



The Cupola and the Chest

An Alexander Finch Adventure

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THE CUPOLA AND THE CHEST

Being an acupuncturist to nobility in nineteenth century Europe had ups and downs or perhaps Dr Alex Lu Zhu thought, its yins and yangs.

He stood at the side of the bed with a near death Countess and surrounded by a grieving husband renowned for his brutality throughout the province. The Count had promised him riches if the Countess was cured but death should she die. Dr Zhu remembered grimly the Chinese curse, "May you live in interesting times".

He began life being christened in England as a newborn Alexander Oscar Finch. He had changed his name after returning from ten years in the Orient studying under some of the most renowned practitioners in China.

Having inherited a modest sum from his merchant father at the age of eighteen had provided him with modest opportunities if he decided to stay in England. He found them all modestly boring and so decided to travel abroad. A compassionate and calculating man with a love for the exotic had led him inevitably along the Silk Roads to China, the source of all mystery and treasure to the western world.

Upon return he had carefully and wisely aligned his fortunes with the well to do in Europe, carefully selecting commissions upon the basis of their wealth, influence and most importantly (using his knowledge of Chinese medicine) the probability of recovery.

Such was his skill that his renown as healer had spread throughout aristocrats and nobility, much to the disgust and hatred of traditional western doctors still more comfortable dispensing lethal doses of heavy metals and toxic salts to their ailing patients. They rejected as equally bad what came to be known as western science and also 2000 years of Chinese empirical medicine.

After a successful delivery of a perfectly healthy baby girl to perfectly healthy mother who happened to be the Crown Princess of Venice netted a tidy sum Zhu had looked forward to a leisurely early Autumn trip back to Calais by land before the European winter began to bite.

Instead on the third night of the trip, where he had shelter at wayside inn, he found himself unceremoniously kidnapped at knife point by henchmen of the provinces robber baron. His wife the Countess was gravely ill after influenza had taken a turn for the worst.

"She may not live your excellency" Zhu had counselled Count Donatello Marco, "her condition is weak and has been weaker by the cupping and bleeding she has received by your physicians."

"Do not tell me something I know already!" cursed Marco. "But what could I do? They told me she was being consumed by heat and that they must bleed that from her. What do I know? They were supposed to be the experts!"

Zhu had heard the same story many times before and smiled grimly. He was always amazed at the arrogance of the western doctors. Bleeding with cups had been brought back to Europe from China in Marco Polo's time. But it had been bastardised by those fool Doctors.

Done correctly, it was a very effective method of draining heat from the body but was to be done sparingly and most importantly by placing the cup on the right acupuncture point and to draining a small amount of blood from a specific channel. But heroic medicine was as addictive to the Western Doctors as laudanum. So instead they drained copious amounts of blood from their patients seriously depleting their blood and damaging what to Chinese physicians was known as vital essence.

“Well, I hardly see how their incompetence is my fault”, Zhu answered as he put on his glasses and rolled up his lace sleeves. “But you give me little choice in the matter of undertaking a search for a cure for you wife’s illness.”

The Count swore an oath under his breath and blew out cheeks in frustration at his captive Doctor. Evilly he looked directly into impassive Doctor’s eyes and reiterated his unpalatable offer. “You both heal my wife and receive the riches it so surely deserves, or if she dies – she shall not walk that path alone!”

With that the Count spun his stout body on his heels and stormed from room, almost colliding with the Countess’s servant and friend, Sara, who nursed the countess.

Countess Donna Marco was febrile and barely conscious as Zhu checked her vitals. He found a weak a thready, barely rooted pulse on the doorstep of death. It would be touch and go. As he examined her she kept moaning and repeating the same thing, “cupola, cupola” over and again.

Zhu glanced at Sara who winced as the countess moaned as she stood on the other side of Donna Marco’s bed and she tenderly stroked the Countess’s hand. “There’s something more here than just a servant’s concern for her mistress”, thought Zhu.



His mind stumbled back through the ages to a time when he had been a student in training at the Shanghai hospital. The head instructor Dr Zhin Yao Wang had kept a watchful eye on his “white barbarian” pupil. Many of his colleagues and even some of his family had expressed doubts about divulging what was considered trade secrets to anyone outside their circle of trust, much less than one from another empire that