hope that there are still some pandas left in the world. And in the meantime, I'll enjoy the family I have right now.*
Two days after the celebrations were finally finished, and the kung fu masters managed to stop a komodo dragon uprising that had occurred when Shen was defeated, a funeral was held for the late Master Thundering Rhino. Because of the nature of his death, there was no body to bury or cremate, so a memorial was built in his memory.

As Shifu, Po, the Furious Five and the Soothsayer solemnly looked on, Masters Storming Ox and Croc laid the slightly damaged wind hammer to rest on a display in front of the large shrine glowing in candlelight, illuminating the large-size portrait of the deceased rhinoceros. Many old friends, comrades and acquaintances attended the funeral, including warriors Rhino had fought beside, villagers he had saved, and even Commander Vachir, who had miraculously survived Tai Lung's escape from prison and was still peeved about it, came to pay his last respects to the son of his old master, Flying Rhino.

The day after the saddening event, the Soothsayer disappeared. According to the scroll she had thoughtfully left on Po's pillow, she had departed Gongmen City in the early morning to return to the village where she was born. Her reasons for doing so were not explained in the letter, but it was agreed that the warriors would not concern themselves. After all, the Soothsayer was a very enigmatic old woman, and for all they knew she had simply decided to visit an old friend.

After the Soothsayer's unexpected departure, the kung fu warriors had a vote to decide who would become the new head of the Masters Council. Master Croc won the vote by a margin, and Ox, despite his legendary temper, was too humble to complain.

Croc's first decision as head was to begin scouring the city for the remainder of Shen's army, a task which surprisingly took only two days to fully complete: it appeared that the majority of Shen's soldiers had been present at the battle in the canal. Those soldiers who had to be tracked down mostly surrendered upon discovery- those few that didn't were knocked out cold before being dragged to Gongmen Jail. Croc had insisted that there were to be no fatalities, a decision that Ox reluctantly agreed to.

Three days after all of Shen's soldiers had been incarcerated, Shifu and his students decided that it was time for them to return to the Valley of Peace. After one last exchange of thanks, and another round of celebrations from the grateful citizens, the seven Jade Palace warriors bade goodbye to Ox and Croc and departed for the long journey back to their home.

They made it back within five days, and the minute they arrived, Po acquired two radish baskets and headed straight for Mr. Ping's noodle shop, where he found his beloved adoptive father sobbing in front of a pig and her little son for reasons he suspected but decided not to inquire about. The delighted laughter of the child alerted the goose to Po's presence, and five seconds later, his wings were wrapped part way round his large belly. Po grinned widely, secretly glad that his father apparently held no hard feelings from their last conversation.

"So how did it go?" Mr. Ping asked once he'd let go. "Did you save China?"

"Yep." Po said simply. The goose beamed.

"Oh I knew you would!" Mr. Ping held up a brand new poster depicting Po doing a flying kick. "That's why I had these new posters made: My son saved China- you too can save: buy one dumpling get one free!"
"Hey, that's a pretty good deal!" Po set down the two baskets, and his expression changed. "But first... there's something I should tell you."

Mr. Ping gulped. Po noticed, but his expression didn't change.
"While I was gone... I found the village where I was born... I found out how I ended up in that radish basket."

"You did?" Mr. Ping asked in a tiny voice. Po could clearly hear the terror in his tone as well as see it in his expression.
"I know who I am."
"You do?" The goose's voice went even smaller.

Po paused before speaking in a small voice:
"I'm your son."

Mr. Ping's expression lit up like the morning sun. Po effortlessly lifted the goose from the floor, and father and son embraced.
"I love you dad." Po whispered, his voice thick with emotion.
"I love you too son." A tear trickled down Mr. Ping's cheek.

They held each other for a few seconds, before Mr. Ping turned his attention to the fat radishes in the two baskets and mentally renounced his old vow to never add radishes to his noodle soup, and twenty minutes later the customers were wildly praising the new radish slice addition to Mr. Ping's soup.

That evening, once Po had bidden goodbye to his father and returned to the Jade Palace, he stepped into his bedroom and collapsed onto his bed.

"Hello, bed." He sighed, his eyes aching from tiredness. "Did you miss me?"

As if in answer, the bed creaked under his colossal weight.

Po hesitated for a few seconds.

When the bed didn't break in half, Po pulled out the little panda toy he had recovered from the ruined village. Tomorrow, the first thing he would do is clean the soot from it's body, and repair the small tear in its back. He would keep the doll all his life, just like he would preserve the memories he had lost so long ago and recently found. He stared at the doll for a whole hour before placing it beneath his pillow and falling asleep.

Two months had passed since then.

During that time, training at the Jade Palace continued as usual, with a slight difference: while the Furious Five continued to hone their skills in the Training Hall, Po was often brought to the Pool of Sacred Tears to master his newfound inner peace to the point where he could use it anywhere in battle. Naturally, Po mastered the ability to redirect projectiles, which of course was the first inner peace technique he ever performed, and was currently learning throw kicks and punches at light-speed. However, he still had yet to master the ability to teleport that Shifu so effortlessly displayed practically every single day. His last attempt at teleporting had ended in him lying face up at the
bottom of the stairs, his head throbbing from a powerful blow from the furious grandmaster he had accidentally falling on top of.

On one of those days, Po and the Furious Five (minus Crane and Monkey) were gathered on the steps outside the Hall of Warriors sipping Mr. Ping's delicious peach/plum juice combination drink. It was a very hot day, and they were glad when a sweating Shifu had given in and decided to give them the day off; the day's training had come to an abrupt end when Monkey passed out during a sparring match and hit his head on the bottom of the jade tortoise.

"Hey, guys…" Po suddenly spoke as he stared up at the blue sky. "Do you really think there's a rabbit on the moon?"

"Huh?" his friends all turned their heads to him.

"A rabbit?" Tigress asked, intrigued.

"The Moon Festival begins tomorrow night." Po explained and sipped his drink. "This morning while I was helping my dad down at the noodle shop, my dad told me about this old legend."

"Go on." Said Viper, slithering a little closer to the panda out of curiosity.

"Supposedly, if you look really closely at the moon, you can see the image of a rabbit on the surface." Po spoke. "Dad told me that the rabbit lives on the moon, continuously pounding the elixir of life."

"Cool." Mantis hopped on Po's shoulder. "If that was actually true."

"You mean that you don't think there's a rabbit on the moon?" Po asked with a frown.

"Absolutely not. Seriously, how old are you?" the insect tapped the top of Po's head condescendingly.

"Twenty five." Po scowled. "You should know that, considering that we went on a night out for my birthday last year and you got yourself engaged to a woman you had only known for five minutes!"

Mantis shut up at once, his eyes narrowing and his cheeks going from dark green to bright red.

"I thought we weren't going to talk about that…" he muttered.

"Hey, you brought it on yourself when you nearly blurted out about me making out in my room with…" Po suddenly shut up, blushing furiously, glancing nervously at Tigress.

"What was that about?" Viper asked slyly. "And what that about you getting engaged?"

"Nothing!" Mantis yelped, leaping off of Po's shoulder and returning to his cup, which had been left discarded on the step.

"Certainly sounds like something." Tigress smirked. "And Po, who exactly did you make out with?"

"I don't remember!" Po cried, leaping to his feet. "I was drunk, and Mantis had spiked our drinks with psycho juice, which we still have to get him back for!" He glared at the bug, who chuckled sheepishly. "Now if you don't mind, I'm going down to the village to find out what's taking Crane so long!"

"Hey, guys." Monkey made his appearance at that moment, his skull wrapped tightly in bandages.
"Hey, Monkey." Po rushed past him, his face still flushed. "Bye, Monkey!"

He sprinted down the first twenty steps…

Slip!

"AAAAAAAAAHHHH! OH! OW! AH! OW! YOUCH…"

…and fell down the last nine thousand and eighty.

"Have you guys ever gotten tired of that?" Tigress rolled her eyes.

"Never have and never will." Said Viper with a crooked grin. "Shall we follow him down? I've been lying idle nearly all day and I want to stretch my body."

"Alright then." Tigress, Viper and Mantis got up and walked down the steps, as Po's cries faded into the distance.

Monkey, on the other hand, remained on the steps for a few more seconds with a scowl on his face.

"My head is killing me, thanks for asking." Monkey said to no-one in particular and followed them.

"… OW! OUCH! GAH! OH!" CRASH! "YOW!"

Po lay motionless at the bottom of the stairs for a few seconds before staggering to his feet and cracking his back.

"Darn…" he muttered. "They really… really should consider adding a jade elevator at the Jade Palace!"

"You say that all the time."

"Because no-one ever listens to me!" Po whined and he turned in the direction of Crane's voice. "Think about it… if I had an alternate means of traveling to and from the palace, then the servants wouldn't have to spend so much time filling in the cracks in the stairs…"

Po stopped talking when he saw the commotion in the street.

Crane was battling it out against two dozen bandits, flapping in the air as the villains swung at him with their axes.

"Crane!" Po ran over to help, and knocked out an incoming bandit with a swift right hook. "Need a little help, buddy?"

"Yes… I would!" Po realized that Crane was panting, the flapping rhythm of his wings erratic and uneven. "I would have… gone to get you… but I didn't want to risk… leaving the villagers vulnerable!"

"Hang in there, the others are coming!" Po yelled as he somersaulted over three attacking bandits, an impressive feat considering his girth, and drop kicked a fourth.

"Po, look out!" Crane suddenly yelled.

Po whirled round, saw the sword swinging towards him, and realized in a split second that he wouldn't dodge it in time.
WHAM!

An orange and black blur send the ox flying.
"Tigress!" Po yelled. "Nice timing!"

"Focus Po! On your right!"

Po floored the attacking bandit with a haymaker as the other members of the Furious Five leapt to the rescue.

"Crane, are you alright?" Viper cried out and she wrapped her tail round the neck of a rhino and yanked him away from the exhausted avian.

"Yeah… I'm fine!"

"Find somewhere to hide and rest! We'll take it from here!"

Crane obediently flew off.

"So much for a day off!" Mantis exclaimed as he disintegrated a bandit's dual axes with his super-speed. "Here we are fighting when we're supposed to be taking a break from training!"
"Stop whining!" Monkey rolled his eyes before kicking a bull into a nearby china shop. Sounds of breaking dishes and bellows echoed within.
"I like whining!" Mantis retorted as he knocked his opponent off his feet.

"Knock it off!" Tigress snapped as she disarmed a large boar and punched him in the face.

She whirled round and faced the last bandit, who twirled a pair of broadswords twenty feet down the street.

Tigress spied Po standing right behind the unaware wolf, and gave him the tiniest of nods. Po nodded back, grinning in anticipation.

The feline snarled and started running towards the wolf on all fours. The wolf bared his teeth, preparing to intercept.

The wolf swung as Tigress reached him. She swiftly ducked, sprung up and struck the wolf's chin with an uppercut, then slammed her other fist into his chest, all in the space of two seconds. The wolf flew backwards, right into Po's waiting belly.

"Hyah!"

The millisecond the wolf made impact, Po leant backwards, redirecting the wolf's rebound into the sky, where he disappeared into the clouds.

Five seconds later, the wolf fell back down to earth. Po caught him just before he hit the ground, and swung him into the wall.

"Nice work, Po." Tigress smiled and flexed her wrist.

"You were pretty awesome yourself!" Po replied as he dragged the dazed wolf towards the pile of unconscious bandits. "As usual."

"You can come back now, Crane!" Monkey called out. The avian emerged a second later, his breathing slightly less ragged than before.
"Let's get these guys tied up." Viper spoke. "The Anvil of Heaven can pick them up later."

The operation was interrupted when the owner of the china shop came storming out and started rapping Monkey over his already sore head with a mop, threatening to sue for damages.
The 100th Customer

Once the bandits had been tied up and arrested by the rhino soldiers, the villagers had thanked the kung fu warriors for once again saving their homes, and Monkey had paid the china shop owner for the damages, Po and the Five returned to the Jade Palace to find Master Shifu waiting for them at the top of the stairs.

"Good afternoon, Master." Tigress bowed before the red panda, and the others followed suit.

"I heard about the bandit attack." Shifu said. "I trust that none of the villagers were harmed?"

"As always, there were no injuries or casualties whatsoever." Tigress spoke.

"Very good." The students noticed that Shifu had discarded his green robe for the first time since the Battle of Gongmen City months before. "Obviously, the sun is still trying to cook us alive, so you may continue to relax for the rest of the day. But I still expect all of you to be training to the best of your abilities tomorrow morning."

"Yes, Master." The students bowed as one and Shifu retreated into the Hall of Warriors to meditate.

"Alright, I say that the first thing we do is drink some more peach/plum juice combination!" Said Mantis as the warriors started for the barracks. "I've got a throat like Monkey's almond cookies!"

"Excuse me?" Monkey glared at the bug, eyes widened in outrage. "Are you saying that my cookies are too dry?"

"I'm saying they're too stale!" Mantis retorted, not realising the danger he was putting himself in. "I mean really, those same cookies have been in that jar for six months!"

"How would you know?" Monkey flared up. "I hid them the last time you stole from the jar!"

"Po gave me one after he found them on the top shelf!"

"Po WHAT?" Monkey whirled round at Po, who backed away in terror. "So you're the reason why they're disappearing!"

"Aw, Mantis! Why did you have to rat me out?" Po moaned.

"Sorry buddy! It was in the heat of the moment!"

"I ought to give you a knuckle sandwich to go with those cookies!" Monkey glared furiously at the panda.

"Hey, wait! I'm sorry, alright!" Po yelled frantically. "Tell you what; when we get to the barracks, I'll cook you a new batch then let you hide them somewhere else! What do you say?"

Monkey seemed to consider this. Then much to Po's relief, the primate lowered his fist.

"Okay, now that that's settled..." Mantis spoke up after breathing a sigh of relief. "Let's get some peach/plum juice combination!"

"Honestly, do you have to always say the full name of the drink?" Crane sighed.
"Uh, yeah!" Mantis replied.

"Why not shorten it?" Po asked. "How about… PP Juice?"

"PP…" Monkey repeated. "Oh gods, no!"

"Alright then… how about PPJC?"

"Nah, acronyms don't suit drinks." Mantis shook his small head.

"Darn. Okay, how about… pealum?"

"Pealum?" Viper blinked incredulously.

"Yeah. A combination of peach and plum!"

"Uh… no." Mantis said without missing a beat.

"Pluch?"

"No."

"Peam?"

"No."

"Pleach?"

"No!"

"Peachum?"

"No!"

"Peejuice!"

"NO!"

"Can we stop talking about juice, please?" Crane groaned and rolled his eyes. "It's making me want to go to the bathroom!"

"Same here!" Viper's eyes were wide as dinner plates. She couldn't believe the conversation that had just occurred.

Tigress merely sighed in annoyance.

At that point, they had reached the barracks and were stepping one by one through the entrance doors. The Furious Five sans Monkey headed for their rooms to relax while Po, loyally keeping his promise to Monkey, headed straight for the kitchen and pulled out a baking tray.

"Monkey, I really am sorry." Po said after catching Monkey's furious eye. He grabbed a bag of flour and started sifting into a large bowl. "But in my defense, I didn't go searching for them. Shifu told me where they were."

"Shifu told you?" Monkey dropped the ladle he had been wielding threateningly.

"Yeah. He told me where they were the morning after you guys left to fight Tai Lung."
"Shifu?" Monkey gaped at the panda.

"Yeah. Excuse me, I need to get the baking powder."

"Master Shifu?" Monkey moved out the way so Po could retrieve the powder from the cupboard. He couldn't get it into his head that Master Shifu of all people would spill the beans.

"Yes."

"Master Shifu?"

"Yes, Master Shifu!" Po confirmed, starting to get a little annoyed himself. "Where are the almonds?"

"In the top cupboard along with the nuts and seeds." Monkey replied, his eyes still bulging.

Po opened the cupboard and started rooting. There were walnuts, sunflower seeds, but no almonds.

"Monkey, you don't mind if I go down to the noodle shop and get some almonds, do you? There's none in the palace."

"Alright then. I'll go with you to make sure you don't try to get out of baking those cookies!"

"Hey, I want to come too!" Crane stepped into the room at that moment. "I need some more paper for my calligraphy."

"Why didn't you get some when you went down to the village this morning?" Monkey asked.

"That was what I went down for, but of course I got sidetracked by bandits."

"Okay then, you can come with us. Now let's go." Po made to pass Crane on his way out the room, but upon getting a closer look at the avian, the panda stopped.

"What?" Crane asked.

"Uh… Crane? You've still got a little brown dye on your chest from the Lijiang incident."

Monkey hollered with laughter as a furiously blushing Crane covered the brown marks with his wings.

"We'd better get you some more white dye, too!" Monkey struggled to speak in between laughs.

"Zip it, Mr. Great-Big-Hole-In-My-Pants!" Crane muttered. Monkey immediately stopped laughing.

"Thank you for coming to Dragon Warrior Noodles and Tofu." Mr. Ping called after the leaving customers.

The goose weaved his way through the tables dotting the floor of the restaurant, collecting empty dishes on his way to the counter. Once there, he deposited the dishes in the bucket of soapy water and added two more marks to the tally on the slate board that stood next to the kitchen door.

"Ninety nine down, one more to go." Mr. Ping said to himself with a smile.

It was a brand new and innovative idea of his to present a prize to the one hundredth customer of the restaurant once he or she entered. Such an idea would attract more customers who would be
eager to receive said prize, and therefore help make an even greater profit. So far, it was working perfectly. Now only one more customer needed to enter before the prize would be given.

"Oi! No touching!" Mr. Ping snapped, and a small pig immediately retracted his hoofs from the mop displayed on the wall.

_For heavens sakes!_ The goose thought in annoyance as he refilled a pot of boiling water with dumplings. _Why do those younglings insist on touching the display all the time? They really have no man-

His train of thought was cut off when he spotted a large figure enter the restaurant.

Mr. Ping grinned widely. It seemed that his son had learned of the little competition, and wanted to get the prize himself. Classic Po.

"Oh goody! My son has become the one hundredth!" Mr. Ping rushed forward. "It's so good to see you Po!"

He stopped rushing when he got a better look at the panda standing in the archway.

This panda was not his son. His ears were closer together than that of Po's, and his jaw was square shaped. Also, in contrast to Po's patched up tan pants, this panda was wearing green robes of a luxurious kind very similar to Master Shifu's. He also looked roughly twenty or thirty years older. The only feature they shared other than black and white fur was the fact that this panda's eyes were also emerald green.

Mr. Ping shook off his surprise and waddled over to the panda. Better to be a polite host than a surprised stranger.

As the goose approached, a second panda, a female much closer to Po's age, entered the restaurant and stood beside the elder male.

"My apologies, sir." Mr. Ping spoke. "I mistook you for my son."

"Your son?" the female blinked in confusion. "But you're a…"

"Don't be rude, Ming." Said the elder. His voice was deep, and a little rough around the edges.

"Oh, I'm sorry." The female bowed her head slightly.

"No, it's alright, I get that a lot." Mr. Ping replied, chuckling good naturedly. What he said wasn't entirely true, but the young lady's shamed expression was just too endearing. "Would you like to take a seat?"

"Yes, please."

Mr. Ping led the two pandas to an empty table in the corner of the restaurant next to the entrance. The other customers in the restaurant stopped eating and stared at the two strangers. Mr. Ping couldn't blame them; just like the other villagers, he had not seen another panda in his life aside from Po.

"We'll both have noodles." The elder panda said.

"Very good." Mr. Ping wrote the order down on a notepad. "Secret Ingredient Soup, Radish and Noodles, Spicy Noodles or Dragon Warrior's Soft Crunch Noodles?"
The two pandas stared. "Uh... which of those dishes is closest to ordinary noodles?" the female panda named Ming asked.

"Secret Ingredient Soup." Mr. Ping answered, leaving out the fact that Secret Ingredient Soup was ordinary soup.

"Secret Ingredient Soup, then." Said the elder panda.

Mr. Ping nodded.

"By the way, since you are the one hundredth customer to this restaurant, your dish will be completely free."

"Really?" The elder panda said. "Excellent."

"Just wait a few minutes, and I'll be right back with your noodles."

The goose then made his way back to the kitchen.

"Please do not stare at them." He told the other customers as he passed them. "I do not want my customers feeling uncomfortable."

The customers obediently turned their heads away from the two pandas and resumed their eating.

Once inside the kitchen Mr. Ping began chopping up vegetables to add to the soup. As he did this, his eyes flickered over to the two pandas sitting in the far corner of the room. He eyed the elder male in particular, and wondered what it was about him that so unnerved him.

Three minutes later, the soup was ready, and Mr. Ping was waddling over to the two pandas with a bowl in each wing.

"There you go." He said as he placed the bowls on the table. "And as I said, today it's on the house!"

"Thank you very much." Said the elder panda, but gave the goose a tip anyway.

Mr. Ping was heading back to the kitchen when he heard a familiar voice behind him.

"Hey, dad!"

Mr. Ping turned around and smiled. This time, the panda standing in the archway in between the primate and the avian was indeed his son.

"Po! Oh it's so good to see you twice in one day!" Mr. Ping rushed forward and wrapped his wings as far round Po's belly as he could.

"Hey, dad." Po grinned, not noticing the two pandas sitting at the corner table. "We're sorta short of almonds up at the palace. Do you have any you could spare?"

"Of course, son." The goose led Po and his friends to the kitchen.

When the elder panda laid eyes on Po, he froze. His green eyes widened with a mixture of disbelief and hope.

Ming noticed her companion's reaction and looked up from her soup in concern.
"Qiang, are you okay?" she asked.

The elder panda didn't answer. Instead, he gripped the edge of the table tightly. He continued to stare in shock at the young male panda standing next to the goose.

"Here you are, son." Mr. Ping handed Po a small bag of almonds, unaware of what was going on in the corner of the restaurant. "No charge of course."

"Thanks, dad. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Wonderful! I've have some soup ready and waiting!"

"Thanks. Bye, now."

Po turned to leave, and that was when he saw the two pandas.

He froze. His breath caught in his throat.

The two pandas stared back at him.

"Alright Po, now lets get those cookies co-"

Monkey and Crane stopped when they also laid eyes on the pandas.

"Oh, er, Po…" Mr. Ping quickly rushed out the kitchen, startled by the sudden tension in the restaurant. "These are just two of my customers."

"Uhhh… hello." Po waved half-heartedly.

It was either too good to be true or downright shocking. Only two months after discovering the fate of his species, two pandas have miraculously appeared right in his father's noodle shop. A whirlwind of emotions, ranging from shock, to disbelief, to relief, to happiness, swirled in his head and sent mild aches in his heart. His mind eventually settled on relief: he now knew that he wasn't the last of his kind after all.

"Hello to you, too." Said the female panda politely. "My name is Ming. You must be the Dragon Warrior. We heard of you during our travels."

"Yeah." Was all that Po could say.

Then his eyes fell on Ming's companion.

His heart momentarily stopped. His eyes widened.

A sudden vision washed over him…

*Flames engulfed everything.*

*The infant panda clutched his little cloth doll and whimpered in terror at the carnage around him. He didn't understand why his usually beautiful green home was on fire, or why scary hulking black monsters were chasing the farmers as they fled for their lives, and it scared him.*

*He spotted three figures amongst the flames.*

*Two scary monsters, one slightly bigger than the other, stood on flanking sides of a slender bird with the biggest tail the infant had ever seen.*
The bird spotted the infant staring at them.

"Get them all!" He yelled.

The infant didn’t understand those words, but did understand that the bird had given a command, for the two monsters suddenly leapt at him, mouths open wide, bearing enormous sharp teeth.

The child's eyes widened in pure terror…

WHAM!

As the gap between the infant and the monsters grew shorter, a large panda in shorts leapt in front of the child and swung his rake. The two monsters were sent flying backwards as the bird looked on in shock.

"Take our son, and run away! Go!"

The infant felt a warm pair of arms wrap round him, and suddenly he was being lifted and carried away by a female panda. The shock of the sudden motion made him lose his doll, but the infant only had eyes for the large panda, who looked back at them once with green eyes before rushing towards the attacking monsters…

Po returned to reality and stared with wide eyes at the elder panda, who stood up from his chair and stared back.

There was complete silence in the restaurant, aside from the thundering in Po's chest.

No way.

No freaking way.

"… Dad?"
An Old Acquaintance

Just so you know, Ming means 'shining' and Qiang is derived from Shao Qiang meaning 'strong'.

Oh, and in case anyone is wondering, my two Hangover fan fictions will play no significant part in this fiction. The references are to serve as humor. They may also be quite frequent, since the Lijiang incident occurred not too long ago in the story's timeline.

Anyway, read and review!

Inside the Sacred Hall of Warriors, all was silent.

Silent except for the quiet, rhythmic breathing pattern of the aged red panda sitting in a lotus position before the Moon Pool. High up in the ceiling, the enormous golden dragon which had once held the sacred Dragon Scroll in its jaws stared down at the red panda as he became one with the universe.

"Inner peace…" he whispered, eyes shut, ears barely twitching. The staff of the late Master Oogway (gods rest his soul) lay in front of him on the intricately detailed marble floor bearing patterns representing the five elements. Shifu did not let his thoughts stray to far in the direction of his memories of the deceased tortoise, though deep in his heart, he still missed him dearly.

"… inner peace…” He whispered again. He inhaled slowly. "... inner peace..." He exhaled slowly. He inhaled... exhaled... inhaled... exhaled... inhaled... exhaled...

Wumph. Wumph. A little butterfly with beautiful purple and blue markings fluttered by. Its wingbeats were loud in the master's ears. Wumph. It fluttered out the side entrance and it's wingbeat slowly faded into nothing, leaving the Hall of Warriors once again silent.

Just like his surroundings, Shifu's mind was empty and calm. Empty and calm except for the small hope that Po would not suddenly burst in and interrupt him as he often does. A pointless hope, Shifu knew, but as time passed and no panda stumbled into the room, that hope grew and grew.

A soft breeze blew in through the open side entrance, causing the red panda's beard to sway gently beneath his chin. Well… it would if said beard was still there.

A few weeks had passed since the infamous Lijiang incident, and during that time, the small stump where the beard had been prior to being cut off had grown two inches. The punishment Shifu had given to Monkey, Crane and Mantis was not too harsh, as the debacle had been at least partly Shifu's fault, but was still severe: after the tasting, it turned out that Mr. Ping's new peppers had broken a world record in terms of hotness.

Shifu pushed those thoughts aside. As amusing as those memories of Monkey, Crane and Mantis screaming as the got peppers ravaged their tastebuds were, they were distracting him from his meditation.

"... Inner peace..." He spoke again, exhaling as he spoke softly to himself. He inhaled again. "... inner peace..." He exhaled... inhaled... exhaled... inhaled... exhaled... inhaled...

Crunch!
The sound of seeds being crushed in one's mouth suddenly assaulted the red panda's senses.

Darn.

Shifu was going to kill that panda.

Sighing in exasperation, Shifu stood up from his meditative position and turned to face his irritating student.

The Chinese alligator who stood in the middle of the room was very burly for his species, having muscles that rivaled even Master Storming Ox's. His black one-sleeved vest was very tight-fitting, in stark contrast to his pure white loose pants. Shifu blinked in surprise at this unexpected visitor, who nonchalantly tossed several sunflower seeds into his mouth as he gazed at the red panda.

*Crunch!*

"I did knock." Said the alligator with a grin that resembled a curved knife.

"Of course you did." Shifu scowled.

He hadn't seen his old acquaintance in six years. The last time they had encountered each other, Shifu was looked on in barely disguised displeasure as the alligator handed the (until very recently) long lost Lady Wind Song's Fan to the Jade Palace. For a price, of course.

In all the years Shifu had known him, the alligator had posed no threat to the palace, but all the same, the red panda retrieved his staff from the side of the pool, ready to counterattack if the need arose.

"It's been a long time, old friend." Said the alligator, pocketing the sunflower seeds he had decided not to eat.

"*Friend?*" Shifu's scowl deepened.

"The Valley of Peace is so stifling at this time of the year..." the alligator fanned his elongated face with his clawed hand as if to prove his point, ignoring Shifu's remark. "If it wasn't for the fact that I am cold blooded, I'd be passed out on the floor by now."

*That wouldn't be such a bad thing,* Shifu thought.

"You know, Shifu..." the alligator reached behind him and pulled out a handful of small scrolls. "You really should find a better hiding place. You're worse at hiding things than that primate student of yours."

"You sneaked into my personal quarters?" Shifu flared up at once, gritting his teeth and gripping his staff tight enough to break it again. Fortunately he didn't.

"'Controversial Treasure Hunter Mu Zanshi discovers the Blade of Bao Ding in the Tavan Bogd Mountains.'" The alligator read out loud from one of the scrolls as Shifu silently seethed. He casually dropped the scroll and lifted another. "'The Sacred War Hammer of Lei Lang is found in the Jagged Cliffs of Death.'" He opened the third scroll. "'Famed Treasure Hunter finds the Shank of Shantou...""

In a flash, Shifu shot forward and snatched the last four scrolls from Zanshi's hand.

"Oh, touchy!" Zanshi chuckled as Shifu quickly stored the little scrolls safely in his sleeves.
"What are you doing here?" Shifu asked coldly. On the outside, he was merely calm in his distrust and annoyance. Inside, he was struggling to control the urge to sweep the alligator's legs then chuck him down the thousand stairs.

"Why the attitude, little man?" the alligator pouted jokingly.

Shifu glared at him. Despite his fame, Zanshi had an uncanny ability to rub people the wrong way. People like Shifu.

"You know darn well why." Shifu replied. "The only reason I put up with you all these years was because Oogway forbade fighting without reason within the Jade Palace."

"But Oogway isn't here now." Zanshi replied. Did Shifu detect the slight hint of a threat in his tone?

"That doesn't mean I won't go back on the promise I made him twenty years ago…" Shifu replied. "... but it also doesn't mean that I trust you either!"

"Is that why you built a little shrine for me in your bedroom?"

"It's NOT a shrine!" Shifu snapped. Zanshi laughed humorlessly. God how he hated that short-nosed reptile. "Whatever you found during your illegal search of my bedroom is evidence I collected… should the powers that be ask me to hunt you down." The red panda struggled to keep the anger out of his voice, Zanshi was irritating him so badly.

"Why do you distrust me so?"

"Should I answer that truthfully, or sarcastically?"

"Aw Shifu, you're breaking my heart!" Zanshi put a hand over his chest mockingly. "What did I ever do to you?"

"It concerns me that no-one I ask seems to know what methods you use during your little adventures." Shifu replied. "Speaking of which… what artifact have you brought to the palace this time? And how much are you asking for?"

"Nope, no retrieved artifacts this time." Zanshi spoke casually. "Not yet, anyway."

Shifu's frown faltered for a second.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that in a few days, I will embark on what will most likely be the biggest quest of my career."

*And the most profitable,* Shifu thought disdainfully.

"Seven days ago, I received word of a very powerful and ancient artifact hidden deep in uncharted territory…" Zanshi went on. "An artifact so old that practically everyone forgot it even existed."

"Which artifact is this?" Shifu asked.

"No-one knows." Said Zanshi. "All I was told was that an important artifact is hidden somewhere in the Shidao Mountain Range."

"The Shidao Mountain Rage?" Shifu stared. "But no explorer has ever dared venture into that
"That's why I'm going to be the first."

"If everyone had forgotten that this mysterious artifact existed, then who was it that told you about its existence?" Shifu asked, leaning forward on his staff, suddenly suspicious. "In other words, who are you working for?"

Was it Shifu's imagination, or did a flicker of nervousness flash across Zanshi's face?

"That's for me to know, and you to never learn." The alligator replied coolly.

"If you interrupted my mediation just to brag about yourself, personally I have better things to do." Shifu turned his back on the alligator and began to head back towards the Moon Pool.

"Actually, I came to offer you and your students places on the team."

Shifu stopped walking. He slowly turned back to face Zanshi.

"Excuse me?"

"I was forewarned that this particular adventure would be very dangerous." Zanshi said. "That is why I have come to ask for your assistance in locating and acquiring the artifact. In fact, someone informed me that coming to you would be a good side-option."

"You cannot be serious." Shifu raised his eyebrows.

"Very serious. I know that up until now I have never asked for your assistance, but I've decided that this time, I will not take any risks. Master Shifu, will you accompany me on my quest?"

Shifu chuckled without humor.

"So you can once again achieve glory and fame? I and my students use our skills for protecting the innocent. We do not and will not squander them on foolish quests such as yours."

"I'll take that as a no?" Zanshi's expression did not change in the slightest.

"Yes you will. Now leave this place before I renounce my vow to Master Oogway."

"Alright then." Zanshi turned his back on Shifu. The red panda spotted the jagged scar on his back, peeking just above his collar. "To be perfectly honest, I expected you to refuse."

"Then why did you come?" Shifu asked testily.

"Simple: so I'd have an excuse to see your little shrine."

"It's NOT a SHRINE!" Shifu yelled as Zanshi exited through the side entrance without another word.

God, how he really, really hated that alligator.

Don't worry, you'll find out more about this Zanshi later in the story.

By the way, Mu Zanshi literally means 'Wooden Warrior', and Shidao means 'Stone Blades.'

R&R, please!
The Birth Father

Po's jaw dropped with disbelief.

It couldn't be.

It wasn't possible.

The panda standing before him couldn't possibly be his birth father.

"No…" Po whispered, desperately trying to convince himself that the shock of discovering the fate of his parents had driven him crazy. "No way…"

"Hello." The middle-aged panda spoke. The expression on his face indicated that he too was in shock.

"It can't be…" Po took a step back. His chest started heaving. "You're dead. You died that night…"

"Po, what the heck is going on?" Crane asked. He and Monkey stared at their panda friend in confusion, not really understanding what was going on.

Mr. Ping, meanwhile, had turned the color of raw dumplings. His wings trembled, causing the contents of the two bowls he was carrying to swish from side to side.

"Qiang, what is going on?" the female panda asked. "Who is this guy?"

Po took no notice of her, having eyes only for the panda who was supposed to be dead.

"Ming…” the panda named Qiang spoke in a slightly quaking voice. "This is my son."

Ming gasped and clapped her paws over her mouth. Crane and Monkey's jaws hit the floor. The noodle bowls Mr. Ping had been carrying smashed on the floor. The customers stared at the scene in astonishment.

"Your… son?" Monkey spoke in a small voice, glancing between the elder panda and the goose.

Po's mouth opened and closed several times, his eyes wide as dinner plates.

"Son…” Qiang whispered. "Son, I can explain…"

Po took off like a shot, sprinting in between Qiang and Ming and out of the restaurant.

"Po, wait!" Crane called, but the panda was long gone.

Po rushed down the street, barely hearing the confused exclamations of the citizens he passed, and reached the stairs leading up to the Jade Palace. He sprinted up them with a speed he didn't know he possessed, passing a perplexed Chinese alligator on the way, and reached the palace in record time. In his shock and turmoil, he failed to notice that for the first time in his life, he had scaled the stairs without any sign of exhaustion.

A still disgruntled Shifu blinked in surprise at the sight of the panda running towards him.

"Po, what's the trouble- panda!" Shifu yelled as Po ran past him without a single word, heading in the direction of the student barracks.
Po burst through the doors of the barracks. Instead of heading for the kitchen like he normally would, he ran straight for his bedroom, and slammed the door behind him.

"Po?" Tigress called, alerted by the slam of the door.

When Po didn't answer, Tigress put down her weights and exited her bedroom, crossed the small corridor and rapped on the paper door.

"Po, are you alright?"

Again, she was met with silence.

"Tigress, what's going on?" Viper poked her head out her own bedroom. Mantis did the same a second later, a half-eaten dumpling wedged in his mouth.

"I don't know." Tigress didn't look away from Po's door. She knocked on it again. "Po? Open the door!"

When Po still didn't answer, Tigress started to get irritated.

"Po, if you don't come out, all the dumplings will be gone!"

She was astonished when the door remained closed. Normally that tactic worked every time, even when he wasn't hungry.

"Po? Come out of there!" She knocked once more, but she continued to be met with silence.

A dreadful feeling began to stir inside her. A feeling that there was something very wrong with the panda on the other side of the door.

"Po, I'm coming in!"

She opened the door.

Po was sitting on his bed, staring down at a black and white object in his hands. He didn't look up when Tigress entered the room.

"Po?" Tigress asked quietly. "What's going on?"

As she slowly approached, she realized that the object Po was staring at was a panda doll, faded and frayed with age. She also realized that Po's lower lip was quivering.

Silently, slowly, Tigress sat down beside the panda. He didn't seem to register her presence.

"Po, what happened?" she asked gently.

It was a while before Po spoke.

"Tigress… do you remember anything about your parents?"

Tigress blinked.

"Pardon?"

"Do you remember anything about your parents prior to the orphanage?"

Tigress hesitated, unsure of how to react to that question. He had never asked her about her past
before. Ever. Why now? What had happened down in the village that would make him ask her that question after so long?

"Uh… not really." She finally said. "I was just an infant when I was brought to the orphanage. I have no memory of them."

"Sorry. I was being insensitive." Po didn't look at her, but his expression was clearly apologetic.

"No, you weren't." Tigress assured him. "Why did you ask?"

Before Po could answer, Shifu stormed into the room with a face like thunder.

"Panda!" He snapped. "How dare you ignore me like that! Explain yourself!"

"Sorry." Po mumbled.

"I'll give you sorry, panda!"

"Master, stop!" Tigress said quickly. "Can't you see he's upset about something?"

It was then that Shifu noticed the panda's expression. His anger faded somewhat as he became filled with concern for his student.

"Po, what is the matter with you?" he asked.

Po swallowed.

"I met someone down at the noodle shop." He said quietly.

"Oh, an old friend?" Tigress asked. It was very unlike her to be so soothing and patient, but she knew from experience that the best way to get Po to open up was to be gentle in your coaxing.

"Someone who I thought was dead."

"Who was it, Po?"

"My dad."

"Your… dad?" Tigress stared at the panda.

"Don't be ridiculous, Po!" Shifu spoke. "Your father is still alive and well and cooking those famous noodles of his!"

"I wasn't talking about my goose dad!" Po looked up from his doll, annoyed. "I'm talking about my other dad!"

"Your other dad?" Tigress's breath caught in her throat. "You mean…"

"Po!" Crane's voice was suddenly heard, as well as the sound of the entrance door opening.

Seconds later, Crane and Monkey appeared in the doorway.

"Po, are you okay?" Monkey asked uncertainly.

Po shook his head.

"Crane. Monkey. What's going on?" Viper asked as she and Mantis joined the small gathering in
Po's room.

"You're not going to believe this, but Po met his birth father in the noodle shop." Crane said.

"What?" Viper gasped. Everyone else in the room was equally stunned. Even Shifu's grip on his staff loosened somewhat. Viper slithered up to the panda and gently wrapped her coils round his shoulders in an attempt to comfort him.

"Are you serious?" Shifu demanded.

"Yeah. We were shocked too." Said Monkey. "Mr. Ping won't even leave his bedroom."

At that moment they heard a small rapping outside the bedroom.

"Um, excuse me?"

It wasn't Qiang: the voice was feminine.

"Who is that?" Tigress called out.

"Um, it's Ming. I came with Qiang to the Valley of Peace. May I talk to the Dragon Warrior?"

"Sure." Po said before his friends could speak for him.

Ming cautiously entered the crowded room.

Po got a good look at her for the first time. She was slightly shorter than him, and thinner too. She wore a simple dark green peasant's dress with a brown and black striped belt. A hair bun protruded from the back of her head. Her face was round, almost a perfect circle compared to the oval shape of the male pandas.

"Um, Dragon Warrior…" she began shyly. "I know you're upset. What happened today must have come as a real shock to you… but maybe you would feel better if you talked to Qiang and let him explain."

Po didn't reply.

"Dragon Warrior, he did not abandon you, if that's what you're thinking."

"That's not why I ran off!" Po said quickly. "It's just that I thought he was dead. But it still took him twenty five years to find me!"

"Did it not occur to you that Qiang probably thought the same?" Ming's eyes narrowed. "All my life, all he ever thought about was you and your mom…" she hesitated. "… and the night he lost you both."

Po felt a dull pain in his chest as he remembered. Once again, he saw his mother tearfully kiss her little boy on the tiny forehead before leading the wolves away from the basket she had hidden him in...

"Uh… son?"

Po froze at the sound of the voice. He looked up suddenly, his eyes wide.

"Son… I'm sorry. I never meant to upset you like this. But please give me a chance to explain."
Po did not get up.

After a few seconds, he felt a warm paw on his shoulder. He looked up and found himself gazing in Tigress's amber colored eyes. "He's your father, Po," Tigress whispered gently. "You should hear what he has to say."

Po slowly nodded. He held out his panda doll.

"Could you hold this for me?"

"Of course." Tigress gently took the doll into her powerful paws.

Po hesitantly got to his feet and walked slowly past his friends. He bit his lip as he once again gazed upon the middle-aged panda who stood so nervously in the middle of the corridor.

It was a while before either of them spoke.

"Son…" Qiang began. "You need to know that…"

"Where were you?" Po suddenly burst out. "Why did it take so long for you to come find me?"

He felt no anger at his birth father, at least none that he knew he had, but he had to know. He had to know where his biological father had been all these years.

Po's friends looked on nervously as he and Qiang stood opposite each other.

"Xue, it's a long story." Qiang wrung his hands nervously as he spoke.

"Xue?" Po blinked.

"Xue was what your mother decided to name you after you were born." Said Qiang. His face contorted in anguish. "Xue… I am so… sorry… I took so long to find you. Come into the kitchen and I'll explain everything."
"Qiang! Qiang! Come quickly!"

Qiang stopped dragging his rake through the soy bean field and looked up in surprise towards the female panda rushing towards him.

"Ting Ting? What's going on?" he asked, alarmed by Ting Ting's panicked expression.

"It's Mei! The baby's coming!"

"What?!"

Qiang dropped the rake and took off like a shot.

It's happening! Qiang thought in a panic as he raced across the fields, past his fellow farmers. It's coming! He thought as he ran through the village, past the women bringing in the baskets of fruit. Holy cripes, the baby wasn't supposed to be here for two more days!

He made it to the house in less than four minutes. He stopped outside the door when he heard his wife moan in pain.

"Mei!" he called, then burst inside.

Mei was lying on her back on the dining table, which had been converted into a makeshift bed. Surrounding her were her three friends, Hao, Song and Li, helping her through the painful process of giving birth.

"Mei!" Qiang repeated and rushed to her side.

"Qiang!" Mei gasped. She smiled despite her agony.

"Ting Ting, where's that water?" Hao called out.

"Coming, coming!" Ting Ting entered the room with a large wooden bowl of the clear cool liquid.

"Alright, let's get this over with." Song said with determination.

Qiang and Mei gripped each other's hands tightly, and did not let go once during the long, agonising hours that followed.

Three hours later, Mei and Qiang were staring at the newborn baby whimpering slightly as Li and Song washed him then wrapped him up in a linen blanket.

"It's a boy." Said a smiling Song as she carefully placed the infant in his exhausted mother's arms. "Congratulations, you two."

Mei gazed down at her tiny son, and lovingly stroked the little tuft of fur at the top of his head. A huge grin was plastered on her face.

Qiang stared over her shoulder down at the baby, unable to find what words to use to describe how he was feeling at the moment.
Eventually, he whispered;
"Holy rice balls."

Mei laughed loudly at his choice of words.

"Any ideas for a name?" she asked as the baby gently tugged on the blanket he was wrapped up in.

"Uh…” at that moment, Qiang's mind shut down. Not a single name came up in his head. 
"Uhhhh… why don't you pick one?"

"Alright then." Mei paused in thought as she gazed back down at the baby. Somehow, he managed to reach past the blanket and grip a tiny handful of the fabric of Mei's dress. "How about… Xue?"

Qiang smiled, liking the name at once.

"Xue it is, then." Mei smiled back. The baby now appeared to be trying to look at his own tongue. 
"Would you like to hold him?"

"Huh?" Qiang started.

"I said would you like to hold him?" Mei repeated.

"Uh, okay."

Very nervously, his heart reacing like crazy, Qiang took little Xue into his large arms. For a few seconds, Qiang held his son, unsure of what to say or do. He held his breath when Xue's eyes suddenly opened. He stared up at the large panda holding him with an expression Qiang couldn't identify.

Oh heck! This is where I find out that he doesn't like me!

Qiang cringed, waiting for the baby to start wailing.

Instead, he heard a small giggle, and felt something soft and slightly wet enclose around his thumb.

Qiang looked down, and saw that Xue had grabbed his thumb with his tiny paws and was sucking on the end. Qiang saw a little smile at the corners of his mouth as he tried to eat the furry digit.

A very warm sensation wrapped around Qiang's heart, and his biggest grin yet exploded across his face. His fears vanished into nothing, and he copied Mei's newly acquired habit of stroking the tuft of fur on top of Xue's head.

"Hey, he has your eyes." He told Mei without taking his eyes off his son.

"Actually, I think he has your eyes." Mei replied slyly.

"What are you talking about? Look at his eyes!" Qiang positioned himself so his wife could clearly see Xue's dark green eyes, identical to Mei's.

"Let me rephrase that:" Mei chuckled. "He has our eyes."

"Huh?" Qiang gave her a confused expression.

"In case you've forgotten, we both have green eyes."
"Oh yeah!" Qiang laughed, feeling silly.

At that moment, Xue began to whimper.

"I think we'd better keep our voices down." Mei whispered.

Qiang nodded, buttoned his lips and handed Xue back to his mother.

All the while, Mei's friends looked on with barely concealed glee at the heartwarming scene.

Slowly, gently, Qiang dragged the rake through the soil of the soy bean field that lay behind the small village where he lived with his relatively new family.

Family.

The word made him smile widely as he raked.

It was only six months ago that Mei had given birth to their little miracle, a wonderful baby boy she had decided to name Xue. Even at such a young age, Xue was very well behaved. He hardly ever cried, only whimpered and laughed even at the slightest provocation. His only flaw (if it could be counted as a flaw) was that he often took pleasure in pulling at his father's ears.

The sky started to the red as the sun began to descend over the horizon. That meant that work day was over.

Qiang swung the rake over his shoulder, picked up a basket full of the radishes he had harvested earlier today, and made his way back to the village. It was a beautiful sunny day, but wouldn't be for much longer: winter had arrived, and the snow was due to descend any day.

Sure enough, as Qiang strolled through the village, the sunlight faded and the first snowflakes floated down from the sky. On the grassy ground, a pair of small children ran past Qiang, laughing as they pulled their kites.

As he approached his house, Ting Ting waddled up to him: as Mei had been not too long ago, Ting Ting was heavily pregnant. In fact, the baby was due this week.

"Hello Qiang." Ting Ting spoke cheerfully.

"Good afternoon, Ting Ting." Qiang replied. "How are you doing?"

"Fantastic!" Ting Ting exclaimed as she ran a paw over her swollen belly. "I'm more than certain that it's going to be a boy. Mei thinks it'll be a girl, but I never question my mother's instinct."

"Oho?" Qiang smirked.

"Never! Oh, here's Mei now! I'll see you around."

Ting Ting walked off and Mei emerged from their house to greet her husband. Her expression was one of pure happiness, much to Qiang's slightly confused pleasure.

"What are you looking so chipper about?" Qiang smiled after kissing her cheek.

"I've finally finished making that little doll for Xue." Mei beamed. "I gave it to him a few minutes ago, and he loves it! When he accidentally spilled milk on it, I couldn't get it away from him to clean it up!"
At that moment baby Xue, now a couple of centimeters bigger than he was a few months ago, giggled happily as he crawled through the front door, clutching a cloth panda doll with one small arm. Mei waved happily to him as he made his way down the steps outside the door and sat at the bottom, nibbling one of the doll's legs.

"I still think you should have waited until his birthday." Qiang set down the radish basket so he could wrap an arm around Mei's shoulders.

"Four months from now?" Mei looked at her husband in mock-outrage. "Forget about it! Mind you, Li wasn't happy either."

"What do you mean?"

Mei's smile faltered.

"She said that me not waiting four weeks is sure to bring bad luck. Something about the number four being related to death."

Qiang laughed, but not out of disdain. He liked Li too much for that.

"When did you start taking any notice of the things Li says?"

"I'm not saying that I'm superstitious!" Mei said quickly. "It's just that I've been hearing a lot of ominous rumors lately."

"What rumors?" Despite himself, Qiang was concerned. As they talked, the snow increased in earnest, and the green grass slowly became consumed in white.

"Apparently there's some trouble brewing in Gongmen City, you know, that large city two miles from here. Lord Shen has been acting strange lately, and his parents are worried."

"What has that got to do with us?" Qiang chortled. However, he remembered also hearing of the unrest during his trip to the city two weeks earlier. He hid the sudden anxiety, keeping his expression cheerful. He didn't want to frighten his beloved Mei.

"I'm just worried." Mei sighed. "That city is so close to our village. If something happens, it could spread to us."

"Don't fret, Mei. Nothing is going to happen." Qiang stroked his wife's cheek and gave her a soft kiss on the lips, not knowing that it was the last act of affection he would ever give her.

"But-"

"Mei, I promise you that nothing will happen to us. Don't you trust me?"

Mei smiled, reassured, and opened her mouth to reply.

And that was when they and everyone else in the village heard the howls emanating from over the large hill by the village.

Mei's smile fell.

"What was that?" she asked. The worry in her expression returned.

Qiang frowned as he recognized the sounds.
No... they wouldn't be here...

"It sounds like…" he hesitated. "… wolves."

"Wolves?" Mei stared. "But the closest wolves around here are the guards from Gongmen City."

Qiang's eyes widened.

As they stared at each other, the howling became louder and louder. Frightened by the ominous sounds, Xue began to whimper.

As the villagers looked on anxiously, a figure emerged from the top of the hill.

Qiang and Mei gaped. They recognized him from the paintings around Gongmen City. White all over in contrast to his parents' vivid blue, red eyes decorating his splayed out tail feathers, eyes an equally bright crimson, a flame shaped lance in one wing…

Shen.

The peacock stared down at the alarmed villagers, light glinting from his bladed weapon. The expression in his crimson eyes made Qiang's heart race.

"Mei…" he whispered as the first wolves emerged from over the hill, flanking the peacock armed with bows and flaming arrows. "Take Xue and get out of here."

"What about you?" Mei whispered, her eyes wide with terror.

"I have to help as many as I can." Qiang whispered back. "Go now!"

At that moment, Shen let out a bird-like call that echoed in the clouded sky. The flaming arrows were fired, and the screaming began.

All hell had broken loose.

There was no other term Qiang could use to accurately describe it.

Right after the flaming arrows were fired, the wolves tore down the slope like the ten thousand demons of demon mountain. As the wolves launched themselves upon the closest pandas, the arrows struck the roofs of several houses and set them alight.

The next few minutes were carnage.

Qiang couldn't even begin to describe the deaths of friends he had conversed with only minutes before, Hao, Li and Song among them. The grief and rage he felt were overcome only by terror for his own family.

In the midst of it all, he frantically scoured the flaming village for Mei, who he had gotten separated from when the chaos began, and also Xue, who had unexpectedly disappeared from his spot in front of their house.

"MEI! XUE!" Qiang hollered, though his cries were lost to the roar of the fire. "WHERE ARE YOU?"

"Goo…"
Qiang froze at the sound of his son's frightened whimper, barely audible over the screaming, howling and frequent crashes as the burning houses started to collapse.

"XUE!" Qiang grabbed a rake from the ground and ran in the direction of his son's voice.

He sprinted through a gap in between two flaming homes, and gasped when he saw Xue sitting on the ground twenty feet in front of him clutching his little doll in terror in front of what was once Ting Ting's home. He must have crawled off in terror of the wolves, and became paralyzed with fear when the massacre started.

Qiang started to run for Xue, but halted when he heard a growl somewhere to his right. Twenty feet away, Lord Shen and two wolves, one bigger than the other, stood no more than twenty five feet from Xue.

Alerted by the baby's whimpers, Shen and the wolves turned round and spotted him. The peacock's red eyes narrowed.

"Get them all!" He yelled.

The two wolves launched themselves at Xue.

"NO!" Qiang roared and sprinted for his son.

He never imagined he could run so fast as he raced towards Xue, who sat rooted to the spot in terror as he stared at his impending death. As he ran, the rage he had pushed aside of of terror for his family finally began to boil over, so that his face was now contorted with the burning emotion.

How dare these monsters attack their village! What had his people ever done to them? What possible reason could Shen have for murdering innocent men? Women? Children? The last thought made him clench his teeth hard enough to crack two of them.

As the two wolves leapt at Xue, fangs bared, Qiang jumped in front of his son, and swung his rake.

WHAM!

The middle of the rake's pole struck the smaller wolf in his abdomen, while the spiked head hit the bigger one right in the eye. As the villainous peacock stared in utter shock, the two wolves flew backward ten feet. Qiang thought he saw blood fly from the big wolf's head, and felt some vicious satisfaction as he spotted the look on Shen's face.

"Qiang!"

Qiang turned his head.

Mei was standing behind her husband and son, paws clasped over her mouth.

"Take our son, and run away!" Qiang yelled at her, allowing himself one second to feel relief that she was still alive. "Go!"

Mei picked up Xue and took off into the forest along with the remaining pandas.

He never saw her again.

Qiang stared at their rapidly shrinking forms for a second longer before turning back to the carnage.
"Don't let them escape!" Shen yelled. The wolves charged forward, weapons raised.

"Oh no you don't!" Qiang yelled back and launched himself at the approaching murderers, rake in hand.

He lost count of the number of wolves he struck down with his unusual weapon in the vicious fight that followed. He barely noticed when the sharp claws raked his limbs again and again. At one point, he thought he caught the peacock in the chest as he was about to skewer him with the lance, knocking him into a nearby grass fire and burning his talons.

As he swung his rake and sent three more wolves flying, Qiang spotted the big wolf running off on all fours into the forest, evidently in pursuit of the other villagers.

"No!" Qiang yelled again, and then ran after him.

He managed to get fifteen feet into the forest before he felt something thin and sharp slam into his shoulder and stay there.

Qiang opened his mouth to yell in pain, but was cut off when his foot caught on an exposed tree root and sent him tumbling down a steep slope laden with thick snow.

He hit his head on a rock at the bottom, and the last thing he saw was a small avalanche rushing towards him.

Just like Harry Potter 7 and Twilight- Breaking Dawn, this flashback will have to be split into two parts… DARNITAL! (Flings helmet.)

Anyway, read and review! (Retrieves helmet.)
Here's part 2 of Qiang's flashback.

Read & Review!

When Qiang opened his eyes, the first thing he noticed was that the snowflakes had stopped falling. The second thing he noticed was that he was half buried in a large pile of snow. The third thing he noticed was the throbbing pain in the back of his shoulder.

The panda winced as he reached behind him, and yelled in pain as he yanked out the arrow. He took the fact that he felt no blood running down his back as a good sign that he wouldn't bleed to death any time soon.

It was a cloudy day. Qiang guessed that he must have been unconscious for over twelve hours.

He stared at the arrow in his paw, at the evil looking black tip stained with his blood, and gasped as a flood of horrible memories came rushing back to him.

"Oh gods..." He whispered.

The wolves. The village. Mei!

Qiang frantically dug himself out of the mass of snow, gritting his teeth as the movement increased the pain in his shoulder. He had to find them! He had to find Mei and Xue!

He quickly climbed back up the slope, grabbing a handhold of the tree root which had tripped him as he did so. When he reached the top, he saw the village... or what was left of it... through the gaps in the trees.

Qiang ran straight for it.

Shen and his wolves would have been long gone by now, and if Mei had escaped them, then the first thing she would do is return to the village to look for survivors and help in any way she can. Her compassion was one of the many things Qiang loved about her.

And yet there was no sign of Mei amongst the blackened ruins. Nor amongst the bodies that Qiang heartbreakingly searched for signs of his wife. Qiang fought back tears as he slowly walked past his friends, and Mei's friends. He found Hao and Song huddled together inside one of the burning buildings, recognizable only by their clothes. He saw Ting Ting's husband, Sao, lying face down in the snow several feet away, but couldn't bring himself to approach him. The only thing he could be thankful for was that none of the dead were children. He found no sign of Mei or Xue.

With a heavy heart and a tear trickling down one cheek, Qiang walked away from the village and headed for the forest. If Mei wasn't in the village, then she definitely would be somewhere in the forest, probably still hiding in fear of the wolves.

Once the village was out of his sight, Qiang began calling for her.

"Mei!" he cried out. "Mei, where are you?"

He didn't care that he was probably putting himself in danger by making so much noise, that
wolves might be nearby. If any one of them came running, Qiang would kill them without a second thought. He would make them pay for what they had done.

"MEI!" He yelled a little louder, cupping paws over his mouth as he continued to call for his wife. "MEI, WHERE ARE YOU?"

No answer. The forest was deathly quiet.

"Mei?" Qiang called half-heartedly.

Not even the birds chirped in answer.

Qiang finally lowered his hands, accepting that his wife was definitely not in this part of the forest. Perhaps he should try looking in another area-

"Qiang?"

Qiang froze.

The small hoarse voice, practically a whisper, emanated somewhere to his left.

Cautiously, he crept over to the source: the edge of what looked like a very small cliff.

"Who's there?" He asked.

"It's Ting Ting!"

At that, Qiang rushed right to the edge and peered over: three feet below him were Ting Ting and a dozen other frightened villagers, half of which were whimpering children.

"Ting Ting!" Qiang quickly scaled down the small cliff, wincing every now as his wounded shoulder ached, and headed over to them. "Are you and the others alright?"

"Pong has a nasty cut on his arm, but otherwise we're all fine!" Ting Ting replied. There were dirty soot marks on her maternity dress.

"Ting Ting, do you know if anyone else survived?" Qiang asked as he walked over to Pong, a sobbing ten year old, and carefully examined the cut. His heart sank when he saw neither of Pong's parents amongst the adults.

"There should be a few more a little way north of here." Said Ting Ting. "I saw them hide beneath a ridge when I ran into the forest. The wolves ran right past them, so they may be still alive… oh my goodness! Your shoulder!"

"It's nothing." Qiang stretched a paw over his shoulder and patted the wound. Only then did he notice that his back was significantly wetter than before. He ignored it. He would worry about the blood later. "Was Mei or Xue among them?"

"No, I'm sorry."

"Alright." Qiang bit his lip in dismay. He fought to keep his hopes from plummeting as he tied a piece of cloth round Pong's cut. "Stay here and I'll go look for them."

Before Ting Ting could say another word, Qiang climbed up the slope that lay next to the cliff, and headed north.
As he walked through the thick white blanket of snow, he suddenly realised that he already knew that Mei was gone. He had known it from the moment he found her absent within the remains of the village, had known it while calling out for her in the middle of the forest.

No... Qiang prayed that he was wrong... Let me be wrong... please...

He found the group of five pandas after fifteen minutes of searching. They were mostly adults, one of them being in their late teens.

"Are you all okay?" Qiang asked as he approached them.

They nodded silently, huddled together in terror.

"It's alright." Qiang said soothingly. "The wolves are gone. There's another group of survivors south of here. Do you know if there are any more-"

Qiang's vision suddenly doubled. He lost balance, and one of the survivors, an acquaintance of Mei's who Qiang didn't know personally, broke away from the huddle to catch him before he could hit the ground. Through unfocused eyes, Qiang saw the survivor retract a paw from his shoulder and stare in shock at the mass of red on her palm. At that moment, it occurred to Qiang that he may be bleeding to death after all.

"Where's…" Qiang struggled to speak as black spots formed in front of his eyes. "Where's Mei?"

Mei's acquaintance hesitated before speaking.

"I'm sorry, Qiang…" She said, her lip quivering with grief. "The peacock killed her. She's gone."

Even half-conscious, Qiang felt his heart rip apart into little pieces and scatter all over his cold body.

"No... you're lying…"

Qiang passed out before the tears could fall.

Even after he woke up with a bandaged shoulder to find himself amongst nearly twenty survivors huddled in a small cave, Qiang still felt as though he was dead.

Other than that, there were no words to describe his pain.

Mei was dead. Xue was nowhere to be found, but there was no way that a helpless infant could have possibly survived a cold night in a forest crawling with wolves. And so he too was dead.

Unlike most of the other traumatized survivors, Qiang did not cry. Instead, he sat stock still on the mat that had been salvaged from the ruined village along with over a dozen crates of vegetables and other objects, his blank eyes staring at nothing in particular. On the outside, it looked as though he was meditating with his eyes open, but those who were familiar with stupors knew better.

Once Ting Ting had partially recovered from her husband's death, she willingly took on the task of caring for the near-catatonic panda, feeding him, giving him water, and changing his bandages when necessary. Meanwhile, several of the less traumatized pandas took to burying the dead. Two nights after the raid, over eighty small mounds of dirt lay in a secluded clearing roughly a hundred meters from the village, Mei's among them.
Once the supplies had been salvaged, and the bodies had been buried, it was time to leave.

If Shen ever found out that there were survivors, he would be after them. The seventeen pandas had to find a new place to live, somewhere where the murderous peacock would never find them. After some debate, it was decided between them that they would travel to the Shidao Mountains, an isolated mountain range nearly a hundred miles away. At least there, they would be hidden.

And so, picking up their supplies, they departed their old home for good.

Travelling only at night, hiding in small caves during the day, they made the slow journey to what would hopefully become a safe haven for them.

In the midst of it all, Qiang continued to silently grieve for his wife and child. Only by gently pulling him on his uninjured arm could Ting Ting get him to travel along with the others. She owed it to Mei to make sure her husband would be alright. Still, being four months pregnant meant that it was just as hard for her to walk as it was for Qiang to do anything at all.

Four days into their journey, the large group stopped to rest for the night in a cave half a mile from the city of Lijiang, which in turn was only ten miles from the base of the Shidao Mountains.

While the majority of the group settled near the mouth of the cave Ting Ting quietly led Qiang to the back of the cavern and set him down in a sitting position, and then sat down beside him in silence. She had given up on trying to snap him out of his stupor the day before. As she fed him some water, she began to grow worried that Qiang would remain like this forever. She feared that he would never wake up again.

Inside Qiang's mind, memories of Mei and Xue floated in front of him like clouds. He remembered the first time he had set eyes on Mei: she was fourteen, sitting in front of her house knitting a scarf for the coming winter. He remembered little Xue nibbling on his brand new toy, wide jade eyes bright with happiness and love. He remembered the sound of Mei moaning as she gave birth to their little miracle…

"Ugh!"

Qiang was suddenly puzzled.

When Mei was giving birth, he had been standing on her right side. So why in this particular memory did it sound like he was on her left?

Very slowly, Qiang turned his head.

He didn't see Mei lying on the dining table. Instead, he saw Ting Ting sitting next to him, grimacing in pain as she clutched her swollen belly.

"Ting Ting?" he asked in a tiny voice.

"Oh gods…" Ting Ting was in too much pain to acknowledge that Qiang was talking to her.

"Ting Ting?" Qiang's blank expression changed into a small frown.

"The baby…” She gasped. "I think it's coming!"

"What?"

Before either of them knew it, Qiang was no longer wallowing in grief. He put his paws around
Ting Ting's shoulders and gently pushed her back into a lying position.

"I'll inform the others." Qiang got up and quickly headed to the other pandas, who were huddled together near the mouth of the cave.

"Ting Ting's gone into labor!"

A minute later, several women were gathered around Ting Ting in a similar manner as Mei's friends had surrounded her during Xue's birth. Qiang, meanwhile, had left the cave to find water.

He returned from the river several minutes later to find the children staring wide-eyed at the sight before them. It appeared that none of them had witnessed a birth before. Neither had the grown panda male who fainted on the spot.

An hour after Qiang handed the women the water, a tiny infant panda, a girl, was sleeping peacefully in Ting Ting's arms.

Ting Ting lovingly stroked the infant's fur, appearing to ignore the fact that her 'mother's instinct' had been wrong about the baby becoming a boy. Qiang, still half in a stupor, yet at the same time half alive, gazed down at the newborn as he sat next to her, using his own uninjured arm as a pillow.

"She's beautiful." Qiang chuckled.

"I wish Sao was still here..." a tear trickled down Ting Ting's cheek as her loving expression briefly changed to one of sorrow. Qiang put a gentle paw on her shoulder. He knew how she felt. Ting Ting's smile returned. She knew that he knew, and it comforted her.

"He would have loved her." Said Qiang. Ting Ting nodded silently. "What are you going to name her?"

Just like Mei had done, Ting Ting paused in thought as her daughter nuzzled the blanket she was wrapped up in.

"I was originally going to choose Ping..." she smirked. "But I guess Ming will have to do instead."

For the first time in days, Qiang smiled.

"Good choice." He said as baby Ming woke up and began sucking on her mother's finger.

Qiang felt a sudden strength flare up inside at the familiar sight.

*Little Xue was smiling as he nibbled on his father's thumb, his green eyes shining with happiness.*

He would get Ting Ting, her little girl, and all the other pandas to Shidao, or die trying.
"... And that's the whole story." Qiang spoke as he sat at the kitchen table opposite Xue (now named Po). "Two days after Ming was born, we traveled into the mountains and found an isolated forest which in a matter of weeks became our new home. To keep myself from going into depression again, I took up meditating. I achieved what you call 'inner peace' a couple of months ago, and the day after that, I sensed that you were still alive."

Po had not spoken once since Qiang had begun his story. He never stopped staring even after Qiang finished and began staring back.

"Xue..." Qiang rubbed the back of his head. "I know this is still a big shock to you..."

"No, I'm feeling a little better." Po said quickly. He was being half-honest: part of him was still in shock, but his father's explanation had answered the majority of his questions.

"Again, I am so sorry it took me over two months to find you after I sensed your existence." Again, Qiang's eyes were swimming with apology. "But I had to take the long way out of the mountains to avoid Gongmen City. My village would be in danger if any of Shen's soldiers spotted me and realized that there were pandas still living."

"Shen's dead."

Qiang almost spilled his tea.

"What?"

"I defeated him a couple of months ago."

"You killed him?" Qiang gasped.

"No! No!" Po waved his hands in front of him in denial. "I just took out his army. His death was sorta his own handiwork."

"Oh." Qiang sighed in relief. "Well, my people will be very pleased to know that." He inhaled, as if he was about to say something, else, but stopped mid-breath.

"What is it?" Po asked.

"Nothing. It's nothing."

"Dad..."

"Alright. It's just that I have to ask... how on earth did you survive that night? And how did you end up all the way here in the Valley of Peace?"

Po hesitated, and bit his lip.

"Do you remember what happened?"

"Oh yeah, I do. It's just hard to talk about..."

"Go on." Qiang urged gently.
"I only survived because of mom." As Po began, the memories of that terrible raid once again washed over him. Once again, he saw his mother clutching his infant self as she fled from a pursuing wolf boss. "While we were in the forest, mom managed to lose the wolves temporarily. She ran down a slope..." suddenly Po found it difficult to speak. "she... she hid me... in a radish basket... and led Shen and his goons away from me..." Po narrowed his eyes in pain and looked away.

Qiang’s paws clenched into fists as he fought back the tears.

"Of course she did," He choked out.

"I never saw her again." Po was having less luck with controlling his emotions. Tears started trickling down his white cheeks.

Before he knew it, Qiang had walked round the table and was now embracing his son.

All this time, Qiang had believed that Mei had died in vain, her death never having been avenged, her attempt to flee failing to save their beloved child. And now he knew otherwise. It was so relieving... like an enormous weight was being lifted from his shoulders.

"After that..." Po went on after regaining some control over himself. "The basket I was hidden in got carried all the way here to the Valley of Peace. Don't ask how, it's a very long and complicated story. Anyway, the basket was delivered to my dad's noodle shop..."

"Your dad?" Qiang blinked.

"I mean Mr. Ping. He adopted me after discovering me behind his shop."

Qiang swallowed nervously. He should have known that Po obviously would have been raised by a parental figure during his time in the Valley, but the news still came as a shock to him.

Little Xue was smiling as he nibbled on his father's thumb, green eyes shining with happiness.

No... Qiang thought. No, I can't lose him to someone else. Maybe if I...

"Um, son..."

"Dad, can I come visit your village?"

Qiang straightened up suddenly, startled that Po had asked before he did.

"Why?" Qiang asked.

"So I can get to know you better!" Po rose up from his chair, his expression serious. "I want to know more about my life before I came to the Valley! I want to see more of my own kind!"

"What, me and Ming aren't enough for you?" Qiang felt the corners of his mouth lift slightly.

"No, it's not that!" Po pouted in a manner very hauntingly like Mei's. "I would also like to meet some of your old friends. Like Ming's mother, Ting Ting..."

"That's going to be a problem, I'm afraid." Qiang sighed sadly. "Ting Ting died of the fever ten years ago."

Po gave a tiny gasp. His pout slackened. He lowered himself back into his chair.
"Oh…" He said in a small voice. "I- I'm sorry."

"Ming doesn't like to talk about it, so please do not bring it up with her."

"Okay." Po nodded slowly.

"So anyway… you're really serious about visiting the village?" Qiang asked hopefully. As he asked this question, he felt another, heavier weight lift from around his heart as it slowly dawned on him that Po had completely forgiven him for his absence.

"Yeah. In fact, can I come back with you to the village now?" Po's face lit up like a child's during the winter festival.

"Huh?"

"When you leave the Valley, I want to come with you. For a visit, like I said."

Qiang stared at his son for a few minutes, and then grinned. This was too good to be true.

"Oh course you can. Honestly, you think that after losing you for twenty five years, I'm seriously going to refuse?"

"Awesome!" Po rose from his chair again. "Hey, is it alright if I bring my friends?"

"Of course. If you're very serious about this, I can set off first thing in the morning. Besides, my village will need to know of Shen's death as soon as possible."

"Double awesome! I'll go ask them right now!"

Viper was the first to speak after Po emerged from the kitchen.

"Po, are you okay?" She asked cautiously.

"Okay? I'm freaking awesome!" Po grinned. Viper and her friends blinked. Ming pursed her lips in surprise.

"Awesome?" A thoroughly confused Monkey stepped up to Po. "Just an hour ago you ran away at the sight of your long lost father!"

"I was just shocked to see him." Po replied. "I mean, I thought he was dead. But my dad explained everything, and everything is okay."

"Oh good." Viper smiled when she saw that Po was being honest.

"So where had he been all this time?" Mantis hopped onto Po's shoulders.

"He and the other pandas were hiding in the Shidao Mountains."

"Other pandas?" Crane gaped. "You mean there's more?"

"That's almost on the other side of China!" Mantis exclaimed. "No wonder it took twenty five years for him to find you."

Viper hissed angrily and smacked the back of his head with her tail. The insect was sincerely the most tactless person she knew.
"Ouch!" Mantis rubbed the back of his head, scowling.

"What do you mean 'hiding'?" Shifu frowned.

"They didn't want to risk Shen finding out about survivors, in case he decided to come after them. Dad was really relieved when I told him that Shen's dead."

"Shen's dead?" Ming gasped.

Po turned to face her.

It was the second time he looked at her properly, and he suddenly realized that she looked pretty cute with her heart shaped nose and warm brown eyes. Aside from his mother, whom he had seen only through flashbacks, she was the prettiest panda he had ever seen.

"Uh, er… yeah, Shen's dead." Po replied, wondering why his cheeks suddenly felt slightly warm.

"I'm guessing you're feeling pretty relieved."

"You guess?" Ming blinked. Her paws, smaller and more delicate than a male panda's, clenched into fists. "Shen killed my father before I was even born! Of course I'm feeling relieved!" She suddenly seemed to realize that she was raising her voice and she shut up. Her angry expression fell. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that. I'm just glad that my people don't have to live in hiding anymore."

"I bet you are." Po smiled gently. Ming smiled back, her cheeks slightly pink.

"I see you've properly introduced yourself to Ming." Qiang spoke and he stepped out the kitchen.

"Hey, dad." Po smiled upon seeing him. "Darn! I totally forgot to ask… when dad leaves, I'm going with him to visit his village. Do you guys want to come?"

While Monkey, Crane, Mantis and Viper all nodded happily without hesitation, Tigress and Shifu alone seemed concerned.

"I don't know…" she stroked her chin. "Who is going to watch over the Valley while we're gone?"

"That's what I was thinking." Said Shifu.

"Oh, we can do that." Said a slightly shaky voice right behind Po, making him yell in fright.

Po whirled round to find himself staring down at a very familiar pig and goat, both as wrinkled as dried apples.

"Mr Yeung! Mrs Gow!" Po exclaimed in surprise and pleasure. "What are you guys doing here?"

"Visiting your father, what do you think?" Yeung chuckled.

"Wait a sec…" Mantis's eyes widened. "By Mr Yeung and Mrs Gow, are you meaning Yeung the Musical Archer and Gow of the Hundred Stars?"

"Yep." Po grinned widely. "In the pale pruny flesh."

"Anyway, if you're going away for a little while, we can take care of the Valley while you're gone." Said Yeung, ignoring Po's comment.

"When you're old and wrinkly, it's good to have something to do." Gow agreed.
Shifu sighed, more out of relief than defeat.

"Alright then. I'll come."

"Me too." Said Tigress, glancing at Ming with an unreadable expression.

"Dear, where's the bathhouse?"

"It's down the path from here. To the right." Said Po. Gow thanked him and then disappeared from the corridor.

"I could do with a bath too…” Said Yeung. "Um, Dragon Warrior?"

"Yeah?"

"When I arrived at the Valley half an hour ago, I noticed that your father looked very upset. Perhaps you should go see him."

Po's heart sank as Yeung followed Gow out the barracks.

In his shock and excitement over seeing his birth father again, Po had forgotten about the goose who had adopted him.

At that moment, Zeng the palace goose entered the corridor.

"Ahem! Master Po, your father is waiting outside the barracks. He seemed unwilling to enter himself."

Po glanced at Qiang. The elder panda was no longer smiling.

"I should talk to him." Said Po.

Qiang opened his mouth as if to disagree, then changed his mind and closed it again.

Po glanced at his concerned friends as he stepped out the corridor.

Po exited the barracks to find his goose father sitting on the front steps of the building. His head was bowed, his beak pointing directly at the ground.

"Dad?" Po asked tentatively.

Mr. Ping slowly turned his head to look up at the panda. Po was dismayed to see that there were tears in his eyes.

"Hello, Po." The goose spoke in a small voice.

Po very slowly stepped down a few steps and sat down next to his adoptive father.

"Dad…” Po said after a few seconds. "Dad, how are you feeling?"

"I don't know." Said Mr. Ping.

"Dad, you have to understand that this changes nothing between us." Said Po gently. He gently put a paw on top of the goose's wing. "When I learned that I was adopted, I made the mistake of not acknowledging you as my father. I'm never going to do that to you again."
"But I'm not your father!" Mr. Ping wailed. "I never was! _He_ is!" the goose pointed to the barracks behind them, or rather the elder panda currently inside.

The despairing words stabbed at the panda's heart. Po sighed and placed a large arm round Mr. Ping, unintentionally forcing the goose to lean forward under the limb's weight.

"Dad, I've said it once, I'll say it again... I'm your son." Po said calmly. "And nothing is going to change that."

Mr. Ping wiped his beak with a feathered finger.

"Oh really?" he asked. "Then why did I overhear you claiming that you were returning to the village with him?"

"As a visit!" Po exclaimed, half out of frustration. "I'm not going off to live with him!"

"Really?"

"Really, really."

Mr. Ping sniffed and wrapped his wings round Po's belly as far as he could.

"Speaking of visiting the village..." Po said as he hugged back. "Do you want to come with us?"

Mr. Ping looked up with wide eyes.

"It's just so you and dad can get to know one another. He's going back first thing tomorrow, so doing it in the Valley isn't really an option."

"Me and _dad_?"

"I mean my other dad!" Po quickly corrected himself.

"I don't know, Po... what about my business?"

"Come on, dad!" Po looked at him with pleading eyes. "The last thing I want is for you and dad number two to be at odds because you both share a son! How do you think it's going to make me feel if I have two parents fighting over me?"

Mr. Ping didn't answer.

"Please do this... for me?" Po leaned down so he was eye-level with the goose.

Mr. Ping sighed. When faced with Po's wide green eyes practically begging him to comply, he just couldn't refuse.

"Alright, son."

"Awesome!"

Po pulled his goose father into a bone-cracking hug, neither of them noticing the panda father watching them with a nervous expression from the doorway.
High up in the bell tower overlooking the Valley of Peace, two pigs grunted as they swung the hanging log towards one of the enormous pair of iron bells.

*Dong!*

"Good morning, Master!"

Down in the Jade Palace, as always, every student in the barracks was standing stock still outside their respective bedrooms exactly at the same time Master Shifu stepped into the hallway.

Every student… except one.

*Not again...* Shifu fought the urge to groan out loud.

"Po." He called out, shaking his head.

No answer.

"Po!"

Silence. Except for the occasional muffled snore.

"Oh, for crying out loud…"

Shifu strode straight past four of his students and rapped his staff on Po's door.

"Panda! Wake up!"

He was answered with a snore that rattled the doorframe. His tempered multiplied by ten.

"That does it!"

Shifu slammed the doors open and stormed up to the monochromatic lump on the bed.

"Wake up!"

He jabbed the panda's belly with the sharp end of the staff. Po responded by rolling off the bed… right on top of Shifu.

Monkey, Viper, Crane and Mantis stifled their chortles as they heard the violent commotion that ensued inside the room. Tigress herself was biting her lip in a desperate attempt to keep herself from laughing as she witnessed the red panda furiously pummeling his student, yelling about getting up when you're supposed to and respecting your master.

"If- I-" Shifu spoke with each whack as the panda wailed and cowered. "- catch- you- sleeping- after- the- gong- again- I'll- make- you- fast- for- six- weeks!"

Tigress stepped to the side as Po was sent cart-wheeling from his room, spinning right past the feline and into her own bedroom.

"In his defense, Master…" Tigress spoke up politely. "He was up all night helping Mr. Ping to pack."
"That's no excuse!" Shifu snapped as he stepped from Po's room, slightly dishevelled from Po's fall on him. "Now all of you, go to the entrance of the Hall of Warriors and wait with Qiang and Ming while I change!"

As Shifu turned on his heel and stormed off, his students saw the dark stain on his back— it seemed that Po had fallen asleep with a half-empty bowl of noodles on his belly again.

"Uh…” Po moaned as he staggered from Tigress's room. "I think I'm gonna hurl…”

"Vomiting will have to wait." Tigress said sternly. "We have to meet Qiang and Ming outside the Hall of Warriors, and we're running late."

She took Po by the arm and pulled him out of the barracks. Once they were gone, Mantis hopped on Monkey's shoulder and whispered into his ear.

"Hey, buddy… did you notice the way Po was looking at that Ming girl yesterday?"

"Yeah." Monkey whispered back with a smirk. "I think he's got the hots for her."

"Hush!" Crane said in annoyance. "What the heck makes you guys think that Po has a crush on her?"

"Well, there was the way he stammered when talking to her…” Mantis raised his eyes to the ceiling. "… the way his eyes kept staring at her…”

"And don't even get us started on that flush in his cheeks!" Monkey added.

"Yeah, you could see it through his fur!" Mantis said.

"That's enough, you two!" Viper hissed like the snake she was, silencing the primate and insect immediately. "I don't want you teasing Po about this, it'll embarrass him!"

Mantis and Monkey nodded reluctantly.

"I'm serious! If you do, I'll make you guys punch yourselves into unconsciousness, and you know I can!"

Tigress poked her head round the corner.

"Hey, are you guys coming or not?"

"Sorry, Tigress." Viper said. She began to slither down the corridor, but then stopped and turned her head to glare at Monkey and Mantis once more.

"I mean it… not… one… word…”

The sun was low in the orange sky as the six warriors made their way down the small path to the Hall of Warriors. Halfway down, they encountered a dark-feathered palace goose.

"Oh, pardon me, masters!" Zeng bowed.

"Where are you going, Zeng?" Po asked good-naturedly.

"Grand Master Shifu asked me to clean up the mess in your bedroom. Since you are leaving early today, you can't do it youself."
"Oh. I'm sorry you have to do it for me." Po struggled to conceal his intense relief.

"Master Shifu also asked me to tell Master Monkey that Po ate all his almond cookies again and swapped them for flattened dumplings to hide the theft."

Monkey's eyes widened. Po gulped.

"PoooOOOOOOO!"

"Mummy!" Po wailed as Monkey chased him down the latter half the path.

Qiang and Ming were waiting for them outside the entrance doors to the Hall of Warriors, a couple of sacks of supplies at their feet. Qiang grinned and waved when he saw Po approach. Ming, on the other hand, smiled shyly and nodded in greeting. Po blushed and waved back. Mantis noticed this and whispered something into Monkey's ear, making them both laugh. Viper silenced them with a hiss as Po glanced at them in confusion.

"Good morning, son!" Qiang stepped forward and put an arm round Po. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yeah." Said Po. "Well, almost. We just need to wait for Shifu to change, and then we've got to pick up my dad from his shop."

Qiang frowned.

"Your… dad?"

"Sorry, I mean my goose dad!" Po said quickly. "You know, dad number two!"

"He's definitely coming with us?"

"Yeah. Why, is there a problem?"

Qiang's frown softened. Slightly.

"No… no there isn't."

"Excuse me… Ming, right?" Tigress spoke up.

"Yes?" Ming replied.

"You left this in the barracks last night. I found it this morning and figured it was yours."

Tigress held out a gorgeous multi-stringed jade bracelet.

Ming gasped.

"Oh thank you!"

She took the bracelet, held it lovingly for a few seconds and then slipped it back on her wrist.

"It was my mother's! I searched all night for this!"

Tigress smiled slightly and nodded.

"Thank you so much, Master… uh…"
"Oh, I haven't introduced my friends yet, have I?" Po said. "This is the Furious Five. Master Monkey..." he gestured to Monkey, who gave a small wave.

"Hey." He said.

"... Master Viper..." Po continued to introduce his friends.

"Hello." Viper flicked the tip of her tail.

"... Master Mantis..."

"S'up?" Mantis grinned as he waved from Monkey's shoulder.

"... Master Crane..."

"Greetings." Crane bowed his head.

"... and this is Master Tigress."

Tigress simply nodded her head again.

"So this is the Furious Five." Qiang said, putting his hands on his hips as he gazed at the quintet. "I must confess, your reputation is not so well known in our village. We're very isolated up in the mountains, you see."

"And we also couldn't leave because we were afraid of Shen finding out about us." Ming added.

"You guys must be feeling pretty relieved, now that Shen's gone." Said Crane.

"Yes, we are." Ming said. She glanced up at the barracks in the distance. "Is your master going to be much longer?"

"No he won't." Shifu scowled as he made his appearance, treading down the small path. He was wearing his normal attire, albeit without the noodle soup stain. "No thanks to the Dragon Warrior."

Po chuckled sheepishly.

"Let's go pick up Mr. Ping." Shifu walked straight past Po and was the first down the steps.

"Alright, let's get goOOOOOO!" Po wailed as he tripped on a tiny rock and once again tumbled down the thousand stairs.

"Aw jeez..." Crane sighed.

"Son!" Qiang yelled and ran forward. "Son, I'm comAAAAA!" he yelled as he tripped on the exact same tiny rock and tumbled down after his son.

Ming giggled as the five warriors stared.

"Like father like son!" She said inbetween laughs. "This is the real reason why it took us so long to find Po!"

Crane, Monkey and Mantis couldn't help it... they started to laugh too.

"OH! AH! OUCH!" Po yelled in pain as he bounced every ten steps, finally coming to a stop at the bottom.
"Owwww…" he moaned, waiting until the soreness died down before getting up… and promptly getting slammed down again as Qiang bounced off the last step and landed on his son.

"HA-HA-HOOOW!"

"Sorry, son!" Qiang quickly lifted himself off of Po and patted the dust off his robe. "So where's this goose father of yours?"

"His name's Mr. Ping." Said Po, wincing as he got to his feet. "Come on, he should still be in the noodle shop."

Qiang scowled as he followed Po down the main street, eventually reaching the restaurant where father and son had reunited after twenty five years.

Standing waiting in the archway was Mr. Ping with a small noodle cart. He grinned when he saw Po approach, but then the grin faltered when he saw Qiang standing behind him.

"Hey, dad." Qiang's scowl deepened when Po leaned down and hugged the goose. "Are ya ready to go?"

"I've been ready since last night, thanks to you, son." Said Mr. Ping.

Po felt a pang of dismay when his eyes fell on the noodle cart, which was as laden with bowls as it had been the day he had inexplicably become the Dragon Warrior.

"Dad, why are you bringing your noodle cart? It's a seven day journey."

"Well I need something to cook the noodle with, don't I?" Mr. Ping said. "I doubt that any of the people in Qiang's village have ever tasted my secret ingredient soup."

"I have a stove in my house." Qiang spoke. "You can use that, if you want."

"No thank you, my cart will do just fine." Mr. Ping replied. "Son, I am so happy that you will be there to sell them with me!"

"Uh… dad…" Po rubbed the back of his head, unsure how to explain. "The point of me visiting the village is so I can spend some quality time with my birth father. Is it alright if you do it yourself, just for a little bit?"

Mr. Ping blinked. His face slackened with barely concealed displeasure.

"Oh, um… okay… anything you want, son."

Mr. Ping struggled to hide his dismay as Master Shifu, Ming and the Furious Five made their appearance at that moment.

"Shall we set off, then?" Shifu asked.

"Oh yes." Said Mr. Ping. He began to pull the noodle cart.

"I'll take care of that, dad." Said Po. "Like I said, it's a pretty long journey."

Only Shifu noticed the dark expressions on Qiang and Mr. Ping's faces as the small group began their journey down the main street.
The journey was long, but fortunately not that difficult.

After two days of traveling through the mountain range that surrounded the Valley of peace, the group reached the edge of the Cliffs of Great Awakening. Lying in front of them was the Devil's Mouth, an enormous misty abyss that appeared to have no bottom. Stretching across the abyss was the Thread of Hope, a tremendously long rope bridge only recently repaired after the Furious Five's disastrous battle against a certain snow leopard.

"Do you remember this place?" Po asked his friends slyly as they approached the bridge.

"Don't!" Monkey scowled, having been the first to be nerve attacked during that disastrous battle. "Just... don't.

Shifu gazed out at the misty horizon, and then turned his head to look at the setting sun, before he made a decision.

"We'd best camp here for the night." He said. "If we start crossing in the morning, we will make it to the other side by sunset. Crane, scout the area to make sure there won't be an ambush during the night."

"Yes, Master." Crane flapped his wings and took off.

Po searched through one of the sacks and frowned.

"Dad…"

"Yes?" Qiang and Mr. Ping both looked up at once.

Po blinked.

Qiang and Mr. Ping glared at each other, both faces practically screaming he was talking to me!

As he gazed at the two of them, Po made a mental note to find alternate names for his respective fathers.

"Uh… where are the sleeping mats?"

"Oh, I have them here." Ming held up a folded mat from the sack she was carrying. "I'm sorry, I thought I was carrying the pots and pans."

"Thanks, Ming." Po reached for the sack, and his hand accidentally brushed Ming's. A sensation like electricity shot through his arm from the contact, and his heart skipped a beat. Both pandas blushed furiously as Po took the sack and pulled out the mats.

"Your welcome, Po." Ming said in a small voice as Po handed one of the mats back to her.

Po handed Shifu and the members of the Furious Five their mats, leaving one extra for the currently absent Crane, and then proceeded to pass Qiang and Mr. Ping their own mats.

"Thank you, Xue." Said Qiang. As Po set his own mat on the flat ground and lay down.

"His name is Po!" Mr. Ping scowled.
Qiang scowled back, and then began to lay his mat on Po's right hand side.

"Er, excuse me…" Mr Ping spoke again. "That's where I sleep."

"I beg your pardon?" Qiang replied.

Po sat up. What on earth were they disagreeing on now?

"Whenever Po and I go on a little camping holiday, I always sleep on his right side." Mr. Ping stepped forward, clutching his mat like a stress relieving doll. "As well as enabling me to snuggle up to my son during the night, it also helps to keep me warm without a blanket, and in certain positions Po makes a good wind-shield."

Qiang stared at the goose in disbelief. He didn't get off the mat.

"Dad, just sleep on the other side of me." Said Po with a sigh of exasperation. "What difference does it make which side of me you sleep on?"

Mr. Ping grumbled in mandarin as he moved to Po's left side. Qiang covered the smirk with his mouth.

In between them, Po twiddled his thumbs, trying to ignore the tense atmosphere he was stuck in the middle of.

A few meters away, Tigress set her mat down next to Ming's placing the mat intended for Crane between them.

"Master Tigress…" Ming spoke, her eyes on the two pandas and the goose. "Do you get the feeling that Qiang and Mr. Ping aren't getting along?"

Tigress followed Ming's gaze, and noticed the two seniors' unpleasant moods.

"You're right. Ever since we started this trip, there's been nothing but hostilities between them." She spoke, furrowing her brows in concern. "You seem to know Po the best." Said Ming. "Do you think he's aware?"

"Probably. He's not too naïve, so he's probably noticed that there's at least some tension between them."

"You guys should keep your voices down." Viper spoke from Tigress's other side. "I don't think Po would appreciate you two talking about something like that." She cast a sideways glare at Monkey and Mantis.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm famished." Ming said, taking Viper's advice and changing the subject. "Who's got the food?"

"I do." Monkey opened his sack. Po's nose twitched when it caught the scent of bean paste rice balls.

"Fried rice balls stuffed with bean paste! Awesome!"

Po got up from his sleeping mat and speed-walked over to the primate. He took a bowl of rice balls and sat straight down in the empty sleeping mat between Ming and Tigress.

"Er, Po…” Tigress spoke up. "That mat's for…”
At that moment, Crane returned, landing in the middle of the circle of mats.

"No bandits about. Gods, I'm so tired…"

Without even looking at the rice balls, Crane staggered onto the mat between Qiang and Mr. Ping and fell fast asleep.

The two elders gaped, and then glanced at Po, who was sitting on the far side of the circle. Their son shrugged, one paw still clutching his bowl.

"Uh, never mind." Tigress stifled a chuckle.

"Sorry, dads." Po said sheepishly.

Qiang and Mr. Ping said nothing, instead lying down with backs facing each other (or rather the sleeping avian between them).

"Mmm… these rice balls are delicious!" Ming took another bite and paused to savor the taste before chewing. "You adoptive father is truly a wonderful cook."

"Actually, I cooked those!" Po spoke quickly. For some strange reason, impressing Ming seemed like a very good idea. "What you said about my dad is true, but the rice balls were my work."

"Oh, well then I pass the compliment on to you." Ming replied sweetly.

Po blushed furiously.

Yes, definitely a good idea.

Some time passed, during which Tigress began quietly conversing with Viper, Monkey and Mantis began sharing jokes, and Shifu walked off some distance to meditate, before Po spoke again.

"So, um…" Po hesitated. "What's life like in your village? Is it anything like our old home?"

"It's just a farming village, so yes it probably is." Ming answered. "I don't know if it's exactly like our old home, since I was born after…" Ming paused. She glanced at Qiang's unmoving form to make sure he wouldn't hear. "… the incident."

"Oh, yeah…” Po's smile faltered. His memories of the 'incident' threatened to rise to the surface again, but he managed to push them back. "My dad told me about that."

"He did?"

"Yeah, he also told me that your mom died."

Po's eyes widened when he realized what he had just done.

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry! Dad told me not to bring it up with you!"

"No, it's alright." Ming said. Her eyes told otherwise.

"I'm just gonna shut up now so I don't say anything else."

True to his word, Po immediately jammed his lips together, eyes narrowed in shame.

Ming giggled at his display. Just as quickly as his comment had upset her, his antics were cheering
her up.

Po was proving to be quite the comedian.

"Po, I told you it's okay." Ming put a paw on Po's shoulder. "You can talk if you want."

Reassured, Po slowly parted his lips again.

"Alright, if you say so… do you want another rice ball?"

"Yes please."

Po passed Ming the delicacy as he tried to find a less upsetting topic of conversation.

"Ming, don't take this the wrong way… but if you were so afraid of Shen, then why did you accompany my dad all the way to the other side of China?"

Much to his relief, Ming didn't take it the wrong way.

"I insisted on coming with him. He said he would be okay by himself, but that shoulder wound still hurts him sometimes."

"Why did you insist?"

"Because of what he did for me. After my mother died, he took me in. He didn't adopt me, or anything like that!" she quickly said, seeing Po's expression. "I became an apprentice to him. He taught me to read and write and cook, and in return I helped him round the house and made him the cups of tea the village doctor told him to drink."

"Cups of tea?"

"For the pain. Like I said, his shoulder wound still affects him."

"He sounds pretty awesome." Po grinned as he looked over at the elder panda. As he watched him 'sleep', he felt a warm feeling wrap around his heart, a sensation he had felt only once before when gazing at Mr. Ping.

"He is." Ming smiled. "He's like the father I never had."

"You said he taught you to cook." Po said.

"Oh yes. When he's not meditating, he cooks in his spare time."

"You mean he's a chef?"

"Not exactly. He just does it to educate the children."

"My goose dad told me how to cook when I was big enough to hold a ladle."

"Really?" Ming shuffled a little closer.

"Yeah. Hey, Ming, do you wanna hear a funny story?"

"Sure!"

Po shifted his body so he was facing Ming directly.

"It was during in one evening when I was eight years old. My dad closed the noodle shop and went
out for about an hour, leaving me to look after the place. After a while I got hungry and tried to
cook myself some dumplings."

"And you boiled them into rocks, did you?" Ming smirked.

"No..." Po scowled half-heartedly, knowing that she was joking. "Anyway, everything went well
up until I put the dumplings in a pot to boil. They were taking a while, so I started tidying up the
kitchen to pass the time. I was sorting out a crate of oils when this girl around my age came into the
restaurant. She was a kung fu student up at the Jade Palace, and she had come to get some
flammable oil for the lamps. She hadn't realized the shop was closed, but she was kinda pretty so I
wasn't going to disappoint her."

"Typical." Ming chuckled.

"Yeah, classic me..." Po's cheeks grew warm. "Anyhow, I went into the kitchen to get some
sesame oil, which is very flammable, and that was when I saw that all the dumplings in the pot had
stuck together and turned into this great big lump!"

Ming clapped a paw over her mouth to keep her laughter from disturbing the others.

"H-how-" she struggled to speak. "-on e-earth did that h-h-happen?"

"You see, I had forgotten to stir the dumplings so they wouldn't stick together!" Po said, laughing
along with her. He could remember the incident clearly in his head now, and he too was finding it
hilarious. "And it didn't stop there! I tried to pick up the pot to take it off the stove, when a bit of
hot water splashed on me. I knocked over the sesame oil bottle onto a candle, and the next thing I
knew the oil bottle was on fire!"

"Gosh!" Ming gasped, laughing even harder than before.

"And I'm still not finished! I panicked and flung the fiery bottle out of the kitchen, where it landed
on a dining table! And then that was on fire!"

By then, Ming was in hysterics, and she wasn't the only one: Monkey and Mantis had been
listening in, and were paralyzed with laughter. Though they still appeared to be conversing with
each other, Viper was giggling behind her tail, and Tigress had an uncharacteristically huge smile
on her face. Four others weren't laughing: Crane, Qiang and Mr. Ping were still asleep on their
mats, and Shifu was still meditating over by the cliff edge.

"What happened after that?" Ming said after she and the others had calmed down somewhat.

"Well the shop didn't burn down, if that's what you're saying." Po said. "Fortunately the fire didn't
spread any farther than that one table. Still, I got a huge scolding from dad when he got home."

"What happened to the girl?" Ming asked. "The girl who caused all that to happen?"

"Hey, it wasn't her fault!" Po said defensively. "I should have been watching the stove! Anyway,
she returned to the jade palace to warn the masters of the fire. It wasn't until years later when I
became the Dragon Warrior that I learned who that girl was..."

"Who was she?" Ming asked.

In answer, Po turned his head to gaze at the striped feline sitting next to him.

"It's getting late." Tigress said, not noticing the panda gazing at her. "We should all get some
sleep."

The members of the group nodded, bade each other good night, and lay down on their mats and closed their eyes.
The Second Party

I apologize for not mentioning this in the previous post: the funny story Po told is actually based on one of the oneshots in my Moments of Time series. You can read the full story of Po's little accident in 'Don't touch the Stove!'. The Moments of Time series can be found on my first account on Fanfiction.net.

In the meantime, back to the story at hand.

Just as Shifu had predicted the night before, the travelers managed to reach the other end of the Thread of Hope by the time the sun began to set.

"Where do we go from here, dad?" Po asked as he leant on the noodle cart. The wheels sank two inches into the dirt under his weight.

"I don't know, I've never been this far out of the Valley before." Said Mr. Ping.

"Sorry dad, I was talking to dad number two."

Mr. Ping shot a look at Qiang as he stepped forward to reply to Po's query.

"Usually we would have to go all the way around Kabuki Crest and the Desert of Desertion."

Po gaped. He was still having trouble reaching the top of the palace stairs without getting exhausted. How in the hell-o would he be able to traverse a freezing high mountain and a sweltering hot desert? He would die before he got halfway!

"But if Shen's dead, then there's no problem going straight through."

Po sighed in relief. He put more weight on the noodle cart, which sank so low that the wheels were now out of view.

"You basically take the same route you would if you were heading to Gongmen City. Except when you reach the end of the desert, instead of heading east you just keep going north. In a day or two, you're at the mountains."

"Actually, it's north west." Ming said. "It shows it right here on the map."

Qiang looked down at the map. He scowled, more annoyed at himself than Ming for pointing out his error.

"Aw, you're right. North west then."

"By cutting through the crest and the desert, we can cut the remaining length of our journey in half." Said Shifu.

"Um, actually…" Crane spoke up as he examined the contents of the bag he was carrying. "We're getting a little low on water. Even if we find a water source, we should probably just go around the desert anyway. It'll lengthen the journey only by a few hours."

"A few hours will not matter. We'll travel for another hour before resting." Said Shifu. "The sun is only just beginning to set, so it will still be light for a while."
And so they headed into the bamboo forest before them. Po fell behind when he failed to pull the cart free from the dirt. He failed three times before Tigress eventually smirked and headed back to yank it out for him.

It was an uneventful part of their journey, up until they found the small stream stretching across their intended path.

"Just what we needed." Crane grinned as he pulled out the flasks. "Viper, what do you think? Is the water safe for drinking?"

Viper slithered to the edge and peered down at the crystal clear surface.

"It has a fast current, so it's not stagnant." Viper spoke. "I also don't see anything that would poison the water. I think it's safe."

"We'll rest here for a few minutes while Crane replenishes our water supply." Said Shifu.

The group was just beginning to sit down when-

**Snap!**

Tigress's ear twitched a second after Shifu's.

"Hush!" She hissed. Everyone quieted down at once. "Did you hear that?"

"Yes." Mantis said. "I'll scout."

He silently zipped off between the bamboo trees.

Two seconds later, there was a shout of surprise, and then another two seconds later a large crocodile was flung to the ground.

"You!" Tigress snarled as she recognized the croc.

"Lidong!" Po looked equally angered.

"Ow…" Fung's cousin moaned as he slowly got to his feet, his armor clanking slightly as he moved… only to be slammed back into the ground again as Mantis made his reappearance.

"What are you doing here?" Tigress stormed forward and leant downwards so her face was level with Lidong's. "Planning to ambush us, were you?"

"N-no!" Lidong winced and struggled to free himself from Mantis's grip: the insect had the crocodile's arm twisted behind his back, pinning him to the dirt. "I was just getting some water, I swear!"

"Yeah right!" Po snapped. Like Tigress, the panda had not forgotten the time when Lidong threatened Prince Zan's life. "Who were you trying to kidnap this ti-"

"Lidong, what's going on over there?"

Everyone looked up as what appeared to be a second crocodile in black and white clothing stepped into the clearing. Then they saw the totally different snout and realized otherwise…

"Oh, Shifu!" Mu Zanshi quickly managed to hide his shock with a toothy smile. "What's a small thing like you doing here?"
"That was going to be my question!" Shifu scowled. After the surprise of Po's father's return, he had forgotten that Zanshi was also traveling to the Shidao Mountains, and for that reason he was a little annoyed with himself as well as the alligator. "And don't call me small thing!"

"I thought you said you weren't coming on the expedition with me." Zanshi folded his arms and chuckled, ignoring Shifu's retort. "What happened, did you realize that keeping a shrine wasn't enough?"

It took all of Shifu's willpower not to swing his staff as the insolent reptile.

"It's… not… a… shrine…" Shifu said through gritted teeth. "I and my students are going to the Shidao Mountains for other reasons."

"You're going to the mountains as well?" Zanshi blinked. Lidong also looked shocked.

"Yes, we are." Said Shifu. "We are accompanying these two pandas to their village in the mountains."

Zanshi shot a look at Qiang and Ming, his expression unreadable.

"But the Shidao Mountains are currently uninhabited." Zanshi said. "There is no village!"

"There is now." Monkey spoke up. "It turns out there have been pandas living there for twenty five years."

"Really?" Zanshi replied. "Well, that's surprising. I'll have to stop by sometime."

"I'd rather you didn't!" Shifu snapped and raised his staff threateningly. "Just focus on finding this special artifact of yours and stay well away from the village!"

"Okay, okay, take a chill pill!" Zanshi took a step back, holding his hands in front of him almost mockingly. "We need to get moving anyway, my team is waiting. Master Mantis, would you be so kind as to release my friend?"

Mantis let go of Lidong and hopped off. The crocodile rubbed his sore arm as he straightened up and moved to Zanshi's side with a furious glare. Shifu felt a twinge of unease went he noticed the crocodile glaring in Tigress's direction rather than Mantis's

"Nice meeting you again, Shifu."

Zanshi chuckled as he and Lidong disappeared into the trees.

"You keep a shrine?" Monkey stared at Shifu once they were gone.

Shifu whirled round and in a flash used the crook of the staff to pin Monkey to a tree by the neck.

"It's not a shrine. Stick your tail in it!" Shifu snapped before releasing him.

"Who was that guy?" Viper asked as they sat around the campfire that night.

"His name is Mu Zanshi." Said Shifu. "He's a treasure hunter, and a very controversial one at that."

"A treasure hunter?" Po stood up excitedly. "You mean the buried treasure in the X marks the spot kind of treasure hunter?"
"No, not that kind of treasure, Po." Tigress said with a small smile. "He collects lost artifacts, and sells them for a high profit. You could say he's more of a grave robber."

"Is he good at it?" Crane asked.

"As much as I hate to say it, he is indeed very good at what he does." Said Shifu. "In fact, almost a third of the kung fu artifacts stored in the Hall of Warriors were recovered by him."

"Really?" Po's eyes brightened like a child's. "That's so awesome!"

"Would you call a price of 500,000 yuan awesome?" Shifu scowled.

Po's smile fell. He slowly sat back down.
"Uhhh… no, not really, no."

"Pardon me for saying this, Master Shifu…" Ming said. "But you don't appear to trust him at all. May I ask why?"

"I already told you, he's very controversial." Shifu replied. "By that, I mean that his methods are very mysterious. No-one has ever witnessed him at work. I don't like that. If someone won't reveal their methods, it usually means they are doing something unsavory."

"Still doesn't explain the shrine." Mantis whispered into Monkey's ear, chuckling. Most unfortunately, Shifu overheard.

"It's not a shrine!" He snapped and leapt to his feet. "It's a collection of all the information I have on Zanshi! The next person to mention it will be dunked in the stream!"

Mantis cowered. Shifu sat back down again, eyes narrowed into slits.

"Wait a sec…" Viper gasped. "My uncle was a captain in the imperial army. I remember him telling my father once that a man named lieutenant Zanshi had been discharged. Are he and Mu Zanshi the same guy, Master?"

"Yes, in fact they are," said Shifu. "Zanshi was indeed a lieutenant prior to becoming a treasure hunter. My guess is that was where he got the skills he needed to collect all those artifacts."

"Do you have any idea what happened to get him discharged?" Tigress asked.

"Yes, but I only know the basics."

Everyone waited patiently for him to begin.

"It was near the end of the War of the Southern Clans." Shifu began after a pause. "One evening, lieutenant Zanshi and a group of soldiers found themselves surrounded by the enemy. It was in an isolated area of a forest, so there were no reinforcements to help them. Only Zanshi survived the slaughter, but barely."

"The War of the Southern Clans?" Po spoke up. "But that was nearly sixty years ago! Zanshi looked like he was barely over thirty!"

"Alas, I am unable to explain that." Shifu said. "Anyway, Zanshi managed to escape with only a large cut on his back. After a few weeks in the infirmary, Zanshi was ready to return to service."

"So what happened?" Mr. Ping asked.
"Unfortunately, it soon turned out that a back wound was not the only thing inflicted on him. 'Post traumatic stress disorder', they call it. Soon after the massacre in the forest, Zanshi began to suffer from nightmares and flashbacks. He became angry and irritable. He became especially violent during particular nightmares when he would begin acting like he was still in the battlefield. During one incident, his superior was seriously injured and had to be hospitalized. That was what caused Zanshi's discharge."

"Yikes." Po whispered, and his friends had similar reactions.

"A few years after his discharge, Zanshi turned to treasure hunting. He has been going after ancient artifacts ever since."

"Strange, he didn't look angry and irritable when I looked at him." Crane said.

"That was odd to me at first, as well." Shifu replied. "But as I continued to cross paths with him I realized that he is also a phenomenal actor. After all these years, he has managed to hide his turmoil quite well. I guess he views his disorder as a weakness."

"Is there a cure for it?" Viper asked.

"Yes, but unfortunately Zanshi insists that he has no problems, which makes helping him easier said than done."

"Bummer…" Po sighed. He felt a twinge of sympathy for the alligator. "All this talk about Zanshi's past is making me feel depressed."

"He's right." Said Ming. "Perhaps we should stop there and get some sleep."

"Agreed."

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He's coming to spy on me! Zanshi thought furiously as he stormed back to his own camp, Lidong struggling to keep up with him. I was a fool to tell him about my quest!

"This isn't good, Zanshi." Lidong said as they neared the camp where the rest of the team were resting. "Those warriors are going to make things difficult."

Idiotic as always! No, no… keep calm. Keep a calm face. You must not let your anger get the better of you…

Zanshi ignored Lidong's many worries. He had always felt alienated from his subordinates, not necessarily because they were slightly different species, but now, in his mind, it was almost as if he was in another room entirely, listening to Lidong through a little hole in the wall, just like long ago when he was still a soldier of the imperial army. He felt seperated from Lidong and his goons that much.

They were half savage, greedy, only interested in the money. Zanshi, on the other hand, was a true admirer of the relics of the ancient world, had been since he was a child. To hell with those judgemental fools like Shifu who call him a grave robber, a greedy hunter. If only they understood...

He was jolted from his thoughts when Lidong suddenly grabbed his shoulder.

"Zanshi, this changes everything!"
Zanshi spun round and seized Lidong by the collar, his scaly face now a mask of fury.

"This… changes… nothing!"

He released the stunned Lidong, his face calm again, and strolled back to the camp.

So readers, what do you think of Zanshi now? I'm trying to fit the symptoms of PTSD as best as I can, so let me know how I'm doing.
"Woah." Po gaped. "So these are the Shidao Mountains?"

"Yep." Said Ming. "Pretty cool, aren't they?"

Two days after their encounter with Zanshi, the group was now standing at the edge of a small cliff, gazing at the mountain range in the distance. Each summit was almost completely round, like a slightly squashed dumpling, and appeared to be glowing in the golden sunlight.

"I thought they would be more… scary looking." Said Po, staring in complete awe at their destination. Not even the mountains that surrounded the Valley of Peace were as stunning as this.

"Why on earth would you think that?" Qiang asked.

"When I was told that this place hadn't been explored, I thought it was maybe because people were scared to."

"That's true." Said Qiang. "But only because it's so huge that they are afraid of getting lost up there."

"How big are these mountains exactly?"

"During my first week in those mountains, I climbed up the highest one just for the sake of it. I only made it about halfway, but it must have been about 10,000 feet."

"Holy rice balls."

Qiang laughed at the very familiar choice of words.

"Don't be too impressed son. It's nothing compared to the Himalayas."

Po's stubby ears pricked in interest.

"What're the Himalayas?"

"It's a mountain range in Tibet even bigger than Shidao." Ming said. "I have a painting of it in my bedroom that was salvaged from the old village. I can show it to you when we get to the village, if you want."

Po grinned in Ming's direction.

"That would be awesome."

"Oh, I can't wait to sell my noodles to these new customers!" Mr. Ping exclaimed as he examined the contents of the noodle cart to make sure they hadn't been jostled around too much during the journey. "Of course, since it's a simple farming village I'll just charge for one yuan per bowl."

Ming and Qiang stopped smiling and looked down at the goose.

"Er, Qiang..." Ming whispered in the elder panda's ear. "Don't you think we should tell him?"

"Nope, he'll have a heart attack!"
"But he might get worse if he finds out the hard way! I don't think Po would be pleased if his father suddenly died of shock!"

Qiang sighed. Just like Mei, who the young woman almost unnervingly resembled, Ming was always right.

"Alright, fine." Qiang walked over to Mr. Ping.

"Um, Mr. Ping? There's something I need to tell you…"

"What is it?" Mr. Ping replied in a clipped voice. Qiang hesitated, slightly taken aback, but not very surprised.

"You may want to reconsider charging for the noodles."

"Why?" Mr. Ping asked testily, his eyes narrowing into slits.

"Because we don't use currency in our village."

There was a deathly silence.

"… Come again?" The goose asked, believing that he had heard Qiang incorrectly.

"Until now, we didn't have any contact with the outside world, so using currency was pointless. Instead, we trade goods. It's a barter system."

Mr. Ping made a strange noise between a squawk and a growl. He leant on his noodle cart for support.

"Never mind, dad." Po put a comforting paw on his adoptive father's shoulder. "You can still use the goods you get for ingredients."

"Why didn't you tell me this before we set off?" Mr. Ping glared at Qiang.

"Because I didn't realize that you would be charging my people for food!" Qiang glared back. "Do you have any idea how close we came to starvation before the crops grew during our first few months in that place?"

"That's enough, you two!" Shifu snapped when Mr. Ping opened his beak to retort. "Are we going to go up there or not?"

"Yes, Master Shifu. I apologize." Qiang tossed his son his spare cloak. "You better put this on. We have to go over one of the smaller mountains to get to the village, and it can get quite cold up there."

"Thanks, dad." Po slipped the cloak over his head.

"Once we cross this forest, we'll be halfway up the mountain." Qiang said as they traveled along a small dirt path.

"Uh, will there be any avalanches?" Mantis asked nervously, looking up at the mountain poking above the trees.

"Very unlikely. There isn't a lot of snow in this part of the mountain range."
A few minutes later, Shifu suddenly stopped dead. Tigress did the same a second later.

"What is it?" Qiang asked.

Shifu's ears twitched.

"Everyone, stand together. Now!"

Everyone quickly formed a tight group round the red panda.

"Can you identify the enemy, Master?" Tigress asked.

"There are thirty people approaching…" he said quietly concentrating on the sounds that everyone else couldn't hear. "… all male… armed with thin bladed weapons… all of crocodilian species, it sounds like…"

"What sort of crocodile?"

"Mugger- oh, now how would I know that, panda?" Shifu snapped.

"Hey, just asking!"

"Are they hostile, Master Shifu?" Monkey asked.

"Quite likely. They're heading this way. And they're making an effort to keep silent."

"Well it's a good thing those ears of yours make the element of surprise redundant." Said Tigress.

"Dad, stay by the noodle cart." Po glanced at his goose father. "I'll watch out for you."

"Ming, you'd better do the same." Qiang said. "No offense, but you're not much of a fighter."

"Never intended to be." Ming replied. "But what about you?"

"Don't worry about me." Qiang swiftly pulled off his robes, revealing a pair of clean dark green pants, and snapped off a thick heavy branch.

"Wait, Qiang!" Ming said quickly. "What about your shoulder wound?"

"I took three cups of tea this morning, I'll be fine." Qiang replied dismissively.

"Ming, he once sent two wolf soldiers flying with just a rake, and took an eye out in the process." Po said.

Qiang looked at his son in surprise.

"You remember that?"

"How could I ever have forgotten?" Po grinned.

"Enough talk!" Shifu hissed. Here they come!

The Kung Fu warriors leapt into combat stances and Qiang gripped his branch with both hands just as thirty mugger crocodiles leapt down from the trees and pointed their lances at the group.

"Right, let's get this over with." Shifu said, and leapt staff first at the bandits.
"Po, Qiang, you stay and protect Mr. Ping and Ming!" Tigress yelled as she and the Furious Five leapt in after him.

The first croc's eyes widened just as Shifu plowed into him, sending him flying backwards into five of his comrades.

"You bandits are all the same!" Shifu taunted as he grabbed the tail of the croc and lifted him into the air, then swung him hard onto the comrades he flown into, knocking them utterly unconscious.

Monkey snatched a ladle from the noodle cart with his tail as he and two crocs grappled with a lance.

"Excuse me, Mr. Ping!"
"Hoi, that's my A ladle!"

Monkey lifted the ladle just as one of the crocs lunged over the lance, toothy mouth opened wide, and promptly jammed the thin wooden utensil inside.

The croc wailed in pain and released his grip on the lance. He staggered round as he desperately tried to extricate the painful object from his mouth.

Monkey took the opportunity to lift his legs off the ground, swing underneath the lance and deliver a double-kick to the second croc. Monkey swiftly rebounded off the croc's belly and struck the first croc down with a punch.

"Nice one, Monkey!" Viper cried as she lunged toward him. In the same maneuver they used in their battle with Tai Lung, Monkey stretch his arm out in front of him, allowing Viper to use it as a springboard and fly towards another of the attacking bandits.

She wrapped round his jaws like a gag, tightening to the point where the croc was forced to drop his weapon and use both claws to try and prize her off.

"What's the matter…" Viper hissed in amusement as she lifted the thin tip of her tail and slid it through the small gap in the croc's snout. "… snake got your tongue?" the tail curled round the croc's tongue and yanked.

The croc shrieked and leapt into the air.

Crane caught him mid-leap and carried him high above the trees.

"What are you doing, Crane?" Viper cried as she slithered onto the avian's back and flicked off the saliva in disgust.

"Something I've been working on in my spare time!" Crane grinned. He proceeded to spin and then dive straight for the ground.

He dove fast.

Faster.

Faster.

"CRANE!" Viper shrieked as they neared the ground.

"HYAH!" Crane yelled as he released the croc three feet from the ground and pulled up at the last second. The plummeting croc plowed through six others, sliding to a stop after fifteen feet.
Crane touched down on one of the branches. His face fell when he saw Viper's expression.

"Never..." she hissed. "... do that again."

Mantis laughed at Crane's nervous chuckle, then yelped as he narrowly evaded a lance that came out of nowhere.

"Hey!" he yelled as the croc retrieved the lance and advanced.

"Mantis! Use this!" Po tossed the insect a wok.

"Thanks Po!" Mantis grabbed the wok as it flew at him and raised it in front of him just as the lance was flung at him again.

The blade impaled the wok, the tip stopping inches from the insect's face.

"Yikes!" Mantis gulped as the croc yanked the lance free.

"Take this, puny bug!"

The croc swung the lance in a wide arc over his head... and got a shock when instead of dodging, Mantis grasped the side of the blade and didn't let go.

"What... did... you... call me?" he asked in a dangerous voice.

"Uh... puny?"

"I'LL GIVE YOU PUNY!" Mantis bellowed. He yanked the lance out of the surprised croc's claws. "HAVE SOME OF THAT- AN' THAT-"

He proceeded to spend the remainder of the battle chasing the croc round the clearing, rapping him over the head with the lance again and again.

"I'd better not interfere." Monkey said to himself as he swung from the branches to aid Shifu in battling a large group of bandits.

Tigress growled angrily as she aimed a flying kick at the nearest croc. Unexpectedly, the croc dodged, and then lunged with his lance. Tigress ducked, and then swung a fist upwards that cut clean through the middle of the weapon, effectively bisecting it.

"Kyah!" She yelled as she slammed the second fist into the croc's gut.

As he flew backwards, Tigress grabbed the bladed half of the lance, spun round and flung it in a straight line towards a fast approaching croc. For a split-second, it appeared as though he was going to be impaled in the face. Instead, he found himself pinned to a tree by his shoulder plate.

She dusted her hands, satisfied with the battle.

"Thud!"

Tigress spun round in time to see a third bandit collapse to the ground right behind her, a lance dropping from his claws. A dented wok clattered on the hard dirt.

Tigress turned her head slightly to see Po flexing his wrest as he stood protectively by his adoptive father's cart.
"You missed one!" he called.

Tigress smirked. Then her amber eyes widened.

"Po! On your right!"

Po barely managed to block the lance as it was swung at him.

"Po!" Ming gasped in fright.

"It's okay, Ming! I got this!" Po said before grabbed the lance and swinging his hips sideways, knocking the bandits away with his belly. "Just stay by the cart!"

"You'd better do as he says!" Mr. Ping cried from underneath the cart.

Po turned his gaze from the fallen bandit… and gaped at the half-dozen bandits rushing right at him.

"Uh oh." Po gulped.

"Don't worry, son!" Qiang was suddenly by Po's side, branch raised. "I've got your back!"

Po smiled at his birth father, and both pandas leapt into battle. Ten seconds later, all six bandits were out cold in the middle of the clearing, along with their other twenty four unconscious comrades.

"Phew!" Monkey wiped some beads of sweat from his forehead. "Those guys were tough!"

"What should we do them, Master Shifu?" Crane asked. "Should we turn them in?"

"I'm afraid that isn't possible." Shifu sighed. "There isn't a prison for miles. Our best option is to just leave them where they are and perhaps find way to deal with them on or journey home."

"Fair enough." Po said. "Dad, you can come out now. It's safe."

Mr. Ping crawled out from beneath the cart and with a stony expression extracted his A ladle from the croc's mouth. He grimaced at the saliva dripping from it.

"You…" he glared at Monkey. "… owe me big time!"

"Heh heh… sorry."

"Ming, are you alright?" Po asked as Ming helped the goose retrieve the scatter woks.

"Yes, I'm fine." Ming smiled. "Thank you for protecting me."

Po blushed and smiled back.
They left the stunned group of bandits where they were in the clearing, and continued through the forest, steadily gaining height as they slowly scaled the small mountain.

Eventually the trees began to thin, and before they knew it they were traversing a flat rocky terrain that sloped steadily upwards.

"Brrr…" Viper shivered. The sudden cold did nothing to help the fact that she was a reptile. A sudden chilly breeze stopped her in her tracks. Her comrade walking next to her noticed and also stopped.

"Viper, are you alright?" Crane asked in concern. He lowered his head so he could talk to her properly.

"It's so much colder here than the mountain range we crossed a few months ago." Viper replied, shivering slightly. "And we haven't even reached the snowy part yet."

"Why don't you…" Crane began, when Po suddenly picked the snake up and wrapped her round his neck.

"There you are." Po said. Viper sighed in contentment as she burrowed her coils into his warm fur.

Crane felt a strange twinge of annoyance as they continued up the mountain.

"We're not going all the way up to the summit, are we?" Po asked anxiously as he pushed the noodle cart.

"No, son." Qiang chuckled as he led the group. "There's a small path just up ahead, and after three hours or so, we're at the village."

"Oh, whoopee." Mr. Ping muttered. Po glanced down at him in confusion. For some reason, the goose had been in a bad mood since the bandit attack.

"Is something wrong, Mr. Ping?" Shifu asked as he walked alongside the goose, his staff tapping on the ground with each step.

"Nothing's wrong." Mr. Ping said without looking at him.

The red panda was unconvinced, but didn't reply, consenting that the goose wasn't going to reveal the truth anytime soon.

"Oh, there's the path!" Ming spoke up. "Won't be long now."

"Crane, scout ahead to make sure we won't run into any more trouble." Shifu said.

Crane's face fell.

"With all due respect, Master, I've been scouting every day since we started this journey."

"Well I don't want another incident like we had yesterday." Shifu said sternly. "Scout ahead, and be back in five minutes."

"Yes, Master." Crane sighed and took off once again.
"Poor Crane." Mantis chortled into Monkey's ear. "Never catches a break."

"Monkey, Mantis," Shifu turned to them with the corners of his mouth curled upwards. "I want you to scout on the ground. Be back in ten minutes."

Mantis and Monkey gaped.

"Do it!"

"Yes, Master." They took off ahead.

"Why do we need three people scouting, Master?" Tigress asked Shifu.

"We don't." Shifu smirked. "I just don't like my students taking pleasure in other people's suffering."

It took all of Po's willpower not to point out the irony of what Shifu had just said.

Five minutes later, Crane returned to the group as Shifu had ordered.

"No sign of trouble, Master Shifu." He explained. "But I caught sight of the village."

"Really?" Po exclaimed excitedly. "What's it like?"

"Not to be anticlimactic, but it looks like the ordinary farming village." Crane replied, his face betraying nothing. "I may have caused a little trouble though."

"What do you mean?" Viper asked, uncoiling slightly from round Po's neck.

"Some of the villagers saw me, and got a little spooked. They probably thought I was a spy or something."

"We'd better pick up the pace." Qiang said. "I need to get back to the village and sort things out."

"You're probably right." Said Shifu. "Po, hurry up with that noodle cart!"

"I'm trying! It's just so hard to keep the pile of bowls from falling off!"

Tigress stepped forward to help the panda as he struggled up the slope, but Ming was closer. She lifted the bowls from the cart, alleviating Po of his burden.

"Thanks, Ming." Po grinned. He puffed as he resumed pushing the cart up the sloped path.

"Po, do you want me to push that the rest of the way?" Tigress asked kindly.

"It's okay, I got this." Po said without looking at her, concentrating entirely on his task.

He continued to push the cart, but soon slipped on a patch of ice and rolled twenty feet back down the path, screaming all the while. Tigress grabbed the cart before it could suffer a similar fate.

"I think I've got it now." Tigress chuckled. "Ming, are you sure you're okay with all those bowls?"

"Oh yes," Ming replied as she expertly balanced the bowls in both paws. "I usually carry much more than this after Qiang's cooking lessons."

"Cooking lessons?" Tigress asked.
"Twice a week, Qiang teaches the children of the village how to cook." Ming said. "Before he left to find Po, he taught them how to make almond cookies."

"Monkey will be pleased." Tigress smirked. "Oh, speak of the devil…"

At that moment, Monkey and Mantis returned, covered in snow, their expressions equally stony. Tigress fought the urge to laugh at their expense, while Ming was unable to suppress the tiniest of giggles at the state of the two of them.

"Nothing to report." The two guys muttered.

"Alright, let's get a move on." Shifu said irritably, as Po finally returned to the group after his slip.

"Are you alright, son?" Qiang asked.

"I fall down the thousand steps seven days a week." Po said as he massaged his sore buttocks. "That was nothing."

They said nothing as they continued up the path, which soon started to slope steeply downwards. Soon the temperature began to get warmer, and they soon spotted patches of green dotted round the rocky ground.

"Not long now." Said Qiang. "We're heading into the forest."

Soon enough, they were trekking through a lush green forest that looked like something from a painting.

"Are we there yet?" Po asked after an hour.

"Yep." Qiang grinned. "There's the small shrine where I meditate."

They walked up to a wooden structure that appeared to be naturally formed from trees. Burned out candles lined the inside of the shrine.

"This is even cooler than the Dragon Grotto!" Po exclaimed. Qiang chuckled as his son excitedly rushed inside the shrine to get a better look. "So where's the village?"

"Look down there."

Po followed Qiang's pointed finger… and his eyes widened at the sight before him.

The emerald green landscape he gazed down upon was dotted with black and white figures gathering the plants protruding from the ponds that shimmered in the late afternoon sun. Further up the plain, three figures dragged their hoes through the dirt strips that ran through the grass. A pair of females carried baskets of crops towards a large pile standing beneath a cliff of rock and moss. One by one, the panda villagers sensed the presence of the visitors and looked up in surprise.

"Woah…" Po whispered. He had never seen so many pandas before in all his life.

"'Ordinary farming village'?” Viper glanced at Crane incredulously.

"Hey, I didn't want to spoil the surprise." The avian replied.

"So what do you think, son?" Qiang asked, turning his anxious gaze towards Po.

"Awe…some." Was all Po said. A huge grin was plastered on his face. "Can we go down and meet
him, please?"

"I and Ming had better go first." Qiang said seriously even as a flush of happiness warmed his cheeks. "Remember, they're a little afraid of outsiders."

And so Qiang and Ming made their way down the small stone path down to the fields. When they reached the bottom, one of the young adults was the first to approach them.

"Qiang!" Pong grinned and embraced the elder panda. "It's good to have you back."

"Thank you." Qiang smiled back and returned the embrace. "How was the village while I was gone?"

"Fine, as usual." Said Pong as they parted. "As you can see, we began harvesting this morning. Uh, Qiang…" Pong's grin faltered. "Who are those people up there?"

Qiang realized that everyone in the field was staring nervously up at the group still standing at the top of the path.

"Everyone, do not be afraid." Qiang raised his voice so they could all here. "These people are friends."

"But what if they're spies?" One of the elder females asked. "What if they report to Shen?"

"They are not spies." Qiang said. "And we no longer need to worry about that peacock any longer. While I was gone, I learned that he died two months ago, and his army has been eradicated."

"Shen's gone?" the exclamations of astonishment and relief echoed across the field, a feeling that still echoed within himself.

"Yes, he is." Ming spoke up. "In fact, our visitors up there were the ones who defeated him."

"Really?" Pong said in surprise. "Who are they?"

"They are kung fu masters from the Valley of Peace." Said Qiang. "The oldest of you may recall that place. Do not be afraid of them. They mean you no harm whatsoever."

The tension in the air dissipated as the villagers' expressions toward the visitors changed from fear to curiosity.

"Hey, Qiang…" one of the other villagers, a slightly blushing girl in her late teens, spoke up. "Who's that cute looking panda with them?"

"I'm glad you asked, Pei." Qiang chuckled. If every young woman like her began looking at Po that way, he would certainly have his paws full. "That man up there… is my son."

There were exclamations of surprise from the eldest pandas and Pong.

"Your son?" Pong stared. "I thought he died during the raid!"

"I thought so too…" Qiang smiled. "Until I received a vision over two months ago that he was alive and well and living in the Valley of Peace."

"Is that why you left?" Pong asked.

"Yes. I didn't want to tell you in case my vision turned out to be wrong."
"Qiang, why don't you bring them down here and introduce them properly?" Ming suggested.

Several of the villagers' heads nodded eagerly in agreement.

"Don't mind if I do." Qiang turned his head up to the group, and gave them a wave to indicate that it was okay to come down.

A minute later, Po, Mr. Ping, Shifu and the Furious Five were standing amongst the curious villagers.

"Welcome to our village." An elderly male shook Po's hand. "And please let us express our gratitude to you for relieving us of that peacock."

"Nah, it was nothing." Po grinned. It was like he was looking at an image of himself in fifty years. "And you are…"

"My name is Sao Yao." Said the elder. "I was one of the survivors of the raid."

"Really?" Po's eyes widened slightly. "I don't remember you."

"Of course you wouldn't. I and your father didn't really know each other that well prior."

Next to them, A trio of tiny panda children stared up in wonder at the snake and striped feline who gazed back. While Tigress simply smiled warmly and knelt down so she was more at their level, Viper was struggling desperately to hide her glee at the site of the adorable little balls of fluff.

"It's great to finally reach your village." Tigress shook each of the children's tiny paws in her own powerful fingers. "My name is Master Tigress, and this is Master Viper of the Furious Five."

"Fabulous Five?" The middle child piped up.

"No, Furious." Viper giggled.

"Are you all angry teachers?"

"No." Tigress had to bite the inside of her bottom lip to keep from laughing. "Furious Five is just our titles. And we're not technically teachers. We're kung fu masters."

"What is kung fu?"

"I'll explain it later."

"Woah…” Mantis whispered as nearby, he and Monkey found themselves surrounded by women. "These are a lotta pandas."

"Would you like an apple?" one of the women held out a basket of scarlet fruit. "Freshly picked from the trees."

"That's enough, you lot." Qiang called, laughing. "Don't crowd them. They've have a long journey. Why don't we let them rest for a while, then we can greet them properly tonight."

"Tonight is the anniversary of that raid." Ming explained to the warriors. "This evening, we gather in the village for a big dinner to remember all those who were killed twenty five years ago."

"Qiang never attended." Pong added. "Brought too many bad memories, I guess."
"But since my son is coming, tonight I'll have to make an exception." Qiang smiled at his son.

"Hey, dad!" Po turned to Mr. Ping. "You can serve them your noodles tonight."

"Lovely!" Mr. Ping exclaimed. Po grinned and turned back to his other father, failing to notice the goose's sarcasm.
Pong smiled contentedly as he took another sip of Mr. Ping's secret ingredient soup.

"Mmm… so good!"

"Didn't I tell you they were delicious?" Po said.

The moon was high in the sky when the panda villagers and their guests were gathered in the grassy clearing amongst the raised houses, armed with dishes made from the freshly gathered crops. While Po was sitting with Ming on the soft grass, Viper was chatting with several of the young women, while Crane sat next to her quietly eating his noodles. Monkey and Mantis were having fun with the young children, while Shifu was conversing with a group of pandas who seemed quite interested in the tales of the late Master Oogway they had once heard of.

"It's a good thing Po brought his action figures." Mantis said quietly as he and Monkey reenacted the Battle of Weeping River in front of the delighted children. The children squealed and clapped when Mantis imitated himself flinging a trio of crudely made stick figures into the tiny stream they sat next to.

"You said it." Monkey agreed as he made the small wooden replica of himself perform a kung fu kick. "Speaking of Po…"

"Yep?"

"I think that tomorrow, we should have a word with him about his big crush on Ming."

Suddenly there was a sly grin on Mantis's face.

"You're right. It's been more than a week, and he hasn't asked her out yet."

"Then it's settled: tomorrow we make sure the Dragon Warrior gets the girl."

The two warriors grinned at each other before turning back to the little pandas.

Meanwhile, Po and Ming continued to enjoy each other's company. Sitting side by side on a small mound of grass near the edge of the clearing, they laughed and talked as they ate their soup.

"So there's no way you can reveal the secret ingredient?" Ming asked.

"Well, I…" Po spotted Mr. Ping glaring at him as he tended to his noodle cart two meters away. "… sorry, my lips are sealed."

"Fair enough." Ming sighed jokingly. "So what does he put in this, anyway?"

"Well, aside from noodles, we use a variety of vegetables, vegetable oil, and we also use soy sauce. Why?"

"Well, I thought that Qiang could maybe teach it to the children during his next lesson."

"Hey, that's not a bad idea. When is his next lesson?"

"It should be the day after tomorrow."
"Awesome! I'd like to go."

"A highly trained chef going to cooking lessons?" Ming asked jokingly.

"I mean to observe!" Po's cheeks went red. "The point of coming here was to get to know my dad. In case you've forgotten, I haven't seen him in twenty five years."

"Of course, I'm sorry. Anyway, you're welcome to come."

"Great. Hang on a sec, where's my dad?"

"Which dad?" Ming asked, glancing at the goose still standing by the cart.

"My panda dad."

"I'm here."

Po and Ming turned to see Qiang striding towards them with a pair of shears. Mr. Ping's eyes narrowed as the elder panda sat down right next to his son.

"Sorry I'm late. The trees surrounding the shrine were starting to overgrow, so I had to cut the foliage back a bit." Qiang explained, setting down the shears and picking up a steaming bowl of soup Po had left for him. "Did I miss anything?"

"Nope. We've just been talking about those cooking lessons of yours." Said Po.

"My lessons?"

"Ming tells me you teach the kids how to cook."

"Oh yes." Qiang grinned with pride. "Next lesson, I'm going to teach them how to cook vegetable stir fry."

"That sounds awesome!" Po exclaimed. "Uh, dad… I was wondering if you could teach them to cook noodle soup instead."

"I would if I knew how to cook that particular dish." Said Qiang. "I mean, the vegetables I can do, but I've never cooked with noodles before. We don't make noodle strands in this village, you see."

"Well, maybe my other dad can teach you how to cook the noodles part of the soup." Said Po, glancing at his very surprised goose father. "In fact, you two could teach the kids together during the lesson!"

"Wait- what?" Mr. Ping blinked.

"What do you think, dad?" Po asked. "Do you think you and my panda dad could teach the kids to cook noodles?"

Qiang and Mr. Ping looked at each other, both thinking the same thing.

This isn't going to go well. I should say no.

"Come on, you're both my dads. This would be a great way for the two of you to get to know each other a little better." Po said. "Please?"

The goose and the panda, saw the pleading look in Po's eyes, gave in and sighed simultaneously.
"Alright then, son." Mr. Ping said.

"If that's what you want." Qiang added.

"Awesome!" Po grinned like a little boy. "I can't wait to see you two working together!"

Mr. Ping and Qiang chuckled uneasily, not taking their eyes off each other.

Po slurped from his noodles, his eyes straying from Viper dragging a reluctant Crane into her girl's conversation ("Come on, Crane. Tell them about the time you dressed up as Master Shifu!") to Tigress sitting by herself away from the others with an untouched bowl of soup.

"Hey, Tigress!" Po called, grabbing her attention. "Come and sit with us!"

"No thank you, Po. I'm okay by myself." Tigress shook her head. She turned away without another word.

Po scowled… then stood up with his bowl.

"Po, where are you going?" Ming asked.

"I'm going over to sit with Tigress." Said Po. "She always does this when something's bothering her. Do you guys wanna come?"

"No, it's okay." Qiang waved his paw in polite refusal. "We wouldn't want to crowd her."

Po strolled over towards Tigress. As he approached, he frowned when he saw that her eyes were narrowed in deep concern, staring at nothing in particular. He didn't like that. He didn't like seeing her in this way. It usually meant she was afraid of something.

Tigress looked up in surprise as the panda sat down next to her.

"Po?"

"I know you said you're okay by yourself, but I don't like it when you insist on hiding your problems." Po said firmly, settling himself on the grass he sat on.

"What makes you think I've got problems?" Po fought the urge to cower under Tigress's annoyed glare.

"Whenever something's bothering you, you insist of being isolated with it." He retorted bravely.

"So what's the problem?"

Tigress sighed. She had learned the hard way that refusing to answer Po almost always resulted in a very long night.

"I'm concerned about that bandit attack the other day." She said.

"Don't tell me you're beating yourself up over the fact that you missed one!" Po groaned incredulously. "It was just one guy!"

"It's not that." Tigress replied quietly. "It's just odd that Qiang and Ming appeared to not know that there were bandits prowling round the mountains."

"So?" Po frowned, not getting her point.
"So… if there were bandits in the mountains, wouldn't they have made an attack on the village in the past, or found some other way to make themselves known to the people?"

"Tigress, I'm not understanding."

"Think about it Po. It's like they appeared literally out of nowhere."

Po shrugged.

"Maybe they're new to the mountains."

"No, it's not that. Master Shifu told me this after the attack…" she leant in close. "He had actually heard their presence long before they attacked. They had been discussing tactics, debating which of the kung fu warriors would be the biggest threat." Tigress paused. "Po… we think they were waiting for us. And they knew who we were."

Po gulped, finally understanding what Tigress what getting at.

"If that's true, then why didn't Shifu do anything to defeat them before they could attack us?" he asked.

"He said he didn't want to do anything that may endanger those in our group who couldn't defend themselves. He had been hoping we would slip by them unnoticed, but they noticed us anyway."

"You don't think they would attack the village, would they?" Po asked anxiously. He gazed out at the many villagers laughing and talking. Elders... young women... little kids...

Fiery visions of wolves and burning houses flashed across his mind, making his heart race.

"Master Shifu doesn't think so." Tigress spoke seriously. Po's gaze snapped back to her. "Even if they do attack, we'll protect the villagers. Don't you worry about that."

Po's breathing slowed down as Tigress's words reassured him. She was right. There wasn't really any reason why they would attack. The bandits had gotten pummelled during their encounter with the warriors, and would know better than to attack a village where their earlier opponents were currently residing.

"Okay, if you're sure…" Po put a paw on his friend's shoulder, and with his other paw jerked his thumb in the direction of his fathers and Ming. "Tigress, do you maybe want to sit with us now?"

Tigress considered Po's offer… then gave a small smile.

"Alright then. I guess I can do with a little company."

Po grinned and led Tigress back over to the spot where both his fathers and Ming still sat.

"… outnumbered a thousand to one, but we didn't stop! And then we were like WAH! YAH WAI-YAH!" Mantis swung his forelegs into the air as he dramatically imitated a particularly action-packed part of the reenactment… and the Tigress action figure he was carrying promptly flew from his grasp and soared high into the air, disappearing into the dark forest surrounding the village.

"Mantis!" Monkey exclaimed in shock, as the children rolled round with laughter at what had just happened. "Po is gonna kill us when he finds out you lost that!"

"Hey, chill!" Mantis rolled his eyes. "I'll go and get it. You just keep providing the entertainment."
Grumbling, Mantis hopped off into the forest as Monkey picked up the Viper action figure and began mimicking her performing the puppet of death on a stick figure.

It was darker in the forest than Mantis had expected.

Even despite his small size, he kept stubbing his thin legs on tiny stones, and tripped on spindly twigs which he failed to see in the darkness. The slight breeze against the branches above him sent a rustling sound, loud in the dark, through Mantis's ears, making him feel slightly nervous.

Mantis grumbled as he ventured deeper and deeper into the forest, furious with himself for flinging the action figure so far into the forest. He often forgot his own strength when excited.

After what must have been twenty minutes of searching, Mantis grinned in triumph and grabbed the action figure: it was fortunate that the bright orange paint Po used for Tigress's fur was still visible in the near-black.

Got ya! Mantis exclaimed in his head. Let's get you back to the-

"Boss! Boss! I think we've found it!"

Mantis froze at the sounds of voices and footsteps not too far away. He ducked low, keeping his small body positioned over the Tigress figure so the invisible figures would not notice the bright orange paint.

"You have? Where is it?"

Mantis recognized the voice of Mu Zanshi.

"About fifty meters in that direction."

Mantis lifted his head slightly, intrigued.

"Is it anything like how they described it?"

"Yeah, all the way down to that weird indentation in the door. The one shaped like a circle."

"Excellent. Now if you don't mind, I would like to see the entrance for myself, just to confirm that it is indeed the site."

"Okay, boss. Anything you say."

Mantis heard footsteps fade into the distance.

"Uh… boss…"

"Yes, Lidong?"

"What are we gonna do about the panda village?"

"Never mind the pandas. They won't be a bother as long as we don't draw attention to ourselves."

A bit late for that. Mantis thought.

"But boss…"

"If you know what's good for you, you'll suppress your bandit urges and stay away from them!"
Zanshi snapped.

"Okay, okay, I'll leave them alone!" Mantis did not fail to notice the reluctance in Lidong's tone.

"Good. Now let's go see that entrance."

Mantis heard more footsteps, and then nothing more.

Mantis waited a few minutes to make sure the alligator and his cohorts had indeed left before moving from his spot on the ground, making his way back to the village. After two minutes, he rushed back for the action figure, cursing himself for forgetting it.

"About time!" Monkey exclaimed when the bug returned. Mantis's eyes widened when he saw that the panda children had all piled on Monkey, trapping the primate beneath a mound of adorable black and white fluffballs. "What took you so long?"

"I flung the action figure a fair distance." Mantis set the action figure down next to the others before laughing hysterically at Monkey predicament.

"Shurrup, you dumb bug!" Monkey yelled in pain as one of the little pandas rolled off the top of the pile and onto the primate's tail.

Mantis's laughing slowed to a stop.

"Excuse me, I'll be right back."

"Mantis, where are you going?" Monkey called as Mantis hopped over to Master Shifu, who had temporarily finished his conversation with the panda elders and was finishing off his noodle soup.

"What is it, Mantis?" Shifu asked when Mantis materialized next to him.

"Um, Master, I've just discovered something I think you should know about…"
"WHAT?" Po gaped at his master in utter dismay. "Are you serious?"

"Dead serious." Shifu smirked at the panda's expression. "Since both your fathers are busy preparing for the cooking lesson, you can take the time to catch up on your training."

"But Shifuuuuu..." Po moaned.

"No buts. There's a clearing a little way from the farming fields. You can spar with the other students there."

"Ughhh... fine."

Po sighed as he, Monkey, Crane and Mantis set off for the mentioned clearing, leaving Shifu alone next to the small pond. Five minutes later, Po was still sulking as he sat on a grassy mound, watching as his friends sparred nigh-flawlessly with each other.

It wasn't until the three-way spar ended in a stalemate that Mantis noticed Po's mood.

"What's the problem, buddy?" Mantis frowned and hopped over to his friend.

"Uh, it's nothing." Po sighed, leaning back on his hands and gazing up at the sky. The sky was completely clear that morning, no white clouds dotting the sea of blue.

"If it's nothing, then why do you look like you ate a spoiled dumpling?"

"Alright..." Po looked back down at his friends. It was now use continuing to deny it. "I sorta had other plans today."

Unexpectedly, two huge grins formed on Monkey and Mantis's faces. Po felt a twinge of unease.

"Did those plans have anything to do with a certain lady panda named Ming?"

Po's widened, and a brilliant red formed on his cheeks.

"What? No! No, absolutely not! Nothing to do with her whatsoever!"

"Then why are you blushing?"

"You know I always get embarrassed when you start talking about girls!"

"Oh, it's not just the blushing..." Monkey and Mantis leaned in towards Po while Crane rolled his eyes.

"Guys, we're supposed to be training." The avian said.
"Hush." Monkey and Mantis said without looking at him.

"As we were saying, Po, it's not just the fact that you blush every time you and Ming make eye contact." Monkey started again. "You always insist on spending time with her…"

"Since you met her, you've been avoiding stinky garlic…" Mantis added.

"You told her a really funny story that was actually true…"

"And you haven't stopped blushing once since we brought her up."

"Okay, fine!" Po snapped. "Maybe I do have a teensy little crush…"

"A teensy little crush?" Monkey laughed. "Understatement of the century, dude!"

"Have you even asked her out, yet?" Mantis asked.

"Uh… no."

"Do you even know how to?"

Po looked away in embarrassment. "No."

"Do you want to?"

"No-yes." Po changed his answer mid-word.

"Then you've come to the right guys!" Mantis grinned and hopped on Po's shoulders.

"Gods, I'm not staying for this." Crane turned to leave.

"Come on, Crane!" Monkey called to him. "Po could do with a little advice!"

"He could do without the humiliation he is bound to suffer if he listens to you!"

"If you leave, we'll tell Master Shifu you skipped out on training!"

"That doesn't scare me! And you can't call giving Po stupid advice 'training'!"

"Alright then…" There was suddenly a dangerous glint in Monkey's eyes. "I don't want to do this… but if you leave… I'll tell Viper about you-know-what!"

"Aw go ahead, I-" Crane froze. "Would you tell her that?"

"I certainly would."

The avian gulped.

"Would you?"

"I would!"

"Alright then!" Crane snapped and plonked his rear down on the ground. "I'll stay, but I'm having no part in what you're doing!"

"Fair enough."

Monkey and Mantis turned back to Po.
"Alright then…" Mantis said. "Since I'm currently the only one with a girlfriend, I'd better go first."

Po waited patiently.

"Before we begin, let me ask you a question. How old do you think Ming is?"

"Dad said she was born a few months after me, so she should be just a little younger than me."

"Okay, so we'll leave out pretending that you're younger than you really are."

"Hang on a sec, are you saying that I should be lying to Ming?" Po exclaimed.

"Not lying, pretending." Monkey corrected. "The less flaws she thinks you have, the better."

"Aw jeez…" Crane muttered.

"Also, you should regale her with all your amazing adventures and accomplishments." Mantis went on. "Ladies love a guy who's awesome at loads of stuff."

"Uh, are you sure about this?" Po asked uncertainly. "My goose dad used to say that talking all about yourself is one of the worst things you can do on a date."

"He's old, so what does he know? You're the Dragon Warrior, so you should talk about yourself as much as possible!"

"I don't know…"

"And all else fails, drink some rice wine to calm your nerves and…"

"Alright, I'll take it from here!" Crane got up and pushed Monkey and Mantis aside. "Go away and do something you're actually good at… like annoying Tigress!"

Crane perched himself on an exposed tree root.

"Po, just ask her to go out to dinner." Crane told him. "Dinner is the most simplistic and best thing you can do on a first date."

"Where should I take her?" Po asked. "There isn't a restaurant for miles."

"You're a very talented cook, we can all testify to that. Besides, it'll impress her if you do the cooking yourself. As for location, take her somewhere secluded and quiet, where you can have peace to eat and make conversation."

"Awesome. What else?"

"It's a bad idea to talk about yourself non-stop, but it's just as bad to not say anything at all. Allow her to talk every now and then, and answer any questions she gives you. Be honest, but not so honest that she'll get offended."

"What should I talk about?"

"Be positive. Talk a little about your accomplishments, but don't forget to be modest about them."

"Is that all?" Po asked when Crane paused.

"One more thing…"
"Yes?"

"No matter what… do NOT overdo it with the rice wine!"

"Got it. Thanks, Crane. That advice is really gonna help me."

"Your welcome. And here's another bit of advice: from now on, do not take any notice of the things those two morons tell you."

"Heh heh… got it."

"Hey, we heard that!" Monkey and Mantis scowled.

Two hundred and ten… two hundred and eleven… two hundred and twelve…

Tigress breathed rhythmically as she pulled herself up and down from the tree branch.

"You know, it's a shame that my body prevents me from doing pull-ups." Viper said as she relaxed on the branch next to Tigress's grasping paws.

"Oh yeah…" Tigress spoke with each lift. "… and why… is that?"

"When girls make conversation, they're supposed to do it while doing the same thing together."

"Is that… really… a social convention?"

Two hundred and twenty eight… two hundred and twenty nine… two hundred and thirty…

"No. But it's still a shame."

"Of course… you would… think that…"

"Hey, Tigress. Are you going to that cooking lesson Qiang and Mr. Ping are presenting?"

"Everyone else is… so I might as well… just in case something… goes wrong…"

"Why would you think that?"

"In case… you've forgotten… Qiang and Mr. Ping… are not getting along…"

"Oh, yes." Viper's eyes narrowed in concern. "I hope for Po's sake that the lesson goes well."

"That will… depend on how… their practice today goes…" Tigress replied.

Two hundred and fifty four… two hundred and fifty five… two hundred and fifty six…

"Do you think Po knows?"

"He's not that… naive… but I can… tell he's concerned… when he looks at them… he's just trying to… hide it… in case they end up… getting along after all."

"You're probably right." Said Viper. "Uhhh… I'm famished. I'm going to get a snack, do you want anything?"

"I would… like an apple… for once I'm done… on this branch."
"Okay. I'll be back in a bit." Viper leapt down from the branch and slithered off.

Tigress continued to breathe in and out as she pulled herself up and down.

Two hundred and eighty one… two hundred and eighty two… two hundred and eighty three… two hundred and eighty four… two hundred and eighty five… two hundred and eighty six… two hundred and eighty seven… two hundred and eighty eight…

"Um, excuse me?"

Without stopping, Tigress glanced downwards to see Ming standing in front of her, wringing her hands.

"What can I… do for you?" Tigress asked.

"Um… is anyone else around?" Ming asked.

"Viper just left." Tigress answered, momentarily wondering why Ming sounded so nervous.

"Could you perhaps come down for a few minutes so I can talk to you?"

"Sorry… but I need to… keep up with my training… but we can… still talk."

"Oh, okay…" Ming hesitated. "Out of all of Po's friends, you seem to know him the best."

"I wouldn't… say that…"

Three hundred and six… three hundred and seven… three hundred and eight…

"But you both appear to be quite close." Ming replied. "Before I continue… I have to ask…" Ming inexplicably began blushing. "Are you and Po… going out?"

Three hundred and thirteen… three hundred and HUH?

Tigress stopped mid-lift.

Her amber eyes widened in shock and her mouth fell open as she registered what Ming had just asked her.

"Er… I…" she struggled to answer as the memory of a similar question washed over her…

"Can we do your hair and makeup?" One of the albino bunnies asked.

The fever-ridden feline glared at them from her bed.

"No."

"Are you strong enough to stop us?"

"… no…"

"We're gonna make you pretty!"

Tigress groaned as the two children leapt on her chest and began painting on her face.

"So do you love Po?"
Tigress blinked.

"Is Po your boyfriend?"

"Wh-what?" Tigress stammered. "No!"

Why was she getting so flustered?

"Tigress?"

Tigress snapped out of her memory and glanced back down at Ming.

She released her grip on the branch and dropped down in front of the female panda.

"Master Tigress, are you alright?"

"Um, er…" Tigress hesitated.

Why are you reacting like this?! You and Po are friends, nothing more!

"No, we're not. We're just friends, nothing more." Tigress finally said in her usual composure, repeating what her mind had just spoken.

"Oh good!" Ming smiled in relief. "Because to be honest… I kind of like him."

Tigress suddenly felt a pang in her chest.

"And I think he might like me, too."

Another pang.

What's the matter with you, Tigress!

"Do you think I should pursue a relationship with him?"

It was a while before Tigress answered that particular question.

"Po is a very kind and loyal person." Tigress said. "And a very good friend. I'm not sure if Master Shifu would approve of Po being in a relationship, but Po is a good person to be with. I should warn you that he isn't experienced with romance, so do not be offended if he screws up. Remember, he's very shy, but very sweet."

"Okay. I'll remember that. Thank you so much, Tigress. I'll leave you to get on with your training now."

Ming walked off.

Tigress did not return to lifting herself from the branch, instead moving to lean against the tree.

What on earth just happened? Why did I get so flustered? Po and I are just friends!

Aren't we?

Viper returned a few minutes later with a small basket of apples.

"Tigress, are you alright?"
"Uh, yes." Tigress answered. "Viper, do you know if there are any ironwood trees in the area?"
Qiang and Mr. Ping sat down at opposite ends of the small table in the little kitchen inside Qiang's house, the scroll containing the noodle soup recipe lying on the wooden surface between them.

The same thought floated in their minds: do this for Po. Do this for your son.

Qiang was the first to speak.

"So, it's noodle soup we're making, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is." Said Mr. Ping. His tone was flat, yet tense at the same time.

"The stove's lit and waiting. We should probably get started." Said Qiang, gesturing to the small fire lit beneath the stove.

"I still think we should use my noodle cart to cook the noodles."

"Well, we wouldn't want anything to happen to the cart if something went wrong, would we?"

"No, I suppose not."

"Good. So, what do we need?"

Qiang reached for the scroll.

Mr. Ping snatched it before the panda could pick it up.

"I'm more experienced. I will read it out." Said the goose. Qiang did not fail to notice the tone of condescension in his voice.

"But we're cooking together tomorrow." Qiang replied. "Shouldn't we read it together?"

"Oh no, you need to cook while I read out the instructions."

"But-"

"Hush! I'm trying to read!"

"But why are you reading from the recipe? I thought you already knew-"

"I said hush! No more questions!"

Qiang scowled as Mr. Ping peered at the scroll.

"The first thing you need is a saucepan."

Qiang obediently got up, grabbed the saucepan, and placed it on the stove.

"What next?"

"Next, you take a tablespoon of vegetable oil and heat it up in the pan."

Qiang did as he was told.
"Which vegetables do we need?" he asked.

"You will need onions, carrots, yellow peppers and spring onions."

"I'm sorry, but the yellow peppers are not ready for harvesting yet." Said Qiang.

"Then the soup will have to do without the spicy aftertaste." Mr. Ping sighed.

"I thought this soup came with radishes?" Qiang asked.

"We don't need radishes for this dish." Mr. Ping said dismissively, without looking up from the scroll.

"Are you sure? There were radish slices in the soup you made last night…"

"No dilly-daddling!" the goose said abruptly. "Strip the vegetables and fry them in the pan until soft."

Qiang bit his lip as he begun stripping the vegetables. However…

"Ah, no!" Mr. Ping suddenly snapped. "You're supposed to peel the carrots first before stripping them!"

"Then why didn't you tell me that before?" Qiang replied, annoyed.

"You're a chef! Aren't you supposed to know that anyway?"

Qiang didn't reply, instead returning to the vegetables.

Once the vegetable strips were softened in the pan, Qiang waited patiently for the goose's next instructions.

"Next, you add the creamed sweet-corn." Mr. Ping continued to read from the scroll. "And make sure it's creamed."

"We don't grow sweet-corn here."

"I beg your pardon?"

"We don't grow sweet-corn in the fields." Qiang said.

"Why didn't you tell me that before?" Mr. Ping scowled.

"I would have known that sweet-corn was needed if you had let me look at the recipe!" Qiang snapped. "I'm not your student! I'm supposed to be your partner!"

"How can you be my partner if you've never cooked vegetable noodle soup before?" Mr. Ping set down the scroll and glared up at the panda.

"Vegetable noodle soup?" Qiang repeated. "I thought you called it Secret Ingredient soup?"

"I don't." Mr. Ping replied testily. "That's because the dish we're making is not Secret Ingredient soup."

Qiang blinked.

"May I ask why are we not making Secret Ingredient soup?"
"Because I refuse to share my secret ingredient with a total stranger!"

At that moment, the tension and anger between the two fathers reached boiling point, and began to bubble over like an unwatched pot of broth.

"Total stranger?" Qiang rose to his full height. "In case you've forgotten, I am Po's birth father! And you've known me for over a week!"

"And in that time, I've learned that you are loud, annoying and downright greedy!"

"How am I greedy? I only ate two bowls last night!"

"And yet you asked for more!" Mr. Ping exclaimed as if proving a point.

"I was complimenting your godforsaken soup, for crying out loud!" Qiang said through clenched teeth.

"What do mean 'godforsaken'?" Mr. Ping's eyes widened.

Qiang hesitated despite his anger, realizing that he had crossed some sort of invisible line.

"Sorry, I didn't me-"

"How dare you call my soup godforsaken!" Mr. Ping leapt up from his chair.

"Oh for gosh sakes, can we please stop this quarreling and get back to cooking?" Qiang groaned. "The point of this is to show Po we can get along!"

"Oh no!" Mr. Ping growled. "Not until I find out just what you meant by godforsaken!"

"I didn't mean anything!" Qiang clenched his fists. "I'm angry, okay, and people say things they don't mean when they're angry!"

Mr. Ping's eyes narrowed: the goose was unconvinced.

"I'm going to tell you something you probably don't know..." the goose said in a low voice. "I don't like you."

"Uh, yeah, I knew that already." Qiang replied coldly. "By the way, the feeling's mutual."

Mr. Ping opened his mouth to retort, and that was when the oil in the saucepan suddenly caught fire.

"GAH!"

Qiang was the first to act, soaking a small blanket in a nearby bucket and water. As he wrung the blanket then draped it over the flaming saucepan, Mr. Ping put out the fire beneath the stove with the same bucket.

The two men stared at the wet stove in silence.

After a while, Mr. Ping glared at Qiang.

"See what you've done?" He snapped. "This is the handiwork of an amateur chef!"

"How is this my fault?" Qiang snapped.
"I should never have let you near the stove!"

"Excuse me, but that's my stove! You have no say whether or not I'm allowed to use it! And this wouldn't have happened if you hadn't started mouthing off!"

"Oh that is it!" Mr. Ping turned on his heel and stormed towards the door.

"Where are you going?" Qiang demanded. "We're supposed to be cooking together!"

"Not on your life!"

Mr. Ping was out the door before Qiang could say any more.

A few minutes passed, and Qiang's anger faded, guilt and sadness forming in its place.

The aged panda sank into one of the chairs as the oil fire trapped beneath the damp blanket slowly died.

_I tried, Po_. Qiang pinched the bridge of his nose with his fingers. _I really did try._

---

Master Shifu could hear the argument between Qiang and Mr. Ping all the way from the small pond in the forest, where he perched on his staff as he meditated.

He swayed very slightly on the staff as his large sensitive ears were suddenly attacked by the loud slam of a door as the goose stormed from the house.

Shifu sighed.

If things didn't improve between the two soon, the old red panda may have to intervene. Though he would never admit it, in a way he owed it to Po to make sure his two fathers didn't end up killing each other.

There was a faint rustling in the bushes, and before long Viper, Crane and Mantis made their appearance.

"Did you hear that as well?" Shifu asked.

"Yeah." Viper admitted.

"Where is Po?"

"He's still sparring with Tigress and Monkey." Said Crane. "I don't think he heard anything."

"Good. Until further notice, it's best that Po remain ignorant."

"Uh, Master, Tigress reckons that Po may already be at least slightly aware of what's going on." Said Viper.

"Hmmmm..." Shifu paused as he considered this. "Po may still be a child at heart, but he's not stupid. Tigress may be right."

"What should we do, Master?" Crane asked.

"If we have any hope of resolving this quickly, we will have to do a little intervention." Said Shifu. "We need to find out exactly what the problems are between the two. It's already clear what the main reason is, but the smallest details are the most important." Shifu hesitated as he remembered
the late Master Oogway telling him those same words when he was a small cub. "Crane, this afternoon I want you to talk to Qiang, find out exactly what his problems are with Mr. Ping. Viper, you go and talk to Mr. Ping and find out what he has against Qiang."

"Yes, Master." Viper and Crane bowed.

"But what about you?" Viper spoke. "What are you going to do?"

"I have other matters to attend to." Shifu and Mantis exchanged glances. "Now go, both of you, and I will join you in a moment, Viper."

"Why, Master?" Viper asked, slightly surprised.

"I have an 'appointment' with Mr. Ping today. You can attend, if you wish."

"Yes, Master."

Viper and Crane slithered and flew off, while Mantis remained where he was.

Once the serpent and avian were out of earshot, Shifu stepped up to the insect.

"Have you found out what Zanshi is up to?" the red panda asked.

"I'm sorry, Master Shifu, but the area is crawling with Zanshi's goons. I haven't been able to get close enough to get a look at this entrance they're talking about."

Shifu stroked his not quite regrown beard in thought.

"Keep observing, and find out what you can learn from their conversations." Said Shifu.

"Er, Master, shouldn't we just take them out and be done with it?"

"No. Judging from what you'd told me last night, Zanshi has no intentions of bothering this village. Until he proves to be threat, you will merely observe."

"Yes, Master."

"Return to the clearing and continue your sparring as if nothing has happened. Dismissed."

"But Master, shouldn't we tell the others?"

"We will wait until tomorrow. Po has enough on his plate already with his fathers. Dismissed."

Mantis knew the conversation was finished. He bowed, and hopped off.

Shifu returned to his meditative position on the staff.

Though his face was calm, his mind was anything but.

Zanshi... he thought as he struggled to find his inner peace. If you so much as scratch any of these innocent villagers, the massacre of your comrades will seem like a picnic.
Shifu had been staring down at the board for fifteen minutes straight.

Suddenly, he reached over and picked up a tile. He started to move it to the right, when he saw Mr. Ping staring at him from the opposite side.

The red panda quickly moved the piece back to his original position.

Another five minutes passed. Viper stifled a yawn as she watched the two men think.

Then Shifu grabbed the tile again, and began to move it to the left. He changed his mind when he again saw the goose's unchanging expression.

Shifu was running out of options now, and he knew it. His eyes continued to stare down at the pieces on the board.

As the gears churned in his opponent's head, Mr. Ping waited patiently. As he waited, his thoughts turned to one of his fondest memories.

Twenty years ago, when Po was nine and Mr. Ping was still in his late thirties, the panda had taken part in a children's foot race, a common event in the Valley of Peace. He could still remember watching from the sidelines as Po huffed and puffed towards the finish line, a small pig named Heng maintaining a strong lead in front of him. Po had insisted that he had participated on his own free will, but his adoptive father knew better; no doubt Heng had pressured Po just so he could beat the boy once again. Mr. Ping greatly disliked the piglet, and disliked himself more for not mustering up the courage to scold him for his treatment of Po; but in his defense, his father was once a wrestler/sportsman.

The younger Mr. Ping brushed those thoughts aside, feeling a surge of pride towards his son for doing so well so far: true, he was currently running second, and sweat was pouring down his small face and soaking his fur, but Po was still running, determined to do his best. His mouth was wide open from panting, but his eyes were narrowed in concentration.

"Keep going, son!" Mr. Ping called, his voice rising high above the cheers of encouragement from the other parents. Five seconds after he yelled, Heng let out a cry of victory as he ran across the finish line and won the race.

Five minutes later, Mr. Ping scowled as he watched Heng tauntingly wave his blue first place ribbon in front of Po's face before running off towards his own parents. Po glanced sadly down at his scarlet second place ribbon before walking over to the goose. Mr. Ping's heart sank at the look of sorrow and self-loathing on the boy's black and white face. He knew what Po must have been thinking: he had failed miserably, and disappointed his father. It hurt the goose that Po thought he had to prove himself to his own father.

"I'm sorry, daddy." Po sniffled, the red ribbon squashed between his small paws. "I tried to win…"

Mr. Ping placed a hand on Po's slumped shoulder. He knew exactly what he had to say.

"You did your best, son." He said with a warm smile. "And for that, I am proud. Never forget that."

His words had the effect he was hoping for: after a couple of seconds, Po's mouth curled into a small smile, and he held out the ribbon for his father to see.
"Look, daddy!" He giggled. "Second place!"

"Good job, son!" Mr. Ping grinned and hugged his boy. "What do you say we go back home and we'll put the ribbon on the shelf to display?"

"Yeah!" Po exclaimed as Mr. Ping pinned the ribbon on the belt of his tan pants (the boy wasn't wearing a shirt).

"And then tonight, I'll make you a giant bowl of noodle soup to celebrate!" Mr. Ping took Po's hand and together they walked back to the village. He thought he noticed Po glancing back at Heng and his parents as they went, but paid it no mind. After all, as far as he was concerned, Po was already a winner in more ways than one. He would never let him go.

A small tapping sound brought Mr. Ping back to the present: Shifu had finally moved his piece, this time straight forward.

With an unchanging expression, the goose moved his own piece.

"Checkmate."

"Uggghhhhh!" Shifu groaned.

"Face it, Master Shifu…" Mr. Ping chortled. "The day you beat me at Xiangqi will be the day I put apples in noodle soup!"

"Ha, ha…” Shifu laughed sarcastically. "I'm going to converse with the elders. Viper, you can try beating him if you want."

Shifu walked off as Viper took his place in front of the board.

"Are you familiar with Xianqi, Master Viper?" Mr. Ping asked.

"Me and Crane play it sometimes when we're not training." Said Viper.

"Oh good. Hang on a minute while I reset the board."

After a couple of minutes, the board was reset.

"Would you like to go first, Viper?"

"Yes, thank you." Viper moved her first piece. "So, how is it going with you and Qiang?"

Mr. Ping dropped the piece he was about to move.

"Excuse me?"

"Are you and Qiang ready for the cooking lesson tomorrow?" Viper asked.

"Er…” Mr. Ping retrieved his piece with a sour expression. "No, we aren't."

"Is anything wrong?"

"Oh no, nothing's wrong. It's your turn, dear."

"Does it have anything to do with the argument you had this morning?" Viper asked as she moved another piece.
Mr. Ping winced.
"You heard that, huh?"

"You're lucky Po was one of the few who didn't hear that."
"It was his fault!" Mr. Ping said angrily as he made his move. "He would not listen to my instructions!"

"Well, you were a little out of line." Said Viper. "Pong was one of the people closest to the house, and he said that your tone sounded a little condescending."

Mr. Ping opened his mouth to protest, but couldn't come up with an excuse.

"I'm sorry for sticking my nose in, but what is your problem with Qiang?" Viper asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Mr. Ping exclaimed, forgetting about the Xiangqi board entirely. "Just a couple of months after my son discovers he's adopted, his birth father comes in out of the blue and tries to take him away! Well he's not going to succeed!"

"Mr. Ping, I think you're jumping to conclusions." Said Viper. "I've never seen Qiang ask Po to stay with him forever. In fact, I think he's more than willing to let Po stay in the Valley of Peace."

Mr. Ping didn't reply.

"Isn't there a way for you and Qiang to compromise on this cooking demonstration?" Viper asked, moving another piece.

"Chefs do not compromise!" the goose snapped. "Too many cooks spoil the soup, you know!"

"I didn't mean that!" said Viper. "What I meant was that perhaps you two could cook a different dish if you're not happy with sharing your secret ingredient with him."

Mr. Ping hesitated in moving a piece.

"That's possible. What sort of dish would you have in mind?"

"Well, I heard that Qiang was originally going to teach the children how to cook vegetable stir fry."

Mr. Ping gazed at Viper for a full minute. "Come on, the point of you coming here was to get along with Qiang. You could at least make an effort."

Mr. Ping was suddenly reminded on a child's foot race long ago.

"You did your best son, and for that I am proud."

Yes, all his life Po had always done his best. Now it was time for his adoptive father to do the same.

But with his ill feelings towards Qiang, that would be easier said that done.

"I'll think about it." Mr. Ping said. "Let's finish this game."

"Kyah! Ha!"

Po ducked Tigress's round-house kick and retaliated with a right-straight. Tigress blocked the
punch then swept Po's legs out from under him.

"Oof!" Po struggled for a moment to regain the air that had been knocked out of him.

"Once again, Tigress wins!" Monkey laughed as he watched from the edge of the clearing.

"Phew, I'll beat you yet, Tigress!" Po said.

"You keep thinking that, Dragon Warrior." Tigress smirked as she reached out a paw to help him up.

"Do you wanna go again or… Tigress what happened to your paw?" Po suddenly exclaimed.

Tigress blinked.

"My paw?" Tigress barely managed to ask before Po leapt to his feet and grabbed the limb. Both he and Tigress stared down at the paw, and she realized with a jolt that her knuckles were bleeding slightly.

"Tigress, what did you do?" Po demanded.

"I was punching some ironwood trees this morning." Tigress replied dismissively, slightly taken aback by Po's sudden concern. "No big deal."

"No big deal?" Po's eyes narrowed. He was still clutching Tigress's paw. "Tigress, I take back what I said before about this being severely cool! This isn't training, this is self-mutilation!"

"Po, it's just some bleeding knuckles!" Tigress retorted. "Besides, dozens of kung fu warriors do this to deaden the nerves!"

"Tigress…"

"I'm going back to the village!" Tigress wrenched her paw from Po's grasp. "I don't need you complaining about my training methods!"

She turned to leave.

"Tigress, wait!" Po cried.

Tigress didn't stop.

"Tigress, I'm sorry!" Po rushed after her and grabbed her arm to stop her. "I was just shocked at what you did to yourself."

"Since when did you care about my health?"

Po opened his mouth to answer, but faltered.

"I'm going. Monkey, you make sure he keeps training." Tigress pulled her arm out of Po's grip and left the clearing.

Po stared at the direction in which she had gone.

"I've cared ever since we became friends." Po whispered.

"What was that?" Monkey asked, his eyes wide with shock at what he had just witnessed.
"Nothing!" Po said quickly.

As he looked down at his paw, which was slightly stained with blood, Tigress stormed through the forest in the direction of the village.

_I don't need anyone caring about me! The orphanage didn't care! Shifu didn't care! No-one cared! Why should Po care? It's Ming he cares about- wait a minute, where did that come from? Besides, all I've done is hurt him! Why should he care?

The angry thoughts ran through her head as she reached the village, where the farmers were returning from the fields, and approached the house where the kung fu warriors rested.

"Master Tigress?"

Tigress stopped at the sound of Ming's voice, and turned to face her.

"Tigress, are you alright?" Ming asked.

"I'm fine." Tigress said dismissively.

"Are you sure? You're bleeding." Ming eyed the striped feline's knuckles.

"I was training."

"You should have that taken care of."

Tigress bit her lip. Ming noticed, but did not falter.

"I have bandages in the house." Ming said. "You can bandage your paw yourself if you want."

"I will. Thank you." Tigress followed Ming into Qiang's house.

As Tigress waited in the kitchen, Ming went upstairs to her bedroom, and returned with a small white box.

"Here you are." She put the box on the table. "You should clean your wound first. There's a bucket of water next to the stove."

"Thank you." Tigress dipped her paw into the water and rubbed it with her other paw.

"So what happened between you and your friends?" Ming asked as she opened the box and took out a roll of white bandages. "I thought I heard raised voices."

"Po noticed my knuckles and we had an argument." Said Tigress. "He wasn't happy that I was training so harshly."

"I don't blame him." said Ming. "Your paw looks really sore."

Tigress didn't answer her, instead drying her paw with a nearby small towel.

"I don't need anyone to worry about me." She said coolly as she took the bandage roll from Ming's paw. "I can look after myself."

"I'm sure you can." Ming chuckled. "Still, I think you may have been overreacting."

"Why?" Tigress asked testily as she wrapped the bandage round her knuckles.
"There's nothing wrong with people worrying about you." Ming spoke. "After my mother died, Qiang worried enough about me to take me in, and now I hardly think of myself as an orphan anymore. Caring about other people is one of the things that good friends do. And didn't you tell me that Po was such a friend?"

Tigress stared down at the table as Ming's words brought back memories of an aged red panda and a game of dominoes. Then she remembered a time when she had been drifting in the ocean, too weak to move or speak, given some strength only when a panda with green eyes had taken her paw and whispered her name. She smiled slightly at the memory, and unconsciously rubbed that very paw, almost as if he could still feel his touch. At the time, it hadn't occurred to her that her paws, which had endured the punching of ironwood trees for two decades, had registered the sensation.

"You're right." She sighed. "I'll apologize to Po when he returns to the village."

"Good." Ming smiled sweetly. "If you've finished bandaging, could I have the roll back? I need to put it back in the box so it doesn't get dirty."

Tigress wordlessly handed the roll back to Ming, who placed it back in the white box.

"Will you be coming to the cooking lesson tomorrow?" Tigress asked.

"I am always there to assist the children." Said Ming. "Will you be coming?"

"Yes. Thank you for the bandages, and for your advice."

Tigress bowed respectfully to the female panda and left the building.
"Here's your vegetables, Qiang." Pong placed a large crate full of garlic, cabbages, spring onions and other ingredients required for the vegetable stir fry.

"Thank you, Pong." Qiang smiled as he rummaged through the crate to make sure he had everything he needed.

"No, thank you." Pong grinned back. "Ever since she began coming to your lessons, my daughter's self-confidence has really shot up."

"Glad to know they were of help." Qiang replied. "Bye, now."

Qiang effortlessly lifted the crate on one shoulder as he made his way through the village. As he walked, he smiled at the sight of Pong's wife supervising their little girl as she flew her red kite for the first time.

As he approached his house, he was surprised to find the avian in the large rice hat waiting for him on the front steps.

"Good afternoon, Master Crane." Qiang greeted the warrior warmly. "How may I help you?"

"Hello, Qiang." Crane replied. "Uh, are Monkey and Mantis around?"

"No, they should still be out in the forest with Po. Why?"

"Uh…" Crane hesitated. "I was wondering if you could…"

"Yes?"

"Could you teach me how to cook stir fry?"

"Of course." Qiang said without hesitation. "If you come to the lesson tomorrow…"

"Um, I was wondering if you could teach me today." Crane spoke. "If Monkey and Mantis saw me learning to cook with a bunch of kids, I'd never hear the end of it."

"Heh, understandable." Qiang chuckled. "If I may ask, has any of this got to do with Miss Viper?"

"Wait, what?"

"I'm just joking!" Qiang laughed at Crane's expression. "Come on in and we'll get started."

Qiang led the avian into the house, where they found Ming emerging from the kitchen with a white box.

"What are you doing with the first aid kit?" Qiang asked in concern. "Who was hurt?"

"Master Tigress injured her paw while training." Ming explained. "It was nothing serious, her knuckles just needed wrapping."

"Oh good." Qiang sighed in relief. "Is the kitchen free?"

"Yes. I'll get out of your road." Ming disappeared up the stairs.
Two minutes later, Qiang gathered a handful of each of the vegetables and placed them on the table as Crane waited patiently by the lit stove.

"The first thing you should do is heat the vegetable oil in the wok." Qiang began. "Here's the oil. Use a tablespoon full."

Crane did as he was told, and then turned back to the panda.

He hesitated before speaking.

"So..." he eventually began. "You and Mr. Ping..."

"Oh no." Qiang sighed in dismay. "You heard our argument this morning, didn't you?"

Crane nodded.

"I'm so sorry." Qiang looked away from Crane. "I let my anger get the better of me. I should have known better."

"It's okay." Said Crane. "Shifu just wanted me to find out what the problem was."

"Uh, I don't know..." Qiang sighed again. "The oil's starting to heat up. Mince the garlic and ginger then sauté them for a couple of minutes."

"How much of each?"

"One sliced ginger and two garlic gloves."

Crane did as he was told.

"Are you sure you don't know what the problem is?" Crane asked as he poured the minced vegetables into the wok.

"I think it's about Po." Qiang admitted. "I mean, it's not easy having to share a son with another father."

"I get what you mean." Said Crane. "What next?"

"Once you're done with sautéing, you carefully put in a quarter cup of water and a quarter cup of soy sauce. You let them stir fry for five to seven minutes. While you're waiting, you can chop up the remaining vegetables."

"Okay." Crane picked up the water and soy sauce. Once they were in the wok, Crane grabbed a knife and began to chop.

"Huh!" Qiang made a small noise of surprise.

"What's wrong?" Crane looked up from the chopping board.

"Oh, nothing’s wrong." Said Qiang. "I just didn't realize you were ambidextrous."

"Pardon?"

"It means you're both right and left handed." Qiang explained. "Last night, I saw you eating with your right talon. But now you're chopping with your left."
"Huh!" Crane looked down at the talon grasping the knife. "I never noticed."

"You'd better get back to chopping." Qiang said. "If you leave the oil for too long, it could catch fire."

"Like it did this morning?" Crane blurted out without thinking.

"Hush up and chop."

"Sorry." Crane resumed slicing the mushrooms, and then moved on to the water chestnuts. "So why exactly do you and Mr. Ping have a problem concerning Po. It's probably already obvious, but we're a little concerned and we want to know exactly what's going on."

"I guess I'm just afraid of losing Po again." Qiang sat down in a chair. "I mean, I lose him for twenty five years, and when I finally find him, I discover that he's got himself a new father! Do you have any idea how that feels?"

"No." Crane answered. "And it's perfectly understandable. But don't you think this hostility with Mr. Ping is a little unnecessary? I don't think Po will appreciate his two fathers being enemies."

Qiang stared at the avian for a long time. Then he looked down at the little bits of vegetables on the table.

Little Xue was smiling as he nibbled on his father's thumb, green eyes shining with happiness.

"You're right." Qiang looked up with narrowed eyes. "I should give it another go. I owe it to my son."

"That's the spirit!" Crane grinned. "Chopping's done. What now?"

Qiang glanced at the egg timer on the table.

"We wait a couple more minutes..."

"You were out of line." Mr. Ping said to himself as he approached Qiang's house. "Give him another chance..."

He had just reached the bottom of the front steps when the door opened and Crane stepped out with a bowl, the contents which judging from the scent was stir fry.

"Mr. Ping!" Crane said, surprised. "What are you doing here?"

"I wish to talk to Qiang." Mr. Ping stated. "So we can discuss the cooking lesson tomorrow."

"Oh great!" Crane grinned. "I was just talking to Qiang, and he feels really bad about the argument you and him had this morning. In fact he's willing to give it another shot, too."

"Is he?" the goose asked.

"Yeah. Look, he taught me to cook vegetable stir fry. Want a taste?"

"Alright." Mr. Ping took a spoon from his pocket and had a small mouthful.

"Mmm..." Mr. Ping paused to savor the taste. "Maybe I misjudged his teaching skills."
"And he told me himself that he is more than willing to cook the plain noodle soup if you wish." Crane said, grinning at the fact that his work had paid off. "Even though he dislikes the soup."

Mr. Ping froze.

He swallowed the mouthful of stir fry.

"I beg your pardon…" He said in a loud whisper. "He dislikes the soup?"

"Uh yeah." Said Crane. "I like the soup myself but…"

"Of course you did. He dislikes the soup?" Mr. Ping's eyes narrowed.

Crane realized, all too late, what he had said.

"Uh, he didn't say that in those exact words…” The avian stammered.

"What words did he say, exactly?" Mr. Ping demanded.

Crane gulped.

"Uh, you should know that… errr… what he said wasn't set in stone…” he stammered some more. "For all we know, he was just… um… angry from the argument you had…"

"What did Qiang say?" Mr. Ping snapped.

"Your soup tasted bland!"

There was a very nasty silence.

Mr. Ping's eyes bulged. His beak clamped shut like a vice.

At that moment, Qiang emerged from the house.

"Mr. Ping!" He said when he saw the goose. "I was just about to go looking for you. Listen, I think we got off on the wrong…"

"Don't you ever come near me or my son again you black and white pudding!"

Qiang blinked as Mr. Ping stormed off.

He looked at Crane.

"What just happened?"

"Heh, heh… heh.." Crane chuckled nervously.

Then he flapped off as quickly as he could.

"They're all around us!" The boar standing next to Mu Zanshi cried. "We're doomed!"

"We're not doomed yet!" Mu Zanshi cried back. The lie was put to his words when the enemy soldiers suddenly emerged from the trees as one, and the group of soldiers found themselves hopelessly surrounded in the pouring rain.

"Captain Zanshi, what are we going to do?" his men asked desperately.
"We wait for reinforcements!" Zanshi quickly said. "I sent a distress message six hours ago!"

"Then why aren't they here yet?"

"I don't know! But they're coming, I know it!"

The boar opened his mouth to reply, but suddenly jolted then fell forward, an arrow protruding from his back.

"No!" Zanshi cried, but his yell of dismay was drowned out by the screams of his other comrades as the enemy soldier attacked.

What happened next was a mixture of screaming, thick drops of rain, the flash of swinging blades, and the splatter of blood. Zanshi couldn't bear to describe it in detail.

Once he realized that all of his men were lost, Zanshi ran for his life. He made it twenty feet into the forest when he felt a terrible pain as a thrown sword sliced into his back. He fell head first into a ditch and quickly found himself half-submerged in semi-liquid mud.

A single thought sprang into his mind through the pain and despair... camouflage.

Zanshi quickly rolled about in the dirt until he was completely covered. Then he lay as still as the dead and waited, praying that the enemy soldiers wouldn't find him, and that if they did, they would make it quick...

Zanshi opened his eyes.

He sat up in his hammock and realized that sweat was pouring down his scaly face, dripping off the tip of his short snout.

"Curse these dreams!" Zanshi growled and dug his claws into his skull hard enough to shed blood. They're nothing more than a nuisance!

At that moment, Lidong stepped into the tent.

The alligator looked up sharply, furious at the interruption.

"This had better be important!" Zanshi snapped.

"We're making no progress with the entrance." Lidong stated. "That stupid door won't open!"

"Is that all you came to tell me?" Zanshi asked in a dangerous voice.

"Uh..." Lidong gulped.

"Get out, stay out, and don't come back until you have some good news!" Zanshi roared. Lidong quickly left the tent.

Zanshi snarled in frustration then lay back down in the hammock. He closed his eyes.

Screaming... blood... death... betrayal...

"Curse these dreams." Zanshi repeated with a whisper.
Knock, knock!

Po made to head for the door of their house, but stumbled with the weight of the crate of vegetables.

"Dad, I've got my hands a little full. Could you get that?"

"Of course, son." Mr. Ping headed for the front door and opened it.

He scowled when he saw Qiang standing in the doorway.

"Er, hello." Qiang waved half-heartedly.

Mr. Ping responded by wordlessly walking over to the table, sitting down on one of the chairs, and turning his back on the panda.

Qiang sighed and turned to Po.

"Have you got the ingredients ready?" Qiang asked.

"Yeah, dad, but the crate's heavier than I thought it would be." Po actually had to set the crate down as he said this.

"Don't worry, son. I'll get that."

Qiang picked it up effortlessly.

"Holy…" Po gaped. "How did you manage to get so strong?"

"You'd be surprised how much weight training you get as a farmer." Qiang smirked. "Your friends are waiting at my house. Why don't you join them and I'll be with you in a minute?"

"Okay. See ya."

Once Po was gone, Qiang turned to Mr. Ping.

"Are you coming?" he asked.

"Why?" Mr. Ping demanded without looking at him. "So I can teach the children how to make bland noodle soup?"

"Come on, Mr. Ping, I didn't actually mean what I said." Qiang pleaded.

"Then why did you say it?" Mr. Ping retorted.
"I was still angry at the way you were treating me." Qiang said. "Besides, the children are going to learn vegetable stir fry today."

When Mr. Ping didn't answer, Qiang took a step forward.

"Are you sure you don't want to do this together?" Qiang asked. "This was Po's idea after all."

Mr. Ping's expression flickered slightly at the mention of Po, but the insult to his soup kept him from reconsidering. However…
"Alright, I'll come." Mr. Ping snapped. "But just to watch. I'm having no part in your silly lesson!"

"Fair enough." Said Qiang. "Come on, I don't want to keep the children waiting."

"You said what?" Shifu's was shocked.

"I really screwed up yesterday, I'm so sorry, Master!" Crane groaned as they and the others stood outside the house. In a flat space to the right of the house, two-dozen children sat patiently next to small stoves, waiting for their teacher to arrive.

"I can't believe you told Mr. Ping that Qiang didn't like his soup!" Shifu said angrily. "I thought Po was supposed to be the screwup in the Jade Palace!"

"I said I'm sorry!" Crane said. "I'll make it up for it, I promise."

"The best punishment I can think of right now is for you to take over Po's turn to clean the gutters when we get back to the palace!" Shifu glared at the avian.

"What?" Crane stared.

"Do not complain, Crane." Shifu said sternly. "I gave you an order to help mend the rift between Qiang and Mr. Ping, and you ended up making it worse. You will clean the gutters when we return, and no buts."

Crane sighed.

"Yes, Master." He said.

"I'm sure they'll work it out." Viper spoke up. "Mr. Ping isn't the type to hold a grudge."

"What grudge?" Po suddenly appeared next to her.

Viper's eyes widened.

"Oh, er…" she stammered.

"Does dad number one have a problem with dad number two?" Po asked worriedly.

"Oh no." Crane came to Viper's rescue. "We were just talking about what would happen if someone actually told Mr. Ping his soup tasted bad."

"Oh gods, do not do that, whatever you do!" Po suddenly looked fearful. "Have I ever told you about the needs-a-little-salt debacle that occurred when I was ten years old?" He shuddered.

"What happened?" Monkey asked.

"You don't wanna know."

At that moment, Ming stepped out of the house.

"Is Qiang here yet?" she asked.

"He said he would be here in a minute." Po said. "Do you want to wait out here with us?"

"Alright. I've been inside all day, I could use some fresh air." Ming sat down on the front steps between Po and Monkey.
Ten seconds had barely passed before Po felt a tapping on his shoulder.

He turned his head, expecting Ming. Instead, he caught a glimpse of Monkey's extremely flexible tail and his head jerking slightly in Ming's direction.

"What?" Po mouthed.

"You know..." Monkey mouthed back.

Ming adjusted the jade bracelet on her wrist, oblivious to the silent conversation.

"It's time!" Monkey mouthed the words. "Ask... her... out."

"Task her pout?" Po blinked.

"No, ask her out!"

"Mask a lout?"

"No, ask her out!"

"Wait, what?" Po almost said the words out loud.

As they stood a few meters away, Tigress, Crane, Viper and Shifu turned and noticed Po and Monkey doing something very strange. They appeared to be having a silent debate while Ming was sitting between them, doing strange gestures with their arms.

"What on earth are they doing?" Viper asked, extremely perplexed.

"Don't ask." Crane sighed. "I don't know and I don't think I want to."

"Kids..." Shifu muttered.

"Men..." Tigress sighed.

"Ask her out on a date!" Monkey mouthed.

"I can't do that!" Po scowled.

"Just do it!" Mantis hopped on Monkey's shoulder and joined in the noiseless argument. "What's the worst that could happen?"

"But..."

"Do it! Buck up and be the Dragon Warrior!"

Po bit his lip.

His heart began racing as he slowly turned his body so he was directly facing Ming.

"Uh, Ming? Can I talk to you in private?"

"Sure. Do you want to go inside?"

"Yeah. This will only take a minute, promise."

Po and Ming stood up and entered the house.
"Is it alright if I shut the doors?" Po asked, turning beet red at the thought of what he was about to ask.

"Alright." Ming said.

Po shut the double doors.

He turned to face Ming.

_Gosh, she's cute. She looks kinda like mom._

"So what do you want to say?" Ming asked.

"Uh… Ming…" Po hesitated. "I was sort of wondering… would you like to-"

He suddenly stopped. One of his short ears twitched. He rolled his eyes.

"Could you excuse me for just a sec?" he asked.

Ming nodded.

Po walked over to the double doors and opened the one on the right.

Monkey felt the smooth wood of the door disappear from his ear, and looked up to see Po's sour expression.

"Heh heh… sorry." Monkey chuckled.

"Beat it!"

Monkey disappeared from the doorway.

Po sighed and turned back to Ming.

"As I was saying… would you like to-"

Po stopped again.

He opened the door on the left.

Mantis chuckled nervously in the doorway, caught red handed with a glass to his ear.

"Go… away!" Po pointed outside the door with his finger.

Mantis obediently hopped off.

Po sighed again and shut the doors. Once again, he turned back to Ming, who was giggling slightly at what had just occurred.

"As… I was saying…" Po opened the doors slightly to make sure that no primate nor insect were lurking behind it. He shut them again. "Do you want to…" his cheeks burned. "Would you…"

"Yes?" Ming asked.

"Do you want to have dinner with me tonight?" Po cringed, his cheeks now redder than chili peppers.
Ming's eyes widened.
"You're asking me out?" she asked in disbelief.

"Uh… yeah." Po said, feeling a mother-load of butterflies fluttering round in his stomach. "You don't have to if you don't…"

"I'd love to!" Ming smiled widely.

Po blinked.
"What?" he blinked again.

"I'd love to have dinner with you." Ming said happily.

"R-really?"

"You're a very nice person, after all. Do you have anything in mind?"

"Would you like Secret Ingredient Soup?" Po asked. The corners of his mouth began to curl upwards as it finally hit him that Ming had accepted. "I can make something a bit fancier if you want…"

"Soup will be just fine." Ming said. "Where will we be eating?"

Po's small smile fell.
"Oh, it's okay." Ming said. "You can figure it out before tonight. What time have you got planned?"

"I was thinking round about sunset." Po replied. "Is that good for you?"

"Perfect." Ming nodded. "Could you pick me up outside the house?"

"Yeah." Po said, the smile now back on his lips.

"Okay, then it's settled." Ming beamed. "Do you want to go back outside?"

Po and Ming went back outside and rejoined the others.

"So what were you two talking about?" Monkey asked slyly.

"Oh, er, nothing!" Po blushed again. Ming chuckled.

Qiang and Mr. Ping then made their appearance, two meters distance between them as they approached the others.

"Hey, everyone." Qiang greeted them all warmly. "Sorry we took so long. Shall we get started?"

"I'll help you with that." Ming followed Qiang into the outdoor classroom. The children spotted them approaching and immediately became overjoyed at the arrival at their beloved cooking teacher.

"So did you finally do it?" Mantis asked Po.

"Yeah! She said yes!" Po suddenly exclaimed, a huge grin on his face. "Excuse me, I'm gonna go help too!"
Po rushed off after the other two pandas.

"What were you two talking about?" Tigress asked.

"Po finally asked Ming out!" Monkey grinned.

"Oh, how wonderful!" Viper said delightedly.

Shifu harrumphed, but with a small smile.

"Oh really? Well good for him." Tigress pursed her lips. "Good for Po…"

She quickly put a small smirk on her face.

"Let's go and get seated." Said Shifu. "I'm not standing here a minute longer."
Vegetable Stir Fry

Po's face fell.

"You two aren't going to be cooking together?" he asked in dismay. "Why not?"

"I'm sorry, son, I know you really wanted us to do this..." Mr. Ping sighed. "But I sprained my wing last night. Nothing serious, but I can't let myself near a stove. It's not safe."

"A sprained wing?" Po was concerned. "Are you okay?"

"I just told you it's not serious, Po." Mr. Ping replied, his heart aching a little at the disappointment in Po's eyes. "Now let's sit down. Qiang is about to start."

Po, Mr. Ping, Shifu and the Furious Five sat down at the side of the outdoor classroom where the little panda children stood with their small stoves, all eyes on their teacher, who was standing at the front with a larger stove before him and Ming by his side.

"Oh, aren't they adorable?" Viper whispered in delight as she gazed the numerous black and white fluffballs.

"I know I'm a guy, but I have to admit that I can clearly picture Po at that age." Crane spoke.

"You can what?" Po asked.

"Nothing. Shut up and watch."

At that moment, Qiang began to speak.

"Good afternoon, children." He said with a huge smile. "Have you all got your ingredients and utensils ready?"

"Yeah!" The children spoke as one.

"Very well, then. Let's begin." Qiang went on. "For those of you who are new to this class, let me explain how this works: I will remain up here and show you how to cook this recipe step by step, and you cook along with me. Ming will help you if you need any assistance."

"Can I help out too?" Po called out.

"Of course you can, son." Qiang grinned.

Pong's little girl put her tiny paw up in the air.

"Yes, Su?"

"What are we cooking today, Mr. Qiang?" she asked.

"I'm glad you asked, my dear. We will be cooking vegetable stir fry."

The children murmured happily.

"Are you all ready to get started?" Qiang asked

"Yeah!"
"Excellent." Qiang placed a wok on his stove. "First, you pour in a tablespoonful of vegetable oil…"

Po stood up and went to aid a small boy with a hurt arm as the lesson began.

Ten minutes into the lesson, Shifu leant in towards Mr. Ping.

"He's a very good teacher." Shifu praised. "The children have not made a single mistake since they started."

Mr. Ping humphed.

At that moment, Shifu felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned his head to see Master Mantis on his opposite side.

"What is it?" the red panda asked.

"Sorry to disturb you, Master." Mantis whispered. "It's about Zanshi…"

"After the lesson." Said Shifu. "There are too many people here."

Mantis nodded and returned to Monkey's shoulder.

"What was that about?" the primate asked.

"Sorry, it's strictly on a need to know." Said Mantis.

Tigress, meanwhile, kept her eyes on Po as he kindly showed Pong's daughter how to measure the amount of soy sauce in the cup accurately, while Ming did the same with another child two rows down.

"Isn't Po great with kids?" Viper asked her.

"Yeah, he is." Tigress replied with a small smile. "Did I ever tell you about the time he saved Princess Mei Li from the Qidan King?"

"You told me when you returned from that particular mission." Said Viper. "You know, you yourself are kind of weird around children."

"How do you mean?" Tigress frowned.

"You are often more than fine with kids, but sometimes you act like you hate them. What's with that?"

"I do like children!" Tigress retorted. "Just not when you're sick and stuck in a room full of them. And also when they follow you everywhere."

"Alright, alright, I get it." Viper chuckled.

As the warriors conversed, the sizzling of vegetables filled the air: the children were in the final stages of the recipe.

"Po, Ming, could you grab the bowls. The stir fry is almost finished." Qiang said.

"Okay."
"On it."

Suddenly, Po was struck with an idea.

"Hey, dad! If they say yes, could my friends have a little taste of their dishes? It would really give the kids a confidence boost."

"That's an excellent idea, Po!" Ming smiled.

"Agreed." Said Qiang with a grin. "Go and ask them, and me and Ming will help the children fill their bowls."

Po rushed over to his friends, master and father, and a minute later they all agreed to taste the children's food.

"Of course son, I'd love to evaluate the dishes of aspiring chefs." Mr. Ping said. For some reason, he looked very sour.

"Mmmmm…" Crane savored the taste of the first bowl he tried. "So good…"
"You kids are really good at this!" Viper beamed. "You're all miniature chefs in the making!"

The children turned bright red and smiled at the praise they were getting.

"Oh… so… awesome…" Mantis breathed every word as he stood on the rim of another child's bowl.

"You think mommy will like it?" the child asked tentatively.

"You kidding? She'll love it!"

As the other members of the Furious Five showered the children with well deserved praise, Shifu took a small mouthful from the bowl of Pong's daughter, who looked slightly nervous.

"Excellent work, child." He said warmly. "Your parents will be proud."

Pong's daughter blushed.

"Um, er… you're Po's teacher, right?"

"That is correct, child."

"And you teach him stuff, and help him out?"

"Yes."

"Oh. So…" the little girl paused in thought. "… so… if the goose is Po's daddy number one… and Mr. Qiang is daddy number two…" suddenly her face lit up. "Then you must be Po's daddy number three!"

Shifu's mouth fell open.

"What?""

"Po's really lucky to be having three daddies who really care about him!" the girl said happily.

"W-wait just a minute…" Shifu stammered. Why were his cheeks suddenly feeling hot? "You've
got the wrong idea, little girl! I am his teacher, nothing more!"

"If you're just his teacher, then why did you freak out when Po got shot by a cannon-thingy?"

"Huh?"

"Mister Po told us about it a couple of nights ago." Pong's daughter said. "He told us all about how you went all the way across China to help them fight that meanie peacock!"

"H-he did?" Shifu blinked. "Panda!" he growled through the corner of his mouth.

"He said he really wished his old school teacher had been that caring."

"Panda!" he growled again.

"He also kinda said that he wished you had cared about Missus Tigress like that."

"What?"

"Alright, children, that's enough tasting!" Ming called out at that moment. "Please take your seating positions in front of Mr. Qiang, please."

Pong's daughter quickly walked off with her bowl and sat down with the other children. Po, Shifu, Mr. Ping and the Furious Five stood at the back behind them. Mr. Ping was glaring at Qiang, fury in his brown eyes.

"You all did very well, today, as usual." Qiang smiled down at the children. "Did you all find that dish easy to…"

As Qiang continued to speak, Po leaned in towards his adoptive father, who was still looking furious.

"Hey, dad, you'll never guess what I did today…" he whispered with a huge grin. Mr. Ping didn't seem to hear him. "I just…"

"… now, before you all take your bowls home, do you have any questions?" Qiang asked.

Suddenly, Mr. Ping put his wing up in the air.

"I have a question…" he said loudly. "What the heck was that?"

The outdoors classroom was suddenly silent. Everyone turned their heads towards the goose.

"Any other questions?" Qiang asked, confusion and annoyance in his expression.

"Dad, what on earth are you doing?" Po asked in a loud whisper.

"I said, what the heck was that?" Mr. Ping snapped, ignoring Po.

"What the heck was what?" Qiang replied, glaring at the goose.

"You…" Mr. Ping strode past the children and straight up to Qiang. "You amateur… blatantly left out the boiled rice that goes with the vegetable stir fry! An inexcusable mistake!"

"I did not leave it out!" Qiang scowled. "It's an optional side dish, it's not part of the recipe."
"Dad, he's right!" Po said, trying to suppress his alarm. "Why don't you…"

"Stay out of this, Po!" Mr. Ping snapped without looking at him. "An optional side dish, huh? Are the hot peppers of my spicy noodle soup just an optional side dish?"

"This dish is not noodle soup!" Qiang retorted.

"That's true enough… this bowl of stuff you call stir fry doesn't even qualify as a dish!"

The children started to exchange glances while the adults standing behind them stared in silence.

Qiang stepped away from the stove and towered over the goose.

"If you hated my lesson that much, then perhaps you should have taught it with me!" the panda growled.

"I've told you a hundred times, I refuse to cook with an amateur chef, who is a back-chatting farmer and a lousy parent to boot!"

Po's eyes widened.

"You lied to me?" He breathed.

"What did you say?" Qiang snarled at Mr. Ping.

"You heard me!"

Qiang paused for a few seconds to resist the sudden urge to hit the goose.

"If you think that badly of me, then why did you come at all?" he eventually asked.

"Firstly, because I love my son, and secondly, because I knew you would mess this up!"

"Dads, please!" Po begged.

The two fathers didn't hear him.

"I did not mess this up!"

"Of course you did! Granted, the consistency of your vegetable chopping was marvelous…"

"Thank you."

"… but it was a complete and utter disaster from there!"

"You're being ridiculous!" Qiang groaned.

"No you're being ridiculous!" Mr. Ping retorted. "You're a fool to think I that would just give up Po without a fight!"

"That does it!" Qiang yelled, forgetting about the children entirely. "I've had enough of your and your big beak! Maybe I didn't raise Po like you did! Maybe the amount of time I ever spent with my son was four months instead of twenty five years, but you are not the only one who loves Po more than life itself!"

"Ha! That's a laugh!"
"Po, how in the world did you live with this guy?" Qiang turned to Po in disbelief. Po simply stared open mouthed. "I should have gone looking for you a long time ago!"

"So you admit that you want Po to stay with you forever?" Mr. Ping cried angrily.

"Yes!"

"Alright, that is it!"

Mr. Ping leapt onto the table, grabbed a ladle and whacked Qiang on the head.

"Ouch!" Qiang cried out in pain. "Cut that out!"

"Shut up and fall unconscious!" Mr. Ping cried and whacked him again.

"Ow! You cannot knock me unconscious with a ladle!"
"Then I'll settle for a concussion!"

_Whack!_

"Ow! Quit it!"

Qiang knocked the goose's wings away.

"Hey, he hit me! Did you see that, Po? He hit me!"

"You attacked me with a ladle!"

"And I'm not going to stop until you admit defeat!"

Mr. Ping whacked Qiang again.

"Stop!"

Again.

"Stop that!"

Again, harder.

"QUIT IT!"

Qiang grabbed the ladle and the two began to wrestle with it grasped in their paws and wings.

Mr. Ping determinedly held on and even attempted to steer the ladle in the direction of Qiang's face. Qiang, the bigger animal, managed to pin Mr. Ping to the surface of the table as they fought over the wooden utensil.

"Master, request permission to stop this!" Tigress turned to Shifu.

Shifu didn't answer right away.

The children and adults continued to stare in astonishment as Mr. Ping, with a strength unexpected of a goose his age, suddenly pushed upwards. Both still holding the ladle, they fell with a crash onto the ground. Qiang was the one pinned this time, and furiously tried to keep Mr. Ping from shoving the handle of the ladle up his nose.
"Master, do something!" Crane whispered.

Shifu quickly zipped over to the two brawlers, and separated them with a swing of his staff.

"Enough!" He yelled.

The children stared in amazement. They had never before seen their cooking teacher go from frying to fisticuffs with a goose.

"Both of you, get up now!" Shifu snapped.

Groaning, Qiang and Mr. Ping slowly got to the feet.

"Did you see that, Po?" Mr. Ping cried angrily. "He attacked me!"

"Do not blame me!" Qiang yelled. "You tried to attack me with a ladle-"

The two men stopped when they saw Po staring at them, mouth still agape, his expression one of shock, disbelief… and regret.

"Inside!" Shifu marched the panda and goose towards the house, prodding them with his staff to keep them moving. "Inside the house, now!"
Shifu practically shoved Qiang and Mr. Ping into the kitchen.

"I've had enough of you two!" Shifu snapped. "That is no way for two middle-aged men to behave!"

"He started it!" Qiang muttered.

"You wanna go again?" Mr. Ping waved his ladle, which Shifu swiftly smacked from the goose's hand.

"Shut your worthless mouths and listen!" Shifu growled. "Ever since Qiang's arrival, you two have been nothing but hostile to each other. This has to stop. Not only are you acting completely childish, you are also being unfair to Po! Just now, he had to watch you two squabble and brawl over a side dish!"

He stepped forward and balanced on the top of his staff so he was directly face to face with Qiang.

"Qiang, you should be ashamed of yourself. Right there, in front of your son and two dozen children, you lost your temper. What sort of example is that to set? Would Po really want a temperamental old fool for a father?"

Qiang wordlessly shook his head.

Shifu leapt down from his staff and strode up to Mr. Ping.

"Mr. Ping, the point of you coming with us to this village was to get along with Qiang, not try to drive him away from Po! You yourself promised Po that you would make an effort to get to know him better. But instead of fulfilling your promise, you were nothing but hostile to Qiang for no good reason. You too should be ashamed of yourself!"

Mr. Ping lowered his head.

"I want you two to stay in the kitchen and sort it out between you!" Shifu went on. "If you two begin fighting again, so help me you'll both wish you'd never been born!"

Shifu stormed out of the kitchen, and they heard the front door slam as he exited the house.

Shifu stepped out of the house to find most of the children gone, and Po, Ming and the Furious Five sitting in on the front steps.

Po was staring at the ground, looking as thought the annual dumpling festival had been cancelled.

"I never should have brought him along." He said to no-one in particular. "I should have known better…"

"Do not blame yourself, Po." Tigress said, a comforting paw on his back. "You had no idea your two fathers would behave like that."

"It was stupid of me to hope that they could ever get along."

"Dads are funny like that." Viper said gently. "My grandfather and step-grandfather absolutely
loathed each other. When my father wasn't protecting the village, he was busying himself keeping
the peace."

Po chuckled a little at that.

"Um, Po…" Ming spoke up. "You have a lot on your mind right now. If you're not up for it, we
don't have to go out…"
"No, no, I'll go!" Po said quickly. "I need something to take all this off my mind."

"Oh, alright then. So we're still on for tonight?"

"Yeah. Remember, I'm picking you up outside the house."

"Of course."

Ming smiled and walked off to take some of the remaining children back to their homes.

"Come on, let's get you back to our place." Viper smiled and wrapped her tail round Po's wrist and
gently pulled him into a standing position. "We need to get you cleaned up for your big date."

Po blushed as Viper led him down the grassy clearing, followed closely by the others.

Only Shifu now remained, standing guard outside the front door and listening carefully for the
sounds of fighting.

He suddenly heard the sound of rustling grass to his right.

He turned his head, and was surprised to see Su, Pong's daughter, still standing at the corner of the
house, clutching her bowl of stir fry.

"What are you still doing here?" He asked and walked over to her. "You should be heading home
now. Sunset will arrive any moment."

"I can't." Su said in a small voice. "When I move, the stir fry spills a little. I'm really clumsy."

Shifu saw little bits of vegetables at the child's feet. The sight suddenly brought back a memory of
a small tiger cub surrounded by the remains of the chair she had unintentionally broken.

"Do you want me to carry that for you?" he asked.

Su looked up.

"Would you mind?"

"Of course not."

Pong's daughter tentatively placed the bowl in Shifu's well-disciplined arms, and together they
walked through the village.

"If I may say so, Su…" Shifu spoke as they walked. "Do you mind if I call you Su?"

"No."

"You seem very down on yourself most of the time. What is the matter?"

Su didn't answer.
"It's alright." Shifu said gently. "You can talk to me."

Su looked up at Shifu. The red could clearly see the nervousness and vulnerability in the child's eyes.

"I will not judge you." Shifu's steely blue eyes gazed into hers.

After a moment, Su appeared to make the decision to trust him.

"I mess up a lot." She finally said. "I trip down the front steps all the time. I drop stuff. I'm a loser."

"Who told you that?"

"No-one." Su said honestly. "But I know it's true."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because I'm the only one who's clumsy!" Su whimpered. "The other kids didn't spill their stuff, did they?"

"No." Shifu admitted.

"See what I mean?"

A tear trickled down the child's cheek.

"You are not a loser." Shifu said sternly. A second later he added in a gentler voice: "You're just a little girl."

Su blinked.

"And FYI, the Dragon Warrior is three times your age, but he still falls down the thousand stairs every day. And he used to have low self-esteem, like you."

"Really?" Su's eyes widened. They were a lovely sapphire blue.

"Really, really. And Master Tigress used to consider herself a monster, because she could not control her strength. Now she's my prize student."

"Did you ever tell her that?" Su asked innocently.

It was Shifu's turn to blink.

"Uh… no. No, I didn't."

"You should!" Su said. "It's really mean for you to consider her your prize student but not tell her!"

"How is it mean?"

"Probably not the right word. But you should still tell her."

"I think it may be too late for that." He muttered.

Su opened her mouth to reply, but then spotted her house five feet away.

"Here's my house!" She said.
"A lovely little abode." Shifu said. "Su, please do not forget that your parents love you deeply, regardless of your clumsiness."

Su nodded.

"Thank you for helping me."

"No problem. I'll place your stir fry on the table on the porch."

Shifu placed the bowl on the table's surface.

"Good night, Master Shifu." Su smiled slightly. "And FYI, I think it's really nice of you to care for Mister Po so much that you tell off dads number one and two."

"You're welcome, my dear. And thank you." Shifu smiled back and walked off.

Huh... maybe I am Po's dad number three.

A long uncomfortable silence passed between the two men in the kitchen.

Then tears sprang up in Mr. Ping's eyes.

"Good lord... what have I done!!"

The sobbing goose threw himself on the table as Qiang looked on in surprise.

"What did I do?" Mr. Ping wailed. "I have turned into a complete monster!"

"Uh, Mr. Ping..." Qiang took an uncertain step forward. "I think you'd better calm down..."

"How can I calm down after what I just did?" Mr. Ping cried. "I broke a promise to Po, all because I was scared of losing him to you!"

Qiang stared at the goose whimpering tearfully, splayed out on the table.

After a while, Mr. Ping's tears subsided, and he sat up on the table's surface.

"Qiang..." He wiped his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too." Qiang replied with a small smile. "Not just for fighting with you, but for insulting your soup. If Mei were here, she would have been ashamed of the way I've been behaving."

"You didn't insult my soup." Mr. Ping spoke, eyes narrowed in shame. "Not really. Sooner or later I was bound to come across someone who disliked my soup. I shouldn't have taken it so personally."

"It's not just your soup." Qiang sat down in the chair next to the table Mr. Ping was sitting on. "I've never really liked noodle soup as a whole. I've always found it tasted a little bland. I don't like tofu for the same reason."

"Have you ever tried it with a little spice?"

"No. By the way, did you really have to freak out like that just because I didn't add rice?"

"Hey, I'm a professional cook!" Mr. Ping retorted defensively. "Whenever I see someone make a big mistake like that, I'm bound to be outraged!"
"For the last time, it's an optional side dish!"

"I'll take your word for it." Mr. Ping scowled. "But I still have not forgiven you for trying to take Po from me! Don't deny it, you admitted it ten minutes ago!"

"I did not say that!" Qiang said. "I just wanted Po back in my life. After I lost my family…" suddenly Qiang felt tears spring in his eyes. "My life was utterly empty, with the exception of the villagers I had to lead. It took twenty five years to find peace, and most of it was spent on meditation. The remainder was spent dreaming of that… that horrible night."

"What night?" Mr. Ping asked.

"You don't know?" Qiang looked at the goose, who shook his head. "A few months after Po was born, our old villager was attacked by Lord Shen and his wolves."

Mr. Ping's eyes widened.

"It was a massacre. I won't traumatize you with the details." Qiang said, his voice thick with tears. "My wife, Mei was one of the many victims. And Po… his name was Xue back then… was nowhere to be found. But he was presumed dead like the others. After we recovered, we traveled far away to the Shidao Mountains before Shen could discover that there were some of us still alive. A couple of months ago, after I finally achieved peace, I received a vision that Po was still alive. I assume you know the rest."

Mr. Ping's beak began to quiver.

"Mr. Ping…"

Qiang received a shock when the goose suddenly flung himself onto his stomach and clutched at his robes.

"Please forgive me, Qiang!" He wailed. "I didn't know! I just thought you had abandoned Po when he was a baby and only came back because he had become famous!"

"Why didn't you say anything?" Qiang asked gently.

"I kept quiet for Po's sake. I didn't want his heart to be broken! I'm so sorry I assumed the worst of you, Qiang!"

"Mr. Ping, I forgive you. And I'm sorry that I gave you that impression." Qiang eased the goose off his chest and set him down on the opposite chair. "What do you say we start over? It's not too late to fulfill the promise you made to Po."

He held out a paw towards Mr. Ping. The goose grabbed it without hesitation.

"Friends?" Qiang asked.

"Friends."

They shook hands.

"Now that we've finally sorted it all out, I say we go and find Po." Qiang said. "We owe him a heck of an apology."

"You're right." Mr. Ping agreed. "After that, we should ask Shifu to go a bit easy on Master Crane. I heard he got severely punished for revealing that you called my soup bland."
"That doesn't seem fair."

"Exactly. Shall we go?"

"Of course."
Side by side, the two fathers left the house, and made their way down to the spare hut where the kung fu warriors resided.

"So you've finally resolved your problems?" Tigress, the one who answered the door when they knocked, asked cautiously.

Mr. Ping and Qiang smiled at each other.

"Yes."

"Definitely."

"Po will be happy to hear that." Tigress gave a warm smile. "Unfortunately, he's not here."

"Where is he, then?"

Tigress struggled to hide her frown as she answered.

"He's out on a date."

Their jaws dropped (no joke) to the ground.
A little earlier that evening…

"Woah…” Po stared in disbelief. "No way…”

The object splayed out on the chair shimmered slightly in the candlelight.

"Really?"

"Come on, you need to look your best for your first date." Viper smiled as she lifted the beautiful dark green shirt from the chair and handed it to Po.

"But this…” Po rubbed his thumb lightly across the soft silk of the yin yang symbol emblem woven into the front of the shirt. "This looks like something the emperor would wear."

"We originally bought it for your birthday…” Crane spoke. "But Viper's right. You need to look your best."

"You got this for my birthday?" Po's eyes widened. "Awesome! I'd take this over a night out any day!"

"You're _never_ going to let that go, are you?" Mantis groaned.

"I got stuck in a hole in the floor for two days, so no."

"Go and get cleaned up, and I'll just make sure there are no marks or creases on this." Viper said. "Go on."

Po climbed up the stairs with a grin on his face. Once he was out of earshot, Monkey frowned.

"What are we going to do for a present now?"

"Don't worry, we'll just give him the new pants Tigress got him."

"Uh… no you won't." Tigress scowled. "There's a new Master Shifu plushy toy coming out in a few weeks. You can get him that."

"Great idea!" Monkey and Mantis grinned,

"Really?" Viper raised a scaly eyebrow at the feline. "A plushy toy?"

"What? He already has the action figure of him." Tigress shrugged.

Viper rolled her eyes and examined the shirt for any stains. It passed the test.

Two minutes later, Po returned, not looking much different than when he went up: it seemed that Shifu had been over exaggerating the panda's disregard for personal hygiene.

"Here, put the shirt on, sweetie." Viper handed him the lovely piece of clothing.

Po slipped it on at once.

"How do I look?" he asked.
Monkey gave him the thumbs up.

"You look dashing." Tigress smiled.

"It's almost sunset. You'd better get going." Viper said.

"Have you decided where you're going to take her?" Monkey asked.

"Yeah. I figured it out while I was cleaning up."

"Where are you going?" Mantis asked.

"Sorry, not telling."

"What? Why not?"

"You know why. I don't want you two getting a picture of me with her to embarrass me with later!"

"Why on earth would we do that, Po?" Mantis asked with a sly smile.

Po's eyes narrowed.

"You guys do anything, I'll tell Tigress about you-know-what."

Monkey and Mantis's eyes widened.

Po grinned in satisfaction and turned to Crane.

"Where are the flowers?"

"Here." Crane handed him a beautiful scarlet bouquet.

"Hey, just like the ones you got Bai Li!" Po ran a finger across one of the red petals.

"Just remember the advice I gave you, and you'll be fine." Said Crane. "Also, don't remember what Monkey and Mantis told you."

"Okay." Po nodded his head as he approached the front door. "You'll tell dad number one where his noodle cart went, won't you?"

"Don't worry, Po. Good luck."

Po exited the building and made his way through the village, pulling the noodle cart behind him with one arm and holding the flowers in the other.

"Let this first date go well... let this first date go well... let this first date go well..." Po whispered as he approached Ming's house.

The female panda was waiting on the front steps, wearing a simple but pretty yellow dress.

"Wow..." Po breathed. "You look... lovely."

"Thank you." Ming turned bright pink. "This dress was my mother's."

"These are for you." Po blushed furiously as he handed her the bouquet.

"Oh, they're beautiful!" Ming took the flowers and breathed in their sweet scent. "What's the
noodle cart, for?" she asked.

"To make dinner. Obviously there aren't any restaurants in this area."

"Of course. Before we go, we need to go up to my bedroom."

Po blinked.

"W-why?" he asked nervously.

_Holy... she's not suggesting... is she?_

"I promised to show you my picture of the Himalayas, remember?"

"Oh, yeah!" Po laughed nervously.

"Just leave the cart here, no-one will steal it."
Po left the cart where it was and followed Ming into the house and up the stairs.

Ming's bedroom was as simplistic and homely as Po's old room, with the exception of the gallery of Furious Five merchandise. A couple of flower vases decorated the room.

"Nice room." Po said, and he meant it.

"Thank you." Ming smiled happily as she stuffed the bouquet of red flowers into a third vase. "The picture's on that wall."

Po turned round, and was immediately impressed by the large-size painting of a snowy mountain range that looked even larger than Shidao.

"Wow, that's a really big rock." Po pointed and peered at the enormous mountain in the middle that towered over the rest.

"It is." Ming said, sounding pleased that Po liked the picture. "Some say it is the tallest in the world. In fact, they say it's so tall that when you're standing at the summit, you can reach up and touch the stars."

"They said a similar thing about kabuki crest. Not that I'm unimpressed, it's just that this mountain looks so much bigger."

"I'm glad that you like it." Ming said sweetly. "So, shall we go?"

"Uh... where?"

"Out, of course!"

"Oh, yeah, right!" Po cringed, fighting the urge to slap himself.

Ming laughed.

"So where are we going then?" She asked, intrigued.

"Just this little place in the forest that I found while exploring last night."

"You explore?"

"Sometimes. So does Mantis, though he probably doesn't like people knowing about it. He seemed
a little shifty when I saw him last night."

"Is this place awesome, as you call it?"

"Yeah. Shall we go?"

Ming nodded with a sweet smile, and together they left the house and made their way into the forest. Po lit a candle to light their way through the thankfully not very dense foliage.

"I haven't been to this place before, have I?" Ming asked as they walked.

"I hope not…" Po muttered. "I mean, I hope not, because this place will definitely blow your mind!"

Ming chuckled.

_That sounded a lot less not-romantic in my head._ Po thought with a scowl.

After a few minutes of walking, Po stopped and doused the candle with his fingers.

"Ouch! Here we are."

Ming gasped.

They were standing at the edge of a small flat clearing of soft, lush green grass. A small round pond, flat and cool, the surface laden with pink and white lilies, sat in the very middle. The evening air was lit with fireflies, bright and golden in the near darkness.

"Oh my goodness…" Ming whispered, paws clasped over her mouth. "I've never seen such a beautiful place before in all my life!"

"You… like it?" Po asked tentatively.

"I love it!" Ming smiled. "I can't believe I never found this place before!"

She held out one paw in front of her, as if trying to touch the sight before her to make sure it was real. As she stared, a glowing firefly floated over and landed on her outstretched finger.

She heard the small sound of rustling fabric behind her.

She turned round to find that Po had just laid down a large blanket, bright green with a delicate flower pattern.

"Take a seat and I'll have dinner made in a jiffy."

_________________________________

"I bet Po comes back with a black eye!"

"I bet that Po comes back a girl!"

"What are you two doing?"

Viper slithered into the room where Monkey and Mantis were sitting snickering.

"Uh… noooooothing!"

"There is no reason at all why this date shouldn't end well!" Viper glared at the two of them.
"Honestly, you're his friends! The least you both could do is have a little more faith in him!"

"Sorry, Viper." Monkey said.

"Yeah, we're being jerks." Mantis said.

"Besides, I bet both of you this date goes swimmingly!"

"Could you all please stop talking so loudly?" A scowling Tigress suddenly appeared in the doorway.

"I'm trying to meditate!"

"Sorry, Tigress." Viper said, lowering her voice significantly.

Tigress glared at the three of them for a moment longer before returning to her room.

She shut the door and sat back down in a lotus position of the floor.

She tried to once again clear her mind, but the voice of denial in her head refused to go away.

_We are just friends... you're feeling displeased because this is his first date and you're worried about him... maybe you should go look for them to make sure it goes well... no! No... it would be stupid of you to interfere... besides, what do you know about romance! You're a kung fu warrior, not a lovebird! You have the bruised knuckles to prove it! You're so hardcore you can't feel anything, even Po said so! So what if the night you watched Po get shot by a cannon was the worst of your life? So what if you hugged him, and then he hugged you back? You're just friends... just friends..._

"Mmmm..." Ming savored the taste of the soup on her tongue. "So delicious... you're as talented as your father."

"Heh, thanks." Po blushed and took a small sip of his soup.

A few minutes of silence passed as they ate.

_Come on, Po! Remember what Crane said! Talk positive and answer her questions!_

"Sooo..." Po began. "Do you like bean buns?"

He mentally kicked himself right after asking.

"Oh yes." Ming said. "But I like rice balls stuffed with bean paste more."

"Oh my gosh, I love those too!" Po exclaimed.

Ming smiled and giggled.

_Tigress was right. He's really sweet, and also really funny._

"I don't suppose you have any more of them, do you?" she asked.

Po's face fell.

"Sorry, we sort of ate them all on the journey."
"Hey, it's alright." Ming said gently. "It was just a suggestion. So… I've heard that you've done a lot of amazing things as the Dragon Warrior."

"Oh yeah!" Po set down his bowl. "What have you heard?"

"Not much. All I really know so far is that you were the one who defeated Shen."

"Oh, that was the latest major thing I've done." Po said. "The first thing I did, which was what made me into the Dragon Warrior in the process, was defeating the evil snow leopard Tai Lung."

"Oh really? I've never heard of Tai Lung, but that battle sounds amazing. Will you tell me all about it?"

"Uh… are you sure?" Po asked nervously. "It's a pretty long story, and most of it's about me and I don't want to bore you or make you think I'm just talking all about myself and being just an arrogant self centered jerk who's got no principles and…"

Ming suddenly leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek.

Po's eyes went wide, and Ming blushed furiously at what she had just done.

"Uh…" Po struggled to find his words.

"I'm so sorry!" Ming gasped. "I don't know what came over me!"

"I-it's alright!" Po stammered. "It's just… no-one has kissed me like that except for a dancer/thief."

"Really?" Ming was surprised. "Heh, you really get around."

"Hey, we were just friends!" Po exclaimed, cheeks red as tomatoes. "I mean, she robbed me then turned over a new leaf, but we did not 'go out' go out!"

"It's okay." Ming laughed. "I wasn't assuming anything. So about you battle with Tai Lung?"

"Huh? Oh yeah, yeah!" Po took a deep breath to cleanse himself of his momentary panic. "Um, are you sure I won't come off as self-centered?"

"No, I won't judge you. Besides, you're a pretty good storyteller."

Po's cheeks grew even warmer from the compliment.

"Okay then… so first off, Tai Lung was Shifu's very first student…"
Breaching

Once little Su was safely escorted home, Shifu made his way back to Qiang's house, where the panda and the goose were surely still in the kitchen hating each other's guts.

That thought was instantly erased when, as Shifu approached the building, he spotted Qiang and Mr. Ping walking across the grass side by side in the direction of the students' residence.

Shifu smiled to himself. They had made peace quicker than he had expected.

The red panda followed them back to the building, with plans to meditate once he was inside his room. He was about to call out that he was behind them when:

"Master Shifu."

Shifu turned round to find Mantis at his side.

"Ah, Mantis." Shifu said. "I'm sorry, I had almost forgotten. What's the report."

"I've got a bad feeling about whatever it is they're doing." Mantis said, keeping his voice down so the panda villagers passing them on their way home from the fields wouldn't hear. "I managed to eavesdrop on a pair of Zanshi's men this morning. I only got a bit of what they were saying, but what I heard wasn't good."

"What did you hear?" Shifu asked.

"They mentioned something about a temple." Mantis paused as he tried to remember what else they had said. "They also said that they would attempt to breach the entrance again tonight. They also mentioned getting their hands on the weapon once they got inside."

At the last sentence, Shifu felt a jolt of alarm.

"A weapon?" he repeated.

"They didn't say exactly what it was." Said Mantis.

"Half of the artifacts Zanshi collects are weapons." Shifu struggled to convince himself. "It's probably nothing to worry about."

"But sir, they said that if this weapon really is as powerful as Zanshi said, then the village would be the perfect place to test it on!"

Shifu's blood froze.

"Master, I think it's time we act."

"You're right!" Shifu's eyes narrowed. "You go and warn the others. Tell no-one but Po and your fellow team members. As for myself, I will go and have a word with Mr. Zanshi." He gripped his staff tightly.

"Goodnight, mommy and daddy." Su smiled up at her parents from her bed.

"Goodnight, sweetie. And thank you again for that delicious stir fry." Her mother kissed her
daughter on the forehead and left the bedroom with her father.

Su snuggled into her pillow, but not before grabbing the large golden coin she had found while playing in the forest. She had discovered it beneath a pile of rocks that looked weirdly like the remains of a statue, and since then she'd claimed it as a good luck charm. It looked really nice, but was too heavy for her to carry around all the time. During those times when she did carry it, she appeared to had lost all of her clumsiness. It was for this reason that she loved the big coin, and that she now held it beneath her pillow in the hopes that one day she could find out something about herself that would give her a reason to feel worthy.

Mu Zanshi slowly ran a clawed hand across the smooth surface of the enormous double doors of the entrance to the Temple of Heroes. His scaled fingers caught slightly on the raised ridges of the golden dragon splayed across the pair of stone slabs, sunk momentarily into the circular depression located between the dragon's head and its left front claw.

He gazed at the depression intently.

He knew from decades of experience that a depression like this meant that a key of some sort would be required to open the large doors. In this case, the key could be unconventional, nothing like the spindly metallic keys you saw every day. Judging from the shape and size of the depression, they were looking for an amulet of some sort. Possibly slightly heavy. Made of a precious metal to differentiate it from the rest of the structure.

For a moment, Zanshi felt a flash of anger that he may have come all this way for nothing, but then remembered that his employer had mentioned a key, but did not say whereabouts. Which meant that the key must still be somewhere in the area.

But where?

Suddenly he was struck with a realization…

"Boss."

Zanshi turned to face Lidong.

"We're ready to try again."

"No, don't bother!" Zanshi said. "This door will not open without the key."

"But boss, we've searched everywhere for that key thingy!"

"Everywhere except the village." Said Zanshi.

Lidong's eyes widened.

"Are you saying what I think you're…"

"Once the moon is in the centre of the sky, I want you to take your stealthiest men and search the villagers' homes for the key."

"But sir! What about the warriors? Last time the guys fought them, they got massacred!"

"Why do you think I'm asking you to get the stealthiest instead of the strongest?" Zanshi snapped. "As long as you don't draw attention to yourselves, you should be able to retrieve the key without a hitch."
"What if the warriors catch us?"

"Then kill as many as you can."

A heavy silence hung in the cool night air.

"Actually, I wouldn't mind it if we had to fight them again." Lidong slowly began to grin. "I've got a score to settle with the tiger."

"Once this is over, you can do what you like with her!" Zanshi growled. "Skewer her, bisect her, crush her head like a grape, I don't care! But until the weapon is in my hands, you will not fight them unless absolutely necessary!"

As if to demonstrate the consequences of disobedience, Zanshi held up his tri-bo-yao in front of his subordinate's face.

Lidong scowled to hide his sudden fear.

"Fine." He muttered.

"Now go and get the men ready. Use the same bandit disguises as before. We cannot let the warriors suspect that I have anything to do with this. Now go."

"But sir, I was really hoping that the feline would recognize me…"

"GO!"

Lidong took off like a shot.

Breathing heavily, fighting to regain his composure, Zanshi turned back to the temple entrance.

His eyes traveled over the enormous dragon depicted on the doors, and eventually fell on one of its claws. The claws of the creature were thin and razor sharp.

Like a sword.

A sword…

As Zanshi lay half-sunken in the ground, covered from head to tail in mud, the sword slid out of his back and splashed into the mud beside him.

Fighting back the urge to scream in agony, Zanshi quickly reached out a shaking arm to shove watery earth over the gleaming metal of the sword.

He had just managed to completely bury it and move his arm back into position by his side when the first enemy soldier appeared, bow and arrow at the ready.

"He went this way!"

A second soldier, a third, and then a fourth leapt by the comrade's side.

"You sure?"

"Yes, I saw my sword skewer his back."

"Shouldn't that have killed him?"
"It should have, but he's nowhere to be seen."

Please don't let them find me, Zanshi thought as he held his breath. His back was screaming, but he didn't dare scream in turn.

"Hey, what's that over there?"

Oh gods, please let it be quick…

"Uh, it's just a log."

"Looks like he got away. Should we hunt him down?"

"No. The wound will kill him for us. I know where the sword hit."

It seemed as thought the soldier was right. Zanshi could feel hot blood pooling into the mud, thankfully obscured from the soldiers' view by the alligator's own frozen body.

"Let's head back to the others. They'll have finished off the rest by now."

Zanshi began to feel weak as the footsteps faded away and the blood continued to spill.

"Zanshi…"

The pool continued to expand until Zanshi could see it out of the corner of his eye.

"Zanshi, I want a word with you…"

Zanshi felt the pain begin to fade as his eyes flickered shut…

"Zanshi, are you listening-"

WHACK!

Zanshi whirled round, quick as lightning, and heard a crunch as his tri bo yao made contact.

The figure soared backwards, skidded the rest of the way, and came to a stop at the roots of one of the surrounding trees.

"YOU DARE DISTURB ME-" Zanshi began to howl, but froze when he recognized the victim of his vicious swing.

Master Shifu stirred feebly, a nasty lump swelling on his temple.

What the-

He knew! He knew all along!

The rage that overcame Zanshi was so fiery, so all consuming that for a few seconds he had forgotten everything but the red panda lying ten feet away. He felt a violent pounding in his ears as his heart began to race. The only thing that kept the alligator from rushing forward and smashing the tiny kung fu master into itty bitty little pieces was the small thought at the back of his thundering mind that the other warriors may also be in the vicinity.

After a timeless silence of violent thoughts and fantasies, Zanshi heard a slumping sound as Shifu finally fell completely unconscious. The alligator's mind slowly began to return to normal as he stood there, shaking, his claws gripping his weapon so tightly it hurt, but the fury still burned white
hot throughout his entire body.

Shifu had been on to him all along. Zanshi should have been more careful, brought more competent subordinates. All his careful planning, all his efforts to ensure that the operation would be as discreet as possible, had all gone to waste.

"Boss, what the heck just happened?"

Zanshi slowly turned round to face Lidong, who was currently staring at the motionless red panda.

"Are the other warriors around?" Zanshi whispered.

"Huh?"
"ARE THE OTHER WARRIORS AROUND?"

Lidong jumped.

"Uh, n-no! They s-should still be at t-the v-village!"

So the warriors were not yet aware of what had just happened… it was this thought that comforted Zanshi enough to successfully regain his normal composure. He took several deep breaths before he spoke to Lidong again.

"Stick to the plan. Find the key at all costs. But first, take this red panda to the camp and tie him up. Use the chains. Just get him out of my sight!"

Lidong did as he was told, tentatively lifting Shifu and carrying him away.

Zanshi breathed again and turned back to the entrance once more.

*Patience*, Zanshi told himself. Once this was all over, he would be able to do whatever he liked with Shifu. He would make him beg for mercy and laugh as he screamed.
"... and then with a 'skadoosh', I flexed my pinky and Tai Lung was officially vanquished!"
"Wow!" Ming gasped.

"And the Furious Five finally saw that I was truly... the one and only... Dragon Warrior!" With that, Po leapt to his feet and flexed his muscles dramatically.

"What an amazing story!" Ming clapped with a huge smile. "Did you tell Qiang, yet?"

"Yeah, he was just as awed as you!" Po grinned. Suddenly his face fell. "Oh sorry, I probably shouldn't have assumed what your emotions are. I'm not self centered, I swear!"

"It's okay, Po." Ming giggled. She looked up at the night sky and saw the moon floating high in the centre of the sea of stars. "It's getting really late. We should head back."

"Wait, let's finish the noodles first." Po sat back down. "It'll only take a few minutes."

Ming picked up her bowl and resumed eating.

"I've really enjoyed tonight, Po." Ming gazed into Po's dark green eyes. "Thank you."

Po's cheeks went bright red for the hundredth time that evening.

"Y-you're welcome. To be honest, I thought I was gonna bomb."

"No, you've done really well for your first date." Ming replied.

"Wait, how did you know it was my first date?"

"Oh, I just guessed." Ming chuckled, briefly thinking of a certain striped feline. "Don't take it as a criticism, but you seemed really nervous."

"D-did I?" Po stammered. "Stop stuttering, Po!"

Ming laughed again. "I think you'd better calm down."

"Yeah, you're right... you're right..."

Po turned to gaze at the pond they were sitting next to, the tranquil and beautiful sight calming him as the blush in his cheeks slowly faded. Suddenly he noticed an oddly shaped object by the edge.

"What's that?"

He leaned closer.
"Wow, Ming look at this!"

Po showed Ming the oddly shaped bamboo stick the length of his forearm and thickness of his thumb. It was naturally contorted into a sharp L shape, and completely hollow.

"This looks so cool!" Po grinned like a little boy.

"Heh, that's nothing." Ming grinned back. "When I was a little girl, I once found a ginkgo leaf shaped like a dragon's head!"

"Do you still have it?" Po asked.

"No, but I have a picture."

"You seem to have a lot of awesome pictures." Po replied. "You must be a real fan of art."

"Yes. Unfortunately I can't draw to save my life." Ming sighed.

"Aw, darn. I would have loved to see you at work." Po pouted. He slurped the rest of his noodles and looked up at the sky. "Are you finished?"

"Yes. Shall we head back now?"

"Yeah."

Po pocketed the bamboo stick and along with Ming packed the blanket and bowls back into the noodle cart.

"Po, can I ask you something?" Ming asked as they trekked through the forest in the direction of the village.

"Ask away."

"Does your adoptive father know that you've borrowed his noodle cart?"

"Uh..." Po cringed. "No. But he's been bugging me to get a date since I was thirteen years old, so I don't think he'll be too mad." Po's heart suddenly sank as he remembered the wrestling match in the cooking lesson. "Besides, he and dad number two will probably be too busy hating each other to care."

Ming smiled sadly and put a paw on Po's shoulder.

"Don't worry too much about it. I'm sure they'll figure it out between themselves."

"I hope so..." Po said quietly as they spotted the distant village in between the trees.

"Po, Qiang isn't the type to keep continue a fight once it's started. Please don't let that incident make you think badly of him."

"I won't." They reached the edge of the forest and stepped back out into the small clearing that separated them from the houses. "Do you want me to walk you home?"

"If it pleases you-" Ming suddenly froze. "Po, did you hear something?"

"What?"
"Shush!"

Po buttoned his lips and listened for whatever was alarming his date.

Then he heard the rustling of bushes. He scowled.

"Monkey! Mantis! Get outta here!"

He frowned when he received no reply.

"Guys? The game's up! Go away!"

Silence.

His kung fu instincts screamed in his head that the listeners were not his friends.

"Ming, stay where you are." Po whispered to the woman by his side.

Ming nodded and didn't move as Po slowly crept towards the bushes…

"Looks like Po's date is going well." Viper said with a small smile. "It's been two and a half hours and they still haven't returned."

"Oboyoboyoboyoboyoboy my son finally has a girlfriend!" Mr. Ping clapped his wings together in utter delight. "By the end of this year, I'm going to have grandchildren!"

"Woah, woah!" Qiang's jaw dropped. "I'm proud of Po too, but isn't it a little bit early to be talking about that?"

"Oh of course not!" Mr. Ping cried. "Oh my gosh, I can't wait!"

"Monkey, it looks like I've won the bet." Crane said smugly. "Hand it over."

Monkey scowled and passed the avian one of his almond cookies.

"I guess I've underestimated him." Monkey sighed. "Mantis, what do you… Mantis?"

Monkey blinked when he realized that the insect was no longer at the table with the others.

"Hey, where did Mantis go?"

"He's not here?" Viper twisted her body so she could see all around the room. "He left and didn't tell us? That's strange…"

"Maybe he's gone to see Tigress." Crane spoke. "I'll go and check."

"Just take a quick peek and get outta there. You know what Tigress is like when her meditation is disturbed." Viper said.

Crane nodded and headed upstairs.

He reached Tigress's room and carefully opened the door.

"What is it, Crane?" Tigress asked, sitting on the floor with her back to Crane.

"Sorry for disturbing you…" Crane said quietly. "But Mantis has just took off for no reason. Do
you have any idea where he might be?"

Tigress paused before answering.

"I don't... but he's been sneaking off a lot and I've frequently seen him with Master Shifu. Perhaps you should ask him?"

"Sure... Tigress, are you alright?" Crane stepped into the room. "You seem a little tense." More like your pre-Po self, his mind added.

"I'm fine." At that moment, Tigress's stomach rumbled. She sighed and opened her eyes. "Uhhh... is Po back yet?"

"No. That means his date's going well, doesn't it?" Crane grinned.

To his surprise, Tigress wasn't grinning back as she got to her feet and turned to the avian.

"I guess..." She said and followed him out the room.

When they entered the kitchen, they were surprised to find the others gathered round a certain green bug standing on the table.

"Mantis, what's going on?" Tigress demanded as she and Crane stepped forward.

"Guys, there's something really important Shifu wants me to tell you..."

When he was finished, everyone stared at him in stunned horror.

"Zanshi's planning to test this weapon on the village?" Tigress gaped.

"I've got to warn my people!" Qiang leapt from his chair.

"Qiang wait, you could cause a panic!" Viper quickly wrapped her tail round his shoulders and pushed him back down. "We need to deal with this carefully."

"Right, here's what we're going to do..." Tigress began. "We'll split into three parties. Me and Monkey will patrol the edges of the forest in case they're already planning to make an attack. Qiang, Viper and Crane will go to everyone's homes and evacuate as many as they can. Mantis, I want you to go and find Po and tell him what's going on."

"What about me?" Mr. Ping asked.

"You'll go with Mantis so you're under protection."

"What about Shifu?"

"Where is Master Shifu, Mantis?" Tigress asked.

"He said he would go and confront Zanshi."
"Then let's hope he's managed to do his job. Move out!"

A sudden noise from her window woke Su from her slumber.

"Mommy?" she called out into the silence.

Her mother didn't answer.
"Daddy?"

Same result.

"Okay, don't be scared… my mommy always said that there were no such things as monsters…” Su whispered as she stood up in her bed, her tiny paws clutching her lucky coin.

Shaking slightly, she crept towards her window.

She screamed when a large monstrous scaled head suddenly emerged in the window frame.

"Su? Are you alright?" Su barely heard her father's voice coming from her parents' room.

"Mom-" a clawed hand slammed over her mouth, cutting off her cry.

"Quiet, you little brat!" the monster snarled.

Su's foot slipped over the edge of the bed, and the terrified child toppled away from the hand and fell painfully onto the floor.

"Ow…” Su moaned, still clutching her lucky coin… which the monster's yellow eyes suddenly fell on.

"Give me that key!" he growled, climbing through the window into her room.

"W-what key?" Su whimpered, curling into a little ball of fear.

"That key!" he pointed a claw at the coin she was holding.

"I-it's not a k-key!" Su wrapped her arms round the coin, holding it to her chest. "It's mine!"

"Give it here or I'll smash you!" Su's eyes widened as the monster lifted an enormous metal hammer.

"It's my lucky coin!" Su wailed.

"Su, we're coming!" Su heard the distant sound of her parents' door opening, and the approaching footsteps of her mother and father.

The monster glanced at the door, snarled in frustration and lunged at Su.

"Give me that key!"

He grabbed the coin and tried to yank it from Su's paws. Though she was scared out of her wits, Su wasn't willing to give up her most prized possession, and held on.

"Darn it!" the monster raised his hammer.

Su screamed and cowered…

WHAM!

The monster was suddenly disappeared.

Su looked up and managed to catch a glimpse of a green snake making the monster repeatedly punch himself in the face with her own body when the bedroom door was flung open and Su found herself lifted into her mother's arms.
"Su!" Her mother clutched her small daughter. "Su, are you alright?"

"I'm okay, mommy." Su whimpered and clutched at her mother's warm soft fur. "But there's a monster in my room!"

"Don't worry, sweetie..." her father ran a hand over Su's head. "Master Viper's taking care of it."

Su turned her head in time to witness Viper fling the monster back out the window.

"You would dare to hurt an innocent child!" Viper hissed furiously before turning to the panda family. "Don't worry, you're going to be alright!"

"What's happening?" Pong asked.

"Mountain bandits." Viper said simply. "They must have discovered your village. Come on, you have to go!"

The snake quickly ushered the three downstairs, where Qiang and a black crested crane were waiting for them.

"Gotcha!" Po plunged his hand into the bushes, felt his fingers wrap around something thick and scaly, and flung the hider into a nearby tree in an explosion of leaves and twigs.

"Owww..." the figure groaned as it slid down the trunk.

"Lidong!" Po exclaimed.

"Darn!" Lidong cursed as he got to his feet and pulled out a large scimitar. "Guys, stick to the plan! I'll stay here to make sure these two don't warn the others!"

Po heard more rustling behind him as two-dozen alligators rushed through the forest in the direction of the village.

"No!" Po moved to pursue, but was instead forced to leap to the side when Lidong swung his blade.

"PO!" Ming's eyes widened in horror as Lidong moved towards the panda, sword raised for another swing.
"Darn, he's not in the orchard." Mantis scowled.

"I didn't think he would be." Mr. Ping said as they trudged through the thicket of apple and peach trees. "Of course he loves fruit, but he knows how to treat a woman."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. I remember once when Ms Yun came to my shop for the first time. Po personally took her order and cooked the noodle soup himself!"

"Speaking of which, you're still not going to tell us what the secret ingredient is, are you?"

"Nope."

"Darn."

Mantis was about to suggest that they look somewhere else when he spotted the hollow trunk of a fallen tree.

"Mr. Ping! Hide in there!"

"In there?" Mr. Ping stared at the darkened interior. "Are you serious?"

"Dead serious." Mantis pushed the goose into the small space. "Sorry, but you're not much help in the battlefield. We need you to stay hidden if a fight does start."

"But…"

"Po wouldn't want you to get hurt."

The goose fell silent for a few moments.

"Oh alright!" Mr. Ping crossed his arms inside the tree and sulked. "Just make sure Po comes back alive so I can apologize!"

"We'll come back for you once the danger's passed. In the meantime, stay hidden and stay quiet!"

Mantis hopped off before the goose could reply.

"Stay alert, Monkey." Tigress whispered as they neared the edge of the forest.

Monkey nodded silently.

They stopped just before the trees.

"Should we split up?" Monkey asked.

"No. By ourselves, we'll be outmatched. We'll patrol the perimeter of the forest, but keep the village in our sights."

"Okay."
And so they trekked silently round the perimeter, eyes trained on the spaces between the trees.

"Monkey, take a look up top." Tigress said after twenty meters of patrolling. "They may be using the trees."

Monkey swiftly leapt up, grabbed a low branch, and swung himself up into the treetops.

"Darnit..." he muttered as he struggled to see anything in the darkness: the leaves and branches were blocking most of the moonlight, and Monkey most unfortunately did not have the gift of night vision.

"It's no use..." he called down just loud enough for Tigress to hear. "I can't see anything."

"Remember what Master Shifu taught us!" Tigress replied. "Use your other senses."

Monkey understood, shut his eyes, and focused all of his concentration into his ears. He heard the soft rustling of leaves in the light breeze, heard the absence of birds, which was never a good sign.

His ears caught the sound of many things, but none of them were the sound of approaching warriors.

Then he heard the sound of Tigress yelling and punching.

"Tigress?" He called out in alarm.

"Get back down here! It's an ambush!"

Monkey swung back down as fast as he could.

By the time his feet hit the ground, Tigress had already taken down five of the twenty five warriors that had suddenly leapt out of the bushes and took the feline by surprise.

"Tigress, how are you holding up?"

"Shut up and help me!"

"Oh, okay!"

Monkey struck down a bandit that had been sneaking up behind Tigress with a flying kick, then rebounded off his body and in the direction of a trio of oncoming attackers.

"Hyah!"

He wrapped his tail round the arm of one of the warriors and swung him into his comrades.

"Is it me..." he said as he dodged the swing of an axe. "... or are these guys the same bandits we fought on our way to the village?"

"You're right!" Said Tigress as she swept the legs out from under a pair of attackers. "Zanshi must had sent them to get rid of us!"

"I thought there was something suspicious about that lizard!" Monkey growled as he drop-kicked another warrior. "Darn, there's too many of them! Where's Shifu where you need him?"

As Tigress fought, she had a strange feeling that a second battle was taking place not too far from where she was, but she shook it off, for a quintet of warriors were currently rushing at her with
lances, and more of them were leaping down from the trees.

"Zanshi..." she snarled as if the alligator she was referring to was right in front of her. "If I ever get my hands on you, I swear I will kill you myself!"

Mantis heard the sounds of battle as he reached the edge of the orchard.

"Uh oh, not good!" he whispered to himself. "Hang on, guys, I'm coming!"

He fluttered his translucent wings to give himself a little extra speed as he raced back to the village, hoping to the gods that no-one had been killed yet.

"Come on, hurry!" Viper hissed as she, Crane and Qiang ushered Pong and his family out of their house. The parents and child were surprised to find the majority of the village population waiting outside in a large group.

"Viper, you get them out of here, we'll go help the others!" Crane turned to fly off.

"Take them to the mountain quarter of a mile north from here!" Qiang told her. "There's a network of caverns where the villagers will be safe!"

"Wait, Qiang, we can't just leave you to face them alone!" Pong stepped forward to protest. "I'm staying!"

"No, Pong!" Qiang snapped. "I failed to protect my people once before! I refuse to lose anyone else!"

"But..."

"No buts! You owe it to your daughter to make sure she doesn't grow up without a father like you did!"

Pong opened his mouth to retort, but then he looked down at little Su. She stared up at him with wide blue eyes.

"Please, daddy." She whimpered. "I don't want you to die."

With a sigh, he turned back to Qiang.

"Just make sure you get back in one piece!" He lifted Su into his large arms.

"Alright, everyone!" Viper slithered quickly to the front of the group. "Follow me!"

"Wait, I've dropped my coin!" Su cried.

"I'm sorry, sweetie, but there's no time!" said her mother.

As the pandas quickly disappeared into the northern forest, Crane and Qiang became aware of the sounds of battle coming from the direction of the clearing.

"Looks like they're here!" Crane gulped. "Come on, we've got to help them! They're probably outnumbered!"

"Hey, where are the pandas?"
"GAH!"

Crane yelled as Mantis suddenly popped up on the avian's shoulder.

"Don't do that!" Crane glared at him as he put a wing over his racing heart.

"Heh heh, sorry." Mantis chuckled.

"This is no time for levity!" Qiang grabbed the two of them. "Are we going to help the others or not?"

"Where are… the others?" Monkey was panting now. He struggled to block one of the attacker's lances.

"They're evacuating the villagers, remember?" Tigress replied, helping Monkey out by kicking away his opponent. "We'll just have to hope they get here soon!"

"Man, I hope Po's not still out on his- Tigress look out!"

Tigress whirled round and saw the thrown lance soaring towards her.

She raised her tired arms to try and deflect it…

CRUNCH!

The lance was suddenly split in half mid air as a tiny green blur tore right through it.

"Mantis!"

"Are you guys okay?" Mantis asked as he took down another warrior with a nerve pinch.

"Yeah, but we could use some help!" Monkey said. As he spoke, a dozen more warriors burst from the bushes.

"Don't worry, Crane and Qiang are on their way?"

"Where's Po and Mr. Ping?" Tigress demanded as she punched an attacking warrior in the face.

"We couldn't find Po and Mr. Ping's hiding!"

"Darnit!" Tigress cursed.

If that panda was still off romancing Ming somewhere, then heaven help him...

"Woah!" Po ducked another swing from Lidong.

"Po, watch out!" Ming cried as she watched the battle in terror.

"Ming, stay back!" Po yelled as he dodged again then countered with a high kick, sending the large crocodile skidding ten feet across the clearing.

"Just stay still so I can kill you!" Lidong yelled in frustration as he stood up and rubbed his jaw. "I don't have time for this!"

"What are you doing here, Lidong?" Po demanded as the croc rushed at him.
"None of your business!" Lidong yelled and thrust his sword out in front of him.

Po stepped to the side before Lidong could run him through, grabbed the blunt edge of the blade, and used the croc's momentum to redirect him towards a thick tree.

"It is my business!" Po snapped at the croc as he rubbed his shoulder. "For reasons unknown you're attacking me and the village!"

Ming screamed and leapt out the way as Lidong smashed into the solid wood.

"Sorry, Ming!" Po cried. "I told you to stay back!"

Lidong groaned as he got to his feet again, this time with a little difficulty. He grabbed the hilt of the scimitar and pulled.

It was deeply embedded in the trunk, and therefore refused to budge.

Lidong growled in frustration. Without a weapon, he was nigh defenseless against the Dragon Warrior.

_Time to change tactics…_

"Come on, fatty!" Lidong faced the panda with a sneer. "Is that the best you've got, you big tub?"

"Hey, that's uncalled for!" Ming cried angrily.

"Sorry, Lidong, that's not gonna work!" Po grinned. "I've received so many of those insults that I don't care anymore!"

"Shut up and fight me, lumpy!"

"Not gonna wo-ork!" Po cried in a sing-song voice.

Lidong continued to snarl at the panda, while his eyes flickered left and right for another weapon to use.

"What are you waiting for, fat panda?" Lidong yelled. "Fight me!"

"Nah, I'm going to let you make the first move." Said Po with a wave of his paw.

Lidong growled, but inside felt a little pleasure that the panda had unknowingly bought him a little extra time.

His reptilian eyes finally fell on a long stick the thickness of his wrist. Nature had stripped it of its leaves and smaller branches, and it looked almost like a bo staff.

Lidong's triangular tongue ran across his sharp teeth. The stick wouldn't be very good at cutting people open, but since his scimitar was currently stuck in a tree, it would have to do.

"Take this, tubby!" Lidong grabbed the stick and launched himself at the Dragon Warrior.

"Po, look out!" Ming screamed.

Po raised his paws and barely managed to grab the stick as Lidong swung it towards him.

The panda and croc were now directly face to face, their hands gripping the stick that was pressed
between them.

"For gosh sakes, panda!" Lidong growled as they glared into each other's eyes. "I told you I don't have time for this!"

"Why are you attacking our village?" Po grunted with exertion as they grappled.

"Not telling! Now will you let me beat you so I can kill the tiger?"

Po blinked.

"What did you say?" he demanded.

"I've got a score to settle with that kitty!" Lidong snarled. "Why do you think I brought my big sword?"

Po could have laughed.

Did this stupid croc really believe he had a chance against Tigress? She was the most powerful of the Furious Five! Not only that, she had fought Lidong once and gave him a thrashing!

But still…

"Tigress…"

After a moment, Tigress feebly lifted her head and looked into Po's eyes. She smiled softly as she gripped his paw in turn…

… still, Lidong had just threatened her…

Unable to hold her head up any longer, she lowered it back down onto the wood she drifted on. Po looked up and saw Shen silently gloating from the mother ship. The peacock was grinning: he knew that he had just hurt someone Po cared about…

… and for some reason…

As Po locked his green eyes with Shen's smug blood red eyes, he felt a burning emotion he had heard about but rarely experienced. Shen had just hurt Po's friends… had hurt Tigress…

… it really ticked him off!

SMACK!

Po swung his head forward and struck Lidong with a headbutt, then sent him flying with a belly bounce.

"Come on, then!" Po yelled, eyes narrowed in fury. "If it's a fight you want, it's a fight you'll get!"
Are we there yet?" Viper asked.

"The caves are not too far now." Said Pong. "Just through this thicket, then we'll reach a rock wall where the entrance is located."

"Good. Once I'm sure that you're safe and well hidden, I have to return to the village and help my comrades."

"Miss Viper…" Viper turned at the sound of the small voice.

"What is it, little one?" Viper smiled at the small panda girl walking beside her.

"When you get back, could you please try and find my coin?" Su asked timidly.

"Your coin?"

"It's my lucky coin. It really means a lot to me. Could you please find it for me?" Su gazed at her with wide, pleading eyes.

"Of course, Su." Viper smiled warmly. How could I refuse someone as sweet and adorable as you?

"Of course, Su." Viper smiled warmly. How could I refuse someone as sweet and adorable as you? "What does this coin look like? Is it different from ordinary ones?"

"Oh yes. It's big, round about the size of one of Master Shifu's ears." Su smiled slightly. "It's yellow and has a picture of a dragon on it."

"When did you last have it?"

"I dropped it in the grass just before we left the village. In the clearing."

"Hmm… then it shouldn't be too hard to find. Don't worry, little one. We'll find it once the bad guys have been taken care of."

"Oh, thank you, missus Viper!" Su exclaimed happily.

"Don't mention it, sweetie. Now let's find these caves."

Just as an attacking warrior lunged at Monkey with his axe, a feathery black and white blur flew into the attacker, slamming him into a tree.

"Crane!" Monkey exclaimed. "It's about time you showed up!"

"Monkey, on your right!" Qiang suddenly appeared before the primate, and knocked away the warrior sneaking up on him with a thrust of his rake.

"Thanks!"

"Where is Tigress?" Qiang demanded.

"She's somewhere in the forest! You have to help her, I think she's in trouble!"

"I'm on my way!" Qiang gripped his unconventional weapon. "You and your friends just keep these
monsters from reaching the village!"

Qiang ran past Mantis as he struck down a trio of warriors and into the forest. The moment he was among the trees, he saw the exhausted feline struggling against a quartet of opponents.

As Qiang rushed forward, one of the attackers got in a lucky swing: before she knew it, Tigress was lying stunned on the ground, the warriors advancing on her with sadistic anticipation.

"Oh no you don't, sonnies!"

Qiang launched himself towards Tigress, leapt in front of her, and with a strange sense of déjà vu, he swung his rake and sent the four villains flying into the forest.

"Qiang!" Tigress's eyes widened in pleasant surprise. "Good timing!

"Are you alright, Tigress?" Qiang asked, not daring to turn and look at her in case their attackers attempted a sneak attack.

"I'm fine. One of those goons got a lucky shot."

"Just focus on getting your stamina back. I'll hold them off."

"What about the others?"

"Crane's helping them. Where is Po?"

"Don't know. Hasn't Mantis found him yet?"

"No, but Po must be aware of what's happening by now."

"If that's true, then he may have run into trouble." Qiang's eyebrows furrowed in concern. "Tigress, once you've got your breath back I want you to go back to the others while I find my son."

"Will do."

With a yell, Po launched himself at Lidong, stick raised.

Lidong rolled out the way and rubbed his sore forehead as he jumped to his feet.

"Whoa, the taunting worked." He muttered, then cried out in alarm and dodged a wild swing from the suddenly furious panda.

What the heck did he do? The fat insults hadn't worked on the Dragon Warrior… what did Lidong say that got him so ticked?

He didn't have time to answer as Po came at him again.

"Po, please be careful!" Ming cried out.

Po didn't seem to hear her.

Lidong didn't have time to dodge as Po slammed into him. Within a millisecond, the large crocodile found himself pinned to the grassy ground, the panda on top of him pressing the stick into his chest.

"Whoa, whoa!" Lidong gulped as he and Po grappled with the stick for the second time. "Time out!
Time out!

Is this what my loser cousin always has to deal with?

Po leant in a little so they were almost nose to snout.

"If you even get a scratch on Tigress..." Po glared into Lidong's eyes. "I'll break your arms."

Uh oh.

There was pain coming. He could see it in the panda's eyes. The panda was so angry he was going to give Lidong the pounding of his life.

Think, Lidong, think!

Lidong's frantic eyes eventually fell on the stick, which was now touching the tip of his chin.

It would probably hurt, but what choice did he have?

Po's eyes widened as Lidong's opened his powerful jaws- CRUNCH- and crunched down on the stick, severing it in two.

Lidong wailed as a dozen splinters pierced his tongue, but he managed to fight the pain just long enough to accurately deliver a kick to Po's gut, knocking him off.

"Zere!" Lidong yelled as he got to his feet, clutching one half of the stick. "Zill heeling cocky?"

"I'm not feeling cocky, I'm... why are you talking like that?" Po blinked as he retrieved the other half of the stick, his other paw massaging his bruised stomach.

"Shinters!" Lidong retorted, wincing as the splinters shifted in his mouth. "I gock shinters in aye nouth!"

"What are you saying?" Po frowned. "I can't understand you!"

"Aw shug up an hight!" Lidong lunged with the splintered stick.

Po raised his arms and blocked the stick just in time. He swept the croc legs out from under his with a lunge of his foot.

"Yow!" Lidong cried as he slammed painfully onto the ground. "You're gogga cay hore hat!"

"If you're not going to put up a good fight, at least you could stop speaking gibberish!"

"Hot jiggerish!" Lidong snapped. "It's shinterish!"

"Still gibberish!"

"Ish hot!"

"Actually, it's quite cool tonight."

"Zat's not hot I neant!"

"I knew you'd agree."

"AW SHOT UG!" Lidong roared in frustration and lunged at Po. Po grabbed the croc's outstretched arms and flipped him over his head. Lidong flew ten feet and crashed into another
"Owwwwww…" Lidong moaned and slid to the ground head first, his body toppling over like the tower of sacred flame and landing on its back.

"That I understood." Po smirked.

Lidong lifted his head feebly, eyes shut from the pain. When the soreness lessened enough for him to open them, the first thing he saw was yellow fabric. His eyes traveled upwards, eventually resting on the round race of the female giant panda.

Ming felt a stab of fear when the croc suddenly grinned maliciously.

"Ming, get away from him!" Po yelled too late as Lidong sprang up, grabbed Ming by the arm, dragged her in front of him and pressed the splintered end of the stick into her neck.

"Ming!" Po's eyes widened in horror.

"Po!" Ming wailed, wincing as the jagged splinters of the stick pricked her skin beneath the fur.

"Suyender or I shick his ingo her ugular!" Lidong sneered.

This time Po understood what Lidong was saying.

"Grop ge shick!" Lidong ordered, wrapping his other arm round Ming's neck.

"Po, help me!" Ming whimpered in terror. Tears sprung in her eyes as Lidong dug the stick just a little deeper into her throat.

"Don't worry, Ming! It's going to be alright!" Po cried, trying to convince himself as well as her. He knew Lidong wasn't bluffing. The croc bandit had once tried to drop a gosling from a roof.

"I shaig grop ge shick!"

Ming gasped in pain as Lidong dug the stick just a little deeper.

"Grop ick!"

"Po… please…"

"Alright, alright!" Po tossed away his half of the stick. "There, I'm surrendering! Let her go!"

Lidong smiled evilly.

"I gone hink sho."

He lowered his arm slightly, preparing to thrust the stick into Ming's throat.

"NO!" Po screamed…

WHACK!

Lidong suddenly fell forward, releasing Ming in the process, a lump the size of an orange swelling on the back of his head. Qiang stood in his place, a slightly cracked rake in his paws.

"You little…" Qiang insulted the motionless croc in mandarin as Po rushed over to the traumatized Ming.
"Ming, are you okay?" Po cupped the sides of Ming's face with his paws and gazed into her eyes.

"Po..." Ming flung herself into Po's chest and gripped the green fabric covering his shoulders. Po felt as well as heard her muffled sobs.

"Hey, it's okay..." Po put his arms round Ming's shaking body and whispered soothingly into her ear. "It's okay... you're safe now... he can't hurt you anymore..."

"Ming, are you alright?" Qiang put a paw on Ming's shoulder as Po continued to comfort her.

"I... I think so..." Ming said in a tiny voice.

"Come on, we should get her somewhere safe." Said Qiang. "You take her to the village, while I deal with..." Qiang turned round. "... oh for gods sakes, he's gone!"

"Aw man!" Po groaned. "Lidong could be anywhere in this forest! Very uncool!"

"We should get back." Qiang sighed and turned back to the other two pandas. "Your friends will probably have dealt with the rest of them by now."

"Po!" Mantis exclaimed as Po, Ming and Qiang approached. "About time you showed up!"

"Where have you been?" Tigress asked, her amber eyes narrowed.

"Sorry guys, Lidong held me up." Po said apologetically.

"So that's where he popped up from." Crane said as he touched down next to the feline. "We were getting the upper hand when Lidong showed up and called for a retreat."

"At least that's what we think he said." Monkey added.

"Are you guys all alright?" Po asked. "Where's Viper?"

"Viper's evacuating the pandas." Crane said. "Tigress got socked in the jaw, but otherwise we're all okay."

"She got what?" Po's mouth fell open. "Tigress, are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Po." Tigress rubbed her jaw. "It's just a little sore."

"Guys!" Viper suddenly came slithering up to them. "Guys, are you alright? Where are they?"

"We're fine, Viper." Crane said. "Those crocs retreated, don't ask why."

"Are the villagers alright?" Qiang asked worriedly.

"Yes, they're safe in the caves." Said Viper.

"Oh thank god." Qiang was so giddy with relief he had to lean on his rake for support.

"It's not over yet." Tigress spoke up. "There's a high chance those guys could come back for a rematch."

The clearing fell silent.

Everyone stared at Tigress in alarm.
"She's right." Said Viper. "Our best chance of ensuring the village's safety is to go after Zanshi and make sure he and his goons can't cause any more trouble."

"Zanshi's behind all of this?" Po gaped. "When I get my hands on him…"

"Po, we all want a piece of that lizard." Said Qiang. "What did those goons want anyway?"

"One of them managed to sneak into Su's room…" Viper began, but was interrupted by a cry of horror from Ming.

"Oh my goodness, is she okay?" Ming cried frantically.

"She's fine." Viper said gently. "I managed to take him down before he could harm her. Anyway, this croc was searching for this key. He seemed to think that Su had it."

"What key? What are you talking about?" Qiang demanded.

"I don't know." Viper went on. "But whatever it is, I don't think they found it."

"Man, it's a good thing we got wind of this attack in time." Monkey sighed. "I'm glad Shifu managed to warn us…" Monkey froze. "Oh heck, Master Shifu!"

"Mantis!" Tigress strode up to the bug and went down on one knee. "Where's Shifu?"

"I don't know!" Mantis exclaimed. "The last time I saw him, he said he was going to confront Zanshi!"

"Something must have happened to him!" Tigress straightened back up. She could feel the near panic in the air as everyone began to feel intense worry for the red panda master. "Mantis, do you know where Shifu would have gone?"

"Me and Shifu managed to locate Zanshi's camp about half an hour from here." Said Mantis. "If Shifu's been captured, that's where he'll be!"

"Alright, let's go and kick some reptilian butt!" Po pumped his fist in the air as Tigress turned to the other two pandas.

"Qiang, you and Ming should head to the caves and make sure your people stay safe." She said. "We'll take care of the rest."

"Are you sure?" Qiang frowned. "This will be really dangerous!"

"Hey, we're kung fu warriors!" Po beamed. "Nerves of steel! Souls of platinum! We were trained to handle situations like thi-" he was cut off when Qiang suddenly flung his arms round him.

There was a loud silence in the clearing, broken only by the distant chirping of crickets.

"Uh…" Po blinked. "Dad?"

"Please come back alive." Qiang whispered into his ear before breaking away. "Come on, Ming." Qiang put an arm round Ming's shoulder and began to steer her away.

"While you're at it, you'd better stop by the orchard and pick up Mr. Ping." Said Mantis. "He's hidden in a hollow tree trunk."

Qiang nodded as he and Ming quickly walked off.
"Be careful, Po!" Ming called over her shoulder before they disappeared into the darkness.

Tigress looked down at Mantis as the bug hopped onto her shoulder.

"Where to, Mantis?" she asked.

"We'll need to cut through the village first. The camp is round about east."

"Alright, let's go."

They trudged through the clearing and back to the village.

As they head through the grassy space in between the houses, the corner of Tigress's eye caught a bright glint of gold. Stopping and looking down, she saw a large golden disc partially obscured by the grass. On a whim, she leant down, picked it up, and tucked it into her vest.
Infiltration

Po and the Furious Five trudged silently through the near-total blackness that was the forest surrounding the panda village.

Well… at least the Furious Five were trudging silently.

"Po, could you be any louder?" Tigress growled in annoyance after being startled by the panda stepping on a particularly large stick.

"I'm sorry, I'm still trying getting the hang of my stealth mode!" Po pouted as he struggled to keep up with the others.

"Just try and keep quiet!" Crane rolled his eyes. "Mantis, are we there yet?"

"Almost. Five minutes and then-"

Snap!

The six warriors froze at the sound of a distant twig snapping.

Someone was approaching.

"Into the trees, hurry!" Tigress whispered.

She and Crane helped each other to quickly haul the not very agile panda into the treetops while their comrades effortlessly scaled the branches.

Once they were completely obscured by the leaves, Tigress motioned for them all to stay silent as a pair of crocodile warriors suddenly appeared, coming to a stop at the base of the tree where Po, Crane and the striped feline were hiding.

"I'm telling you there's nothing here!" one of the crocs exclaimed in annoyance.

"But I'm sure I heard something!" said the second croc. "I definitely heard a twig snap somewhere around here!"

Tigress and Crane glared at the panda sitting between them.

"Sorry." Po mouthed as he cringed.

"Let's keep moving." The first croc spoke again. "We still have two more miles to patrol."

"If I may ask, what the freaking heck are Zanshi and Lidong doing while we grunts are doing all the hiking?" the second croc asked, his voice dripping with displeasure.

"Lidong's still getting his splinters removed and Zanshi is interrogating the red panda in his tent."

Tigress stifled a gasp. In her line of work, the word interrogation usually meant something else entirely.

"Has that big eared rat talked yet?"

"How should I know? We were starting our patrol when Zanshi started!"
"Speaking of him…" the second croc seemed to falter. "Have you noticed Zanshi acting weird lately?"

" Weird how?"

"Well… he keeps acting like he's in some sort of trance, and he's started having mood swings."

"So?"

"Doesn't that worry you just a little bit?"

"All I'm worrying about right now is whether or not we get into that darned temple!"

"So you guys didn't find the key when you attacked the village?"

"One of the guys managed to enter one of the houses, and he reckons he saw a little panda brat holding the key, but one of the kung fu warriors took him out before he could take it from her."

"Su." Viper whispered, her azure eyes widening.

"Look, it's cold and I want to get some shut eye!" the first croc snapped suddenly. "Can we talk about this back at the camp?"

"Alright, alright! Geez…"

The six warriors waited until the footsteps faded into silence before leaping down from the trees.

"They know!" Viper gasped. "They know Su's got the key!"

"This… not good." Crane muttered.

"She's in danger! We have to do something!"

"Calm down, Viper." Tigress put a calming paw on the back of Viper's neck. "Su is just a little girl, so I don't think she knows what she's holding. That's why we need to get this key from her so she'll be out of danger." She turned to Crane. "Crane, take Viper back to the caves and see if you can get the key from Su."

"Alright. Climb on, Viper." Viper slithered onto Crane's back.

"Meet us here at this tree once you're done."

As Crane flapped off with his passenger, Tigress turned to Mantis, Monkey and Po.

"We'll need to hurry. If Zanshi is indeed interrogating Shifu, then he may not have much time left."

"Why would they want Shifu?" Monkey asked. "What could they hope to gain from capturing him?"

Tigress's eyes narrowed.

"Trouble." She said icily.

"Anything yet?" Lidong winced as his words sent fresh pain shooting through his splinter-less but still very sore tongue. He stepped up to the rather obese croc standing guard on the outer rim of the camp.
"Nope." The croc replied. "I've patrolled the perimeter of this place three times already, but I don't see no kung fu warriors."

"Well if you do see them, kill them on sight." Lidong said coldly, and then winced again.

"Well I can kill on sight if I can't see nobody!" the croc retorted with a scowl. "I got worked up thinking I stuck a lance in someone this morning, but now there's nothing. I'm telling you I'm getting sick of this!"

"Just do your job!" Lidong rolled his eyes. "Ow!"

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, it's just my tongue. Those splinters were a real pain to yank out."

"Tell me again how you got a mouthful of splinters." The croc chortled.

"Shaddap and patrol!" Lidong stormed off. "I've gotta report to Zanshi."

"Is that really necessary? Nothing's happening."

"He ordered me to give hourly reports regardless of whether or not nothing's happening."

"That's weird. What's with the sudden paranoia?"

"Heck if I know. Just don't let your guard down. Those warriors are a sneaky bunch. Especially the bug."

"Don't worry, I'll squish him when I see him."

The croc turned back to the forest surrounding the camp as Lidong walked off.

A second later, he fell forward, struck down by a nerve pinch from a certain praying mantis.

"Fear the bug." Mantis whispered into the croc's ear as he lay paralyzed in the dirt. "Alright guys, the coast is clear!"

Behind the nearby bushes, Tigress put her arms out in front of Po and Monkey as they made to leap out.

"No." She whispered. "I need you two to stay hidden in case anything happens. Me and Mantis are the stealthiest, and someone needs to warn the others if we get caught."

Po and Monkey nodded reluctantly.

Tigress leapt out of the bushes, silent as a ghost, and together with Mantis crept behind the nearest tent.

"Man, I hate this!" Po whispered in displeasure. "My dad's village is in danger and I'm stuck sitting here!"

"Just bear with it, Po." Monkey whispered back. "Tigress knows what she's doing."

"Where are all the goons? I thought there'd be a lot more?"

"They're probably in their tents recovering from the battle."
The panda and primate fell silent and watched as Tigress and Mantis waited for a pair of crocs to pass by their hiding place before swiftly switching to another tent.

It was two minutes before either of them spoke again.

"Hey, Po." Monkey whispered. "I forgot to ask before… how did it go with Ming?"

"Awesome!"

"Really?" Monkey seemed suspiciously stunned. "You didn't mess up in any way?"

"No! At least I don't think so…"

"Don't worry. You can always ask her once this is all over."

"That's if I manage to stay in one piece until then."

"Hush!" Monkey suddenly hissed. "Someone's coming!"

They ducked down behind the bush as the pair of crocs that had unknowingly passed Tigress and Mantis earlier approached. Before they could look down, Po quickly reached out beneath the bush and dragged the paralyzed croc out of sight.

"… I can't breathe… Sai, I just said I can't breathe." Said a gruff, panting voice.

"Oh, okay." Said a normal second voice.

"Oh, okay? Whaddya mean oh, okay, are you kidding?" exclaimed the first voice. "I said I can't breathe! I could be dying!"

"Well you're not, are ya?"

"What makes you so sure?"

"Besides, how can you be hot? There's a cool breeze tonight, and we're cold blooded in case you've flippin' forgotten."

"I'm just hot."

As the two crocs conversed, Tigress and Mantis moved to another tent, slowly but surely making their way towards the largest tent on the other side of the camp.

"I know what it is!" the second croc retorted. "It's all that armor you're wearing! Take it off, you'll feel cooler!"

"No way! I need to be prepared in case those kung fu warriors attack! We're holding their master captive, remember?"

"Like they would dare attack our camp. They'll be outnumbered!" the second croc scoffed.

"Ugh… I'm sweating buckets! I can't breathe, I'm so hot!"

"For gods sake…" Po and Monkey could clearly hear the irritation in the second croc's tone. "… will you either take that armor off or shut up! My head's like a bag of pudding!"

"Hey, it's not my fault you got hit in the face by a panda with a rake!"
At that, the crocs appeared to have finished with their conversation and Po and Monkey listened as their footsteps began to fade.

Suddenly, after ten steps…

"Nope, it's too hot."

"RIGHT, THAT'S IT!" The second croc suddenly hollered. "Off with the armor!"

"No! Go away!"

Po and Monkey peered over the bushes and stifled their snickers as they watched one croc chase the other.

"Idiots…" Monkey chortled. "Can you see Tigress and Mantis?"

"Wait a sec…" Po strained his eyes to catch a hint of green, orange or black amongst the tents. After a few seconds, he spotted Mantis's tiny head peering round the corner of one of the tents surrounding the biggest. "There!"

As he continued to watch, his stomach lurched when he spotted the two crocs running in the direction of one side of the tent. On the other side, Lidong himself was emerging from the big tent and strolling in the direction of Tigress's and Mantis's hiding place. He was carrying his enormous, lethal looking scimitar.

"I've got a score to settle with that kitty! Why do you think I brought my big sword?"

"I've got to do something!"

"Tigress said to stay here!" Monkey whispered.

"In about fifteen seconds they're going to get caught! I can't just stand by and do nothing!"

"But Po, how are you going to help them without getting spotted yourself?"

Po looked down at the ground as he frantically tried to think. Then his eyes fell on the paralyzed croc that was even fatter than he was.

"Monkey, stay here!"

Po lifted the croc with difficulty and rushed round the bush.

"Tigress, what're we gonna do?" Mantis whispered frantically as the crocs and Lidong closed in on both sides. "In five seconds, we're gonna get spotted!"

"We have no choice but to fight." Tigress replied grimly. "Get ready, Mantis…"

"Prriiiiiincess…"

The two crouching warriors froze and blinked.

"Princess… Daaance Ceremoniaaal…"

"What the heck is that?" Mantis whispered, stunned.

"What the heck is he doing?" Lidong asked, his voice so loud that Tigress realized with a jolt that
he was just around the tent's corner.

"… Dance… Ce-ceremonial…"

They heard footsteps as Lidong and the two crocs moved away from the tent.

"Mantis, find out what's going on!"

Mantis poked his head back round the corner.

"Princeeeeeeettt…"

After two seconds, Mantis pulled his head back, struggling to keep a straight face.

"You're not gonna believe this!" a strange whistling sound emanated from his mouth as he bit his lip to keep from laughing. "See for yourself!"

Cautiously, Tigress crept to the corner of the tent and poked her head round.

Her jaw went slack.

"Princeeeesss… Dancing Ceremoooonial… Sooooong…"

Lidong and the two crocs were standing laughing hystERICALLY at the obese croc, who was tap-dancing erratically in between two other tents like a puppet on strings. His scaled head bobbed limply and his tail flopped left and right across the ground, scattering leaves and dirt.

"Xi, what the heck are you doing?" One of the crocs guffawed.

"What on earth…" Tigress whispered.

"… Ceremoooniaaal… Priiiinneeesss… Danciiiing… Soooong…"

"Mantis, I though you'd paralyzed that guy!"

"I did!" Mantis whispered. "Look behind that tree over there!"

Tigress peered at the katsura tree Mantis was pointing at. Her eyes widened when she saw a pair of large black arms pulling at some strings. Her eyes followed the strings which stretched over one of the low thick branches, and down to the arms and legs of the dancing croc.

"Oh my gods…" she whispered.

"Do you recognize that song?" Mantis chuckled quietly.

"I'm going to kill him." Tigress's cheeks grew hot. "I am going to kill him."

"Let's get out of here!"

Mantis and Tigress quickly crept out from behind the tent, and while Lidong and the crocs were still distracted, and slid behind the largest tent.

"Can you hear anything?" Mantis asked.

Tigress pressed her ear to the canvas. She heard the unintelligible voice of Mu Zanshi.

"Zanshi's in there." She whispered.
Then she heard a second voice, and her heart leapt.

"So is Shifu."

"Is he okay?" Mantis asked worriedly.

"I- I don't know." Tigress whispered.

"Princeessssss... Daaa-

The singing suddenly stopped and they heard a crash as the obese croc collapsed to the ground.

"Out like a light!" Lidong laughed along with the others. "I told him to lay off the rice wine!"

"What's going on out here?"

Tigress and Mantis heard a rustle as Zanshi stormed out of the tent.

"B-boss!" Lidong gulped.

"What going on here?" Zanshi demanded angrily. "And what is that idiot doing on the ground?"

"He's passed out, sir." Said one of the crocs. "Too much wine."

"Put him in a tent! I'll deal with him later!"

They heard a dragging sound as the two crocs carried Xi away.

"How's it going with the interrogation, boss?" Lidong asked.

"Just as I expected, he refuses to answer my questions." Zanshi growled.

"Have you tried torturing him?"

Tigress sucked in a breath.

"Didn't bother." Zanshi replied. "I know his type. Torture will be useless if not fun."

"So what do we do?"

"You stay and guard the entrance. Do not go inside whatever you do: that red panda is resourceful as well as cunning."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to the temple entrance again."

"Again? But boss, we haven't found the key yet!"

"We have no choice but to make one last attempt at opening the door with alternative means." Zanshi replied.

"You mean we're gonna try the powder kegs this time?"

"Yes. If that fails, then you have my permission to hunt for the villagers."

"Yes, boss."
"Stay here. I'll be back in half an hour."

They heard footsteps as Zanshi walked off.

"To the back." Tigress whispered. She and Mantis crept round to the rear of the large tent… and very nearly collided with a giant panda.

"Po!" Tigress almost cried out loud. "Po, I told you to stay in the bushes!"

"I'm sorry, but I had to do something to help you!" Po whispered back.

"Shut up and keep a look out!" Tigress scowled as she unsheathed a claw and began to cut a long line down the back of the tent.
"… I'm going to ask you one more time, Shifu…" Zanshi leant down so that he and the chained red panda were face to face. "Where is the key?"

"I do not know what you're talking about." Shifu stated bluntly for the twelfth time.

Zanshi's reptilian eyes narrowed.

"I knew this was a waste of time." He sighed.

"What next?" Shifu asked coldly, trying to ignore the throbbing in his temple. "Are you going to beat the information out of me?"

"You know as well as I that torturing you would be pointless." Zanshi replied. "Your turtle master has trained you too well."

"I take it that wasn't a compliment?"

"Correct."

"Is it alright if I ask a few questions?" Shifu spoke a little louder, hearing a clink as the chains binding him to the pole shifted.

Zanshi seemed to pause and consider this. Then he sighed again and sat down on the hammock.

"Depends on what you have to ask. I'll give you three questions, and then I have business to attend to."

"Alright then…" Shifu decided not to ask who Zanshi was working for: the alligator would either give a banal, pointless answer or ignore the question completely. "… How did you manage to keep your good looks after all these years?"

Zanshi chuckled humorlessly.

"Trade secret."

Shifu sighed. He should have seen that coming.

"Second question…” the red panda's head continued to ache. "What have you done with the village?"

"I sent my men to retrieve the key a couple of hours ago."

Shifu's heart skipped a beat.

"Don't worry, none of them were hurt… unfortunately… and in case you were wondering, we didn't find the key."

Shifu slumped in relief.

"One more question, Shifu. Make it quick."

"Alright then… how are you coping with your nightmares, nowadays?"
Zanshi stiffened.

Shifu smirked. He knew he had stuck a nerve.

"What… nightmares?" Zanshi asked coolly.

"Do you really think I'm stupid?" Shifu demanded. "There's no way you can just escape what happened that day without any menta-"

Before Shifu knew it, Zanshi was pinning him to the pole with one end of the tri bo yao. The reptile's face was contorted, and a sinister hiss emanated from his teeth.

"No… more… questions." Zanshi snarled.

The weapon was compressing Shifu's chest to hard he was having trouble breathing. As he struggled to inhale, he looked up at Zanshi's face, and for the first time, he saw the rage, the insanity in his yellow eyes.

A second later, the tri bo yao was moved from his chest, and Shifu could breathe normally again. The fury was gone from Zanshi's face, replaced instead with a cruel but composed smile.

"I will have to leave you now, Shifu." Said Zanshi. "Don't worry, I have a surprise to tell you when I get back."

"What surprise?" Shifu asked cautiously.

"You'll find out in a little while."

*Crash!*

Zanshi whirled round.

"What's going on out here?" he yelled and exited the tent.

From what Shifu could hear, it appeared that one of the crocs had passed out drunk. Two minutes passed, but Zanshi did not return.

Now all Shifu could do was wait.

*R-r-r-i-i-i-i-i-p!*

Shifu's ears pricked.

The sound was coming from behind him.

Someone was entering the tent from the rear.

"Who's there?" he asked, lowering his voice so as not to alert whoever was guarding the entrance.

"Master Shifu, it's us!"

*Po!*

Shifu's eyes widened in amazement as Po, Tigress and Mantis slipped through the tear in the tent and moved themselves in front of him.

"Master, are you alright?" Tigress whispered, her own eyes wide in concern. "Oh gods, your head!
"I will eviscerate him!"

"It's just a bump, I'm fine." Shifu replied with a smile. "I'm more concerned about your cut lip."

"Come on, let's get you out of here!" Po grabbed the chains and started to tug.

"No, Po, wait." Shifu whispered. "Hush and listen, there's something I need to tell you."

"What is it?" Mantis asked.

"I've figured out what Zanshi is after." The red panda spoke. "Why he wants this key."

"Well?"

"He's attempting to gain entrance into the Temple of Heroes."

"The Temple of Heroes?" Po gaped. "You mean the final resting place of the youngest of four brothers who forged the Sword of Heroes?"

"Yes." Said Shifu.

"Oh my gosh, my dad's been living next to one of the most legendary sites in kung fu history!" Po grinned like a little boy. "Awesome!"

"Keep your voice down!" Tigress scolded. "Go on, Master."

"Before I continue, I need to tell you a not very well known tale of the four brothers, so you will understand a little better." Shifu spoke. "I trust that you all are already aware of the tale of the fourth brother becoming a blacksmith and forging the sword so that his three elder brothers could defeat the attacking mountain giants?"

"Yes!" Po whispered louder and more excitedly than the others.

"Well, this is the tale of what happened several decades after that event." Shifu went on.

His three students fell silent and listened as he began the tale.

"As the years passed, the three elder brothers continued to protect their village with the Sword of Heroes, quickly gaining a reputation as the strongest and most powerful warriors in China. However, their power came to the attention of a ruthless warlord who desired a weapon that could help him to take over China with no resistance. Once he learned of the power of the Sword of Heroes, a burning desire grew inside him. The warlord wanted that power, and he was going to get it. One night, he alone crept into the home of the four brothers, and stole the sword from under their noses. He brought it back to his fortress, and had his blacksmiths fuse a shifting stone to the hilt…"

"A shifting stone?" Po blinked.

"Yes, Po." Shifu nodded. "Rather than only two shifting stones in existence, there are actually three. Anyway, with the shifting stone fused to the hilt, the Sword of Heroes gained the power to shape shift into any kind of weapon imaginable, making it a far more powerful… and deadly… tool of destruction. When the three elder brothers learned of the theft, they stormed into the warlord's fortress. A deadly battle ensued, and the three brothers were slain."

"Oh no!" Po moaned.
"The fourth brother, grief-stricken and determined to avenge his brothers' deaths, confronted the warlord himself. The warlord was convinced that the fourth brother would be no challenge. However, as the forger of a variety of weapons, the fourth brother knew of each and every one of their weaknesses, and despite the sword's shape shifting ability, the warlord was defeated and slain. Unfortunately, the fourth brother was also mortally wounded. Before his last breath, he requested that the sword be buried with his body, so that it could never be used for destruction again. Determined to honor the most heroic of the four brothers, the villagers built the Temple of Heroes in a remote and unknown location, and buried the sword with him."

"The Sword of Heroes is in the temple?" Po stared. "But what about the one back at the palace…"

"Ah yes. Very few, Oogway and myself among them, are aware that that particular sword is a fake."

"A fake?" Po gaped. "So I just imagined all those times I cut myself from looking at the sword too hard?"

"Yes, you did." Shifu rolled his eyes. "To ensure that the fourth brother's last request would be eternally fulfilled, the villagers also built a variety of traps, and sealed the entrance so that only a special key could open it."

"The key Zanshi's looking for." Tigress whispered. "If he gets his hands on a weapon that powerful… oh gods…"

"Come on, Master, we need to get you out of here." Mantis grabbed at the chains and raised a foreleg to punch through them.

"No." Shifu replied sternly. "If someone walks in here and finds me gone, they will know that you know what they are after. They will quicken their efforts to find you and the villagers. If I stay here, then I can buy you all a few hours of time at the most."

"But Master…"

"No buts. Now listen to me… you have to find this key. You have to make sure that Zanshi never gets his hands on the sword. Do you understand me?"

"Yes." The three students spoke simultaneously.

"Before you go, pass me that twig over there."

Mantis placed the tiny stick in Shifu's hand.

"Now get out of here! Hurry, before someone enters and sees you!"

Tigress hesitated, glancing at Shifu once before following Po and Mantis out the rear of the tent.

"Please be careful." Shifu whispered, fearing for his daughter above all else.

Viper and Crane were waiting for them by the time they made it back to the tree.

"Do you have it?" Tigress asked as she and the others approached.

Viper and Crane shook their heads.

"Su said that the goon that attacked her thought that her lucky coin was the key." Viper said.
"Her lucky coin?" Po raised his eyebrows.

"Su had this large coin which she keeps as a good luck charm. She told me about it while I was evacuating the villagers."

"Where is it now?" Po asked.

"Su said she lost it during the evacuation." Crane said. "She dropped it somewhere in the grass field in the middle of the village."

"We've got to find that coin as soon as possible!" Tigress spoke. "Did Su say what it looked like?"

"She said that it was larger than the average coin." Viper paused to think. "Made of gold… has a symbol of a dragon on it…"

"Gold?" Tigress frowned and reached inside her vest.

"Is it shiny?" Mantis asked.

"It's made of gold, so yeah." Viper replied.

"Right, let's back to the village." Said Po. "Once we get there, we should split up an-"

"Guys…" Tigress suddenly spoke up. "This is it!"

She held out a large golden coin.

"Hey, where did you find that?" Viper stared.

"I found it in the field where Su said it would be." Said Tigress. "I didn't think anything of it until now."

"Well, let's give it a shot." Said Po. "Next stop… the temple!"
"Mr. Ping!" Qiang whispered as he and Ming crept through the darkened orchard. "Mr. Ping, where are you?"

"Mantis said he was hidden in a hollow trunk." Ming said. "Do you think he meant the big tree that fell down twenty years back?"

"Possibly. Let's look there."

They walked for two more minutes before Qiang spoke again.

"So…" he hesitated. "How did it go with Po?"

"It was very enjoyable." Said Ming without missing a beat. "Your son really is sweet and kind."

"What did you do?" Qiang asked, a slight redness in his cheeks.

"He took me to this beautiful little place in the forest where we had dinner." Said Ming with a smile. "We talked, and he told me about how he became the Dragon Warrior by defeating Tai Lung."

"Who the heck is Tai Lung?"

"I'll have to repeat the story to explain."

"Oh. Did you do anything else?" Qiang chuckled.

"Sort of. At some point during dinner, he started getting nervous. He was worried that he was acting self-centered, so I…" she paused and blushed.

"What?"

"I gave him a peck on the cheek to reassure him."

"Oh, did you?" Qiang laughed.

"A peck on the cheek?" squawked a voice coming from their right. "What's wrong with the lips, for heaven's sake?"

"Mr. Ping?" Qiang stared in the direction the voice had come from. "Where are you"?

"Over here!"

They found the goose hiding in a hollow trunk, just as Mantis had said.

"Are you alright, Mr. Ping?" Ming asked worriedly as he climbed out and brushed the cobwebs off his coat.

"Quite fine, thank you dear." Mr. Ping replied. "What about my son? Is he alright?"

"Yes." Qiang said. "We managed to force the enemy to retreat."

"Oh thank goodness!" Mr. Ping almost collapsed with relief. "Oh joy! Oh thank you god! What about the villagers? Are they safe?"
"We managed to get them to safety in a nearby cave network before the raid." Said Qiang. "That's where we need to go before another raid starts."

"Another raid!" Mr. Ping squawked. "Oh my goodness!"

Before Qiang or Ming could react, the goose took off... in the direction of the village.

"Ping! Where are you going?!" Qiang ran after him. "Ming, stay here!"

"Okay!" Ming cried, but the panda was already out of earshot.

Qiang didn't manage to catch up to the frantic goose until they ran all the way back to the village. By the time he did, he found him rummaging desperately through his noodle cart, which had been left next to Qiang's house.

"Mr. Ping, forget the noodle cart!" Qiang groaned. "We have to go!"

"It's not the noodle cart I'm worried about right now!" Mr. Ping retorted as he dug around the packs of raw noodle strands. "Ah, I've found it!"

He pulled out small scarlet object, its edges frayed slightly from age.

"A second place ribbon?" Qiang frowned.

"A symbol of my son's endearing tenacity and bodacity!" Mr. Ping stroked the ribbon lovingly. "Alright then, let's go!"

"Where did he win that?" Qiang bent over so he could clearly see the second place symbol on the ribbon.

"He almost won a footrace when he was a boy." Said Mr. Ping.

"A footrace? Po never told me he did sports."

"Oh no, he didn't. It was just a one time thing. Besides, the only sport he was interested in was of course kung fu."

"Why did you keep it in your noodle cart?" Qiang asked, pointing a finger at the ribbon. "Normally, someone would have put it on display."

"Oh, I just like to keep it as a good luck charm." Mr. Ping said. Qiang gazed into the goose's eyes and sensed that he wasn't being entirely truthful. He decided not to pressure him.

"I'll tell you all about it on the way to the caves, if you'd like." Mr. Ping said as he carefully pocketed the aged red ribbon.

"Yeah." Qiang smiled as they made their way back to the orchard. "I'd like that."

The two crocodiles guarding the temple entrance straightened themselves quickly when they saw Zanshi emerge from the forest.

"Get the powder kegs ready." Zanshi spoke briskly as he strode forward.

"But boss, what about the key?" the soldier on the right frowned and held his lantern a little higher.
"If this last attempt fails, we will continue the search. Now do as you're told and ready the kegs!"

"Alright, boss." The two crocs quickly moved towards the small pile of powder kegs sitting next to the tent.

"Just use three kegs." Zanshi ordered as they began lifting. "We don't want to risk causing a rockslide that will bury the entrance."

Two minutes later, three powder kegs stood at the base of the large pair of doors as one of the crocs careful used to fourth to pour a thin line of black powder from the middle keg to the threesome's protective position fifty feet away.

"Boss, what do we use to light it?"

In answer, Zanshi grabbed the croc's lantern and smashed it on the trail of powder.

Fsssssshhhh…

As the sparkling fire burned rapidly along the trail towards the temple entrance, Zanshi knelt down behind the overturned table. The two crocs did the same.

… sssssshhhhh…

"Three…” Zanshi whispered, eyes staring intently on the flame. "… two… one…”

… sshhhKABOOM!

Branches and rocks were airborne and exploded bits rained down, wood and rock and burned leaves, a large tree tipping over with a deafening creak, slamming to the ground with a tremendous crash and dirt was everywhere.

After fifteen seconds of quiet, Zanshi and the two crocs poked their heads above the edge of the dented table.

Through the cloud of dust, dirt and leaves, they made out a lone smoking powder keg.

"Get down!"

KABOOM!

More wood, rock and burned leaves flew through the air and rained down over their heads, and then all was once again quiet.

They waited for a whole minute before slowly emerging from behind the table.

"Did it work?” One of the crocs asked.

It was a while before the dust cleared and when it did… they were faced with a perfectly intact pair of double doors emblazoned with an enormous golden dragon.

"Darn." The croc muttered.

"You." Zanshi glared at the croc who had muttered. "Stay here with your comrade and continue to guard the entrance."

"Yes, boss."
"As for myself, I will return to the camp and inform the others that we will be doubling our efforts to search for the key. If anyone approaches who is not one of us, kill them."

Without another word, he departed the site.

"What the heck is the deal with that door?" The first croc moaned once Zanshi was gone. "We used enough powder to bring down a ten-storey tower!"

"I always thought that there was something weird about this place." His comrade whispered. "Something… not quite… normal."

"Yeah, you said it. Not that I'm superstitious, but do you ever get the feeling that there's something in there?"

"What something?"

"Just… some… thing."

"I believe you, but I think you'd better keep your worries to yourself." His comrade replied, trying to suppress a shudder. "You know Zanshi doesn't tolerate cowardice."

"Yeah, you're right." The first croc turned away to gaze up at the dragon on the doors. "But I still can't suppress this feeling in my-"

Thud.

"What was that?" The first croc turned back round to find his comrade lying prone of the ground.

"What the-"

WHACK!

The first croc felt a dull pain at the back of his head before falling unconscious.

"All clear!" Crane whispered and stepped off the motionless croc.

"Good work, Crane." Viper was the first to emerge from the trees, the rest following straight after.

"Tigress, do you still have the key?"

Tigress held out the large gold disc.

"I haven't let go of it once since I found it." She replied. "Monkey, Mantis, scout ahead to make sure there aren't any more crocs hiding by the entrance."

"But what about traps?" Monkey asked worriedly.

"These goons do not appear to have come to harm since they found the entrance. Either they managed to disarm the traps surrounding the entrance or there aren't any at all."

All the same, Monkey and Mantis were very cautious as they crept right up to the entrance.

After a few minutes, Monkey gave the others a silent thumb up.

All clear.

Po and the others swiftly rushed to the entrance.
"Woah, that's a really big door." Po patted one of the two big slabs of wood.

"Stand back, guys." Tigress stepped forward so she was literally ten centimeters from the doors.

Her comrades stepped away as she slowly pushed the golden disc into the circular indentation.

Nothing happened for a few seconds.

And then… they heard a muffled but thunderous series of creaks emanating from behind the doors, as if a gigantic centuries old lock was being undone by a pair of giant hands.

And then, with a deafening sound, the pair of doors slowly creaked open. Po and the Furious Five backed away quickly as the doors slid open completely, revealing nothing but a tunnel of blackness.

As the opened doors creaked to a halt, silence fell once more onto the clearing.

"Holy rice balls." Po whispered.

"Alright, let's go." Tigress stepped forward… and was stopped in her tracks when a black paw grabbed her wrist.

"Tigress, wait!" Po exclaimed. "There's something I wanna check out, first!"

Tigress sighed.

"Alright then." She said. "But make it quick."

Po nodded.

He moved quickly over to the door where the coin was still embedded. He dug his blunt claws in and prized out the coin.

Nothing happened.

"Oh good." Po sighed in relief. "Zanshi can't remove the coin and trap us in here."

"Smart thinking, Po." Tigress was impressed. "It's a good thing you thought of that."

"Thanks." Po grinned.

Then his grin faded as he gazed into the dark interior of the temple.

"Po?" Crane frowned.

"I thought I would be excited to finally enter the Temple of Heroes…" Po said quietly. "But right now… I'm feeling a little nervous."

"You're just worried about the traps." Said Tigress. "Don't worry, we've all been trained to handle situations like this." Po blinked when she put a warm paw on his shoulder. "Po, don't worry. It'll be fine."

Po hesitated… but then relaxed as he felt Tigress's warmth transferring from her palm to his shoulder.

"Alright." He said. "Let's do this!"
And so Po and the Furious Five stepped cautiously into the darkness of the Temple of Heroes.
They walked.
And walked.
And walked.

In the near-blackness, no-one dared stray far from the group. As they continued, the moonlight emanating from the open entrance behind them dimmed more and more until they were finally enshrouded in pure darkness.

It was so silent in the tunnel that when Po eventually spoke up, everyone jumped a little.

"Tigress, you've been really quiet since we came in here." Po blindly reached out and his paw luckily fell on the warm fur of Tigress's shoulder. He was stunned when he actually felt the shoulder shaking slightly. "Is something bugging you?" When she didn't answer, he added, "I mean aside from Zanshi and the fact that we're inside a tomb?"

"Po…" He heard Tigress say quietly. "Do you think that Shifu will be okay?"

For the first time in his life, Po could hear the fear, feel the slight aura emanating from her as she worried about her master. His heart went out to her as he tighten his grip on her shoulder when she began to move on ahead.

"Don't worry, Tigress." Po grinned, even though she couldn't possibly see him, and gently squeezed the feline's shoulder to reassure her. "Shifu's the grandmaster of the Jade Palace. I'm certain that he'll be able to handle himself."

"Are you sure?"

"Tigress, you've lived with the old man for nearly twenty years. If anyone would know him, it would be you. And I think you know that he can look after himself."

He strained to see Tigress's expression in the darkness.

"You're right." Tigress eventually said, the fear gone from her tone and replaced with her usual determination. "I should stop worrying and focus on our mission."

"Atta girl." Po's grin widened.

"Alright, new topic." Mantis said. Monkey almost yelled in surprise. He had forgotten that the insect was sitting on his shoulder. "Po, how did it go with Ming? Did you bomb?"

Most unfortunately for him, Viper was located right behind he and Monkey.

*Smack!*

"Ow!"

"What did I tell you?" Viper hissed. Though she had zero visibility, she could clearly picture Mantis rubbing the back of his tiny head.

"Sorry, couldn't resist." Mantis muttered.
"Hey, Po." Crane decided to continue the conversation while Mantis grumbled under his breath. "Did you remember my advice?"

"I did great!" Po exclaimed. "Crane, I did everything you told me! I made her dinner, we talked, and everything went well up until Lidong attacked us."

"Good for you, Po." Viper smiled widely, even though she couldn't see the panda. "I knew you would do well."

"Thanks, Viper." Po replied. "At least someone isn't making fun of…" He stopped when he no longer felt Tigress's presence beside him. "Tigress, did you just stop?"

She didn't answer.

"Tigress?"

Silence.

"Tigress?" Po's cry of fear echoed in the tunnel.

*Where is she?* Po though as he frantically ran back down the dark tunnel. She was with him only a minute ago? Did she lose her way? End up walking down a side tunnel by accident? Did she... Po's last thought made him start shaking... come across one of the traps Shifu warned them about?

"Tigress!" Po reached out with his paws and felt for the walls.

He was on the verge of hyperventilation when he finally heard her voice.

"Sorry, Po!" Tigress called out some distance behind him. "I think I've found a torch here!"

"Tigress!" Po ran back down the cave. He slowed down when the path before him was suddenly lit in a dull golden glow. In the middle of the square shaped tunnel stood Tigress, holding an ancient looking torch. "Don't do that!"

"I'm sorry, I should have answered when you first called." Tigress stepped up to him with an apologetic expression. "It won't happen again."

"You're darn right it won't!" Po scowled.

Tigress scowled back, her own anger growing.

"What's that supposed to mean?" She demanded testily.

"It means that if you fall back without telling me again, I'll-"

"Never mind it, Po." Crane walked up to them out the darkness where the light of the torch didn't reach. "At least we now have some light."

Po and Tigress fell silent, though the scowls did not leave their faces.

"Hey, shine that torch over here a minute." Monkey called ten feet away. "I think I've found another one!"

Half a minute later, Po and Tigress were both carrying lit torches.

"Right, let's keep moving." Tigress said. "We have to find that sword before Zanshi and his goons
discover the entrance.

So they continued down the tunnel.

Now that they had light, they could make out the detail of the architecture of the tunnel. The walls were deep crimson, and decorated with golden dragons which stretched across the rock and spat frozen yellow flames across the surface. The ceiling glittered slightly with dark jade tiles which gave the appearance of scales. The floor was also jade, but instead of tiles a flat jade surface stretched down the tunnel and made echoing dull taps as the warriors walked across it.

"Wow…" Monkey muttered. "Whoever built this really spared no expense."

"Yeah." Mantis agreed. "Those golden statues must have cost a fortune to sculpt."

"Hush!" Tigress hissed. "I can see the end of the tunnel up ahead. Stay quiet and keep close."

They slowed down considerably as they neared the opening in the tunnel.

The second they exited the tunnel, the walls disappeared, so that now nothing existed except for the bubble of orange light and the six warriors who inhabited it. It appeared that whatever new area they were in was bigger than the Hall of Warriors.

"Hush, everyone." Tigress whispered. Everyone obediently fell silent. As they did so, so did their surroundings. They strained their ears, but heard no tiny scuffles or other sounds of movement in the darkness. It appeared that… for the moment… they were alone.

"Alright…" Tigress spoke eventually. "We'll split into two teams. Po, you take Monkey and Mantis and go to the right. I will go with Crane and Viper and take the left. When you find the wall of the room, move along it and see if you can find more torches. Light them if you find them and we'll see if we can get some light in this place. Hurry up before the torches go out. And stay alert. Remember what Master Shifu said about traps."

Po nodded and moved off with his comrades, all of them taking slow and cautious steps, as if the floor might suddenly give way at any moment. Tigress moved in the opposite direction with her own team.

Po was the first to find a torch, and set it alight in its bracket. A bubble of orange suddenly appeared in the darkness some distance away as Tigress's team also progressed.

"Hey, guys." Po spoke as they continued along the wall. "Have you guys ever done something like this before?"

"Never anything like this." Monkey said without hesitation. "We usually just battled bandits and warlords and whatever."

"So if we suddenly came across an evil demon guardian of this temple, you guys would be no use?" As Po spoke, he found another torch and lit it. The growing light in the room illuminated crimson red walls framed with dark brown panels depicting glorious wars between muscle-bound warriors, several of which wielded a certain Sword of Heroes.

"We got pummeled when you accidentally unleashed the Mongolian Fist Demon, so yeah." Mantis pouted. "We wouldn't last five seconds."

"Then let's hope that there's no scary guardian lurking round here." Po muttered and lit a third torch. "What do we do if we do encounter something?"
"Then we'll run out the temple screaming." Monkey and Mantis spoke simultaneously.

Meanwhile, Tigress and her team made their own progress along the wall, illuminating three torches before anyone spoke.

"Hey, Viper." Crane said. "I know this probably isn't the best time but…"

"Yes?" Viper asked.

"You probably aren't aware that yesterday I visited Qiang so he could teach me to cook stir fry."

"Oh, I already know about that." Crane blinked in confusion as Viper inexplicably started giggling. "Mantis and Monkey spied on you and told everyone they met. They went into explicit detail about the moment when you ka-kawed like a woman after you got hot oil on your beak."

"Oh ho…" Crane glared at the primate and insect walking along the far side of the now partially illuminated room. "They did, did they?"

"Yup." Viper nodded. "I told them not to make fun of you. They didn't listen, and so I give you permission to get revenge on them in any way you see fit."

"Thanks, Viper." Crane replied. "Back to the original topic of our conversation… Mr. Ping already tried my stir fry, and he didn't puke. So…" Crane was glad that the dull orange light didn't show his blush. "When this is all over… if I make some more, would you like to have a taste?"

"Of course." Viper said without missing a beat. "I'd love to have a try."

"R-really?"

"I tried Po's soup the first time he cooked for us, didn't I?"

"Good point."

"Let's stop here." Tigress interrupted at that moment. "Let Po and the others come to us."

Sure enough, two more lit torches later, Po, Monkey and Mantis rejoined the others at the side of the now fully lit room.

"Is that all of them?" Tigress asked.

"There was one that was busted beyond repair, but other than that that's all of them." Po nodded.

The circular hall they now stood in was big enough to fit three of Mr. Ping's noodle shops. The domed ceiling was beautifully detailed, golden dragons curling across a deep red surface. An enormous yin-yang symbol sat in the very middle of the ceiling. The floor was virtually an enormous mosaic of green, white and red, portraying the biggest depiction of an eastern dragon they had ever seen. A series of red pillars constricted by golden dragon statues formed an inner circle within the hall. As the warriors wandered into the middle of the room in awe of the architecture, they caught sight of five enormous wooden doors that circled the room. A weathered symbol was engraved on a jade plaque above each door, and four large paintings of what was very likely the four oxen brothers occupied the four gaps in between the doors.

"Holy rice balls." Po whispered.

"You can say that again." Viper whispered. Her gaze wandered down to the wonderfully decorated floor, and she suddenly frowned. "What's this?"
The six warriors looked down, and realized that they had stepped into a circular jade panel in the very centre of the floor. Five indentations, slightly smaller than that which the golden coin fit into, ringed the edge of the panel.

"Any idea what this means?" Mantis asked.

"I think something fits into these indentations," Tigress ran her fingers across one of shallow holes. She saw a small symbol inside it, similar to the ones above the doors. "We need to find whatever fits in these holes in order to progress."

"Where do we find them?" Monkey asked.

After a few seconds, they all came to the same realization. They looked up towards the five doors.

"Please tell me we aren't going in there." Crane groaned.

"What choice do we have?" Tigress asked, and stepped up to the door on the far right. "What does that symbol mean?"

She was able to decipher it after peering closely.

"Tu." She spoke aloud. "Earth."

"Earth?" Mantis blinked. "What the heck does that mean?"

Tigress shook her head, indicating that she didn't know, and moved on to the next door. She looked up at the symbol above it. She frowned. Part of the plaque had broken away with age, leaving the symbol indecipherable. She moved to the centre door. The symbol above it was also impossible to understand. The fourth one, however, was near-intact, and Tigress deciphered easily: Huo, meaning fire. The fifth symbol was too damaged to read.

Tigress turned back to the others.

"Earth and Fire..." The gears in Tigress's head churned. "Five doors... I think I understand what we have to do."

"Go on." Po urged. "We don't have much time."

"I believe that those five doors lead to trap rooms designed to represent the five elements." Tigress spoke. "The keys for the floor panel are inside those rooms."

"Aw no..." Mantis moaned. "Don't tell me..."

"We will have to enter those trap rooms and retrieve those keys." Tigress said.

"AAAAWWW!" Mantis collapsed on Monkey's shoulder.

"Grin and bear it, Mantis!" Tigress snapped. "The fate of China may depend on whether or not we get that sword before Zanshi does!"

Mantis opened his mouth to protest, but then thought of Anming, his girlfriend back in the Valley of Peace, and buttoned his lips.

"Alright..." Po broke the silence that had followed after Tigress's outburst. "So who goes through which door?"
"I'll take the earth door." Mantis spoke with a scowl. "I'm the smallest, so I should be able to dodge the boulders with ease."

"How do you know it's gonna be boulders?" Monkey asked.

"It's earth, so I'm guessing that the traps are going to involve a lot of falling rocks." Mantis replied.

"I'll take the fire door." Viper said.

"Good choice!" Po grinned. "You're the most awesome at the Field of Fiery Death, anyway!"

"Unlike you." Monkey chortled.

"Watch it, noodle tail." Po retorted.

"That's enough." Tigress said. "Since we don't know what the other doors will lead to, I will decide who goes through which from now on. Crane, you go through the second door. Monkey will take the fifth. I and Po will take the one in the centre."

Monkey and Crane didn't argue.

"Right, let's go."

And so the six warriors moved to stand in front of their respective doors.

"Uh…" Monkey said as he stared up at the foreboding door in front of him. "How do we open them?"

"Maybe this chain…" Po grabbed the chain dangling next to his and Tigress's chosen door. He pulled it down, and the door raised up two foot.

Getting the idea, everyone grabbed their chains and pulled on them until all five doors were open.

Beyond the doors were narrow short tunnels at which a second door stood that the end.

"Oh man…" Monkey gulped.

"Just remember your kung fu training." Tigress called to her nervous comrades.

"Good luck!" Po called as they stepped through the doors toward what may very likely be their deaths.
The Stone of Tu

_I finally admitted it, Mantis thought sorrowfully as he hopped up to the second door. I finally admitted that I'm small. Monkey, if you start teasing me about this, I will kill you._

"Let's get this over with." He muttered out loud as he pulled at the dangling chain until the door was fully raised. As the second door raised, the first slid shut behind him. After tying the chain to the metal ring on the floor to make sure the door wouldn't slide back down and trap him inside, he stepped up to the very edge of the tunnel.

He was surprised when he gazed into the massive room. The architecture was utterly plain, and the curved shape of the paved floors, walls and ceiling gave the impression of the interior of a giant sphere. Maybe Mantis _was_ inside an enormous sphere.

The large stone paving was dull golden brown and cracked with age. At the far side of the large hollow sphere, Mantis spied a second tunnel, too far away to examine in detail.

"Let it be falling boulders, please let it be falling boulders, _please_ let it be falling boulders..." Mantis muttered. He raised a shaking leg, poked it out into the massive space, and set it down on the paving.

Nothing happened. No boulders tumbled from the ceiling.

Mantis wasn't relieved.

He very cautiously put out another leg. Nothing happened. He put out a third leg. No trapdoors popped open. He put out a fourth leg, now fully inside the room. Still no booby traps were activated.

"So far, so good." Mantis whispered. He kept his ears open for the slightest sound of an ancient mechanism grinding into action.

He carefully made his way down the curved slope that was the bottom of the hollow sphere. The cracks and gaps in the aged paving made a decent climbing all, albeit with a slight crumble of rock here and there. In two minutes, Mantis was half way towards the very bottom.

"Huh, maybe the trap's too old to work." Mantis thought aloud.

That was when the stone slab he was standing on began to sink into the floor.

_Uh, oh!_

Mantis quickly hopped off the slab, but it was too late. He heard enormous ancient gears grinding behind the walls as the trap was activated.

"Move, Mantis, move!"

Mantis frantically began hopping, but the deafening scraping of stone against stone brought him screeching to a halt. He looked up, saw circular holes opening in the ceiling.

"Oh cripes!"

Mantis watched in horror as enormous boulders, carved into perfect spheres by ancient hands, tumbled from the ceiling holes. Two boulders. Four boulders. It went on until there were ten...
boulders the size of gorillas rolling down the sides of the sphere like Po inside the jade tortoise.

"Gah!" Mantis yelled and leapt out the way as the first boulder came thundered down to the bottom. It rolled up the other side ten feet and began rolling back in Mantis's direction.

"Holy rice balls!" Mantis yelled and barely dodged the second and third. The tremendous crash of boulders four and five right behind the insect sent pain shooting through his ears.

You gotta get high, Mantis!

Mantis quickly hopped high in the air, briefly touched down on the boulder coming at him, and leapt even higher, managing to latch his forearms to the high wall. The slab he grabbed shifted slightly. Mantis held his breath. The slab didn't fall.

Mantis exhaled in relief then stared down at the chaos below him. Ten boulders rolled across and up and down the lower half of the hollow sphere, occasionally colliding with each other and sending thunderous crunching sounds echoing all around the room. None of them showed signs of crumbling to bits or slowing down.

"Come on, Mantis, think!" Mantis whispered furiously. "You've gotta get across to the second tunnel, somehow!" he stared down as the mess of rolling boulders below. "Going through there is not an option..." he looked up at the ceiling, which looked as ancient as the rest of the room. "Going right across the ceiling might be a bad idea..." his gaze wandered to the wall which curved all round the room infinitely, broken only by the side of the far tunnel. "Maybe if I went along instead of up and over..."

He cautiously reached a foreleg over to his left. The stone slab he grabbed onto didn't crumble or shift or show any sign of dislodging.

"Hmmm..." Mantis narrowed his eyes. "This just might work..."

And so he spent the next few minutes perilously traversing the high curved wall of the room. The cracks and gaps in the slabs made climbing along the wall easy, but every now and then a part of the rock would crumble or dislodge from the wall, and Mantis would always freeze for a few seconds just in case he was about to fall. Down below, the large boulders continued to roll around and crash into each other.

"Half way there..." Mantis muttered.

As he progressed, the terror in his gut began to fade. He was going to make it. He was going to reach the second tunnel. As he approached, he noticed that the shape of the mouth of the second tunnel was a perfect circle, and the tube within seemed to slope upwards.

Five feet from the side of the second tunnel, the rock suddenly disintegrated beneath Mantis's four legs.

Before he knew it, he was falling, screaming as he tumbled towards the thunder of boulders below...

Whump!

One minute Mantis was falling to his death... the next he was frantically trying to balance himself on top of a giant boulder as it rolled down the lower side of the hollow sphere.

"This is not as fun as it looks!" Mantis hollered to no-one in particular. He hopped a foot in the air
to escape the tremor that rippled along the boulder as it again collided with another.

"Focus, Mantis!" Mantis whispered as his four legs frantically moved with the motion of the boulder. "Remember what Master Shifu taught you! Use the environment to your advantage!"

The sound of another collision caused Mantis to look up from his moving feet for a second. In that second, he spied one of the boulders rolling up the slope, right beneath the mouth of the circular second tunnel.

That gave him an idea.

"Right, let's see…" Mantis summoned of all him chi, collected it in his four legs, and then pressed then as hard into the top of the spinning boulder as he could. With a deafened scrape, the boulder instantaneously ground to a halt at the very bottom of the floor. Mantis pressed his feet firmly into the stone surface, so that the boulder refused to budge even when the others crashed into it.

"Perfect." Mantis grinned. He began to move his legs across the top of the boulder. The boulder immediately began to move. Mantis began to run on top. The boulder once again started rolling up and down the curved floor, this time in whatever direction Mantis wished.

He rolled the boulder until it was half way up one side of the wall. Then he sent it rolling down with all the speed he could muster.

"Wait for it…" he whispered as it thundered across the floor… up the far wall… "Now!"

He leapt through the circular second tunnel just as the boulder began to roll back down.

"YES!" Mantis couldn't help but scream in triumph, but stopped himself mid-scream, feeling a little silly. "Okay, that's enough celebrating… let's see where this tunnel leads."

The sloped tunnel was much wider than the mouth, so big that twenty gorillas could have fit inside and not get wedged together.

"Big tunnel." Mantis whispered.

Fifty feet along, he round himself staring up at the biggest dragon statue he had ever seen. On its back, held up by its front claws, was a jade sphere five times as large as the stone boulders and engraved with a portrait of the four brothers stretched all the way across its surface. Securely held in the dragon's mouth was a jade coin with the Tu symbol engraved on the green stone. It looked like it would fit perfectly inside one of the five indentations.

"That must be it." Mantis hopped up onto the dragon statue's lower jaw, wrapped his forelegs round the coin, and pulled.

It didn't budge.

Mantis pulled harder.

The top of the coin shifted just a little. Mantis braced his legs. One more yank and it would come free. The insect gritted his teeth and pulled with all his might.

The coin broke free, and it and Mantis toppled to the floor.

*Thud!*

"Ow!"
Rubbing the back of his head, Mantis pulled himself to his feet. He picked up the coin.

"Mission accomplished." The insect grinned and began the sloped descent down the tunnel.

He got ten feet when he heard stone scraping behind him.

Oh no…

Mantis turned round.

His jaw dropped.

The gigantic jade ball was wobbling in the stone dragon's grasp.

Suddenly it hit him.

The large circular shape of the tunnel. The steep slope. The fact that the size of the jade sphere slowly dislodging from the dragon's grip was a perfect fit for the tunnel.

No room to dodge.

No room to live.

Not even for a bug.

Mantis ran for his life.

Keeping the coin firmly grasped in his forearms, Mantis ran as fast as his four spindly legs could carry him. He heard a deafening crash behind him as the jade ball fell to the floor and began rolling down after him.

"Run, run, run, as fast as you can!" Mantis screamed as he heard the scraping of the rolling ball grow louder by the second.

The mouth of the tunnel was twenty feet away.

"HURRY MANTIS!" Mantis shrieked. The jade sphere was nearly ten feet behind him now, and still gaining.

The mouth of the tunnel was now ten feet away… the jade sphere five feet… Mantis's heart thumped almost as loud as the pursuing green sphere of death.

The mouth was not five feet away… the jade sphere two feet… one foot…

Mantis launched himself forward through the small mouth of the tunnel.

He barely had time to register the fact that the smaller boulders had disappeared through a huge hole that had miraculously appeared in the bottom of the hollow sphere as he tumbled down the side. Above him, there was an explosion of rock and dust as the jade sphere crashed through the wall. It flew through the air above him, the surface brushing the tip of one antenna, and with a thunderous crash tumbled into the darkness of the hole and vanished.

Silence and stillness followed.

It took a while for Mantis to realize that he was hyperventilating. He forced himself to calm down. Gripping the jade coin tightly, he waited until his breathing was back to normal before forcing
himself to his feet.

"Easy, Mantis..." he whispered as he slowly made his way across the bottom of the hollow sphere, going around the rim of the black void. "Easy, boy... you're still alive... still alive..."

Keeping the coin firmly grasped in one hand, he scaled the curved wall up towards the mouth of the first tunnel. He reached the top, stepped back into the short tunnel, pulled on the chain. The second door slid shut and the first reopened.

Mantis took a deep breath and stepped back into the main hall, sincerely hoping that the others were having a better time of it than he was.
Crane slowly approached the second of the large doors, feathered chest puffed out.

On the outside, he was your everyday kung fu warrior, bravely striding towards danger. On the inside, he was dearly wishing that he was back home in his room painting symbols on paper with black ink. All the same, he stepped up to the chain that opened the door and began to pull.

"Alright..." Crane spoke with each tug on the chain. "Here... we... go."

With a deep breath and an audible gulp, he stepped through the doorway...

And found himself in a square corridor so small that the ceiling was a mere ten centimeters from the top of his rice hat. There was no stone architecture to be had in this place: instead, wooden boards covered every inch of the tunnel. Crane recognized the type: peach wood, probably chosen because it supposedly warded off evil. Evil such as grave robbers.

"I'm not a grave robber!" Crane called out, and instantly felt mortified. What was he thinking? There was no-one here.

He felt a flicker of annoyance when he spread his wings, and found himself unable to do so completely in the small space. Flying would be useless in this corridor.

"Damnit." He cursed and continued to stare down at the corridor. At first, he was under the impression that the corridor was infinite, but then he spotted a solid wooden wall at the very end, different in color.

Cautiously, fighting the unnerving feeling of claustrophobia in the small space, Crane took a step forward. His right foot touched down on the peach wood.

Nothing happened.

Breathing a bit easier, Crane slowly approached the wooden slab. As he got closer he recognized the wood as ironwood, like the trees Tigress used to punch. Crane would never confess it, but he had spotted Tigress punching the ironwood trees until her knuckles bled several times during his early years at the Jade Palace.

The closer he got to the ironwood slab, the more detail he saw. On the surface, he saw a bird's eye view (he pardoned the pun as he thought this) of four figures gathered round a fearsome yet docile looking dragon curled into a circle in the very middle of the slab. In its claws was a familiar looking double edged sword.

"Woah." Crane whispered. "I've got to remember that picture." It would make a remarkable painting, something that Viper would love.

He didn't have time to blush at the sudden thought, for the wooden slab suddenly slid upwards as Crane approached. Crane leapt back with a caw of alarm, losing balance and falling back on his rear but after a few seconds he relaxed when no traps came flying at him.

Crane got to his feet, extremely glad that no-one was there to witness the embarrassing fall, and gazed at the new opening.

The door had opened to reveal that the corridor stretched even further than he had expected. Ten
feet ahead was a fork in the corridor, splitting three ways.

Cautiously, Crane stepped over the dark line on the floor, the only sign that the wooden slab had ever existed. Five feet forward, the door suddenly slid back in place, trapping him in the new area.

"Uh oh!"

His wings useless in the small space, Crane kicked at the door with its talons. It held like rock.

"Oh bother!" He groaned. "Well… one thing at a time."

Turning away from the slab, Crane stepped up to the fork. Each new path was completely identical to the other, and like the first corridor seemed to stretch infinitely. No… not infinitely, Crane realized. He could just see a sharp turn fifty feet ahead.

His heart thudded a little harder as Crane suddenly became nervous. Just how big was this maze he had stepped into?

His eyes stared into each corridor as the minutes passed, as if desperate to find an indication of which path was the correct one.

Five minutes passed, and Crane was still stuck.

He raised a foot and rubbed his temple. There was nothing else for it.

Thoroughly mortified with himself, wondering why he had ever let Monkey teach him this ridiculous… whatever the heck it was, Crane lowered his foot to horizontal level and began to point.

"Eeny… meeny… miny… moe…" His cheeks burned so hot he could have fried tofu on them. Still he pointed at each corridor with each word. "Catch… a… tiger… by… the… toe…" He paused, scrunching his eyes in humiliation, even though he was alone in the corridor. "If… he… hollers… let… him… go…" If this doesn't work, Monkey, I swear to every god I know I will peck you to death. "Eeny… meeny… miny… moe!"

He opened his eyes. His foot was pointed directly at the left hand corridor.

"Left it is." He whispered, and stepped forward.

A wooden slab identical to the first slid shut in front of him with a bang.

"What the-"

Crane pushed at the slab, but it refused to budge.

"So much for left." He muttered. "Middle it is, then."

He turned and approached the middle corridor. He was a foot from it when it too suddenly sealed.

"Alright, this is getting ridiculous!" He called out. He then lowered his head to examine the floor. The floorboards were completely bare, with no sign of tripwires, depressions, anything that Crane might have stepped on that triggered the doors.

So what was making them function?

Crane gulped again, and turned to the only remaining corridor. If that one closed too, then he was
trapped and totally screwed.

"Please don't close… please don't close… Please don't close" Crane cut the sentence short and cursed his sudden fear. He was a warrior for crying out loud.

The avian took a deep breath and walked towards the corridor. Only after he was halfway towards the turn did the door slam shut.

"Well…" Crane let out the breath he had been holding and continued down the tunnel. "At least you're not trapped."

Not yet, anyway.

The avian reached the turn and kept going. Up ahead was another fork, this time with only one side corridor heading left.

"Keep going straight ahead." Crane told himself. His voice was unnaturally loud in the silent corridor.

As he reached the fork, yet another wooden slab sealed the corridor up ahead.

Crane stopped dead. The left corridor remained open, and twenty feet ahead was another three way fork.

What the heck was going on? Why were these doors keeping him from going in one direction yet leading him into another? He didn't really care too much about puzzles, but what Crane understood about mazes was that the point of them was trial and error, for the puzzled person to figure out the way by themselves.

So why did this particular maze appear to be leading him away from the dead ends? You'd have thought… and this particular thought sent another rush of terror through his body… you'd have thought that the maze was alive.

Was this the builder's idea of psychological trickery? To lull the participant into a false sense of security? Or just to scare him or her silly?

Crane shook his head free of the thoughts. Whatever the heck was going on, he had to see it through to the end. His friends were counting on him.

The avian turned left and made his way to the third fork.

This time it led him left again.

The fork the corridor led to forced him to go right.

Left… middle… right… right again… left… middle… left… left… right… right… left… right… left… middle… right… at some point, Crane became convinced that the corridor was infinite after all… left… right… right… right… left… left… middle… middle… middle… middle… left… left… right… left… and so it went until at long last, Crane spied an opening at the end of the middle corridor that appeared to lead to a larger room.

He practically ran for it.

"Yes!" Not used to running, Crane stumbled through the opening.

He did it! He was out!
As another wooden slab slid shut behind him, panting Crane gazed at his new surroundings: an octagon-shaped room the size of a two storey building, made entirely out of soft wood painting in red and gold. Aside from the dozens darkened star-shaped holes the size of Monkey's head in the walls and ceiling, the room was plain.

On the small space on the bottom that was the floor, was a small wooden podium. On the podium was a wooden coin, made of willow and engraved with the symbol $Mu$.

"Wood." Crane whispered as he approached the podium. As he stepped further into the room, he realized that on the opposite side was another opening, leading into a corridor identical to the one he had escaped from. Crane guessed that it was the exit, though was highly displeased at the fact. He didn't want to have to go through that terrible maze again, if he could help it.

"Come on, Crane, time's getting on!" He muttered. He stepped up to the podium, and after a moment's hesitation, lifted the wooden key.

*Click.*

Crane's eyes widened when he heard the near-inaudible sound.

He saw the star-shaped holes out the corners of his peripheral vision, and he came to a split-second realisation.

"WAAAAH!"

Crane didn't even think.

He flapped his wings and rather than flew, practically threw himself over the podium, across the room, and through the second opening.

Keeping the key tightly clasped in one claw, Crane crashed in a heap on the floor of the corridor, just as he heard a tremendous sound behind him, as if a hundred larger-than-normal chopsticks were clacking against each other.

Crane's shoulder ached from the fall, almost certainly bruised beneath the feathers as he got to his feet and gaped at the room he had just fled from.

The space he had occupied only seconds before was now consumed by dozens of large wooden spikes protruding from the many star-shaped holes. Each spike had been sharpened to a needle point, and pointed directly at the podium, practically impaling it a hundred times over.

"Holy…" Crane breathed, his heard thundering from the adrenaline rush.

If he had been a second slower to realize…

"Idiot!" Crane mentally slapped himself on the forehead.

What had he been thinking, just lifting the key off the podium without considering the dangers? As he stood there in the corridor, staring at the spike-filled room, Crane made a silent vow to be more gosh-darned careful in future.

Well… at least he had the key… all he needed to do now was find out where this corridor led and it was his escape.

Crane turned away from the spike room and made his way down the corridor.
Twenty feet down, he heard a slam as a wooden slab slid shut behind him.

_Slam_!

And another. Closer.

_Slam_!

Crane turned his head and saw a third door slam shut three feet behind him.

_Uh oh_!

Crane started running.

Keeping his wings folded by his sides, Crane pumped his legs as he sprinted down the corridor, frantically trying to stay ahead of the series of slabs that slid shut one after another mere feet behind him. If he tripped, even once, the slabs would shut him in and leave him to a slow, agonizing death.

"Run, Crane!" Crane gasped as he ran. As he ran, he was vaguely aware of sealed wooden slabs in the sides of the walls that he passed.

_Slam_!

_Slam_!

Crane kept running.

_Slam_!

_Slam_!

There it was! The opening where he started!

Crane felt a rush of relief… and then horror when another slab began to slide shut right in front of him.

"NO!"

Crane leapt forward, slid across the floor, through the shrinking gap.

Crane slid to a stop back inside the short entrance tunnel, his ears ringing as the slab slammed shut behind him.

"Holy crap on a rice cracker." Crane stood up, realized that his knees were shaking.

He took a deep breath to calm himself, and started pulling at the chain to reopen the door to the main hall. As he pulled, Crane hoped that the others were having a better time of it than he was.
The Blades of Jin

Monkey had pulled on the chain three times before he figured what Mantis had said.

"Did…” He whispered, realization hitting him like a bag of bricks. "… did Mantis just admit that he was small?"

He couldn't help it. He let go of the chain as he started to laugh hysterically, clutching his sides as the pain set in. He laughed and laughed, up until the slam of the large door sliding back to the ground shocked him from his hysterics.

Monkey leant on one wall as he struggled to breathe normally again. After a minute or so, confusion set in.

"What the heck was that?” He asked himself. Only now did he realize that he had completely overreacted, and had a slight suspicion that Mantis's confession was only half of the reason. He looked up at the door. The dull grey metal surface dotted with rusted bolts was the most foreboding bit of architecture he had ever seen.

After a moment's thought, Monkey decided that he had laughed so crazily because he was freaked out. He would never say it out loud, but he agreed with the two crocs who had guarded the entrance. Something was off about this place. The only way he could describe it was a feeling, a feeling that made the fur at the back of his neck stand up on end, that they were not exactly alone in the Temple of Heroes.

Monkey suddenly slapped himself lightly, feeling furious with himself.

"Get a hold of yourself, you dumb ape!” He snapped. "You've been listening to too many ghost stories!"

Without another word, he grabbed the chain again and resumed pulling. Once the door was fully open, he stepped through without a moment's hesitation.

Chinkchink!

Chinkchink!

The first thing Monkey noticed was the rhythmic sound of small blades clashing against each other, pausing after two 'chink' sounds.

It didn't take the primate long to guess which element this trap room represented.

"Heh!” Monkey chuckled. "Piece of cake!” Back at the Jade Palace, he had beaten the seven-talon rings too many times to count. He could handle swinging blades. He had done so all his life!

All the same, he was very cautious as he made his way down the grey stone corridor engraved all over with swirling images of dragons.

He discovered the source of the metallic sound twenty feet down the corridor: the strangest blade contraption he had ever seen.

A rapidly spinning bronze ring circled the corridor completely, leaving a tiny gap where the four corners were. Inside the interior of the ring, half a dozen lethal looking steel blades formed a
secondary inner ring. At regular intervals of roughly two thirds of a second, the blades swung down and clashed together at the tip twice.

*Chinkchink!*

The blades retraced again, clashing nearly a second later, retracting, clashing, and so on as Monkey watched.

*So much for swinging blades,* Monkey thought with a pang of dismay. *But you can still do this, Monkey. Just focus!*

Monkey gulped as he slowly stepped up to the deadly ring of blades.

*Chinkchink!*

*Chinkchink!*

*Chinkchink!*

The sound was now painfully loud in his short ears. Monkey winced as the tips of the blades clashed again, but otherwise became fully focused, his stare concentrated at the very centre of the ring where the tips struck each other repeatedly.

He would have to time this very carefully. If he got it wrong by even a millisecond, he would either be mutilated, bisected, or beheaded, depending on whether he was too fast or too slow.

Monkey tried to keep the unpleasant images of the many possibilities out of his head as he coiled his body, prepared to spring at just the right moment.

*Countdown from three…* Monkey thought. His eyes narrowed in concentration.

Three…

*Chinkchink!*

Two…

*Chinkchink!*

One…

*Chink-

"Now!"

Monkey flung himself through the ring as the blades retracted, a last second thought prompting him to tuck his tail between his legs as he flew through the air. He heard the blades clash again with another *chink* before he hit the ground painfully.

"Owwww…" Monkey moaned. His elbow had hit the ground first, and the pain that resulted from his bruised funny bone made him grit his teeth.

With an uttered curse, Monkey got to his feet, looked back once at the metal ring of death, then continued on his way down the corridor.

He cursed again, this time a little louder, when fifteen feet down he was faced with yet another
ring of blades.

"Darnit!" He groaned, his throat vibrating a little from the intensity of the sound of dismay.

_Not again... no! No! No complaining! Just get through this, get the key, and get out of here as soon as possible! Just do what you did before..._

Monkey took a deep breath, steeled himself and stepped up to the ring until he was right in front of it.

_Just like before..._

_Three..._

_Two..._

_One..._

_Now!_

Monkey leapt through the hole as the blades retracted. He felt a stab of relief as he once again hit the ground without injury, with the exception of a now visibly bruised elbow, dark purple even through the fur.

_Chinkchink!_

"YOOAAAGHHH!" Monkey hollered as a terrible pain suddenly shot up his tail from the very tip. He leapt backwards from the ring, landing on his rear, tears stinging his eyes.

"Ohnoohnoohnoohno..." He muttered, shock giving way to horror as he found himself unable to examine his agonized tail. Eventually, he knew he had to take a look. With yet another deep breath (he'd been doing that a lot since he'd stepped into the temple) he grabbed his tail and had a look.

He almost fainted with relief. Rather than completely severed as he had feared, the tip of his tail had lost a chunk of fur, and just the smallest bit of flesh. Still, it had hurt like hell, and so at that precise moment, Monkey promised himself that he would never tease Po whenever he got his little poofy tail jammed in the outhouse door again.

Once he had torn off a piece of brown fabric from his pants and wrapped it round his throbbing tail, Monkey resumed his journey down the corridor. Most fortunately for him, he only encountered one more bladed ring, and managed to leap through it without any trouble. After that, the next thing he encountered was a dead end. At the dead end was a ladder carved out of the wall, heading straight up a darkened shaft that seemed to stretch up to fifty feet.

"Aw man..." Monkey sighed. He really... _really_ didn't want to do this. But the safety of China was probably at stake here, and so he had no choice but to start climbing.

By the time he had reached the top, his arms with aching. So were his teeth as he clenched them in frustration: the ladder had led to nowhere but a plain stone ceiling.

"Is this some kind of joke?" His angered cry echoed in the small space.

He was about to begin his descent back down to the bottom when he suddenly noticed his shadow on the wall right in front of him, framed by a dull orange glow. He turned the upper half of his flexible body round... and smacked himself on the forehead with his free hand.
The way forward was right behind him.

Monkey shirked off his embarrassment and leapt across the small gap through the large square opening in the opposite wall.

The room he entered was much wider and at the same time much shorter than the corridor Monkey had just left, only stretching twenty foot across the room, and partially lit by flaming torches. The room sloped slightly upwards, a series of wide, thick steps leading up to the very end, where Monkey spied a circular pedestal made entirely of iron.

Monkey took three steps forward… and stopped dead right before the first step.

A fleeting vision of Shifu berating him for not analyzing his surroundings after a disastrous training session came to Monkey’s mind.

Something’s not right, he thought with a scowl.

Instinct told him to look down.

He realized that the edge of the first step was different from the steps farther up the room. While the other steps consisted of enormous stone slabs, the first step was lined with large bricks.

Suspicion crept into Monkey's mind, and he lowered himself closer to the bricks.

Cautiously, he reached as and pressed down on a brick. It stayed in place.

He moved his hand on to the next brick. Again, nothing happened. He pressed down on the brick right it the middle. It sunk down several centimeters and-

Monkey flung himself backwards as blades the thickness and length of pillars suddenly swung down inches from his face from the walls and ceiling, striking the floor and sending small chunks of grey stone flying. Monkey half sat, half lay on the floor, watched in silent shock as dozens of enormous blades swung down with deafening metallic scrapes, rapidly working their way up the steps, eventually coming to a stop right before the pedestal, then retracting back into the slits in the walls Monkey had failed to notice.

All was silent once more, aside from the occasional crackle from the flaming torches.

Monkey was barely breathing as he stood back up, wondering how in the world he was going to get past this particular trap.

Maybe if he watched it again, he would spot an opening…

Monkey pressed down on the brick, and the blades once again came swinging down like a flurry of swords. Monkey didn't fall backwards this time. He pressed the brick again. The blades swung and retracted.

By the sixth time, Monkey had found a very risky solution.

The primate stood up straight, took a tiny step forward so he was now right in front of the space where the first of the blades would swing.

"I'm gonna die." Was the only thing he said before he raised his foot… and stepped over the brick.

Nothing happened whatsoever.
Monkey put his other foot over the brick, so he was now standing within the killing field. The blades did not swing and reduce him to meaty chunks.

Monkey let out the breath he had been holding, yet another habit he had developed since entering the temple.

He literally ran up the remaining steps and didn't stop until he reached the pedestal.

By now, all Monkey wanted was to get the heck out of there. He lifted the silver disk engraved with the Chinese symbol Jin from the pedestal.

"Yes." He whispered.

A thin blade suddenly shot up from the spot where the disk had been a moment before.

"Yikes!" Monkey stepped back in alarm as the blade swung forward, down a slit running down the front of the pedestal, opening a shallow cut in Monkey's chest, slamming on the ground and staying there.

Monkey glanced down, caught a glimpse of a thin red line in the middle of his chest, before the blood obscured it and began to trickle down his stomach.

He cried out in shock as well as pain, backed away from the pedestal, and staggered back down the steps.

Despite the pain, he had enough sense to step over the dangerous brick, stopped just before the stone shaft.

Monkey cursed himself for foolishly removing the key without thinking as he ripped off yet another piece of fabric from his pants, so that he now wore ragged shorts that to some extent resembled Po's.

With one hand pressing the makeshift wad to his cut, Monkey climbed one-handed back down the staff, an easy task with his agility, and trekked back down the corridor. He leapt through each of the deadly bladed rings, this time without any trouble, and stepped into the short tunnel which separated the trap room from the main hall.

Tucking the silver disk safely in the belt of his torn pants, Monkey began pulling at the chain, all the while hoping that the others were having a better time of it than he was.
The Fires of Huo

Viper had to loop the front half of her body round the metal loop before she could easily pull on the heavy chain.

"One…" She counted as the door slid open a little more with each tug of the chain. "… two… three… four…"

*I wonder what will be on the other side of the door?* She wondered as she pulled. *Lava pits? Fire balls? Po's farts set on fire?* She giggled a little at that last thought.

By the eighth tug, the door was fully open. Viper tied the chain round the loop to keep the door from closing again, and slithered part way through the doorway into the chamber.

She was surprised at what she found.

The chamber was roughly the same size as the Hall of Warriors. The difference was that it looked like an enormous cave carved up into architecture, the arches and pillars that ran along the walls and ceiling cut out from the black rock.

The only lighting in the chamber was the ominous bright red veins partially illuminating the dark walls. It came to Viper's mind that there may be volcanic activity deep within the heart of the mountain where the temple was almost certainly located, something that the builders cleverly used to their advantage.

Which meant that Viper had better be gosh-darned careful while traversing this chamber.

"Right, let's see what we're up against." Viper whispered to herself, and slithered more into the chamber.

Now that she was fully inside, she could properly see what was ahead. A stone set of steps led down to a deep pool of dark colored liquid that took up almost the entire floor. The liquid had a rather dull scent, like oil spilled into a body of water.

"Strange…" Viper said. Why would the builders use oil and water rather than just oil? What was the point of diluting it?

*You're not going to found out by just standing here, are you?*

Nervously, Viper began to slither down the steps.

She slithered round the small pit full of the same oil and water combination that sat in the middle of the steps, and reached the edge of the pool.

Viper looked out across the pool to the far side of the chamber. She could clearly see a second pair of steps, as well as something small, circular and pure glistening black set in the wall.

There was no discernible path through the pool, and Viper suspected that simply swimming across would be a bad idea. So she turned her attention to the walls.

The pillars were too smooth and wide to climb or wrap around, but the walls were rough, with many natural protrusions and indentations which would make decent foot and handholds. Viper of course, had neither foot nor hand, but she could improvise.
She slithered to the side, prepared to spring for the wall, when the spot she was aiming for exploded.

She gasped and retreated backwards as a spurt of glowing white hot lava suddenly flew from the hole in the wall, and into a thin line running down the steps that Viper had missed.

She heard a wet crack as another spurt of lava exploded from the opposite wall and into another thin line.

"Uh oh." Viper whispered as the lava ran rapidly down the thin lines like a fiery river and into the oily water.

**WHOOMPH.**

Within seconds, the pool was aflame, a literal lake of fire blocking Viper's path to the key.

"Oh my gosh!" Viper gaped in horror at the new obstacle before her.

Dodging fire spurs in the Field of Fiery Death had not prepared her for this.

Come on, Viper! Think! There had to be a way across! The builders wouldn't have bothered to build this chamber and put the key way over there if there wasn't at least some way to get to it. There has to be a solution!

Crane would have gotten past this easily. He had been specially trained to resist the terrible blazing hot updrafts that rose up from the tips of the flames. If only he was here… Viper would be safely out of this uncomfortably hot room with key in hand (or tail, in Viper's case) by now.

Viper slowly turned her gaze back to the rough wall of the fire chamber.

She sighed.

The climb would of course be very dangerous, but what choice did she have?

Viper took a deep breath, coiled her body, and sprung. She barely managed to wrap the middle of her body round a protruding rock. She clenched her jaw in fear and slight frustration.

Monkey would have been much better for this kind of task.

No matter…

She poked the tip of her tail into the depression half a foot from her, and once she was sure she had a good tail-hold, swung her body along the wall like a pendulum and latched on to the next protrusion of black rock. The rock felt hot under her scaly skin.

Viper was now above the lake of fire. The realization sent a wave of terror through her body, but she shook it off. She was a warrior. She had a job to do.

If only the flames weren't so darned hot…

Viper reached for the next protrusion, so short and rounded that she had to put her strength training to use by digging out a little hole above the protrusion to poke her tail into.

She was swinging along the wall when the hole crumbled some more and her tail suddenly slipped out.
Viper didn't have time to scream before she plummeted into the fiery lake.

The oily water hit her, and then she was beneath the fiery surface.

Viper waited until the momentum of her fall wore off and she stopped sinking before she opened her eyes. The oil the water made her eyes smart as she looked up at the surface above her, bright orange with fire.

She was in trouble, and she knew it.

Viper turned her head in the water, looking for a way to escape.

Her lungs were just starting to ache when she noticed that the body water extended beneath the steps of the entrance side of the chamber. She could tell because she could see where the orange surface collided with the black rock of the ragged underside of the steps. In the middle of that raggy underside was a small hole.

She quickly swam forward, swishing her body from side to side like Master Croc's tail to propel herself forward.

She reached the hole, poked her head through the surface and took a breath of air.

"Whew!" She exhaled, glad to be alive. "Now where am I?"

Once she had blinked the oily water from her eyes, Viper saw that she was treading water in the small pool in the middle of the steps, back in front of the doorway.

"Wow, good thing this was here…" Viper began to say when a sudden realization hit her.

Could it be…

She couldn't see anything through the flames, but once she had leapt back up on the first protrusion of rock, she could see just above the fire enough to spot a similar small pool in the middle of the steps at the far side of the chamber.

"Well what do you know…" She muttered. "You're supposed to swim across it after all."

She leapt down from the protrusion and stared across the pool, narrowing her eyes a little from the brightness and heat of the fire, and attempting to estimate the distance.

She knew she was more than capable of making it across. The only question was whether she could make it back should the hole turn out to be blocked.

Only one way to find out.

Viper slithered back to the hole, took a deep breath, and dived in.

The swim beneath the fiery surface was uneventful, if not a little painful (Viper's eyes were still smarting from the oil in the water), and much to Viper's relief the hole of the far side of the chamber was unblocked. She surfaced, breathed, and slithered out.

Yes! I did it!

She shook the oily water off her body before ascending the steps.

Nestled in the wall, which Viper could now see was engraved with yet another image of the four
brothers holding the three separate pieces of the Sword of Heroes, was a small black disk, carved from obsidian, engraved with the Chinese symbol Huo.

Viper dug the tip of her tail into the groove surrounding the key, and prized it free.

"Huh, that wasn't too hard." Viper mused as she gazed down at the glistening object.

A spurt of fire the size of a powder keg explosion erupted from the depression in the wall right after she said this.

Viper cried out and dodged to the side, but not in time.

She felt a terrible, agonizing pain as the fire caught the middle of her body. The wet oily patch of dampness Viper had missed caught alight.

Viper screamed and fell to the ground as the fire spurt died and faded into the air. As she rolled about in her desperation to put out the fire, Viper rolled over the edge of the pit and back into the oily water.

Viper sank to the bottom, unaware of anything but the pain of her body.

She was brought to her senses by the sudden aching of her lungs, as well as the obsidian key lightly tapping her on the head as it sank with her. Viper quickly swam back up to the surface of the small pit, and started gasping in pain the moment her head was above water.

"Owww…" She whimpered. She dragged herself from the hole and laid herself out on the steps. The middle of her body was screaming, but she couldn't bring herself to look. Eventually, she told herself that she had to see the damage. With a quivering lower jaw, Viper raised her head from the stone step she was resting it on and looked down at her body.

She almost fainted. The patch skin the size of Po's nose was bright red against her normal light green skin, and blistered in places. She should have been relieved that there was no blackness in the flesh, but right now all she could think about was the pain.

She lay there on the steps, gasping in pain, until she remembered the crisis at hand. She had to hold it together for her friends, who were surely having similar troubles elsewhere in the temple.

Viper clenched her jaw in agony as she moved, slowly slithering back to the small hole. She dived back down, picked up the obsidian key from the floor with her mouth, and made her way back across the chamber beneath the surface of the fiery pool.

With a gasp of pain and relief, Viper surface on the other side of the pool, climbed out the hole, and spat out the key.

"Gods, it hurts…" She allowed herself one more whimper before picking the key back up and slithering back into the small tunnel.

The burn screamed in protest as Viper began pulling at the chain again, shutting the second door and reopening the other. As she pulled, Viper hoped that Crane and the others were having a better time of it than she was.
"Tigress…" Po spoke with each pull of the chain. "I said… I'm sorry!"

Tigress didn't look up at the panda as he alone pulled on the chain, something the still very annoyed feline had forced him to do under threat of death.

"Well there's not much you can do about that except pull on that chain, is there?" She asked snidely.

"Actually there is…" Po went on. "I can apologize… for yelling at you… which I have…" He tied the chain round the loop on the ground and turned to Tigress. "And you can forgive me, and we can get this key."

"I agree." Tigress pushed herself away from the wall, still refusing to look at him. "Except for the forgiving part."

"Come on, Tigress!" Po groaned. Why did she always have to be so stubborn? "This argument is getting really pointless! Can we please just drop it now?"

"No. You threatened me. Only someone with a death wish does that."

"Tigress, I'm SORRY!" Po practically yelled the last word. "Can we talk about this some other time? Like after we've got the sword and defeated Zanshi?"

"Very well." Tigress stalked past him and through the doorway without another word. Po sighed in exasperation and followed her.

The chamber they stepped into was circular and unremarkable, the marble walls bright blue and white.

"Where's the water?" Po asked.

"Most likely in the next room." Tigress replied. Po winced at the iciness in her tone. "We should look for a lever or something that will help us progress."

"Or set off a scary trap."

"Get on with it."

"Sorry."

Po and Tigress split up and began feeling the walls of the room for any sign of a trigger switch or anything that looked unusual.

"So how did it go with Ming?" Tigress suddenly asked.

"Huh?" Po was caught off guard. "How did it go with Ming?"

"Oh. Really great. We had dinner, we talked, and Ming actually told me that she had a really great time." Po grinned absentmindedly as the memories of the date washed over him. "Oh. Well good for you." Tigress replied coldly.
Was it Po's imagination, or did he detect a hint of displeasure in her voice?

"Are you alright?" He asked. He turned round to look at her, but all he could see was her back as she continued to pat the wall.

"Of course I am." She said without looking at him. Something in her tone told Po that questioning her further would be a bad idea, so he turned back to the wall.

His index finger pressed on the eye of a dragon carved on the wall, which sank down like a button.

"Hey, Tigress I think I've found something!"

Sure enough, a flat slab of rock at the far side of the room suddenly slid open, revealing a narrow corridor that seemed to stretch forever.

"Lucky find." Tigress smirked humorlessly. Po cringed at her expression, now seriously regretting his scolding of her.

"Look, Tigress." He spoke up. Tigress turned her head to glare at him, but he held his ground. "I shouldn't have yelled at you. I admit it. I was just freaked out when you disappeared for a few seconds. Can you please just forgive me so we can move on?"

Tigress just narrowed her eyes at him, and Po's heart sank as she simply turned her back on him and approached the opening of the corridor. He opened his mouth to apologize further, when he was suddenly hit with a sneaking suspicion… what if it wasn't his scolding of her that she was ticked off about?

Po realized that Tigress was leaving him behind and quickly followed her into the corridor.

"Hey, Tigress! Wait up!" When Tigress didn't stop or even acknowledge that he had called, Po started running. "Tigress, wait! My dad always told me that you should never swim alone!"

"What makes you think we'll be swimming in this?" Tigress pointed down at the water completely covering the floor of the corridor, barely reaching their ankles.

"Good point." Po glanced up to see the square holes blocked by thick metal bars spread down the ceiling, a gap of ten feet between each one.

"Shall we keep moving?" Tigress asked.

"Okay." Po replied.

Slam!

Po and Tigress whirled round, and were dismayed to see that the slab of stone had slid shut, trapping inside the corridor.

"Oh brilliant!" Tigress stormed forward, her footsteps splashing into the water, and punched the rock once.

The slab didn't even crack.

"We're trapped!" Po exclaimed. He rushed forward and pushed at the slab in vain.

"I know we're trapped Po!" Tigress snapped. "Let's just keep going! There may be a way out farther ahead."
Po nodded, and the two of them resumed the trek down the corridor.

They walked in silence until they reached… of all things… a dead end.

"Aw brilliant!" Po groaned, repeating Tigress's earlier words.

"Stop whining. We'll just head back and try to force the door open." Tigress said coolly, oddly unperturbed by the obstacle.

As they walked, the tense silence between them began to make Po feel uncomfortable. He didn't like it when Tigress was angry at him. He had always considered her his favorite of the Furious Five, and always had a small worry in the back of his mind that one day he would mess up and Tigress would go back to hating him like she had during his first few days at the Jade Palace. He couldn't let that happen. He wouldn't.

It was this thought that made him speak up.

"Tigress…" He said tentatively.

"Yes?" Once again, she refused to look at him.

"Will you please tell me what's bothering you?"

"Nothing's bothering me, Po." She replied curtly.

"You've been mad at me since we stepped into this temple." Po said. "And I think that you and I both know that it's not about our little argument earlier."

"Nothing is wrong."

"Yes, there is!" Inexplicably, Po began to feel his own anger growing. He knew he shouldn't be feeling this way, but the way Tigress was acting mad at him for something he did but didn't know what, and not telling him what it was, was really beginning to irk him.

"Are you going to start scolding me again?" Tigress sneered.

"Yes! I am!"

"Go ahead!" Tigress snarled, eyes narrowed into slits. "I've been scolded every day since I was a little girl! What's one more nasty word going to matter?"

"For gods sakes, Tigress!" Po half groaned, half shouted the words in utter frustration. "How can I make things right if you won't tell me what I've done to upset you?!"

"You wouldn't understand!"

"Try me!"

"I'd rather not!"

"If you don't tell me, I'll… I'll…" Po hesitated despite his anger. "I'll tell Monkey that it was you who stole the cookies, and I was just covering for you!"

Tigress smirked.

"Go ahead."
"Fine!" Po snapped. "Po…"
"On your head be it!"
"Po…"
"Unless you want an axe-crazy primate chasing you to death, you'd better-"
"PO!"
Po stopped mid-sentence.
"What?" He asked.
"Trouble." Tigress said simply, staring straight ahead.

Po followed her gaze… and his eyes widened in horror when he saw the slab of stone slowly sliding toward them, shortening the corridor as he and the feline looked on.

"Run." Tigress muttered. "Po, run!"

She grabbed the panda's arm and pulled him backward, bringing him back to his senses.

"Darnit!" Po yelled as he and Tigress fled back down the flooded corridor, the slab falling behind but still pursuing.

In no time, they were back at the end of the corridor, facing a solid stone wall. They turned round, watched the slab slowly approach them.

"Tigress, what are we gonna do?" Po desperately turned to her for answers.

"Hang on, give me a chance to think!" Tigress hissed, her eyes traveling all over the walls, floor and ceiling. "Unless that slab picks up the pace, we have about a few minutes before it crushes us!"

Po gulped. "We still have time!"

"What do you suggest we do?"

"Feel round the walls! There may be a switch somewhere!"

Po immediately slammed his paws against the wall, running his fingers over them for any sign of a switch. He heard series of dull thuds behind him as Tigress did the same.

The slab slid closer.

After half a minute of patting the walls, Po suddenly frowned.

"Tigress?"

"What?" Tigress demanded.

"Is it me, or is the water getting higher?"

Tigress froze. At the same time, she and Po looked down at the water, which was now up to their knees.
"Oh my god…” Tigress's eyes suddenly widened in horror.

"What is it?"

"It's the slab." She said slowly. "It's shortening the corridor, narrowing the space where the water is collected. It's not pouring in from somewhere… but it's not going anywhere either."

"Get to the point, Tigress!" Po yelled as the water lapped at their lower thighs.

"The shorter the space gets…” Tigress took a deep breath. "The higher the water rises."

Po gaped as he realized what Tigress was saying.

They wouldn't be crushed.

They would be drowned.

The water reached the middle of their thighs.

"Keep looking!" He hollered and turned back to the wall. Tigress set her jaw and did the same.

They stood high on their tiptoes to reach for the highest part of the wall as the water rose to their hips.

"There's no switch…” Po whispered eventually. "There's no switch!"

"Calm down Po!" Tigress grabbed his shoulders as the panda began to panic.

"How can I calm down when we're going to die?" Po yelled at her.

"If we panic, then we will die!" Tigress yelled back. "Look up!"

Po looked up and saw the bars above them.

"Hoist me up!"

Po lowered himself down slightly, the bottom of his chin momentarily dipping in the rising water as he did so, wrapped his arms round Tigress's hips and lifted her off the floor.

As the water steadily crept up Po's chest, Tigress wrapped her fingers round the bars and began pulling with all her might.

They refused to budge.

Tigress tried again.

Then she tried pushing.

Her heart began to race.

"Keep trying!" Po yelled, fighting to keep his cool as the water rose high enough to start soaking his chin again.

Just as the water started lapping at the bottom of his mouth, Tigress yelled down at him.

"Po, put me down!"

Po lowered her into the water at the same time his feet left the ground and he ended up treading water.
"Po, I can't move those bars!" Tigress said as she floated by his side.

"What are you saying?" Po stared at her in dread.

"We should wait until the water rises high enough for us to reach the bars!" Tigress replied. "Then we can try working together to get the bars out!"

"Alright!"

Soon enough, the bars were a mere foot above their heads, now within reaching distance. Po and Tigress grabbed the solid bars and drew all their strength into trying to pull them from their stone sockets.

"It's not working!" Po yelled as the tips of his ears brushed the very bars he was pulling and pushing at.

"Keep trying!" Tigress yelled back.

But the metal bars still refused to budge, even as Po and Tigress's heads bumped against the ceiling.

Eventually they tilted their faces upwards…

They raised their lips as high as they could just to get the last bit of air…

The surface of the water lapped at the corners of their mouths…
Trouble

Mantis stepped back into the main hall of the Temple of Heroes to find it empty.

"Huh…” He said aloud. "Guess I'm the first out."

*Or the last survivor.*

Mantis swiftly shook off that terrible thought and sat down on a little rock, leaning forward slightly on the jade key as he gazed at the other four doors.

He got the key.

All he could do now was wait.

Mantis was just getting settled on the rock when the fifth door suddenly slid open and Monkey stepped out.

"Monkey!" Mantis grinned and stood up to greet his best friend. "Thank gods you- oh cripes, your chest!"

"It's nothing." Monkey muttered, keeping the piece of brown fabric pressed to the cut on his chest.

"Your tail!"

"Don't ask. Ever."

"Did you get it?"

Monkey held up the silver disk.

"Great. The others haven't come out yet."

"Then let's wait for them."

Monkey and Mantis sat down on the floor together and waited in silence.

Some time later, the second door slid open and Crane emerged with a plain wooden key.

"Crane, buddy!" Monkey exclaimed. "You made it!"

"Barely." The avian muttered. "Where's Viper?"

"She hasn't come out yet." Said Mantis. "Don't freak out, she's probably just running a little late."

"I'm not freaking out."

"Then why did you stop breathing for a second there?"

"Shut up."

"Sorry."

"Po and Tigress haven't come out yet either." Mantis piped up.
"Then the only thing we can do now is just sit and wait for them." Crane said.

His friends nodded in agreement, and together they sat down in the middle of the floor and waited for their remaining friends to emerge.

This is the end… was the last thing Po thought before he took a deep breath and went under a second before the water level reached the ceiling.

He could hear nothing but the gurgle of the water, and his and Tigress's own muffled grunts as they continued to desperately pull and push at the bars.

Those thick metal bars refused to budge an inch, as if determined to keep them under.

His concentration fully focused on his straining arms, Po's legs drifted limply in the water.

The corridor they were trapped in was now no bigger than a cupboard.

He could tell because his feet occasionally brushed against the slab that had scraped to a stop mere centimeters from them.

Sooner than he would have desired, his limited air supply began to run out.

His lungs began to ache.

Po ignored the small but steadily growing pain, fully focused on the bars that still refused to give up the ghost.

He stopped when he felt Tigress's struggles suddenly grow a little more frantic.

He looked down from the bars and found himself locking eyes with her.

Her eyes were narrowed in pain, her fists striking frantically at the stiff bars.

Po frowned.

Had Tigress managed to take a breath before the water reached the ceiling?

The question was answered when Tigress suddenly let out the breath she could no longer hold.

As the dead air rose up and popped on the surface of the water now several inches above the bars, she clapped a paw over her mouth and screwed her eyes up in agony.

At that moment, as he watched Tigress fight to keep the water from entering her lungs despite the horrible pain she was surely in, Po lost control.

He slammed his fists against the bars with all the strength he could muster, the screaming of his own lungs now a mere irritation now that he may be about to watch his friend die.

The thought of watching Tigress, his best friend, drown before his eyes filled him with a terror and rage he hadn't felt since that night in the waters of Gongmen Harbor.

He couldn't let her die like this.

He wouldn't.

Not if he could help it.
The thrashing movements of his furious battle with the bars forced Tigress to release her own hold and drift to the side, her paws still clamped over her mouth as she desperately fought to keep from inhaling.

As Po angrily tugged at the bars, his hip brushed the side of the wall.

As it did so, something hard and narrow dug slightly into his flesh.

Po stopped struggled, confused.

He quickly reached into the pocket of his brand new green shirt and pulled out the object which had distracted him.

He blinked.

In his paw was the oddly shaped bamboo stick he had found while on his date with Ming.

Suddenly Po's eyes widened as he looked down at the thick stick.

It was long.

Narrow.

Hollow.

An idea sprung in his mind.

With no time to waste, Po stuck the longer end of the L-shaped stick through the bars until it was poking out the surface of the water.

Now fully aware of the pain in his chest, Po closed his mouth round the other end.

He quickly blew the water from the inside of the hollow stick, and after a moment's hesitation, inhaled.

Sweet, wonderful air entered his lungs, numbing the ache.

Po's eyes fell on Tigress, whose eyes were shut, either from pain or unconsciousness.

Not wasting a second, Po swiftly reached out and dragged Tigress towards him by the vest.

Her eyes shot open in surprise as he pulled her right in front of him.

A tiny bubble floated from her lips.

Po removed his mouth from the hole in the hollow stick, immediately pressed a thumb over it to keep the water from filling it up again, and turned the stick until it was facing Tigress.

He jerked his head in the direction of the stick, then gently tapped a finger on Tigress's lips.

Tigress frowned slightly, her blurred mind not really understanding.

Po grabbed the back of her head and pulled her until her mouth was an inch before the hollow end.

Tigress's eyes were flickering shut as Po quickly shoved the wooden tube in between her half-open lips…
And then she was jerking back to life, her eyes widening as she sucked in air through the stick.

Her paws shot up and grasped the stick as she frantically breathed in the precious oxygen, and Po could have sworn that he heard a muffled moan of relief.

After a few moments, she blinked a few times and, her mouth still closed round the stick, she looked over at Po. Her eyes stared at him with relief, amazement, and immense gratitude.

Po grinned back, and returned his attention to the bars above their heads. He was just beginning to resume his struggles when he felt a tapping on his shoulder.

He looked back at Tigress, and blinked when he saw her offering the tube to him.

He shook his head, pushed the tube back towards her direction with one paw.

Tigress's eyes narrowed. Po recognized the expression well.

The expression usually meant *Do what I say or you know what you'll get.*

Po gave in and took a few breaths from the tube before he began pulling at the bars again.

He was once again interrupted when Tigress gently pushed him aside.

*Tigress, what are you-*

BAM!

The sound of Tigress maneuvering herself until she was upside down and then slamming her legs against the bars with all her strength was loud even underwater.

Po felt a rush of joy when he saw little spider cracks in the stone surrounding the bars.

BAM!

Tigress kicked the bars again before poking the tube back through and taking a few more breaths.

Po did the same when she offered, then gestured to her that he would attempt a few kicks himself.

Tigress quickly moved to the side as Po maneuvered into position. Ignoring the strange sensation of water going up his nose, Po kicked.

BAM!

The cracks in the stone grew larger.

BAM!

The bars jerked just a little.

BAM!

There was an explosion of dust and stone as the bars flew upwards and crashed to the floor of the room above them.

Before Tigress could do anything, Po grabbed her by the front of her vest and thrust her upwards until her head was above water.
She quickly climbed out, allowing Po to surface himself.

"Hah! We made it!"

He gripped the floor of the wide corridor they were now inside, half in the water, half through the hole, and watched Tigress lift herself from the floor in a sitting position, coughing up a little water.

For some time they didn't speak.

And then Tigress lifted her head and looked Po in the eye, a small smile of gratitude on her lips.

"Thank you." She murmured.

Po gently smiled back.

"Don't mention it."

"I'm sorry for being such a jerk before." Tigress lifted her knees up to her chin as she sat on the cold floor. "You don't deserve it."

"Will you tell me what the problem is now?" Po asked.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"If I tell you, it'll only make it worse."

Po frowned.

"Are you sure?"

Tigress nodded.

Po sighed.

"Well, if you ever change your mind..." he trailed off.

"Okay."

Po raised a paw to wipe the water from his eyes as he and Tigress gazed at each other.

"I'm sorry too." He said. "I shouldn't have yelled at you either."

"You don't need to apologize. I deserved it."

"No you didn't. I should have been more patient with you."

"You had every right to yell at me."

"But not to threaten you again."

"Fair enough. Do you want me to help you out of the hole?"

"I really need to follow Shifu's advice and take up fasting." Po muttered as Tigress grabbed his arms and began to pull.
The Key

The very embarrassed Po's belly was wedged in the hole for five whole minutes before Tigress managed to extricate him.

"Thanks." Po muttered as he brushed the water from the lower half of his body.

"Your welcome." Tigress smirked. "Let's go get that key."

After their near death experience in the first corridor, Po and Tigress were very slow and cautious as they walked down the wider tunnel made entirely of marble. Neither of them spoke as they walked, instead keeping a sharp eye and ear out for any more unexpected traps.

It wasn't long before they reached the end of the corridor. Instead of a door leading into another room, a hole in the floor lay right at the end, full to the brim with clear water.

"Looks like there's another room in there." Tigress said as she peered intensely into the water. "Stay here, and I'll check it out."

She had just taken a deep breath when Po suddenly grabbed her arm and yanked her back from the hole.

"Po, wha-"

"Tigress, what the heck are you doing?" Po glared at her furiously, keeping a tight grip on her arm. "Let go, Po!" Tigress snapped, and attempted to wrench herself free. Po's fingers didn't slip an inch.

"Tigress, you should never swim alone!" Po would have raised his voice higher, but a certain comment that Tigress had made during their earlier argument stopped him. "What if you get into trouble while you're down there, and I don't know about it?"

Tigress opened her mouth to retort, but hesitated. Po was absolutely right. Now was not the time to go solo.

As for Po himself, watching Tigress nearly die right in front of him had shaken the panda far more than he had ever expected it would. A few minutes ago, as Tigress had been trying to pull him from the first hole, Po had promised himself that if he could help it, he would never let Tigress go through something like that again.

"Alright." Tigress sighed after several more seconds of staring at each other. "I'll just take a quick dive and get a look of the room. Then we'll both swim in together. I'll come back in five seconds, I promise."

Po narrowed his eyes, considering the plan. After a moment, he slowly released his grip on her arm.

"Five seconds." She repeated, then took a deep breath and leapt into the water, disappearing from view.

Po held his own breath in anxiety and waited.

He breathed again when Tigress reemerged a second early.

"What's the report?" He asked, crouching down so he and Tigress were at near-equal level.
"Just a simple room." She said as she treaded water. "There's a huge mirror covering one whole wall, but other than that it's a dead end."

"Move along, I'm coming in."

Not wanting to splash his friend, Po sat down on the very edge of the hole and gently slid his body into the water.

"On the count of three, we'll dive down together and take a closer look." Said Tigress. Po nodded in agreement. "One… two… three!"

They both took a deep breath and went under.

Just like Tigress said, the only detail in the large room was an enormous mirror on the opposite wall. Po gestured to Tigress that he would go first into the room. He swam into the middle. No traps emerged.

As he gazed at his own reflection in the mirror, he saw as well as felt Tigress swim up and joined him. They glanced at each other, then returned their gazes to the mirror. There had to be a clue that involved the mirror, or the people who had built this place wouldn't have bothered installing it.

Eventually their breath ran out and they were forced to return to the surface. Po and Tigress gasped as they tread water: they had been underwater far longer than they had intended to be.

"Po…" Tigress panted. "Did you see anything… strange about the reflection?"

"No…" Po replied. "Wait till… I've got… my breath back….

A long time passed before Po could breathe normally again.

"One… two…" Tigress counted down again. "… three!"

Back under water, Po gazed intently at the mirror. His brow furrowed in confusion. He saw nothing.

Tigress grabbed his shoulder, grabbing the panda's attention, and pointed upwards.

Po raised his eyes up to the upper part of the mirror… and blinked when he saw the hole in the ceiling within the reflection.

He turned his head and looked up at the real ceiling. No hole was existent. He looked back at the mirror.

What the heck?

In the mirror, he watched Tigress swim upwards towards the space on the ceiling where the hole was positioned in the reflection. He released a few bubbles in shock when he saw her climb through the hole and disappeared.

Po spun round under the water. No hole suddenly appeared in the ceiling, but Tigress had vanished.

Oh my gods! Where is she?

Po was on the verge of panicked when he saw an orange and black paw poke through the stone in the ceiling.
The paw gestured for him to come forward. Tentatively, Po reached out and grabbed the paw. He was pulled upwards and through the ceiling as if it was nothing more than thin air.

"Holy crap on a rice cracker!" Po exclaimed upon surfacing in the tiny, darkly lit corridor, finding himself face to face with Tigress. He looked down at the marble stone he was half-submerged in.

"Are you okay?" Tigress asked as she pulled him out.

"Am I okay?" Po's eyes bulged at her, then stared back down at the fake stone. "That's amazing! How the heck did they do that?"

"No idea, but it doesn't matter." Tigress chuckled a little at Po's reaction. "Look up there."

Po followed her finger, and saw the short corridor end and open up into a slightly larger room up ahead.

"Let's keep moving." The feline said. "Zanshi may be searching for the villagers as we speak."

Po suddenly stopped freaking out. After a moment's pause, he narrowed his eyes, nodded, and followed Tigress down the corridor.

In the middle of the room was a circular pedestal that rather resembled a cone. Sitting on top was a clear quartz disk engraved with the symbol $Shui$.

"Finally." Po sighed and lifted the disk... and leapt backwards in surprise as the wall in front of him and Tigress suddenly opened up, revealing a wide stone ladder that led down a narrow shaft.

"Let's go." Tigress reached the ladder first and started climbing. After a moment's hesitation, Po grabbed the marble rungs and followed her.

After a couple of minute's climbing, Po heard Tigress call up to him.

"Watch out Po, the ladder drops from the ceiling."

"How far is the drop?"

"You won't break your legs as long as you drop from the very bottom." Tigress replied.

Sure enough, Po's foot landed on thin air. He had reached the bottom of the ladder.

"Is it okay to drop from here?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I don't know." Po gulped. "I haven't mastered the basics of landing yet."

"Do you want me to catch you?" he heard the smirk in her voice.

Po frowned.

"A-are you sure?"

"I'll be fine."

"Okay, on three."
"Remember to actually count to three this time."

"Yes, Tigress."

Po felt an odd flip-flop sensation in his stomach when he heard her laugh at his mumbled reply.

"One… two… three!"

Po released his grip on the ladder and plummeted.

He only fell for a second before he felt Tigress's strong arms grab him.

"Oof!"

"Are you okay?" Po exclaimed, worried that she had injured herself breaking his fall."

"I'm fine." Tigress quickly set him down on the floor. "But Shifu's right. You really should start fasting."

Po nodded, his cheeks heating up. They had been doing that a lot lately.

He turned his eyes away from her, and realized that they were back in the room they had started off it.

"Have you still got the key?" Tigress asked.

Po nodded and held up the quartz disk.

"Good. Let's get the heck outta here."

"Here, here!"

Po and Tigress stepped back into the small tunnel. Po reached for the chain when Tigress stepped in front of him and started pulling instead.

"Tigress, what are you…"

"I still have to make up for the way I'd been treating you." Tigress said without looking at him.

Po watched her pull at the chain for a couple of seconds… before surprising her by grabbing the chain and pulling it with her.

"No you don't" he said bluntly.

"But-

"For the last time, we've both been at fault." Said Po sternly. "You shouldn't have been so mean, and I shouldn't have yelled at you. Now let's leave it at that."

Tigress considered replying to that, but then returned to pulling the chain.
"Mommy, I'm cold." Little Su shivered as she sat on the stone floor next to her mother. "When can we go home?"

"Not yet, sweetie." Her mother wrapped a warm arm around her daughter.

Pong, meanwhile, kept his gaze towards the mouth of the cave where the pandas were hiding.

"Where are they?" he eventually asked, his eyes narrowed in concern. "They should be here by now!"

"Please calm down, Pong." His wife said quietly. "The last thing we need is to start scaring people more than they already are."

Pong nodded, giving her and Su an apologetic look before turning back to the cave mouth.

At that moment, three figures appeared, framed by the moonlight.

Pong stood up in alarm and reached for his rake, but then recognized who they were.

"Qiang!" Pong leapt up and rushed over to greet Qiang, Ming and Mr. Ping as they entered the cave. "Thank the gods you are alright!"

"I was about to say the same thing." Qiang chuckled.

"Where are the kung fu warriors?" Pong asked.

"They're taking care of the crisis at hand." Qiang replied. Pong saw a flicker of anxiety in the aged panda's expression. Mr. Ping, meanwhile, clutched a ragged red ribbon to his chest. "We managed to fight off the bandits for the time being. Until my son and his friends have dealt with them for good, we must stay here for our own safety."

Pong nodded, satisfied with the report, and sat back down beside his family. Like his wife had done, Pong put a large arm around Su, who immediately stopped shivering.

Qiang, Mr. Ping and Ming, meanwhile, sat down beside the mouth of the cave to keep watch.

For a while, none of them spoke.

Then Ming opened her mouth, but quickly closed it again.

"What is it Ming?" Qiang asked.

"Do you think Po will be okay?" she asked, her white brows burrowed in worry.

Qiang struggled to keep his own fear from being evident as he answered her question.

"Do you remember watching Po fight those bandits when they ambushed us on our way to the mountain?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then you know as well as I do that we have nothing to worry about."
Mr. Ping stayed silent, his attention focused on the red second place ribbon he was currently flicking specks of dust off of.

Ming nodded in response to Qiang's answer, then looked away. The elder giant panda frowned.

"Is something else troubling you?"

"Oh no." Ming gave him an unconvincing reassured expression. "I'm just worried about what will happen to us, that's all."

"That's not it, is it?" Qiang leaned over to her.

Ming didn't answer.

"Are there any problems with you and Po?"

"No!" Ming exclaimed suddenly. "Nothing that would be called a problem!"

"Then what are you worried about?"

"I don't want to say anything in case I'm wrong."

Qiang looked at her for some time before sighing in acceptance and leaning back into a normal sitting position.

Master Shifu winced slightly as the chains began to chafe his wrists. However, he continued to jiggle the twig inside the small lock, his ears pricked for the slightest click.

The red panda looked up sharply as his sensitive ears caught the rustling of the tent's flap. He narrowed his steely blue eyes when Mu Zanshi stepped into the tent.

"Good evening, Shifu." Zanshi spoke with a slight chuckle.

"Wish I could say the same to you." The red panda replied coldly. Zanshi ignored this.

"Have you reconsidered?" the alligator asked.

"You can do whatever you want to me." Shifu growled. "I'll never tell you where the key is."

"Again, I suggest you reconsider." Zanshi's own reptilian eyes narrowed into slits. "My men are hunting for the pandas and your students as we speak. This is your last chance to tell me where the key is before I decide to take drastic measures."

Shifu scoffed.

If this fiendish alligator thought he was going to break him, then he was more deluded than he had thought.

"What drastic measures?" he asked disdainfully.

Zanshi crouched down in front of the red panda.

"You know..." he said slowly. Again, Shifu saw the insanity in his eyes and it unnerved him. "...when I decide to get to you through someone you care about."

Shifu's disdainful sneer flickered.
"Excuse me?" he asked.

"Some time ago, it came to my attention that my right hand man, Lidong, has a deep grudge against your feline student. You know, the one you adopted."

Shifu's blood ran cold. Dread swirled in his gut like icy water.

"Y-you wouldn't…" He stammered, all bravado gone.

"I've given Lidong permission to do whatever he wants with her if he finds her. And you know how malicious and twisted he can be…"

"No…"

"Unless you want your foster daughter to be tortured to death, then I suggest you tell me where the key is. Oh, and in case you need reminding…" Zanshi leant down so that his snout was a mere inch from Shifu's. "This is your… last… chance."

Shifu felt sick. He bit his lip as he considered his options.

He could refuse to tell Zanshi the truth once again, and risk Tigress dying a horrible death at the hands of a violent thug. Or he could tell Zanshi where the key was, and risk the alligator going back on his word and letting Lidong kill her anyway.

Or he could take a leaf out of Po's book and take a third option.

It didn't take long for him to make his decision.

Quick as lightning, Shifu lifted an unchained fist and punched Zanshi square between the eyes.

As the stunned alligator stumbled backwards, Shifu tossed aside the little twig he had picked the lock with and let the chain clatter to the ground. He then proceeded to slam Zanshi to the floor with a drop-kick, and was out the tent before the out cold alligator had even hit the ground.

As he sneaked behind the other tents and into the forest, Shifu promised himself that if he could get his hands on Lidong, he would kick his scaly buttocks into the middle of next week.

As Mu Zanshi lay motionless on the floor of the tent, he began to dream…

Lieutenant Mu Zanshi blinked and opened his eyes with a feeling like fire in his back.

He was lying on a flat and uncomfortable bed on the ground of a darkly lit tent. He lifted himself a little, winced at the pain in his back, and looked down to find his bare chest wrapped tightly in bandages.

"Oh good, you're awake."

Zanshi looked up to see a squat goose enter the tent.

"How are you feeling?" the goose asked gently.

"Like I'm dead."

As Zanshi spoke those words, he remembered the ordeal with a feeling like a kick in the gut… the enemy soldiers surrounding them… the dying screams of his comrades… the flying sword sinking
into his back... his own blood pouring out of him, mixing with the mud...

"Stay still please while I check for a fever." The goose walked over to Zanshi's side. "You were half buried in mud when we found you, so I need to make sure that the wound is not infected."

"Shouldn't you check the wound itself for that first?"

"I will in a moment. I need to check because I will need to resort to my medicines if you have already developed symptoms."

"Fair enough."

Zanshi kept still as the medic felt his forehead for signs of a fever. He heard the goose sigh in satisfaction: he was out of danger for now.

"Sit up please if you can, so I can unwrap your torso."

It hurt to do so, but Zanshi did as he was told. Five minutes later he was wearing fresh pure white bandages.

"What happened?" Zanshi asked once the medic had finished tying the knot.

"Like I said, we found you in a puddle of mud. Our soldiers moved in once the enemy finished off your comrades and moved on. You had lost a lot of blood, so we brought you in as soon as possible."

"Why did they take so long?" Zanshi asked suddenly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Colonel Heng's men." Zanshi glared at the goose. "I sent a request for help two hours before we were attacked. Why didn't they come until it was too late?"

The healer cowered slightly as Zanshi shouted the last sentence.

"It is..." The healer spoke after a tense moment. "... not for me to say."

"I think it is." Zanshi growled, his anger growing to the point where the pain of his back was now no more than a mere annoyance. "My men are dead, and I want to know why."

The goose gulped.

"Because..." He hesitated. "... because..."

"Tell me the truth, or I swear..."

"Colonel Heng decided that a surprise attack would be the best course of action!" The healer took a step back. "He needed something to use as bait to lead the enemy to the right location!"

Zanshi's eyes widened as he realized what the goose was telling him.

"No..." He whispered. "You..."

"Please understand that the others did not approve of it either!" The goose spoke quickly, taking another step away from the stunned alligator. "But they had orders!"
"Get out." Zanshi spoke in a slow, quiet voice.

The healer quickly exited the tent.

Zanshi slowly lay back down on the bed, burning anger replaced with numbness.

To be honest, he wasn't surprised. He and his men had been assets. Expendable assets. And they had been used to get the job done.

But that didn't justify the fact that they had been betrayed.

Two months after the revelation of the imperial army's betrayal, the nightmares began…

Zanshi's eyes shot open.

Wincing at the throbbing in his skull, the alligator slowly got up from the floor. He glanced at the pole which Master Shifu had been chained to, and quickly remembered what had happened.

God damn you, you stupid red panda…

A growl rumbled from Zanshi's throat as he stormed out the tent.

Pursuing Shifu would be pointless. The red panda was long gone by now, has probably already reunited with his students.

But still… as Zanshi's father had always said, every cloud had a silver lining.

If Shifu and his students were to find the key first… their most likely course of action would be to enter the Temple of Heroes and attempt to retrieve the sword before Zanshi could get his hands on it.

Which meant that…

Zanshi's snarl curled upwards into a sly smile.

"Boys!" He barked out to the remaining crocodiles within the camp. "We've got work to do!"
It was quiet in the main hall of the Temple of Heroes.

So quiet that when the centre door suddenly slid open with a loud scrape, Monkey, Crane and Mantis nearly leapt out their skins.

They only relaxed when they recognized the panda and tiger approaching them, sopping wet, the former clutching a clear crystal disk.

"Po! Tigress!" Crane was the first to get up and approach them. "Thank gods you guys made it!"

"Feeling's mutual." Po grinned and briefly gave the avian a one-armed hug out of relief: during his time in the water chamber, he'd worried about his friends non-stop. "Did you get the key alright?"

"Yep." Monkey held up his metal disk. "Got a few scratches, but otherwise I'm fine. Po, I said I'm fine!" He exclaimed the last sentence when he saw Po's eyes widen at the sight of the cut on the primate's chest.

"A-are you sure?" Po stammered, taking a step forward as if he was considering to play the temporary role of medic.

"Yeah. I'll probably need to get this treated once this is over, but I'm okay for the moment." Monkey said. Then he chuckled and pointed at his and Po's lower halves. "Hey, look! Matching pants!"

The humorous observation made Po chuckle in turn, lifting the mood in the room somewhat.

"Who's left?" Tigress asked once the chuckling had died down.

"Just Viper." Said Mantis as he hopped up onto his usual spot on Monkey's shoulder. "I hope she comes back soon, or Crane just might have a panic attack."

"Shut it, bitesize!" Crane snapped, his gaze intensely focused on the door Viper had disappeared through.

Just as he was about to say that he was getting worried, the door opened, and a green tree viper slithered slowly and slightly erratically into the room and towards her friends.

"Viper!" Crane exhaled in intense relief. "Thank heavens you're... oh gods, Viper!"

The avian half ran, half flew over to Viper once he caught a glimpse of the angry red burn in the middle of the snake's body.

"I'm... fine..." Viper winced as her own movement added extra agony.

"Does that look fine to you?" Crane gestured with his wing at the burn.

"Oh cripes!" Mantis gaped when he and the others came over and reacted with shock at her injury. "We need to get that treated, pronto!"

"I told you that it's okay!" Viper snapped, half annoyed from her friends' concern and the terrible pain. "It's a superficial burn. As long as I don't get anything on it, I'll be okay."
"Even so, Viper, that looks really painful." Crane spoke. Suddenly his face lit up, as if he had a sudden thought. He turned to the panda. "Hey, Po! Is the water in the chamber you entered easy to get to?"

Po blinked, unsure as to why his friend was asking him this.

"Uhhh… yeah, sort of." He rubbed the back of his head. "You just go up the shaft in the first room, then you'll find the water at the far end of the corridor. Don't be fooled by the stone square at the end, it's just an illusion. Don't ask how they did it."

"Gotcha. One more question… is the water clean?"

"Yeah, I guess…"

Crane rushed off and vanished through the water door before any of his comrades could react.

For the next two minutes, the five friends waited in silence, Tigress in particular staring down at the wounded Viper in concern: as unofficial leader, it was her duty to maintain the welfare of the team.

Crane eventually returned, clutching his wide rice hat, turned upside down and full to the brim with water.

He set it down on the floor beside the ailing Viper, keeping his wings firmly gripping the edges so the hat wouldn't topple over.

"Here, Viper." He said gently as the snake looked up at him in confusion. "It's not running water, but it should help."

Viper hesitated, but eventually the intense fiery agony made up her mind, and she slowly dipped the middle of her body into the hat.

She gasped and relaxed as the cool liquid did its work, soothing the burn to a certain extent. Not completely of course, but enough so that the pain was more than bearable.

"Oh Crane…" She whispered, closing her eyes in relief. "Thank you…"

"Your welcome." Crane blushed furiously as he nodded in reply.

Then he felt his friends' stares and looked up in confusion.

"What?"

"Nothing." Po said quickly, putting a paw over his mouth to hide the knowing smile.

"Right, now that we've got Viper taken care of for now…" Tigress spoke up. "It's time we move on. Everyone, grab your keys and gather round the centre panel."

Crane positioned three small rocks around the hat to keep it stable before picking up the glistening black obsidian key Viper had retrieved. On her instruction, he handed the obsidian key to Tigress before moving into position by the side of the panel with his own wooden key along with everyone else.

"Alright, is everyone ready?" Tigress asked.

Po, Monkey, Crane and Mantis nodded.
"Okay, put your keys in the depressions."

Mantis, being the smallest and therefore the closest to the depression, was the first to set his jade disk in place.

A muffled yet thunderous sound, like mountainous rocks scraping together, filled their ears as the section of the panel with the jade key suddenly started to rise from the ground.

"Back up!" Tigress yelled, even though her comrades had already done so.

The panel rose up until it became an unusually shaped column, suddenly splitting into small rectangular pillars that each rose half a foot higher than the other.

When the movement finally stopped, Po realized with a jolt of horror what he was looking at.

"Oh no…" He whispered, his jaw dropping in dismay. "Stairs…"

"Crane, you next." Tigress said, unperturbed by what had just happened. After all, they were making progress.

Crane hesitated before inserting his wooden key.

Like the first, the second panel rose up into the air, coming to a stop above the first set of steps and increasing the overall height of what they now recognized as a partial circular staircase.

"Your turn, Monkey."

Monkey set down his steel key, and the staircase rose higher, now more than halfway to the yin-yang symbol high up on the ceiling.

Tigress inserted the obsidian key, and the staircase rose higher.

"Now your turn, Po."

Po very slowly inserted the clear quartz key.

The moment the top of the circular staircase reached the stop, the two halves of the symbol slid open with a deafening stone scrape.

For a moment, no-one moved, eyes trained on the ceiling.

Eventually, Po let out a very loud groan.

"Have you got a problem, Po?" Tigress asked.

"You know how I am with stairs…" Po sighed.

"These stairs aren't nearly as high as the one in the Tower of Sacred Flame." Tigress replied with a smirk. "You'll be fine."

Po sighed again, steeled himself, and put a foot on the first step.

"Crane, Mantis and Monkey, you stay with Viper and keep an eye out." Said Tigress. "If something happens and we get trapped, we need someone back here to find a way to get us out."

Crane nodded and sat down next to the snake as she continued to soothe her burn in the water.
"Right, let's go Po. We don't have much time."

Po nodded, remembering his father, his goose father and Ming as he traversed the steps, Tigress right behind him.

Halfway up, he started to feel his chest tighten. His breathing became ragged and his legs began to feel like lead.

"Having a little trouble, Po?" he heard Tigress chuckle.

"No…" Po gasped sarcastically as he neared the top. "I'm… having… the… time… of… my… life!"

"Don't worry, Po. We're almost there."

Po was on the verge of collapse by the time he reached the opening in the ceiling and stepped up into the new chamber. He fell on the floor and began gasping for breath, but had enough sense left to roll aside to allow Tigress entry.

Though stern, Tigress was also considerate, and so she sat down on the floor and allowed Po to regain his breath before dragging him to his feet.

"Are you ready to press on?" she asked.

Po nodded wordlessly.

While lying on the ground in exhaustion, Po had noticed that the chamber was roughly the size of his father's restaurant. The walls were pure green jade, and engraved with fiery dragons just like the rest of the architecture. On the far end of the chamber was a set of bright red doors with golden rings for handles.

"Shall we, then?" Po asked.

"After you." Tigress replied with another of her signature smirks.

Together, they stepped up to the doors.

They both grabbed a ring, slowly and cautiously opened the doors, and went through.

Master Shifu smiled as he stood in front of the entrance to the Temple of Heroes. He knew his students would have found the key quickly, but not this quickly.

He felt a momentary twinge of pride, but then remembered the reason for the finding of the key.

For a moment, he considered entering the temple himself and aiding Po, Tigress and the Furious Five in any way he can, but quickly decided against it. He had trained his students and trained them well, despite the harshness in his lessons (something he has regretted to this day). They were more than capable of retrieving the sword themselves.

The people who really needed help were Qiang, Mr. Ping, and the panda villagers currently being hunted by Zanshi's men. None of them had any fighting skills except for Qiang, and even he would be severely outmatched should the goons succeed in tracking them down.

Shifu had to be there to help them should that happen. He had to find the villagers before Zanshi or Lidong did. He had to protect them in any way he could.
With that in mind, he turned his back on the Temple of Heroes and disappeared once more into the forest.

Two minutes later, a burly alligator entered the clearing in the red panda's place, a tri bo yao firmly gripped in one claw.

He smirked, allowing himself a small expression of his anticipation, before freezing and gathering up his chi.

After a few moments, he sprinted into the temple, silent as a ghost, fast as the wind, deadly as a thunderstorm.

"Viper, how are you feeling?" Crane asked the snake as up above, Po and Tigress reached the top of the circular staircase and disappeared through the opening.

"Fine. Perfectly fine." Viper breathed as she bathed in the avian's upside down hat. This time, she meant what she said.

"How's your burn?"

"Still hurts a little, but with luck, it shouldn't scar."

"Oh, good."

"Crane?"

"Yes?"

"I don't suppose you have any vegetable stir fry on you now, do you?"

Crane laughed.

"Sorry, but no."

"Oh dear." Viper chuckled with him.

*What a nice laugh she has,* Crane thought.

Meanwhile, Monkey and Mantis were standing at the base of the staircase, staring up at the ceiling Po and Tigress had vanished into.

"Are you sure we shouldn't go after them?" Mantis asked. "What if something happens to them?"

"They'll be fine." Monkey replied. The cut on his chest had stopped bleeding, courtesy of the blood drying up and staunching the flow. "Tigress knows what she's doing."

"Then why did she tell so many of us to stay behind?" Mantis glanced at his friend in confusion.

"Probably because she wants as many of us back here as possible in case Zanshi's goons come bursting in."

"Oh. Good point." Mantis suddenly felt an unnatural breeze brush past him in the direction of the staircase. He frowned and looked to his left, but saw nothing.

"Monkey, did you feel that?"
"Yeah." Monkey scowled in suspicion. "What was that?"

"Don't know. But it didn't seem natural to me." Mantis replied. "Did it to you?"

"No."
The Fourth Brother

The fear in the hearts of every panda villager was so strong that getting some sleep was difficult.

Yet all but Qiang, who had insisted on taking the first watch, eventually succeeded in shutting their eyes.

As Qiang gently rubbed the sleeping Ming's shoulder as she dreamed, he kept his eyes trained on the mouth of the cave for any intruders or allies.

A silent hour passed before Qiang spotted the still awake goose just inside his peripheral vision. Mr. Ping was sitting at the opposite side of the cave, small brown eyes staring in anxiety at the entrance. His feathered fingers were still clutched around the aged second place ribbon.

Taking care not to wake Ming, Qiang got up and slowly walked over to the goose. Mr. Ping didn't seemed to acknowledge his presence as the large panda sat down next to him.

"I know exactly how you feel, Mr. Ping." Qiang spoke in a low voice.

At first, Mr. Ping didn't reply.

"Do you really?" He eventually asked, his small voice cracking.

"Yes." Qiang replied. "When Lord Shen's wolves attacked our village, I got separated from Mei and Po. The ten minutes it took for me to find either of them again were the worst ten minutes of my life, even worse than when I learned that Mei had been killed. You know why? Because the not knowing is the worst part about being a parent…"

"Not knowing whether or not your child is safe or in peril." Mr. Ping finished the sentence for him, his grip tightening on the red ribbon. "Whether or not he is alive or dead." He looked up at the panda with tear filled eyes. "I'm sorry, Qiang. Once again, I've underestimated how much you care for him."

"No, you're just worried about him." Qiang replied, putting an arm around the goose. "And so am I."

Mr. Ping opened his beak to protest, but then decided against it.

A few more minutes of silence passed before either of them spoke again.

"Qiang, there is something I must confess…"

Qiang looked down at the goose in confusion.

"I hadn't been entirely honest with you earlier."

"Please explain." Qiang urged the goose gently.

"I wasn't being hostile towards you just because I thought you had ulterior motives. The truth is…” The goose hesitated. "I'm a little jealous of you."

Qiang's eyes widened in surprise.

"You see, unlike me you are actually capable of protecting Po." Mr. Ping was finding it difficult to
keep his voice down. "Like a few days ago, when those brutes attacked us! While you just whipped off your robe, grabbed a big stick and aided Po in battle, what did I do? Hide beneath a noodle cart like a coward!" The tears in Mr. Ping's eyes finally broke free with that last sentence, and began trickling down his cheeks as he hung his head in shame. "Maybe Po *is* better off with you."

Qiang stared down in the goose in shock… then narrowed his eyes and gripped his small shoulder, making him look up into his eyes.

"Now you listen to me…" Qiang said sternly. "You are not a coward. You were told to stay hidden for your own safety. Besides, I doubt Po would be best pleased if the goose who been his father for a quarter of a century got himself killed, now would he?"

Mr. Ping didn't reply.

"And if it makes you feel any better, *I* am jealous of you."

That particular revelation made Mr. Ping's eyes nearly pop out their sockets.

"You're jealous of me?" He breathed.

"Of course! Even though you couldn't protect Po in battle, at least you actually got to *raise* him! Even though you're not his birth father, you still got to feed him, give him a bath, put pants on him, basically do all the fatherly things fate prevented me from doing!" Qiang suddenly realized that his voice was rising. He shut himself up and glanced anxiously at the sleeping villagers. They continued to sleep on undisturbed.

Qiang slowly turned back to Mr. Ping, who was sitting stock still, looking up at the panda with wide eyes.

"I…" Qiang paused. "I just wish that I could have seen him grow up."

Mr. Ping's stunned expression softened.

After a moment, he shuffled closer to Qiang and gently put a wing on the panda's large forearm.

"Do you know what the important thing is, Qiang?"

Qiang slowly shook his head.

"The important thing is that he *did* grow up."

Qiang replied with a small smile, and together the two fathers turned their gazes back to the mouth of the cave, anxiously waiting for their son to return.

"Wow…" Po gaped in awe at the sight before him. "I mean… wow…"

"Normally I couldn't care less…" Tigress whispered next to him. "But there's something you don't see every day."

Whoever had designed the burial chamber had clearly taken inspiration from the Jade Palace. Thick pillar of dark and bright jade supported the bright red ceiling embroidered with golden dragons. The reddish brown walls were illuminated by golden fire that almost seemed to glow like the real thing. The floor, jade green like the pillars, portrayed larger than life images of the four brothers, who were surely currently resting in peace inside the golden caskets sitting in the centre of the chamber, circling a circular pedestal where a very familiar sword lay.
Aside from the Hall of Warriors, it was the most magnificent chamber they had ever been in.

But now was not the time to stand around admiring the architecture.

Lives were at stake.

Tigress had just taken a step forward when Po grabbed her arm.

"Tigress, wait!" Po whispered loudly. "Remember what happened last time? What if there are booby traps in here?"

"The builders wouldn't have placed traps in here." Tigress said calmly. "Not unless they wanted to risk the bodies of four of the most respected and revered heroes in China getting damaged."

"Speaking of bodies..." Po gulped. "Do you notice anything weird about the caskets?"

"What do you mean?"

"According to legend, there were four brothers..." Po spoke quietly, nervously. "How come there are only three caskets?"

Tigress returned her gaze to the tombs, and realized with a jolt that Po was right. Only three caskets circled the sword.

"Stay quiet, and stay close." Tigress whispered as she cautiously approached the centre of the burial chamber, getting a bad feeling in her gut.

Po gulped again and followed her.

They were nearing the first of the three caskets when Po suddenly froze and gasped.

"What is it, Po?" Tigress asked, her first thought screaming trouble.

"L-l-look!" Po stammered, lifting a quivering paw to point at something at the far side of the chamber.

"Is there someone here?" Tigress demanded, quickly unsheathing her claws.

"Y-yeah!"

Tigress whirled round, claws raised... and gasped softly at the sight of the figure lying motionless on a jade and gold throne the two warriors had failed to notice earlier. Two other figures, soldiers clothed entirely in aged and rusted armor, stood stock still on either side of the throne.

"Hu... hu..." Po's lip quivered in terror. "Who the heck is that?!"

Tigress didn't answer.

Po's eyes widened as she slowly approached the figure on the throne.

As she came closer, she noticed that the figure was an ox, evidenced by the pair of cracked horns protruding from the helmet he wore over his dragon mask. Like the deceased soldiers on both sides of him, he was completely clothed in gold and green armor. No flesh was visible, and any smell of rotting flesh had faded away centuries ago.

"You can relax, Po. He's dead." Tigress turned her head to look at the panda.
Po let out the breath he had been holding.

"Hey, look!" He suddenly pointed to a space above the figure's head. "There's writing on top of the throne!"

Tigress looked up, and also saw the inscription on the back rest of the throne, a foot above the dead ox's head.

"You're closer, Tigress." Po said. "What does it say?"

The surface of the throne was so old and cracked that Tigress had to squint in order to read the writing.

"Here sits Lord Peng, youngest of the quartet. Forger of the Sword of Heroes. Breathed his last in this very chamber after the successful avenging of his three siblings, Heng, Zeng and Feng."

"Holy…" Po breathed. "You mean to say that that dead guy is the legendary fourth brother?"

"Yes." Tigress nodded. "This is a hallow and sacred place, Po. If you start getting all fanboyish in this room, I will slap you silly. Got that?"

Po stopped dancing on the spot and nodded solemnly.

"I'm a little confused, Tigress…" He said with a slight frown of confusion after a moment's silence. "I thought the legend stated that the Temple of Heroes was built after he died."

"You're right." Tigress spoke. "But remember that it also said that the fourth brother was mortally wounded, not killed right away. It's possible that the construction of the temple began after the deaths of the older three brothers, and was nearing completion by the time of the fourth brother's death."

"Woah, that's a cool theory." Po grinned, impressed.

*Man, she's so awesome when she's using her smarts!*

"Please retrieve the sword, Po." Tigress replied without grinning back. "We're wasting enough time as it is."

Po nodded, and had to resist the urge to squee as he slowly approached the circular pedestal.

The Sword of Heroes greatly resembled the fake sword currently resting in the Hall of Warriors, but with a few subtle differences. For example, the green dragon on the silver blade glowed even brighter than the faux one. Also, the sharp edge of the blade was far more notched and scratched. And fused to the bottom of the dull gold hilt was a reddish orange stone, roughly the size of an egg.

"Oh wow…" Po whispered, his green eyes shining with delight. "I'm about to pick up the most awesomest weapon in the history of kung fu! Awesome…"

"What did I say to you Po?" Tigress asked as she stepped closer to the armored corpse of the fourth brother.

"Sorry! Shutting up now!" Po cringed from the admonishment and reached out a shaking paw towards the sword's hilt.

The sudden small sound of a gust of wind made the panda look up in the direction of the doors. He
frowned and turned to Tigress.

"Hey, Tigress… do you remember if we had shut those doors earlier?"

Tigress shook her head, stepping right up to the corpse of the fourth brother out of curiosity.

"Tigress, we should get out of here…” Po said. "I'm starting to not like this place again."

Tigress ignored him.

She leaned forward, peering intensely at the dragon mask obscuring the corpse's face. She could see every chip of paint and needle-thin crack. But the eyeholes revealed nothing but pitch blackness.

Po watched her closely examine the body, and suddenly felt a sensation like butterflies in his stomach when he glanced at her butt.

He looked away, mentally kicking himself for the perverted act, and instead turned his attention to the dead soldier standing to the right of the throne.

As he looked at the soldier, Po suddenly realized how odd it was that there were dead soldiers in the room. It was very out of place inside such a sacred burial chamber.

He was just coming up with a far fetched theory involving imperial grave robbers when he saw the soldier sway just an inch.

Po frowned.

"Tigress, be more careful!" He scolded. "You nearly knocked over that soldier dude!"

"I didn't even touch him, Po." Tigress said without moving her head away from the fourth brother.

Po opened his mouth to reply when he saw the soldier sway a bit more. This time Po knew that Tigress wasn't disturbing it.

As he looked on, the soldier suddenly toppled over in Tigress's direction.

In the split-second that it fell, Po saw the head turn in her direction… its mouth opening in a silent snarl… a gnarled clawed hand lashing out at her…
"TIGRESSLUKOWT!"

With a speed he didn't know he possessed, Po leapt forward, wrapped his arms round Tigress's waist and yanked her away from the throne as the soldier crashed to the ground in front of the throne with a sickening crunch.

"Po, what are you-" Tigress exclaimed in alarm, but Po ignored her, releasing his grip on her waist and stepping in front of her, narrowed eyes staring intently on the corpse.

It didn't move again.

"Po, what are you doing?" Tigress snapped, her shock slowly giving way to anger. "What's the matter with you?"

"That body moved!" Po replied, keeping his attention fully focused on the body. "Didn't you see it?"

"No, I was too busy being yanked off my feet!"

Po didn't turn to look at her, instead keeping himself between her and the corpse.

"Po, the body just toppled over. Calm down."

"I'll calm down once I'm sure that this guy is going to stay dead this time!"

"Po, you've been down here too long." Tigress put a paw on the panda's shoulder. "You're starting to get paranoid."

"But-"

"Let's just take the sword and go."

At first Po didn't move. He continued to eye the corpse intently.

Then after a while, he relaxed. He stepped away from the body.

It looked like Tigress was right. The corpse hadn't moved once since it fell on the floor. Chances were that a slight breeze from their swift movements had somehow managed to sway the corpse enough to make it topple.

But he had been sure he had seen the corpse lash out at Tigress…

"Let's go." Po said and turned away from the body. After a moment, he also asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine Po. It was just a body."

"Oh, okay."

"Po, just take a deep breath and relax. It's going to be alright."

Po nodded, only half reassured, and did as he was told as Tigress turned towards the circular
Po stopped mid-inhale.
"Tigress?"
"The sword! It's gone!"
"What?!"
Po's jaw dropped when he saw the empty pedestal.
"Oh man! Where is it?"
"How should I know, Po?" Tigress rushed over to the pedestal, as if hoping that the sword had merely fallen off and was lying by the side. "Did you see anything out of the ordinary?"
Po began to shake his head, but then remembered the odd breeze from earlier…

WHAM!

Something large and circular swung towards Po's face, and suddenly the panda was flying. He skidded across the floor and crashed headfirst into the wall.
"Po!" Tigress cried.
She made to run to him but was forced to block a second swing as it came at her.

The feline caught a glimpse of a figure clothed in black and white before she had to leap off the ground to avoid a low swing from a glowing green sword. In mid air, she made to punch the attacker, but then the heavy end of a tri bo yao struck her square in the stomach and sent her flying into the wall next to Po.

"Tigress…" Po moaned, struggling to stay conscious as he watched the winded feline gasp for breath as she slid to the ground by his side.

"Hmph. I expected better from the Dragon Warrior."

Po turned his head to see their attacker. His eyes widened when he got a good look at him.

"Zanshi!" He exclaimed.

"Oh good. You remember me." Zanshi chuckled humorlessly as he ran a clawed thumb over the razor sharp edge of the Sword of Heroes. He didn't wince, instead looking bizarrely satisfied when the movement drew blood.

"How the heck did you get in here?" Po demanded. "How did you get past Crane and the others?"

"Two words… Stealth. Mode."

"Hey, that's my mode!"

"Not your strongest from what I've heard." Zanshi chuckled again, this time with humor. "Thank you for getting rid of all the obstacles for me."
Po froze.

"You were using us." Tigress growled.

"Correct, my girl." Zanshi replied. "To be honest, the idea to wait until you retrieved the sword for me didn't come to me until less than an hour ago, when your beloved master punched my lights out and ran like a wuss. Yes, unfortunately he's escaped."

"He escaped?" Tigress whispered. Po thought he could feel the intense relief emanating from her, and mingling with his.

"That's what I said. Now if you don't mind, I have to leave you."

Zanshi left the tri bo yao discarded on the floor and moved towards the exit with the sword.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?" Po ignored the pain in his throbbing nose and stood up.

"I'm giving you a chance to run away in one piece." Zanshi replied coolly.

"Why don't you come back and fight like a man?" Tigress snarled as she also got to her feet. "You have the most powerful weapon in China in your twist hands, don't you?"

"Oh I would if I could..." Zanshi sighed. "But the thing is, I don't want to risk you getting hurt or killed trying to stop me from killing the panda. You see, I promised Lidong that he would be allowed kill you in his own way, and that not even I would interfere."

On hearing those words, Po felt that familiar rage, the burning anger he had felt earlier that night when Lidong had threatened Tigress's life.

Before Tigress could stop him, Po launched himself at the alligator with a shout of fury.

"I don't think so, panda."

Zanshi lifted the sword in front of him. There was a brief flash of green light, and a split second later Po collided with a large golden shield with a deafening **clang**!

"Gah!"

Po's stubby black ears were ringing as he crashed back to the ground.

"Po!"

Tigress rushed over to Po as the shield in Zanshi's hand morphed back into a double edged sword in a green flash.

Po's nose, which before was merely bruised, was now bleeding from both nostrils.

Tigress looked down at Po in concern for a few seconds, then straightened up and snarled at Zanshi.

She took a step forward, fist raised, but was stopped short by a lance at her throat.

"Don't think I won't go back on my promise to Lidong and poke a hole in your windpipe." Zanshi spoke casually.

Tigress growled in response, her golden eyes narrowed into slits.
"Seriously. Don't tempt me."

Zanshi gently pushed forward with the lance, making Tigress topple over the stunned Po and fall back against the wall.

The tip of the lance was pushed against her chest before she could recover.

The tiger's golden eyes locked with the alligator's narrowed reptilian ones.

"Actually, instead of your windpipe..." Zanshi almost mockingly paused in thought. "I think I might just poke through your chest. No, I don't mean the heart... nothing's worse than a punctured lung in my opinion..."

"No..." Po whispered, his heart skipping a beat as he watched Tigress glance down at the lance pressing into her chest. She was barely breathing as the lance's tip poked through her vest and pricked her flesh, drawing beads of blood. "Please don't..."

"Actually, I just realized something..." Zanshi mused as he traced a little circle in the fabric of Tigress's vest, cutting the red silk slightly. "Do you know what's worse than a punctured lung? Two of them..."

"NO!" Po hollered. Quick as lightning, he reached up and grabbed the staff of the lance, yanking it away from her chest. "JUST TAKE THE SWORD AND GO, OKAY?! LEAVE HER ALONE!"

"Po, what the hell are you doing?" Tigress yelled.

Zanshi, meanwhile, looked down at the panda with an unidentifiable expression before stepping away from the feline, letting the lance morph back into the sword.

"Very well." Zanshi sighed, sounding almost disappointed. "As long as you two don't follow me, I won't make your lady friend suffocate to death."

Zanshi once again headed towards the door, sword in clawed hand.

"Now if you don't mind, I have a panda village to decimate. Don't want to leave any witnesses."

"NO!" Po yelled again and leapt to his feet, but the alligator had disappeared through the door.

Zanshi took care to bolt the door shut before gathering up his chi again.

After a moment, he relaxed, ready.

He stuck the Sword of Heroes in his belt before sprinting down the staircase faster than the strongest wind, past the other kung fu warriors who were oblivious to the lightning fast warrior rushing between them. As he ran, Zanshi momentarily considered simply killing them, but decided that he would deal with them later. He had better things to do.

Once he was sure that all the villagers were killed, Zanshi would inform Lidong of the feline's whereabouts. Not necessary to the plan, but at least it would stop the brutish crocodile's constant ramblings about his score to settle with the big cat.

Yet, Zanshi thought he felt a slight disappointment that the feline would be killed.

Not that he was that kind of predator, but physically she was very easy on the eyes.
A moment later, after Zanshi had rushed through the entrance to the Temple of Heroes and slowed to a stop in the clearing outside the doors, he wondered whether or not the skills he had taught Lidong would help him gain the upper hand in his upcoming battle with Tigress.

A moment later, Zanshi realized that he couldn't care less.

"Yes!" Shifu whispered when his sensitive ears caught the sound of soft snoring coming from the mouth of the cave at the top of the hill which he could just see from above the tree tops.

Which meant that after an hour of searching, he had finally locating the panda villagers' hiding place.

As he resumed his sprint through the forest (even at such an advanced age, Shifu still had a good few years still left in him, thank the gods) Shifu couldn't help but feel that something had gone badly wrong.

He didn't know what or why.

Just a prickly feeling at the back of his neck.

Qiang's eyes widened and he suddenly gasped sharply.

"Qiang?" Mr. Ping, the only other inhabitant of the cave who was awake, looked up at the panda in concern. "Are you alright?"

"Something's wrong..." Qiang whispered.

Dread began to stir in the aged goose's gut.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"The leader of the bandits." Qiang said quickly, frantically. "He's got a powerful weapon. He's searching for us. For the villagers."

"What?!" Mr. Ping exclaimed, them clamped his beak shut with his wings.

Thankfully, Ming and the other villagers didn't waken.

"I have to go." Qiang suddenly stood up. He whipped off his robe and let it settle to the ground beside the startled goose.

"Qiang, what are you doing?" The goose whispered, his voice muffled by the winged fingers still covering his beak.

"I have to intercept him." Qiang said without looking at him. "I have to try and stop him."

"Don't be foolish, Qiang!" Mr. Ping leapt to his feet and grabbed the leg of the panda's green pants. "You'll be killed!"

"I have to protect my village!" Qiang growled. "I can't let innocent people be killed again!"

"Qiang, no!"

Qiang ignored Mr. Ping, wrenching his leg free of the goose's grasp and rushing out of the cave.
He stopped just outside the cave, glancing back at Mr. Ping.

"Watch over them for me while I'm gone." He said. "And take care of Po."

"Qiang!"

The panda disappeared down the hill.
"Oh gods…" Crane whispered as he sat on the floor next to the injured Viper, staring up at the opening in the ceiling with an expression of deep concern. "Something's wrong…"

"What was that?" Viper asked, lifting her head from the side of the overturned hat she was soothing her burn in.

"Something's happened…" Crane didn't seem to hear her. He continued to stare at the ceiling. "Something's wrong…"

"Darn it, I can't wait any longer!" Mantis suddenly snapped.

"Huh, what?" Monkey stammered, startled by the insect's outburst that occurred right next to the primate's ear. He scowled in pain and rubbed his aching ear hole with a thin finger.

"They've been up there for half an hour!" Mantis hopped off of Monkey's shoulder with a look of concerned anger. "Something's happened, I know it!"

"Calm down, Mantis. Stop worrying."

"Hang on, maybe Mantis is right." Viper said. "Even in a place like this, they shouldn't be taking so long."

"Look, let's not be hasty." Monkey said. "They're probably just delayed."

"Delayed?" Mantis stared at the primate incredulously.

"Everyone gets delayed at some point." Monkey replied, though he too was beginning to get worried. "Remember the Winter Feast? We got delayed for a few minutes when we got ground jasmine instead of flaked, and Po had to go all the way down to the village to get the right stuff."

"Oh yeah." Mantis replied. "And it only took a few minutes because Po slipped on a patch of ice and bounced all the way down."

"That's not the same, guy!" Crane snapped angrily. "Something's happened, I can feel it in my gut… you guys stay here with Viper. I'm going up there."

"Hey, wait!" Viper cried, then winced as her burn sent a shot of pain through her body. "Tigress told us to stay down here in case Zanshi's men burst in. If they come storming in here and there's only a couple of us, then we may be outnumbered."

"That's why only I'm going up there to check it out." Crane turned back to her and lowered his head so he and Viper were at eye level. "I'm just going to find out what's taking Po and Tigress so long, and then I'll be back in two minutes tops."

"But…"
"Viper, if something's happened to Po and Tigress, something needs to help them out." Crane said gently. "I'll be back as soon as I can, I promise you on that."

Viper sighed.

"Okay."
"Wait, we'll come with you." Mantis and Monkey stepped up to him.

"No, I need you guys to stay here with Viper." Crane shook his head as he stepped on the bottom step of the circular staircase. "Just in case."

Monkey and Mantis nodded half-heartedly, and watched anxiously as Crane began to scale the staircase.

The avian was halfway up the steps when Monkey called out to him.

"Hey, are you going to fly?"

"Huh?"

"Are you a bird or not?"

"Oh, right."

Crane scowled, mortified with himself as he spread his wings and flapped the rest of the way up to the ceiling.

Lidong was startled when Zanshi suddenly materialized next to him in the middle of the dark forest, holding a glowing green sword.

"Is that it?" Lidong gaped at the glorious weapon.

"Yep." Zanshi replied. "Lidong, I want you to take a group of men and head to the Temple of Heroes at once."

"What? Why?"

"I need you to keep Shifu's students busy for as long as possible."

"Aw man!" Lidong moaned and furiously swung one end of his recently acquired meteor hammer into a nearby tree trunk. "And I really wanted to kill some fat pandas!"

"Why are you complaining?" Zanshi raised a scaled eyebrow. "Didn't you have a score to settle?"

"Huh?" Oh yeah, yeah!"

Lidong motioned to the twenty warriors by his side and set off through the forest.

"When we get there, don't forget…" Lidong yelled to his men with a sinister grin. "The cat is mine."

Shifu swiftly and effortlessly scaled the hillside, and felt immensely relieved when he saw that all the villagers were sleeping inside the cave. Little Su was clearly visible near the mouth of the cave, peacefully tucked in between her parents. For some reason, Shifu found the scene heartwarming.

It looked as though the entire village population was hidden safely inside this cave.

At least for the moment.

Shifu silently stepped inside the cave, careful not to wake them. Once he had done a head count
one of the skills not bestowed to him through kung fu was an eidetic memory) Shifu would wake Qiang and inform him of the current situation, then stand guard outside the cave until his students returned.

As Shifu headed farther into the dark cave, he felt a twinge of unease when he did not immediately see Qiang among the many black and white figures.

"Master Shifu!"

Shifu almost jumped out his skin when he felt a hand grab his shoulder.

He relaxed when he recognized Mr. Ping.

"Goodness, Mr. Ping, you startled me." The red panda replied. Then he frowned when he saw the panicked concern on the goose's face. "Mr. Ping, what's wrong?"

"Oh Shifu!" Mr. Ping whispered frantically. "You have to do something!"

"What's going on, Mr. Ping?" Shifu asked as he retrieved his staff, which he had dropped on the cave floor when the goose had surprised him.

"It's Qiang!" Mr. Ping whispered a little louder. "He's gone to fight the bandits!"

"What?!" Shifu almost shouted. "Why would he do that?!"

"Somehow he sensed that something had gone wrong!" Mr. Ping replied. "He said that the leader of the bandits has gotten hold of a powerful weapon!"

Shifu's heart skipped a beat. If what the goose said was true, then Zanshi has succeeded in obtaining the true Sword of Heroes, which in turn meant that something had happened to his students.

Po…

Tigress…

"Mr. Ping, I want you to stay here with the villagers and stay hidden!" Shifu spoke quickly. "Whatever you do, keep quiet and do not leave this cave!"

"What about you?" Mr. Ping asked. "What are you going to do?"

"Go after Qiang." Said Shifu. "And find out about this weapon."

"Okay." Mr. Ping replied. "I know I probably don't need to tell you this, but please be careful!"

Shifu nodded, and then rushed back out the cave. He stopped just outside, and after a moment's consideration began gathering the leafy vines. The rock formation surrounding the mouth of the cave was uneven and rough, making it easy for the red panda to climb up to the top of the cave mouth and begin constructing a camouflage.

"Master Shifu, what are you doing?"

Shifu looked down. His eyes widened when he saw little Su staring up at him from just outside the cave. A moment later, Mr. Ping and to Shifu's increasing surprise Ming, appeared beside her.

"I'm sorry, Shifu!" The goose spoke up to him. "She woke up just as you were leaving. I tried to
"Su, you shouldn't be out here." Ming reached out to take Su back inside, but the little girl stepped forward out of her reach.

"What are you doing, Master Shifu?" Su repeated.

"I'm covering up the cave with vines so you and your family will be well hidden." Shifu replied quietly. "Now please head back inside where you will be safe."

"Can I help?"

Shifu blinked, not expecting this request.

He opened his mouth to refuse her gently, but then stopped himself.

Many years ago, when Shifu had been a small cub only recently been taken in to the Jade Palace, an overconfident warlord had laid siege to the palace. Two days into the siege, little Shifu, eager to prove himself, had asked Oogway if he could help with the effort to transport all the supplies to the main storeroom. Master Chao, eighteen years old at the time, had refused on account of Shifu being a little boy, but Oogway had overruled him, more than happy to allow the small cub to help.

The siege had only lasted a week before Oogway himself struck down the warlord in a sneak attack. Shifu smiled slightly as he remember his joy when Oogway had warmly congratulated his younger self for his (in the old tortoise own words) very well appreciated assistance.

The red panda looked down at the little panda girl, who looked back at him almost pleadingly with her lovely sapphire blue eyes.

As serious as the current crisis was, there would be no harm in allowing her to assist him in such a minor task.

"Alright, my dear." Shifu spoke. Su looked as though the winter festival had come early. "See if you can pull down those vines on the cliff wall."

As Su eagerly started on the task she had been given, Shifu turned to Mr. Ping and Ming. "Ming, since you're awake you can help Su. Mr. Ping, keep an eye out for trouble. The first sign of life in those tree, inform me at once, got that?"

"Yes, Master Shifu." Mr. Ping quickly turned his attention to the forest's edge as Ming started assisting Su in gathering the vines.

In next to no time, a large pile of vines was sitting on the floor.

"Master Shifu?" Su asked tentatively. "Is it alright if I help you put them up?"

"I'm sorry, Su..." Shifu didn't look at her, too busy with tying the vines. "But you're going to be quite high up. I can't risk you getting-"

He blinked again when he turned his head, and found Su on the rock formation right next to him, looking at him with a strong determination that was very unexpected of her.

"Su!" He exclaimed in surprise. "How on earth did you get up here so quickly?"

"Sorry, Master Shifu." Su cringed apologetically as down below, Ming looked up at them with fearful astonishment. "But I really wanna help some more. Please?"
Shifu blinked a few more times before nodding his head speechlessly.

Su beamed before grabbing the end of a vine.

"Po, you idiot!" Tigress yelled as she ran at the door and failed to yank it open. Zanshi had locked it from the other side. "What were you thinking, just letting him go like that?"

"I'm sorry, Tigress!" Po attempted to help Tigress force it open, to no avail. "I thought he was going to kill you, and I panicked."

"Shut up and help me get this door open!" Tigress retorted.

Po set his jaw and furiously tugged at the door handle along with the feline.

After a few minutes of tugging, they reluctantly slowed to a stop. Tigress slammed her fist against the scarlet wooden surface in frustration.

"Darnit!" She cursed.

Po understood as well as felt her anger.

As they remained trapped here in this burial chamber, Mu Zanshi was roaming the forest with the Sword of Heroes in hand, hunting down his friends and loved ones.

Just as Po raised a fist to vent his own frustration, he heard a knock on the door.

"Po? Tigress?"

Po's heart leapt when he heard Crane's muffled voice.

"Crane!" Tigress yelled. "Let us out of here!"

"There's a bar blocking the door, hang on…"

A low scraping of a thick bar being removed later, the doors were wide open, a black crested crane standing in the doorway.

"You were taking too long, and we were getting worried." Crane explained. "What happened to you two?"

"Zanshi snuck in here and stole the sword!" Po said quickly. "He's gone after dad and the villagers! Come on, we have to stop him!"

Crane's eyes widened, then they narrowed in angered determination.

"Okay, let's go!"

As they ran for the circular staircase, Po glanced behind him to take one last look at the sacred burial chamber. He frowned slightly as he followed his friends down the staircase, but didn't falter in his step.

He didn't say anything as he, Tigress and Crane rejoined the others and quickly informed them of what had happened before they all rushed out the main hall, but Po could have sworn that for a split second he had seen the armored corpse of the fourth brother getting up from his throne.
"Come on, hurry up!" Po yelled as he and the Furious Five rushed towards the exit. Even Viper, who had climbed back out of the cool water despite Crane's protests, slithered as fast as she could despite the prolonged throbbing of her burn.

"Get a move on, guys!" Po yelled again as they ran through the corridor.

"Po, calm down!" Tigress replied as she ran on all fours beside him. "We will find Zanshi before he finds the villagers!"

"You don't know that!"

"Po, in case you've forgotten Zanshi does not know where the villagers are hiding! We probably have three hours borrowed time at the most!"

Po, terrified for his fathers and Ming, was not comforted in the slightest.

"There's the entrance!" Monkey called out, quickly lifting a hand to point at the opening of the corridor they were quickly approaching. "Come on!"

Within seconds, they were through the enormous doors and back in the clearing.

"Right, here's what we're going to do..." Tigress spoke up at once. "We'll split into three teams. Crane, Viper, you two go to the villagers' hiding place and watch over them. Po and Monkey will go west to track down as many of Zanshi's men as possible. I and Mantis will go south and do the same."

"Okay! Come on Viper." Crane waited until Viper was safely secured on his back before taking off.

"Got it. Monkey, let's go!" Po and Monkey took off into the forest the second Tigress finished her sentence. Tigress watched him go, and made a silent prayer that Crane and Viper would get to his parents in time.

Mantis hopped on Tigress's shoulder.

"What are we gonna do with these guys once we find them?" He asked.

"Make sure they can't trouble the villagers again." Tigress replied coldly. "Come on, let's-"

"Going somewhere, kitty?"

Tigress stopped mid-sentence, and slowly turned to face a larger than normal crocodile slowly emerging from the north side of the forest, flanked by half a dozen warriors.

"Lidong." She uttered, her voice laced with an animalistic snarl.

"Long time, no see, huh?" Lidong replied with a huge grin.

"What are you doing here?" Tigress growled as Mantis hopped off her shoulder and landed on the grass beside her in a combative pose. "Your boss has obtained the sword. You have no more business here! Leave this mountain and leave the village alone!"
"No can do, kitten." Lidong replied. Tigress growled again at the insult. "You see, we can't afford any witnesses. We'll leave once every single big fat panda is dead."

"Well, what about us?" Mantis replied with a death glare.

"That's why we're here." Lidong took a large step towards the two warriors. "See, we can't let you guys interfere. Oh, and in case you need reminding..." Lidong turned his attention back to Tigress. "I've got a score to settle with you."

That was when Tigress saw the weapon in his clawed hands.

It was a five meter length of thick coiled rope. Dangling from one end was a spherical weight, dark in color and covered in thick spikes. It was a meteor hammer. Liúxīng chuí.

Lightning fast. Unpredictable. Deadly in the right hands.

Tigress clenched her teeth behind her sealed lips. If Lidong was indeed skilled with such a weapon, and she would be surprised if he was, then she would have to be extremely careful. One mistake would result in her face being smashed in.

"Sir, there are only two of them." Tigress heard one of the crocs whisper to Lidong. "Where are the rest?"

Lidong's eyes widened momentarily as he realized this as well.

"Dammit! We didn't get here in time." He muttered. "They must have gone after the rest of the gang. You three, find the others and warn them."

The three crocs on his left disappeared into the forest.

Lidong turned back to Tigress and Mantis, who glared furiously at him and prepared for combat.

"Right, let's finish this!" Lidong growled. "You guys, take the bug! The cat is mine!"

As the three crocs raised their lances and charged at Mantis, Lidong slowly stalked towards Tigress, who held her ground.

As Lidong approached her, he began twisting his wrist. The meteor hammer started to swing.

Tigress narrowed her eyes as the distance shortened by the second.

As unpredictable as the meteor hammer was, Tigress knew a few of its techniques.

Once Lidong was within five meters of her, he would attack. Probably use a simple throw to catch her off guard. Or attempt a 'grab' and wrap the weight around her arm or neck. Or maybe the brutish reptile would attempt a 'storm from above', and lunge at her with a wide overhead arc for maximum damage.

The spiked weight was now swinging in full circles now. Lidong grinned maliciously. He was less than six meters from her. In a moment, Tigress would find out whether or not his hands were the right ones.

She ignored the shouts of Mantis as he battled the crocs three on one ten feet away. She would need all her instincts to fight a meteor hammer.

She set her jaw as Lidong stepped within five meters of her.
Four meters in, he struck.

Tigress nearly snapped herself in half as she bent backwards to avoid the weight as it flew at her in a straight line. She could practically feel the disturbance in the air as it flew over her face then snapped back to its owner.

She quickly straightened herself as Lidong expertly twisted the rope around his body, then swung the hammer at a low angle.

Tigress lifted herself into the air with an upwards leap, the weight swinging below her and missing her legs by a millisecond. Her paws caught a lower branch that stretched far out over the clearing and her fingers grabbed on.

They let go a second later when Lidong swung it again at her. Tigress fell to the ground as the hammer obliterated a section of the wood and the branch crashed beside her in an explosion of twigs and leaves.

Tigress kicked herself upright then somersaulted backwards out of the five meter range.

She took a few steps backwards as Lidong slowly advanced. The meteor hammer swung in full circles in his hand.

Four seconds. Lidong had attacked her three times in four seconds.

As much as she hated to admit it, but he was good.

Breathing heavily, Tigress took a quick glance at Mantis. He was still busy battling two crocs, the third dangling unconscious from a tree by his tail. She turned her attention back to Lidong, who was thirteen meters away and closing in.

Her normal tiger style would be useless. To attack him head on would result in a three kilogram metal ball obliterating her head. She couldn't block. The weight would smash through her arm like it was a toothpick wrapped in tissue paper and cotton wool.

Think, Tigress, think!

She took another step backwards as Lidong came within ten meters of her. He laughed, his toothy lips curled upwards in a crooked smile.

He had the upper hand, and he knew it.

Tigress stepped backwards again, desperately trying to remember the meteor hammer's weaknesses. All she could come up with was that the storm from above could be easily dodged, and that the swing could easily backfire and injured the wielder. But within four seconds Lidong had proved that he could perform the swing with ease.

Tigress needed to come up with a different tactic, and fast.

She stepped away from Lidong again, but felt a pang of dismay as her back hit the rock wall to the right of the entrance to the Temple of Heroes.

The hammer continued to spin as Lidong closed in.

Maybe if I prevent him from retrieving the hammer once he swings…

On the other side of the clearing, Mantis felled the last croc and looked up. His eyes widened when
he saw Lidong closing in on the cornered feline.

"Tigress!" He yelled and rushed forward.

"Mantis, no!" Tigress yelled back. "Stay back!"

She couldn't risk Mantis getting involved. As strong a kung fu master as he was, one swing from the hammer would crush Mantis harder than Po's foot. She couldn't risk it.

As she called out to the insect, Lidong stepped within five meters and lunged.

Tigress cried out and twisted the upper half of her body to the side. Her left ear rang as the hammer slammed into the rock and embedded itself there.

Almost on instinct, Tigress lashed out with her right paw and grabbed the midsection of the rope.

"Oi!" Lidong yelled, taken aback by the unexpected move. He pulled on his end of the rope. Tigress was yanked forward as the weight was pulled back out of the rock.

"Let go!" Lidong yelled, but Tigress kept a tight grip on the rope. With her left paw she grabbed the edge of one of the big wooden doors of the temple entrance, latching on with her claws.

If it wasn't for the fact that she would be yanked off her feet and lose her grip on the hammer the second she let go of the door, Tigress would have reached out and sliced through the rope.

So she held on.

Lidong growled in frustration and pulled. The rope began to slip through her palm.

Tigress gritted her teeth hard enough to nearly crack them and held on, even as red stains began to appear on the rope as it was steadily ripped from her grasp.

"Tigress!" Mantis yelled again and leapt at Lidong with a flying kick. With a lucky shot, Lidong lashed out with one arm and sent the insect flying into the trees out of sight.

Tigress grimaced as the intense friction of the rope's movement cut into her palm and fingers, but at the same time was mildly thankful that twenty years of punching ironwood trees had numbed any feeling in her paws.

But then she began to feel a tiny sensation in her paw.

She frowned in confusion.

As the rough, coarse rope cut deeper into her paw, the sensation grew, until she registered it as a burning feeling. A burning painful feeling that was growing more terrible by the second.

What was going on?

Tigress started gasping as her fingers started to shake.

This wasn't supposed to happen!

She had spent two decades beating the feeling out of herself!

Why was this happening?!
Why, after all this time, was she starting to feel again?!  

With a shout of anger, Lidong gave a good hard yank, and the meteor hammer was wrenched from her grip.  

Tigress staggered back against the rock wall, clutching her screaming, trembling paw.  

Lidong swung the bloodstained meteor hammer until he had regained his momentum, and then closed in on her once again.  

"It's payback time!" He snarled as he advanced.  

Tigress didn't reply. She was done. Her paw was in agony, and she had no tactics left.  

She watched the spherical weight swing round and round as Lidong came closer, and mused that aside from the spikes, it looked almost like a cannonball.  

Cannonball.  

Something suddenly clicked in her head.  

Unlike Po, Tigress didn't have any inner peace, but then she turned her gaze to the side, and saw the large golden disk, still embedded in the large door.  

I've only got one chance.  

As Lidong neared the five meter range, Tigress reached out and quickly prized the key from the depression.  

"Heh, not much of a shield!" Lidong chuckled.  

He twisted the rope around his body, preparing for a whip motion.  

He wouldn't kill her right away.  

He wanted to savor the moment.  

He would save the storm from above for when he became bored.  

For now, he would begin with a horizontal swing. Hit her in the face, then follow with a second, lower swing which would bring her to her knees.  

The rest he would make up as he went along.  

"Take this, kitty!" He yelled then swung.  

Tigress swung at the same time.  

Clang!  

The weight struck the large disk directly in the centre, then was redirected, swinging back towards Lidong's face.  

He barely had time to utter a 'holy crap' before it struck his skull with a dull thud.  

He staggered on the spot for a few seconds before crashing to the ground.
Tigress tucked the slightly dented disk into her vest before stepping away from the wall, standing over the unconscious croc with an expression of disdain and mild triumph.

"Skadoosh." She whispered as a slightly dazed bug emerged from the forest, muttering about a girlfriend and oranges and lemons.
Po stopped running when he heard the distant sounds of breaking rock and shouts emanating from the direction he and Monkey had run from.

The panda spun round on the spot as Monkey stopped swinging from the branches and set himself on the ground beside him.

"You hear that?" Po whispered.

"Yeah." Monkey said. "Looks like Tigress and Mantis found some goons already."

"Or some goons found them."

"Po, don't freak out." Monkey had to stretch to put a hand on Po's shoulder. "They're more than capable of handling a bunch of crocs."

Po didn't answer, his brows furrowed with worry.

"We should keep moving." Monkey said.

"Ugh..."

The two warriors froze when they heard a small moan coming from right in front of them.

Monkey was the first to cautiously approach. His eyes widened when he found the source of the moan lying sprawled on the forest floor, twenty feet from where they had been standing.

"Mantis?"

"Money?" Mantis asked back.

"No, it's Monkey. Not Money."

"Sorry."

"What the heck are you doing way over here?" Monkey held out a finger and helped the bug to his feet as Po walked up to them.

"Lidong." Mantis said. "Hang on a sec. There's oranges and lemons dancing round my head."

"Easy there, buddy." Po said, kneeling down beside the primate.

Mantis blinked a few times before he spoke again.

"Lidong." Mantis repeated. "He and a few of his boys found us at the temple entrance. Lidong went after Tigress with a meteor hammer. Ugh, go away you stupid fruit!" Mantis swatted at the air in front of him. "I took out the crocs and tried to help, but Lidong sent me flying with a pretty wicked backhand."

"A meteor hammer?" Monkey's eyes widened.

"Yeah, a heater manner." Mantis replied. "Come on, I'll take you to them."
Mantis hopped a little unevenly back in the direction of the temple.

"Oh man, this isn't good." Monkey muttered.

"You mean the fact that getting hit in the head has turned Mantis in a fruit loop?" Po replied.

"Tigress's style isn't best suited for fighting a meteor hammer." Monkey replied.

Po's heart skipped a beat.

"What?" He asked in a tiny voice.

"I think she may be in trouble."

A millisecond after Monkey finished his sentence, Po was sprinting after Mantis as fast as his short legs could carry him.

Qiang had forgotten his rake.

He had realized this when he was five minutes from the cave where the other pandas were hidden. He couldn't risk going back for it. Chances were that Mr. Ping had woken up half the villagers by now, and if he returned they would stop him from leaving again. Granted, they had good reasons for doing so… but then again, Qiang had good reasons for leaving in the first place.

Cursing himself for his senior moment, Qiang did what he had done several days ago: snapped a thick branch from one of the shorter trees.

As he removed his green robe and left it hanging on another branch as he ventured further into the wood, he thought of Po, of the bandit leader and his new weapon, and silently hoped that his thick branch would be enough.

"Stop there, Su. I think that will do." Shifu said as he tied the last vine to the top of the cave mouth.

Su nodded and let the vine she had been grabbing fall to the ground below. Ming picked it up and tossed it through the green veil of foliage along with the small pile.

"Take my hand, Su."

Su did as she was told. Shifu pulled her into a half hug, and swiftly leapt down from the rock. Even with the added weight of the child, he landed without trouble.

"Thank you for your help, Su." Shifu smiled warmly at her. "It was well appreciated."

Su's cheeks turned bright red.

"Now please go back inside with Ming, where it's safe."

"Come on, little one."

Ming took the little girl's paw and led her back inside the cave.

"Mr. Ping, you go with them. No matter what happens, do not leave."

"Okay."
Mr. Ping glanced at the red panda once before slipping through the veil.

Shifu turned away from the veil and was about to make his way back down the hill when he saw the black crested crane flying toward him, bearing a green tree viper on his back.

Tigress glanced up in slight alarm when she heard Mantis hop into a pile of dry leaves.

Clutching her injured paw, Tigress stepped away from the unconscious Lidong. She frowned when she saw that the bug was swaying from side to side as he approached her.

"Mantis, are you alright?" She asked.

"Stupid oranges and lemons…" Mantis muttered. "Yeah, I'm fine. I think my head's starting to clear up now."

"Good." Tigress replied. She bit her lower lip and closed her eyes as the bright red streaks on her palm and fingers continued to send wave after wave of pain through her nervous system.

"Hey Tigress, are you-"

Mantis was knocked aside as a breathless panda burst from the bushes.

"Tigress!" He yelled when he saw her. Monkey also emerged from the bushes a second later.

"Po?" Tigress blinked. "What are you doing back here?"

"Mantis… told us about Lidong!" Po bent forwards as he fought to catch his breath. "When Monkey… told me… about how your style… isn't good for fighting… a meteor hammer… I was worried…"

"I'm okay, Po." Tigress said, mildly surprised that Po had exhausted himself rushing back here just to aid her. "Look, I managed to take down Lidong anyway."

Po spotted the motionless Lidong several feet behind her.

"Oh man…" Po whispered so the feline wouldn't hear. "Oh thank god…"

Then he saw her holding her paw.

"Tigress, are you okay?" He asked.

"Yes, I thought I already made that clear." Tigress replied with a slight tone of annoyance.

"No, I mean your paw." Po took a step forward, his paw raised slightly as if to take her own. "Is it…"

"It's just a scrape." Tigress replied. "Seriously, a superficial scrape." She added when she saw Po's eyes widen. She remembered his reaction to her bleeding knuckles. "Seriously."

"Okay, if you say so…"

Po looked as if he was about to say something more when Crane and Viper came flying in at that very moment.

"Guys!" Monkey exclaimed. "What are you doing back here?"
"Guys, we've got a problem!" Viper said quickly as she slithered down from Crane's back, along with a familiar red panda.

"Master Shifu!" Po felt a rush of joy rush through him. "You managed to escape!"

"It's good to see you too, Po," Shifu replied. "But this no time for happy reunions. Like Viper said, we have a serious problem. Qiang has gone after Zanshi."

Po's blood froze.

"What?" He breathed.

"According to Mr. Ping, Qiang somehow sensed that Zanshi had acquired the sword and is hunting his fellow villagers. It seems that he wishes to avoid another catastrophe like what happened to his old village."

Po's legs buckled and he fell on his knees.

"Oh man…” He moaned. "Oh man, dad…”

"There's still time to avoid tragedy." Crane spoke up, breaking the tense silence that had followed. "On our way back, we spotted a large group of crocs moving through the forest. From the looks of it, it's the entirety of Zanshi's team."

"Is Zanshi among them?" Tigress asked.

"No."

"Darnit."

"Where are they heading?" Po asked anxiously. "Are they heading for the villagers' hiding place?"

"Thankfully, they're heading completely in the wrong direction." Viper said. Inexplicably she began smiling at this point. "In fact, they're heading straight for a huge field of long grass."

Po scowled in confusion when he saw similar smiles forming on the others' faces.

"Perfect." Mantis grinned, now fully recovered from his blow to the head.

"What are you guys planning?" Po asked.

"No need to explain." Shifu replied. "For you're not going to be involved." He turned to the Furious Five. "All of you except Po head straight for the long grass. You know what to do."

"What about the villagers?" Po asked as the Five disappeared into the forest. "What about dad number one and Ming?"

"They're safely hidden, Po. I've made sure of that." Said Shifu.

"Then… what are you and me gonna do?"

"We are going to find your dad number two. And hopefully take down Zanshi in the process."

"Are you guys serious?!" One of the forty crocs gathered near the edge of the forest exclaimed. "Dead serious." One of the three crocs who had arrived to warn the large group nodded in
confirmation. "The kung fu warriors are hunting for us as we speak."

"Oh man…"

"The good news is that there are only four of them. Not only will they be outnumbered, they will be outmatched."

"All the same, I think we'll be safer in the long grass." Said the croc standing next to the first. "That way, those guys can't ambush us from the trees."

Thirty nine saurian heads nodded in agreement. After a moment's hesitation, three more went along with it.

And so forty three crocodiles strode quickly through the edge of the forest and into the wide field of greenish yellow grass that rose up to their chests.

The croc who had first expressed alarm at the news, a slightly skinny reptile called Rong Ling, abruptly stopped at the edge.

"No, wait!" He yelled to his comrades. "Don't go into the long grass!"

The forty two other crocs ignored him, venturing further and further into the long grass, holding their weapons above their heads as if they were wading through water.

Rong Ling scowled. He may be a lowly bandit, but he wasn't stupid.

He suddenly heard the slightest rustling from the bushes behind him.

Torn between a sense of responsibility and his better judgment, Rong Ling hesitated.

"Come on, you idiot!" One of the crocs called back to him.

Rong Ling opened his mouth to refuse, when he once again heard the rustling of the bushes. He quickly sealed his scaly lips and rushed into the grass after his comrades.

The field of long grass, half a mile in diameter, was spread out beneath a cliff. It was a short cliff, only thirty feet tall, so the burly alligator standing at the edge could clearly see the crocodiles leaving trails as they strode through the grass.

Mu Zanshi gripped the hilt of the Sword of Heroes tightly, unable to believe what he was seeing.

"What are those idiots doing?" He whispered. "Do they have any idea what they've gotten themselves into?!"

Down below, the forty three crocodiles continued to wade through the chest-high grass.

"Any sign of them?" One of the crocs called, stopping momentarily in the middle of the field.

"Nope." The croc on his left spoke. "Don't worry. They're outnumbered. If they do show up, we'll just slice and dice them."

In the distance, Rong Ling's requests that they move away from the middle of the field fell on dear ears.

"Hey, look! It's Zanshi!"
The two crocs looked up, saw their leader on the top of the cliff. He was waving one arm, and they could just make an angry expression.

"He must want us to get a move on." One of the crocs rolled his eyes. "If he wasn't a total ace with that tri bo yao…"

They paid the alligator no more mind, and resumed their trek through the grass.

Fifty yards away, the tops of three heads, a snake's, a tiger's and a crane's, rose up slowly, backlit by the waxy full moon.

They spied the forty three crocodiles in the distance.

After a few moments, the three heads descended back into the grass.

On the other side of the field, one more head, a monkey's with a praying mantis crouched on top of his skull, rose up in the grass, gazed intently at the crocs for a few seconds, then sank back down and vanished.

On all sides of the forty three crocodiles, the long grass rippled as five dark figures moved forward toward them, undetected, relentless as cannonballs yet silent as phantoms.

And the silent cannonballs were bang on target.

At the rear of the group, the very last crocodile was suddenly yanked down, dragged silently and swiftly below the surface of the tall grass.

A couple of feet in front of him, two more crocodiles were suddenly yanked down, their comrades unaware.

At the front of the group, the croc at the forefront heard a rustling several feet in front of him. He froze, and held out his arms to stop the group behind him.

"Shush!" He hissed. "Did you hear that?"

"What?" Rong Ling asked, dread stirring in his gut.

A second after he asked that question, his khaki colored face turned white as a Chinese south Bengal tiger sprung out of the grass.

The croc in front barely had a millisecond to register that this was one of the kung fu warriors before Master Tigress slammed into his body with a feral roar, taking him down in a flash.

Chaos ensued.

Forgetting all about the weapons they held in their clawed hands, the crocs ran screaming in all directions. One by one, they were pulled down and vanished into the rustling grass like stones tossed into murky ponds.

A black crested crane suddenly exploded from the grass, soared high into the air past the full moon, and struck two crocs in one go, slamming them into the ground beneath the grass.

Two feet away, Rong Ling looked on in dismay, his fingers slackening and dropping his axe.

He looked round.
He too was standing prone in the middle of the long grass.

Not only prone, but alone.

Around him, three trails closed in on him.

Rong Ling simply held up his hands in surrender.
Zanshi watched as the last croc was swiftly paralyzed on the spot with a nerve pinch, toppled over, and disappeared into the grass.
"Fools…" He snorted in disgust. He turned away from the field below the cliff edge and returned to the bowels of the forest.

He slowly stalked through the darkness of the forest, holding out the Sword of Heroes in front of him, listening for the slightest snap of a twig or the smallest rustle of dry leaves.

The entirety of his crew was defeated.

If the feline was still alive and well, then Lidong had almost certainly lost his long awaited rematch.

Zansho was on his own now.

Which meant that from now on, he would have to be cautious.

Unsurprisingly, that did not faze the alligator in the slightest.

After all, he now had the Sword of Heroes.

Nothing could stop him now.

Not that he was planning on double-crossing the secret organization that had employed him to retrieve the sword in the first place.

Believe it or not, he had no intention of taking the sword's unimaginable power for himself. Though said unimaginable power was indeed tempting, and wonderful to use, Zanshi honestly didn't fancy taking a stab at world domination. Doing so would make him ten times as many enemies as the small band of kung fu warriors currently opposing him, and that, in Zanshi's opinion, was far too annoying of an inconvenience.

Besides, Emperor Xian was doing a decent enough job of running the country anyway.

No, Zanshi had better things to do than abusing the power of the Sword of Heroes.

Like wiping out a village of pandas, for example.

If only he could find them…

*Snap!*

Zanshi stopped dead in the middle of the small clearing.

He spun to his left, the sword gleaming emerald green in the moonlight.

"Who's there?" He demanded.

For two seconds, there was no answer.

Zanshi was just considering storming in after his mysterious stalker when a giant panda slowly emerged from the bushes.
For a moment, Zanshi thought it was the Dragon Warrior, but then saw the green pants and box-shaped jaw and realized that this was a different bear-cat. Still, judging from the dark green eyes, there was the possibility that they were related.

"Who are you?" Zanshi asked casually.

"You should know." The panda replied coldly. "You are the one hunting my people."

Zanshi blinked a few times before realizing what the panda was talking about.

"You must be the village leader." He said with a slight chuckle. "Pardon me, but I'm a little lost. Could you direct me to the pandas?"

"So you can massacre them? I don't think so."

"If you don't tell me where they are, I will make you."

As Zanshi said this, he held the sword out in front of him.

The sword morphed into a shape he was sure the panda was familiar with: a long lance with a flame shaped blade.

Zanshi was mildly surprised when the panda didn't even bat an eyelid.

"Psychological tactics won't work with me." The panda replied icily. "My mind has been pushed to the boundaries of insanity and back. Don't think for a second that bringing up the destruction of my old village will tip the battle in your favor."

"If that's the case, then why are you here?" Beneath the taunt, Zanshi was genuinely curious.

"Perhaps because you wish to prevent history from repeating itself?"

"Yes." The panda said at once. "As long as I'm alive, I will never let you hurt another soul."

He raised the thick branch he was holding threateningly.

Zanshi's eyes narrowed.

"Then let's get this over with."

He morphed the lance into a tri bo yao and charged.

The panda held his ground.

Zanshi swung one end of his weapon in a wide arc over his head, aiming for the panda's shoulder.

He couldn't kill him yet.

Finding the pandas was top priority.

The alligator was astonished when the panda, quick as lightning, suddenly raised the branch over his head. The branch successfully blocked Zanshi's attack.

Zanshi leapt back to his original spot before the panda could deliver a low punch to his stomach, and snarled.

The panda set his jaw and prepared for the next assault.
Zanshi morphed the sword into a crossbow and fired.

"Argh!"

Po skidded to a halt when he heard the cry of pain.

His blood turned to ice in his veins as he recognized the voice.

"Dad." He whispered. "DAD!" He yelled and ran in the direction of the cry.

"Po, wait!" Shifu took off after him, even after he himself felt a twinge of fear for Po's birth father.

As Po ran through the forest, he began to hear voices.

As he got closer, he began to register agonized panting, and the voice of a certain alligator speaking.

"Not so tough now, are you?" the voice said.

Zanshi.

Po ran faster.

"Now that I've beaten you, perhaps now you will tell me where your fellow pandas are.

Po heard his father say a very bad word in a pained voice.

"I will use this again." Zanshi replied.

Po forced himself to slow down.

The only chance his father had was a sneak attack.

Po crept through the forest as quietly as he could, Shifu effortlessly and silently traversing the try leaves and small twigs by his side.

"Where are the villagers?" Zanshi asked.

"I ain't telling you nothing." Qiang replied.

Po could see two figures through the trees now.

"I don't have time for false bravado," Zanshi said, a tone of annoyance in his voice. "I am going to count to ten, and you are going to tell me where your monochromatic friends are."

Po neared the edge of the small clearing, and what he saw nearly made his heart stop.

Mu Zanshi was standing over the fallen form of Qiang, who was sitting vulnerable against one of the thicker trees, a paw pressed to his shoulder. Blood seeped through his fingers, and a red-stained arrow lay by his side.

"Oh god, dad..." Po whispered.

"Easy, Po." Shifu whispered. "I'll take care of Zanshi. You go round and get ready to pull your father out of danger once I make my move."
Po nodded.

"One…" Zanshi began, unaware that he was being watched. "Two…"

He raised the sword above his head.

"Nine… te-"

WHAM!

Shifu sprang from the bushes and sent Zanshi flying with a swift kick.

As the alligator skidded across the ground, Po rushed to his weakened father.

"DAD!" He hollered and practically collapsed by his father's side.

"Po…" Qiang grinned despite his condition. "You're okay…"

"Don't talk." Po fought to keep his cool as he pressed his paws to the profusely bleeding wound.

"Shifu! Get over here!"

Shifu was on Qiang's opposite side in an instant.

"Shifu, it won't stop bleeding!" Po yelled frantically, his shoulders shaking as he fought to keep the blood from leaving his father's body.

"Po, calm down." Shifu ordered. "Keep pressure on the wound."

His ears pricked as he heard a sound some feet away: Zanshi was getting to his feet.

"Po, stay with your father." Shifu turned to face the alligator. "I'll take care of him."

"No!" Po snapped. "I'll do it!"

"Po…"

"It's my family he's threatening!" Po yelled, this time with anger. "I'm going to take that big lizard down, whether you like it or not!"

Shifu was uncertain for a few moments, but then nodded solemnly and removed his outer green robe.

"I'll take it from here." He said simply.

He pressed his green robe to Qiang's wound a second after Po removed his paw.

Po slowly turned to face Zanshi, as the angered alligator approached with sword in hand.

"You're gonna pay for this, Zanshi." Po's green eyes narrowed into slits. "I swear to every god I know, you're gonna pay."

"Oh, am I?" Zanshi raised an eyebrow. "Strong talk from a guy who ran face first into a shield."

Po fought the urge to touch his still aching nose.

"Why don't you fight like a man?" The panda took several steps forward, moving slightly to the left so their upcoming battle would take place away from his injured father. "Put away the sword and
fight me evenly, why don't ya?"

"So you can take me down with your… what do you call it… 'bodacity'?" Zanshi snorted. "No thanks. I may be brawny, but I'm not stupid. See, I have a job to do, and I've wasted enough time as it is. Now if you don't mind…"

Zanshi suddenly charged, sword raised.

Po ducked the swing, and sent Zanshi staggering backwards with an uppercut.

"M grandma could fight better than that!" The panda yelled.

Zanshi snarled.

The sword morphed into a lance and Zanshi brought it down. Po dodged, but Zanshi changed the direction of the swing at the last second. Po cried out as the bladed pole caught the corner of his shoulder and opened a small cut. Before the panda could react, Zanshi swung again, opening a slightly larger cut on his chest, just below his throat. Po quickly backed away. Picked up a broken branch as the lance morphed into a rope dart and shot at him in a straight line. Po leant backwards. The sharpened green dart stopped just short of his left eyeball. Po raised the branch in front of him in an attempt to block. The rope wrapped round it and yanked it from his paws. Po cried out in alarm.

Dizzy from blood loss, Qiang could only look on.

Zanshi laughed. The rope dart snapped back and morphed into a fire lance, which fired out lead pellets. Po rolled to the side, retrieving his branch in the process. The fire lance morphed into a flaming tri bo yao and Zanshi swung it at him. Po successfully blocked the blow with his branch. The fire from the magical weapon charred the bark, singed the fur of Po's fingers. Zanshi stepped away, snarling in frustration.

"I don't have time for this, you fool!" He snapped.

"Getting tired, Zanshi?" Po asked.

"You wish."

The fire lance morphed into its original sword form and Zanshi launched himself at the panda.

Po tried to block, but the sword sliced clean through the branch and barely missed Po's chest. Po didn't bother being dismayed, and instead swung the two halves of the branch and struck Zanshi on both sides of his head. Po kicked the stunned alligator in the chest and sent him flying backwards.

He took the opportunity to shoot a concerned look at his father. The elder giant panda was now half conscious, kept alive only by the green cloth Shifu was determinedly pressing to his wound.

"Dad…" Po whispered.

He heard a moan and a curse and turned back to his enemy.

Zanshi now had a mad look in his eye as he stalked towards the panda.

"Right…" The alligator snarled furiously. "No more mister nice reptile…"

Po glared right back at him, his wooden weapons raised.
The sword disappeared in a flash of green light, and in its place was a strange metal weapon completely encompassing Zanshi's arm. The weapon was tubular, shaped partially like a dragon, and looked strangely familiar…

"Remember this?" Zanshi asked with a sinister grin. "Made this using my own imagination. I call it… the hand-cannon."

Oh crap.

Po launched himself out the way as the hand-cannon fired, obliterating the tree Po had been standing in front of moments before.

Po quickly got to his feet as the clunking sound of the hand-cannon reloading itself filled the air.

"Po!" Qiang managed to cry out as Shifu looked on anxiously.

"Inner peace, Po…" The panda whispered furiously. "Inner peace!"

He straightened himself.

Zanshi smiled.

The hand-cannon fired.

KABOOM!

Po narrowed his eyes.

The cannonball soared towards him…

And just like two months ago in Gongmen Harbor, Po reached out, caught the cannonball in his bare paw, swung it round, and sent it flying right back at Zanshi.

The alligator barely had time to express astonishment before the cannonball made contact.

There was an explosion of green light as the projectile struck the hand-cannon, and a moment later Mu Zanshi was lying prone on the forest floor.

Clutching a paw to his cut shoulder, Po cautiously stepped forward.

He had expected the artifact to be obliterated. He was surprised when he spotted the Sword of Heroes, back in its original form, lying intact in the middle of the small clearing.

When Zanshi didn't get up right away, Po turned back to his father.

"Dad!" He rushed to Qiang's side.

When his father didn't answer, dread began to grow inside Po.

"DAD!"

"Quiet, Po." Shifu said gently. "He's merely fallen unconscious. We have to get him some medical attention as soon as possible."

Po nodded.

"On the count of three, we'll both lift him up." Shifu said. "There should still be medical supplies
in the village. If we hurry, we can get Qiang there before his condition worsens."

"Okay. I think Ming has what we need in the house." Po said. He picked up the Sword of Heroes before hooking his arms beneath his father's armpits.

"Right, on three…" Shifu said. "One… two… three!"

Together, Po and Shifu lifted Qiang. With his strength, Shifu helped prop Qiang on Po's shoulders before leaping on the elder panda's back to resume putting pressure on the wound.

"Right, let's go."

The trek through the forest seemed to take forever, but Po eventually reached the edge of the forest. He crossed the large field then stepped back into the deserted panda village.

He carried his injured father to his house and gently set him down on the porch steps.

"Get the bandages!" Po yelled.

Shifu rushed into the house without responding.

A second later, he emerged with a white box.

"Get back, Po. I need to stitch the wound first before bandaging."

Po stepped back as Shifu set to work.

"Where do you think you three are going?"

Oh no.

Po gritted his teeth and turned back to Zanshi.

"Aw for the love of… keep him busy, Po!" Shifu snapped as he continued to work on Qiang as fast as he could.

"Give me back that sword!" Zanshi snarled.

"Not a chance!" Po growled. He raised the Sword of Heroes threateningly.

"You give back that sword or else!" Zanshi yelled. Po was momentarily taken aback by the animalistic tone in the alligator's voice. "The order will be very unhappy if you-"

"The order?" Shifu spoke up with a frown.

Zanshi cut himself off, scowling in anger.

"Almost let it slip." He whispered to himself. "Enough talk! Give me that-"

Zanshi suddenly stopped mid-speech.

His reptilian eyes bulged in shock.

Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth.

Po's eyes widened as he and the alligator looked down at the tip of an enormous blade protruding from his chest.
"Wha-" Po whispered as the sword slowly slid out and Zanshi fell to the side.

In his place was a large oxen completely covered in golden aged armor.

Po's blood froze. Only a couple of hours ago, this armored warrior had been a mere corpse sitting limp on a golden throne.

"No..." He whispered. "No way..."

Po's jaw dropped as the undead fourth brother stepped over Zanshi's motionless form and slowly approached the panda, bloodstained broadsword firmly gripped in a large armored hoof.

"Oh..." Po stepped backwards in pure horror. "… hell."
"Enough talk! Give me that-"

Zanshi’s voice was suddenly cut off as he felt something slam into his body through the back. After a few moments, he tried to rhetorically ask what had just happened, but failed to speak through the blood that began to well up in his mouth, overflow and trickle down his chin.

At first, he didn't register the pain. But then he did feel it, but he was still in too much shock to scream.

He and the panda looked down at the tip of an enormous blade protruding from his chest. Oddly, Zanshi mused that this particular blade was far much bigger than the one that had impaled him several decades ago.

There was a wet sound as the blade slid back out the way it came in. Zanshi’s legs gave way and he fell to the side, just the moon became obscured in black clouds and rain began to fall in torrents.

For a moment, he was back in the muddy bank, rainwater pounding down on him as his lifeblood mingled with the liquid earth.

A moment later, Zanshi was back in the village, lying on green grass covered in beads of water.

So much better than a mudbank.

That was Mu Zanshi’s last thought before he fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Silent yet threatening, the tall corpse of the fourth brother stepped over Zanshi and towards the stunned Dragon Warrior, torrential rainwater pouring down its armor like small rivers. Its armored legs clanked slightly, its footsteps crushing the grass with dull thuds. The enormous blade dripped with alligator blood. With a jolt, Po recognized the blade; Lidong’s broadsword, last seen embedded in a tree. The undead corpse must had acquired it prior to entering the village. In the corpse’s hands, Po saw just how large the sword was. The blade was the width and length of a door.

"Oh crap…” Po stepped backwards, terror threatening to turn to hysteria. "Oh my god…”

"Who is that?” Shifu demanded.

"Th-the…” Po gulped as the corpse slowly approached. "The fourth brother."

Shifu almost dropped the needle.

Po's body started to shake. He began to have trouble breathing.

"Po! Get a hold of yourself!” Shifu yelled, though he too was staring in shock at the impossible sight. "He's a corpse! He's not the fourth brother anymore! Now get your head together and defeat him!"

Po fought to restart his respiratory system. He slowly nodded and narrowed his eyes.

"Get my dad inside, Shifu."

"Alright. Be careful.” Shifu grabbed the unconscious Qiang’s arm and dragged him inside the
building.

Po looked back for a second to watch them go. He turned his head back to the direction in front of him and saw the large blade swinging towards him.

"GAH!"

Po leapt to the side as the blade sank twenty inches into the ground where he had been standing a millisecond before.

The panda rolled to his feet, paused for a second to take a deep breath, then leapt into the air as high as he could. The round house kick he delivered to the helmeted head barely made it jerk.

Po landed back on the ground as the undead corpse yanked the blade from the ground as if it was butter then swung and Po again.

Po leapt backwards as the blade struck the ground again, this time obliterating Mr. Ping's noodle cart. He braced his legs to attempt another high kick, but instead ended up leaping sideways as the blade lunged at him horizontally, slicing through a corner of the house.

Blinking rainwater out his eyes, Po slipped on the wet grass and fell on his back.

He rolled to the side as the blade swung at him in a wide arc, tearing into the dirt as Po scrambled to his feet.

Soaked and scared, Po raised the Sword of Heroes, just as the flat of the blade struck his side and slammed him into the side of the building, knocking the weapon from his hands.

Po slid to the wet ground, his shoulder screaming in pain from the blow.

"Owww…" He murmured. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the undead fourth brother raise his sword.

_Holy CRAP!_

Po lifted his lower half into the air, rolling backwards and barely avoiding the blow. He felt a slight pull as the sharp edge shaved off the fur on his left elbow.

Po rolled to his feet, quickly assessing his options.

He had lost the sword.

The corpse was too strong and big for panda style.

He couldn't see any ears to use princess style on.

So Po ran.

He sprinted through the rain filled wide grassy path that stretched through the panda village, and heard a series of splashing thuds as the undead corpse came after him.

As he ran, Po looked back, just in time to see the corpse swing at him. He ducked mid-run, folding his body nearly in half as the blade came at him.

He actually felt the air rush and the rain temporarily stop as the blade swung several inches above his back.
Po straightened, kept running.

The undead corpse ran after him, mere feet behind.

Po straightened, seconds later ducking again as the blade swung at him, going over his back and again missing him by centimeters, instead striking three of the posts of a front porch and bisecting them all in one go.

All the while the undead corpse was rapidly catching up.

This wasn't good.

At this rate, Po would be caught and sliced and diced.

Somehow, someway, he had to get out of the corpse's path.

As he thought this, Po saw that he was running straight for the building at the end of the path. The wall he was facing was a flat wooden surface, no windows or doors whatsoever.

That gave him an idea.

He ducked again as the corpse swung, his back beginning to ache with the constant effort of folding his large belly.

*Come on... almost there...*

Anyone watching would think that Po, as he rushed for the wall, the corpse two meters behind him and still gaining, was about to be cornered.

But no...

"TAHLIA LEAP!"

Po hollered as he reached the wall and kept running. Despite the slippery rain, the momentum carried Po up the vertical surface. Five steps up, Po pushed off and somersaulted over the corpse as it stopped just short of crashing into the wooden wall.

Po landed on the grass with a lot less grace, and quickly backed away as the corpse slowly began to turn, the intense rainwater washing Zanshi's blood from the massive broadsword.

*Okay, I've managed to escape the chase... now what?*

Keeping his head directly facing the corpse as it continued to turn, Po's eyes glanced left and right, searching for a weapon, anything he could use to turn the tables.

His eyes eventually fell on the Sword of Heroes, lying on the wet grass between the panda and his undead opponent.

Po's eyes narrowed.

He glanced from the sword and up at the corpse as it finished its turn and faced him through its emotionless helmet.

There was nothing else for it.

Po took a deep breath, his last thoughts being that he wished that he had a better idea than this...
And ran.

Straight at the corpse.

The corpse started running at him in turn, blade raised.

The distance between them narrowed… Po's paw reached down in mid-run and grasped the sword…

*I need the fire lance… I need the fire lance…*

Just as Po had hoped, the sword disappeared in a flash of green light and morphed into a shorter-than-life lance. Two feet in front of him, the corpse raised his blade high, just as Po fired.

**BLAM!**

Dozens of led pellets exploded into the corpse's chest, sinking through the chest plate and disappearing.

The undead fourth brother froze mid-swing. No blood poured through the pellet holes. Instead, out floated tiny dark specks of what looked like ash.

The corpse swayed, and Po quickly leapt to the side as it fell forward and sent water flying as it crashed to the ground.

The lance turned green then morphed back into a sword.

The only sound was the rain as it continued to pour down on the panda and his fallen opponent.

The rainwater continued to soak his fur as Po gazed silently down at the fourth brother.

It was a while before he spoke, and when he did…

"Okay…" He breathed. "That was… AWESOME!"

He danced on the spot for a few seconds before he remembered his father.

"Dad…"

Po turned away from the corpse and rushed towards the building where Shifu and Qiang had retreated. He passed Zanshi’s corpse as he ran, and felt a momentary twinge of sadness before he stopped at the front porch.

"Master Shifu!" He yelled through the rain. "Master Shifu, I-"

"PO!"

Before Po could turn to see who had shouted, something small and feathery slammed into his back, sending him toppling forward. As Po fell toward the ground, he felt the air rush as something massive soared over his back…

**THUNK.**

"Give me that!"

Po felt the Sword of Heroes being yanked from his grasp.
He turned himself on the ground and sat up.

His eyes widened in amazement when he saw his adoptive father step towards the undead fourth brother, which had gotten up on its knees.

"Take this!"

The sword morphed into a powder keg, already lit and ready to explode.

With a grunt, Mr. Ping flung the keg as far as he could.

It struck the corpse in the middle of the chest and-

KABOOM!

Po gaped as the corpse exploded into hundreds of metal pieces and thousands of bits of ash, which fell and settled on the ground with the rain.

For a moment, no-one spoke.

Then Mr. Ping turned round, ran to his son, and wrapped his wings round his belly as far as he could.

"Dad…" Po whispered, still utterly stunned. "What are you doing here?"

"I saw that thing from the mouth of the cave…" Mr. Ping replied, his voice muffled by Po's soaked fur. "And I couldn't just stand by and do nothing… like before…"

Po stopped his father short by hugging him back.

"Thanks dad." He said, his voice thick with relief and happiness.

"Your welcome." Mr. Ping replied, and hugged him tighter.

Po glanced up to see the enormous broadsword embedded deep in the wall above his head.

"By the way…" Po said once they broke apart so Po could get up off the wet floor. "Have you fixed things with dad number two?"

"Of course son." Mr. Ping replied with an apologetic expression. "I'm sorry I caused such a scene earlier."

"It's okay." Po replied. He put paw on the goose's back and steered him into the front porch, out of the torrential rain. "But I have to know… what the heck was your problem with him?"

"Oh, it's a long story, son." Mr. Ping sighed. "One that begins with-"

Then Mr. Ping saw the mangled noodle cart and started screaming.
Mr. Ping was so distraught over his ruined noodle cart that Shifu hadn't the heart to scold him for destroying the sword by exploding it as a powder keg.

Leaving the red panda to awkwardly comfort his adoptive father, Po walked past the broadsword that the fourth brother had flung at him then entered the house. He found his birth father half-lying, half-sitting on the floor of the living room, leaning against a chair leg, his shoulder heavily bandaged.

As Po approached him, he felt a rush of immense relief when he saw that his father had regain consciousness to an extent, and was staring at the opposite wall with an odd expression.

"Po…" He asked. "Why is a giant sword impaling my living room?"

Po followed his gaze and stifled a laugh when he saw the tip of the large sword protruding from the plain wooden surface. He turned back to his father and sat down beside him.

"How are you feeling?" He asked.

"Wound still hurts like hell…" Qiang replied. "Other than that, I feel like a million yuan."

Po chuckled. Then his eyes narrowed.

"That was real stupid, going after Zanshi." Po said sternly. "He could have killed you. He would have."

"I would have happily died if it meant that I could prevent history from repeating itself." Qiang replied without looking at the younger panda.

There was no way to answer that, so Po changed the subject.

"Just so you know, Zanshi's dead."

"Did you kill him?"

"Nah. A giant zombie did the job for me."

"A what?"

Qiang sat up a little higher, wincing with the effort. Po put a paw on his uninjured shoulder and set him back against the chair leg.

"It's a long story." Said Po. "One that ends with dad number one saving my life and destroying the zombie for me."

"Oh."

"Speaking of which, I hear that you and dad number one patched things up." Po grinned. "Glad to know that."

"I was hoping you would be." Qiang replied with a slightly guilty expression. "I'm sorry I caused such a scene."
"It's okay. All I'm concerned about now is you getting better."

Po gestured to Qiang's injured shoulder.

"The same one that got shot twenty five years ago..." Qiang muttered with a scowl. "... total bummer."

"Yeah..." Po laughed a little. "Let's get you upstairs and in bed. You need to rest."

"Wait, what about the other bandits?" Qiang asked worriedly as Po made to help him up from the floor. "They're still out there!"

"Don't worry about them." Po grinned again as he supported his father and helped him up the stairs. "The awesomely bodacious Furious Five are on the case!"

When Po emerged from the house five minutes later, a huge smile exploded across his face when he found Tigress, Monkey, Crane, Viper and Mantis standing outside, forty four bound crocodiles sitting behind then looking very sour. Po laughed when he saw Lidong among them, looking very disgruntled and sporting a huge bump on his head.

"Guys!" Po rushed forward to greet his friends. "You did it!"

"Of course we did." Mantis grinned. "After all we are, in your own words, totally awesome!"

"Is this all of them?" Po asked.

"Yep." Monkey replied. "What about Zanshi? Did you take him down?"

"Oh, he got taken down..." Po's smile fell when he saw Zanshi's body out to corner of his eye. "Just not by me."

Monkey would have given a cheer of praise, but then he noticed Po's expression.

"S'up?"

"You're not going to believe this..." Po replied, and then he told them all about how the undead fourth brother came out of nowhere, killed Zanshi, and battled Po until it got blown up by none other than Mr. Ping, who was still sniffing on the front porch with Shifu still trying to soothe him. By the time he was finished, the Furious Five looked like they had all received slaps to the face.

"You're kidding..." Mantis started to laugh. "You're kidding about the undead fourth brother from the legend, right?"

"Oh, he's certainly not joking." Shifu replied. "I saw it for myself."

"Holy crap..." Crane gaped when he saw the black mark on the ground where the powder keg had blown the corpse to bits.

"Woah, Crane, it's not like you to curse like-" Viper gasped as her burn sent another wave of pain through her body.

"Viper?" Crane frowned. "We'd better hurry up and get that burn bandaged."

"There's a roll of them in the living room." Said Shifu.

Crane nodded in thanks and led Viper inside.
"What do we do with these guys?" Tigress asked.

"We'll have to let them go." Shifu spoke with a small sigh. "It would be foolish to attempt to transport them all the way out these mountains. But first..." He started smiling sinisterly at this point. "Monkey, Mantis, I want you to take them into the forest and explain to them exactly what will happen if they threaten this village again."

"Yes, Master." Monkey and Mantis saluted him, and then with equally sinister grins led the forty four crocs into the forest.

"Tigress, go inside and take care of Viper." Shifu continued to speak. "Also, tell Crane to return to the villagers' hiding place and inform them that it is now safe."

"Yes, Master." Tigress replied and disappeared into the house. A moment later, Crane emerged, flapped his wings and took off without a word.

"What about me, Master Shifu?" Po asked.

"If you may, please take over the comforting of Mr. Ping." Shifu gestured to the goose, who was still sitting on the top step in tears. "As for myself, I will deal with that."

Po felt a twang in his chest when he realized that Shifu meant Zanshi.

In the hour that followed, Po managed to succeed where Shifu failed and ceased Mr. Ping's tears with the assurance that they would replace the cart the minute they returned to the Valley of Peace. Meanwhile, Tigress finished treating and bandaging Viper's burn then went upstairs to check on Qiang. He was stable and snoozing peacefully in bed, the loss of blood having tired him greatly, so Tigress left the building to check up on what the others were doing. At the same time, Monkey and Mantis emerged from the forest.

"We've just let them go." Monkey replied with a huge, evil grin. "And I doubt that they'll be bothering this village again."

"Very good." Tigress replied. "I think you should have that cut taken care of."

"You're right." Monkey touched the cut on his chest. "There are bandages in the house, right?"

"Yes, in the living room. Viper will tell you exactly where they are."

"Okay. Thanks."

Tigress turned to Mantis as Monkey disappeared into the house.

"So has everything been taken care of?" she asked.

"Oh yeah." Mantis replied. "Zanshi's been defeated, and his goons have been sent on their way. Looks like it's all over."

"Good." Tigress replied with a small smile of satisfaction. "All the same, we should keep an eye out, just in case."

"Okay."

And so Mantis and Tigress sat on the front porch next to Po and Mr. Ping for the rest of the hour. Ten minutes after they sat down, Master Shifu returned from his grim task.
"I've disposed of Zanshi's body." He said. "Let's not say anymore."

Po, Mr. Ping, Tigress and Mantis nodded solemnly.

By the time Crane returned with a large group of relieved pandas in tow, the darkness in the sky had begun to fade, and the horizon turned orange as dawn approached.

The next half hour consisted of the panda villagers expressing their immense gratitude towards the warriors for protecting their village and saving their lives, as well as insisting that they did not hold Po and his friends in any way responsible for the incident. Po, Shifu and the Five expressed apologies all the same, and humbly (reluctantly in Po's case) declined the village's gifts of food.

During the celebration that followed, Tigress felt a gentle tug on her pants leg. She looked down and smiled warmly when she saw little Su looking up at her.

"Hello, little one." Tigress knelt down so she wasn't towering over the child.

"Er… um…" Su hesitated. "Is Mr. Qiang okay?"

"He was injured during the battle." Tigress replied honestly. "Nothing serious. Rest assured he will make a full recovery."

"Oh, good." Su sighed in relief.

"By the way, I believe you were looking for this."

Su gasped with joy as Tigress procured the golden coin from her vest and placed it in her small paws.

"Oh thank you, missus Tigress!" She giggled with delight and hugged her beloved coin. "Why is there a dent in it?"

"One of the bad guys attacked me with a spiked ball on a rope, so I used the coin to redirect it into his face."

"Oh…" Su's eyes widened momentarily. Then she shrugged. "Okay."

Tigress smirked at the little girl's reaction, and glanced up momentarily at Po, who was conversing with Mr. Ping and Qiang, who upon learning that his people had returned safe and sound had found the strength to come outside, some distance away. She continued to smirk as she watched Po laugh loudly at something Qiang said, then suddenly hugged them both at the same time.

"Mister Po is really cool, isn't he?" Su asked. "He defeated a giant monster all by himself."

"Not by himself, Su." Tigress replied. "But you're right. Aside from his quirks, he is pretty cool. Don't tell him I said that."

"Okay.

As Tigress watched them, Ming unexpectedly appeared. She walked up to Po and tapped him on his shoulder. Po turned round, grinned widely when he saw her, then pulled her into a huge hug.

The smirk vanished from Tigress's face.

Her eyes widened slightly and her jaw slackened.
Her heart ached and her breath caught in her throat.

She had felt the pain in her chest before; many years ago, on the adoption day after Tigress finally succeeded in controlling her strength and temper, only to sadly discover that the adults still feared her.

She knew what it meant, but didn't understand why she felt it now.

Su looked up from her coin and frowned when she saw Tigress's expression.

"Missus Tigress? Are you okay?"

"Huh?" Tigress blinked and looked down at the child. "Oh, it's nothing. I'm just thinking."

"About what?"

Shifu suddenly made his appearance at that very moment.

"What are you thinking about?" He asked.

"Nothing." Tigress said quickly. "Su, where are your parents?"

"I don't know. I wanted to find you to know about Mister Qiang." Su replied.

"I appreciate that you're worried about your teacher, but you shouldn't just run off without your parents knowing." Tigress spoke gently. "Shifu, could you stay with her while I find her parents?"

"Of course. It's a little crowded here, so I'll take her to her house."

Tigress nodded and disappeared into the crowd, keeping her distance from Po and Ming.

"Come, my dear." Shifu took Su's tiny paw into his own and led her away from the crowd.

"I'm sorry for running off." Su replied, her eyes cast down in shame as they walked. "I don't do that a lot."

"I know. And it's alright." Shifu replied.

They reached Su's house, which was actually within sight of the crowd, and started up the front steps.

"Ah!"

Su tripped on the top step. As Shifu caught her before she hid the floor, the coin flew from her paws and disappeared through the open door.

"Oh no!" Su wailed. "I did it again, I'm so stupid!"

"You're not stupid, Su." Shifu replied gently as he helped her up. "It was an accident. We've all done it."

"But I do this all the time!" Salty tears started to stream down Su's small face.

"So does the Dragon Warrior." Shifu smiled reassuringly.

"That does it!" Su's jaw suddenly set, even as her tears continued to fall. "I tired of making dumb mistake!"
"Su…"

"From now on, I'm gonna better myself no matter what!"

Before Shifu could stop her, Su ran into the house.

He felt a jolt of alarm as clattering ensued.

"Su?!"

Shifu rushed inside… and blinked when he saw the child ten feet above the ground, reached for the coin which had ended up on a tall shelf.

"Su?" He asked again.

"In a minute, Master Shifu!" Su said. "I've almost got it!"

"Su…" Shifu stepped forward, in disbelief at what he was seeing. "Look at you…"

"Yeah, I know." Su sighed as her tiny fingers brushed the edge of the coin. "I'm a loser."

"No, no!" Shifu exclaimed. "Look at what you're doing!"

Su blinked in confusion.

"I'm getting my coin back." She replied. "That's what I'm doing!"

To her surprise, a knowing smile began to grow on Shifu's face.

"Su… do you realize that what you're doing right now is what we in the kung fu field call a 'perfect split'?" The red panda asked.

Su frowned and looked down at her legs, which were horizontally propped high above the ground.

"A perfect split?" She asked, perplexed.

"Su…" Shifu took another step forward. "Do you understand the meaning of kung fu?"

"Uh… yeah." Su replied. "Mister Po said that it means 'excellence of self'."

"Exactly."
"So…" Su spoke slowly to make sure Shifu was saying what she hoped he was saying. "If I come with you to the Jade Palace and start learning kung fu… I will stop being a loser?"

"You are not a loser, Su." Shifu said with a small smile of reassurance. "And I will keep saying that until you accept it. What I am saying is that kung fu not only teaches you how to fight, but also grace, discipline, confidence and balance. With kung fu, you will gain new skills which will increase your self confidence, and perhaps cure you of your clumsiness."

"Really?" Little Su's sapphire eyes lit up with hope.

"Yes." Shifu's smile widened.

"Yes!" Su cried. "Yes, I wanna go with you! I wanna learn kung fu!"

"Easy, my child." Shifu's smile faded. "You are still a young girl, and so whether or not you come with us will have to be determined by your parents."

"Oh…" Su said in a tiny voice. She wrung her small paws.

"But don't be too disappointed if they say no." Shifu replied. "I and my students will be more than happy to teach you the basics before we return to the Valley of Peace."

"Yay!" Su nearly leapt into the air with joy, and Shifu couldn't help but beam at her happiness.

The more he observed her, the more Shifu saw both Po and Tigress inside the child. On one side, she had Po's clumsiness, sweetness, and a strong determination to do her best. On the other, she had Tigress's intelligence, higher than usual for a girl her age, and sadly a strong belief that she was someone utterly worthless.

Shifu's thoughts were interrupted by two adult pandas entering through the door.

"Ah there you are, Su." Su's mother knelt down and hugged her daughter. "Master Tigress told us where you were."

"Please do not run off like that again." Pong said, though he too was smiling.

"I'm sorry, mummy." Su replied. "I won't do it again."

"Su…" Shifu spoke quietly. "Could you try retrieving the coin from the shelf again?"

The golden coin was still sitting on the top shelf, temporarily abandoned by Su when Shifu had asked her to come down.

"Okay."

Su's parents watched in pure amazement as Su effortlessly scaled the shelves, again performed her perfect split at the very top, retrieved the coin, then scaled back down again. Shifu stifled a chuckle as he remembered Po's less than graceful landing.

"Su…" Pong stared at Su as she walked back to her parents, triumphantly holding her coin. "That was amazing!"
"How on earth did you do that?" Her mother exclaimed.

"As you can see, Su has an unconscious ability to perform kung fu feats with the right motivation. I discovered this only a few minutes ago." Shifu spoke. "The Dragon Warrior was the same."

"Mummy, Master Shifu says that if I go with them back to the Jade Palace, I can learn kung fu and stop being clumsy!" Su cried excitedly.

Pong and his wife suddenly looked uncertain.

"But…” Pong paused. "Isn't that nearly on the far side of China?"

"I understand that this is a big decision." Shifu spoke calmly. "And Su is just a young girl. I will not take her without your full consent."

Su's parents didn't answer.

"Let me assure you that if you consent, Su will be well cared for and treated fairly." Shifu went on. "And holidays are allowed for young children, so you can see her regularly. I will give you time to think about this."

Shifu walked past the three pandas and disappeared through the front door.

"I don't know…” Su's mother said. "It's such a long distance…”

"Please, mummy, I really wanna go!" Su gripped her mother's skirt and stared up at her with pleading eyes. "I wanna be a kung fu kicker!"

"Su…” Pong started.

"I don't wanna be a loser any more!" Su's eyes brimmed with tears as dread swirled inside her. "I wanna be worthy of being your daughter!"

Pong and his wife stared in shock at what their child had just said. Did their beloved Su really think that she was unworthy of having them as parents?

"I…” Su forced herself to calm down. "I just wanna stop falling down all the time. Please… please let me go!"

Pong and his wife looked at each other for a long time, both thinking the same thing.

It was a very long distance between the Valley of Peace and their isolated village, and their little girl was so young… but then they remembered the many times when Su would tear up whenever she fell over or accidentally broke something, the many times when she would isolate herself from the other children because she was afraid of causing an accident and making them hate her.

Their constant reassurances and Su's cooking lessons weren't enough.

As much as her parents hated to admit it… she needed this.

"Su…” Pong knelt down. "Do you really, really want this?"

"Of course, daddy." Su replied, her eyes still shining.

"If we say yes…” Su's mother knelt down beside her husband. "Will you promise to be a good girl?"
"I promise, mommy."

Her parents simultaneously took a deep breath.

"Alright then…" Pong said. "You can go."

Su squealed in delight and hugged her parents one at a time before rushing out the house and falling down the porch steps.

"Master Shifu!" Su cried as she picked herself up from her latest tumble. "Master Shifu! Mommy and daddy said I can go!"

Her smile flickered when she realized that Shifu had been in the middle of conversing with his students, sans missus Tigress. And all five of them had just heard her outburst.

She turned bright red as six pairs of eyes turned to look at her.

"Master Shifu, what's she talking about?" Po asked out of genuine curiosity.

"Some time ago, I learned that young Su has a hidden knack for kung fu." Shifu explained with a smile. "I offered her a chance to train at the Jade Palace, and it appears that her parents have given their consent."

"Woah, that's awesome!" Po grinned widely and knelt down before Su. "Su, you're gonna love it at the Jade Palace. They have this awesome dummy that kids your age can train with, and you can use it to prop the door open if it gets hot!"

Su giggled a little. Viper slithered up next to Po, the green grass staining her bandage a darker shade than her scaled skin, and flashed a warm motherly smile at the girl.

"I look forward to getting to know you, Su." She spoke.

"If you like, Su, you can try one of my almond cookies when we get there." Monkey spoke up with similar (though much less motherly) smile.

"Hey, how come she gets almond cookies?" Po pouted. "You're a big greedy guts who steals my cookies thrice a week, and she's a little six year old girl who's cute beyond all reason." Monkey replied. "No contest, dude."

"Mister Qiang taught me how to make almond cookies." Su replied shyly. "Would you like to try some?"

"We'd love to." Crane said.

Su's red cheeks grew hotter. She wasn't even at the Jade Palace yet, but these grown ups were already making her feel welcome.

As she looked up at Crane, she spotted Mantis perched on top of the avian's rice hat.

"Whassup?" He asked nicely when he noticed the child looking up at him with wonder.

"Oh um…" Su hesitated. "I was just thinking that Mister Po was right when he said that you're the same size as your action figure."

Po gulped as the insect scowled in his direction.
The panda was only saved from a beating when Qiang, Mr. Ping and Ming made their appearance at that very moment.

"Hey, son." Qiang grinned. "Have you got those cuts sorted out yet?"

Po glanced at the cuts on his shoulder and chest.

"Nah, not yet." He sighed.

"I'll fix them up for you." Ming said kindly. Po grinned in her direction. "You used up a lot of bandages on Monkey and Viper, but I should have just enough left for your wounds."

"Okay."

Po allowed Ming to lead him up the village path and into the living room in Qiang's house.

"Sit down and take off the shirt while I get some water and a cloth." Ming said.

Po did as he was told while Ming grabbed a bucket.

A minute later, Ming sat in front of the male panda, dipped a clean cloth in some of the liquid then squeezed some of it out.

"Hold still." Ming said as she raised the wet cloth to the cut of Po's chest. "This might sting a little…"

"Why would it-" Po gasped in pain as the cloth made contact and a terrible stinging pain ensued.

"Sorry." Ming sighed. "I changed my mind and got some alcohol instead. Those cuts look like they need disinfecting."

"Oh, okay." Po clenched his teeth as Ming continued to gently dab at the cut before moving on to the one on his shoulder. Once the disinfecting was finished, she bandaged both injuries and allowed Po to put his shirt back on.

"That was the last of my bandages." Ming said. "You guys will have to lay off the fighting and training until I've made some more."

"Sure, okay." Po said. "Thanks Ming."

"You're welcome."

"Hey, ugh, Ming…" Po hesitated. "Um… I was wondering if…"

He suddenly heard noises behind the closed door. He caught the excited tone in Mr. Ping's voice, the gruff voice of Qiang, and the slightly annoyed voice of an aged red panda.

"Oh my goodness, this is it!" Mr. Ping whispered, unaware that his son was listening.

"Hush!" Qiang whispered back. "They'll hear you!"

"I understand your excitement, but could you two please move away from the door?" It sounded like Shifu at least wanted to give Po some privacy.

Po sighed. He couldn't bring himself to drive away his loving parents, so he merely rolled his eyes in exasperation and turned back to Ming, who was chuckling sweetly.
"Déjà vu, eh Po?" She said.

"Anyway…" Po fought to keep the blood from rushing to his cheeks, with little success. "You really enjoyed last night, didn't you?"

"Of course I did." Ming replied. "Aside from the bandit attack, it was one of the most wonderful nights of my life."

"Oh, great…" Po breathed a sigh of relief. "Well… I was just wondering… if you wanted to… would you like to have another dinner before me and the others go back to the Valley of Peace?"

Ming blinked a few times before smiling widely.

"I would love to, Po…" She said. Her smile faltered. "But I've been thinking a lot… and I'm afraid I'm going to have to decline."

It was as if doomsday had set in and destroyed the earth in fire, water and rock monsters.

Po's jaw dropped and his heart plummeted to his stomach.

Moans of dismay could be heard behind the door.

"Wh-what?" Po stammered. "Why not?"

"Yes, exactly? Why not?" Mr. Ping's voice cried.

"Is it because of what happened with Lidong?" Po exclaimed. "Because contrary to popular belief, that does not happen often to hero's girlfriends, I swear! My dad only got taken hostage three times in the two and a half years I've been Dragon Warrior!"

"That's not it, Po…"

"Is it because you're worried that Master Shifu would forbid me being in a relationship?!"

"Oh no, Shifu would never do that!" Qiang cried.

Behind the door, Mr. Ping and Qiang suddenly rounded on Shifu with fierce expressions.

"Right?" They both asked.

"O-Of course not!" Shifu said quickly. "I would never stoop so low as to forbid romantic relationships!"

Back inside the living room, Po opened his mouth to cry out another possibility.

"Po, please calm down!" Ming exclaimed.

Po obediently stopped freaking out.

"Po, it's not because of what happened with that bandit…” Ming said gently. "And it's not because I'm worried about our relationship being forbidden…” The small smile that so reminded Po of his mother returned to her lips. "I would love to go out with you again… but thing is… I don't want to… get in the way."

Po blinked in surprise.

"Huh?" He asked in confusion.
"Huh?" Qiang, Mr. Ping and Shifu asked simultaneously from behind the door.

"The fact is, she is a really nice girl, and I like her." Ming said. "And I think you like her too." Po was very quiet as he tried to process what the female giant panda was saying.

"You will be pleased to know that I believe she likes you in return." Ming went on. "And it is for this reason that I will happily step aside."

No way… is she saying what I think she's…

Ming stepped forward and put a paw on the stunned Po's uncut shoulder.

"Good luck with her, Po."

She grabbed her empty bandage box and disappeared up the stairs, leaving Po sitting in complete silence in the living room.

"Who in the world was she talking about?" Mr. Ping asked from behind the door.
When Ming returned after putting her first aid box back in her bedroom, she kindly offered to wash Po's shirt and mend the tears. Po accepted said offer, albeit quietly, and in twenty minutes the green shirt was as good as new. Po then thanked Ming, bade her goodbye, and left the house.

He walked down the porch steps, passed his two fathers who were in the middle of a 'quiet' conversation. Shifu was absent, seemingly having left after tiring of the parents' banter.

"Who was she talking about?" Mr. Ping was asking. "Who is this other girl?"

"Beats me." Qiang replied. "Maybe Po has a secret crush and Ming found out about it. Do you know any women back in the Valley that Po likes to hang out with?"

"I don't think so." The goose said. "There was a young woman called Song that Po met a year and a half ago... but I don't see why Ming could mean her."

"What about Master Tigress and Viper?" Qiang asked. "They're both girls. Maybe Po has developed feelings for one of them!"

"Perhaps..." Mr. Ping stroked his beak in thought. "I've seen Po hanging out with Tigress a lot lately..."

Po walked swiftly past them before they even noticed that he was there.

He walked through the village, which had mostly returned to normal after the bandit incident, passed Monkey and Mantis who were relaying the tale of their exploits within the Temple of Heroes to a very excited group of children, little Su amongst them. He reached the clearing, where he found Viper and Crane admiring a patch of beautiful white flowers. Po smirked a little when he saw that while Viper was marvelling at the spotted petals, Crane was silently marvelling at the snake looking at them.

"Hey, guys." Crane and Viper looked up as the panda approached. "Uhhh... have you guys seen Tigress?"

"Don't know." Viper replied. "We haven't seen her since this morning. Master Shifu may know."

"Yeah, he should be meditating by the small pond." Crane added.

"Don't forget the celebratory dinner tonight!" Viper called as Po ventured into the forest. Sure enough, when he reached the pond Shifu was standing in the middle of the tiny pond, perfectly balanced on his staff.

"Hey, Master Shifu." Po said.

"Yes, Po?" Shifu asked without looking at him.

"Sorry to bother you, but have you seen Tigress?"

"I suppose you need to tell her about the dinner tonight." Shifu replied. "I don't think she knows about it yet. She should be by the pond."

"This pond?"

"No, the larger one about twenty minute's walk from here. In that direction." Shifu pointed. "Be
quick. The dinner begins in two hours."

"Oh, okay. Thanks, Master." Po saluted and walked off.

As Po walked, he wrung his paws, and bit the inside of his cheek as many thoughts ran through his head. Some he immediately dismissed as ridiculous. Some he cringed just by thinking about them. The rest he hoped wouldn't lead to humiliation and the destruction of an awesome friendship.

Ming meant Tigress, I know she did. I mean, why else did I get so angry when that big dumb lizard Lidong threatened her? Why else did I freak out when Tigress nearly drowned in the water chamber? Oh man, why didn't I see this before? I'm so stupid- stop! Cut that out! You're the Dragon Warrior for pete's sake! Just find her, talk to her, see if Ming was right about you liking her. If so, then find out if she likes you back... no biggy! Unless of course, things between us get so awkward that we can't even sleep on opposite sides of the student barracks any more and-

"Ugh!"

Po's thoughts were cut off when he heard a gasp of pain up ahead.

"Tigress?"

When she didn't answer, Po started running.

"Tigress?!"

Oh gods, what if Lidong came back for another rematch? I have to help her, I have to-  

He burst through a pair of bushes, tripped over an exposed root and tumbled head over heels into the small clearing, startling the striped feline sitting against the thick trunk of a tree.

"Po?!" She exclaimed.

"Tigress, are you okay?" Po jumped to his feet. He looked around for any sign of a giant crocodile, but saw none.

"I'm okay, Po." She replied, unsure whether or not she should be annoyed.

"I heard you gasp. You sounded like you were in pain."

"Oh, er... it's nothing!" Tigress said quickly.

Po suddenly spotted the bottle in her left paw before she could hide it.

"What's that?" He asked before noticing that her right paw was oddly shaking, and Tigress was speaking through clenched teeth.

"It's nothing, I told you." Tigress said. Her eyes were narrowed in pain.

Before she could react, Po grabbed the bottle from her paw. He lifted the neck to his nose, and smelled the alcohol.

"Tigress, what is this?" He demanded.

Tigress set her jaw and looked away, clutching her paw.

Po was about to raise his voice when he remembered the other day when he had scolded her for
training herself to harshly, and how badly she reacted to it. He sealed his lips, decided on another approach. Slowly, he sat down beside her next to the tree.

"Tigress, are you hurt?" He asked gently.

"Po, it's nothing." She said again.

"Tigress, you look like you're in a lot of pain." Po replied. "Let me see."

"I'm fine."

"Tigress..." Po sighed. "There's nothing wrong with other people looking out for you. It doesn't make you weak. Let me take a look."

Tigress's eyes flickered in his direction as Po held out a paw.

"Po..."

"Tigress, I'm your friend. Friends help each other. Please let me help you."

For a moment, Tigress didn't move. And then, slowly, hesitantly, she turned back round, and held out her right paw, palm up. Po gently took her paw into his own, looked down, and gaped at the bloody red streaks cutting through her palm and fingers.

"Oh my gods... Tigress, what did this?" He struggled to stay calm.

"I grabbed the rope of the meteor hammer Lidong was swinging at me." Tigress muttered. Po was too focused on her paw to look at her expression. "Stupid thing to do."

"Dang, this looks painful." He whispered. As he looked, he realised that her palm was soaked in alcohol.

"Yes, I was disinfecting it." Tigress said. "It hurts like hell, but it was necessary."

"You know..." Po said slowly, and pulled out his napkin. "You shouldn't just splash it on like this. You can't guarantee that you will cover the whole area in one shot. And one shot by itself is bad enough."

"What do you propose then?" Tigress asked.

"Hang on a sec..." Po grabbed the bottle and poured a little onto the napkin. "This might hurt just a little... try to stay still..."

Tigress gasped as Po gently dabbed at the parts of the rope burns that she had missed. She tried not to cry out as the stinging alcohol seemingly set fire to her already burned paws.

"Why are you going so fast?" She asked after a while.

"So the old sting will dull you to the new." Po replied without looking up. "Trust me, it's better this way. I learned this during my earlier years of falling down stairs."

Tigress merely nodded, and realised that as Po continued to dab, the pain started to become more bearable. The panda really knew what he was doing.

Once he was done, he stuffed the napkin back in his pocket.
"There, that should do it." Po replied. "Darn, I just remembered... Ming's run out of bandages."

"It's okay, I can wait a few days." Tigress replied. She sucked in air though her nose as her rope burns continued to sting. "Until then, I'll just have to-"

R-r-r-riiip!

Tigress whirled round.

She blinked and the blood rushed to her cheeks as Po wrapped his shirt sleeve round her paw. He proceeded to rip off the other one, tear it into smaller strips of green fabric, and wrap each one around her fingers. Though he tied each one tightly, his thick fingers were so nimble, so gentle, that Tigress did not feel an ounce of pain.

"There." Po grinned, his work complete. "Is that better?"

"Uh..." Tigress was lost for words. "Yes. Thank you."

"You can get it treated properly once Ming's made some new bandages."

"Okay."

Then their eyes locked.

Po stared into Tigress's bright golden eyes with their amber cores, and realised for the first time that they were utterly beautiful to behold. Out of his peripheral vision, he took in the other features of her face. The elegant black markings around her eyes that resembled eyeliner, meaning that she would never need the real thing. Her left ear flicking at the slight rustle of a leaf that fell from they tree they were sitting under. Her fur bright as fire. Her stripes black as night. Her dark lips, strongly contrasted against the white of her chin, curled slightly into a small grateful smile.

An hour ago, he had thought that his interest in her was merely because she was so utterly awesome, his favorite of the Furious Five purely because she was the bravest, the boldest, the strongest.

But now he knew better.

"Tigress..." He began but hesitated, unsure how to proceed. "Tigress... I..."

"Oh my gosh..." Tigress's eyes widened as she suddenly spotted something over his shoulder.

Po stopped talking and followed her gaze.

As they had been talking, Po had failed to notice until now that the sun had fully set, and the small clearing was now alive with glowing fireflies. They floated in the air like tiny spectral spirits.

"Woah..." Po suddenly realised where they were. "I brought Ming here last night for our date. Isn't it great?"

"Yes..." Tigress replied quietly, transfixed by the miniscule but wonderful creatures that lit the small clearing. "Speaking of which, have you set up your next date with her yet?"

"Uhhh..." Po hesitated when he saw her badly concealed expression. "Nah. It's not going to happen."

The second he finished the sentence, Po saw pleasant surprise flash across her face.
"Oh, I'm sorry." Tigress said, and Po could tell that she meant it. "What went wrong?"

"Nothing." Po replied. He suddenly realised that he was still holding her injured paw, and let it go. "She said it's because she didn't want to get in the way."

Tigress raised her eyebrows.

"What do you think she meant by that?" She asked.

At that moment, Po seriously considered telling her right there, right now. He actually opened his mouth... and quickly shut it again.

No, now wasn't the time.

He and Ming had only broken up nearly two hours ago. Tigress was injured. It had only been less than a day since the fiasco with Zanshi and the Sword of Heroes. It was too soon.

"No idea." He replied. "Hey, Tigress, I forgot to tell you, the celebratory dinner starts in a little bit. Whaddya say we head back?"

"Sure, why not?" Tigress smiled and got to her feet. "Need a hand?"

"I really, really need to take up fasting." Po sighed as he grabbed Tigress's uninjured paw and let her pull him up.

Po and Tigress returned to the village to find that they had already finished setting up the tables in a circular arrangement in the middle of the clearing. Most of the village population was already seated, a ring of black and white in the clearing, save for the green, gold and brown where Viper, Mantis and Monkey were all seated together.

"Hey, guys!" Mantis called when he saw them approach. "Come sit here, we're almost about to start!"

"Hiya." Po grinned and waved.

"Po, what happened to your sleeves?" Viper asked.

Po's cheeks reddened and his eyes flickered to Tigress's paw. His eyes flickered upwards, and he felt a jolt of surprise when he saw that Tigress was also slightly blushing.

"Are my dads still cooking?" He asked, in an attempt to change topic.

"Yep."

"Okay, I'll go and give them a hand. Tigress, are you coming?"

"No thank you, I'll stay here." The feline replied.

Po nodded and walked off. Tigress sat down on one of the six empty chairs next to her friends.

"What did you do to your paw?" Monkey asked when he noticed.

"I got scratched during my battle with Lidong." Tigress replied casually. "Nothing serious. Where's Crane?"

"Oh, he's helping Qiang and Mr Ping with the cooking." Viper said.
"Really? I didn't know he was a chef."

"He isn't, but he promised me vegetable stir fry." The snake smiled happily.

Tigress fought the urge to roll her eyes, and turned her gaze to the other partakers. She smiled and chuckled when she saw young Su sitting in between her parents, looking much happier than her usual self as she cleaned her dented lucky coin with her napkin. Tigress's eyes moved on after a couple of minutes and fell on Ming, who was sitting on the far side of the other members of the Five.

Ming suddenly looked in her direction, and for a moment their eyes met. They stared at each other for a while before Tigress managed to look away and determinedly focus her attention on the empty plate in front of her. For the five minutes that followed, Tigress struggled to understand why her heart had leaped when Po had told her the unfortunate news. She was so deep in her thoughts that she didn't register Master Shifu's presence when he appeared and sat down.

Sooner than expected, Po, Qiang, Mr. Ping and Crane arrived with carts full of delicacies, much to the delight of the participants. Every dish imaginable had been made for this occasion. After all, a repeat of the catastrophe which destroyed their old home had been averted, so they had every reason to celebrate to the fullest.

Po and his two parents went on to lay every single bowl down on the ring of tables, while Crane headed straight for his friends. He set down a steaming bowl of stir fry in front of a beaming Viper before sitting down.

Po grabbed several more bowls and a handful of chopsticks from a cart and walked over to Shifu and the Five.

"Here's your chopsticks." He said as he set them them in front of each of his friends.

All except Tigress.

"I'm not discriminating against you or anything like that." Po said when he noticed her expression. "You can't handle chopsticks with your paw in that condition."

With that, he set down several bowls in front of her and moved on. At once, Tigress could see that they were all handheld food: rice balls, biscuits, almond cookies (she smacked Monkey's hand when he reached for one), and in the middle, a large bowl of big, bright red juicy apples.

Tigress fought against a smile as she picked up an apple and bit into it.

It was just as ripe and juicy as the apple Po had given her two years ago.

She heard a slight creek as Po sat down next to her, having finally finished handing out the dishes.

"What do you think?" He asked, grinning like a little kid. "Great spread, huh?"

"Yes." Tigress agreed. She looked down at the bowls of specifically chosen food the panda had given her. "Thank you for thinking about me."

"You're welcome. What are friends for?"

He put an arm around her and gave her a one sided hug before reaching for the nearest bowl of bean buns.
As Tigress allowed herself a small chuckle and looked down at the bitten apple she held in her wrapped paw, she didn't notice that Ming had been watching the brief exchange between her and Po.

The panda gazed at her for a while before she looked away with a grin.

She wouldn't regret her decision.

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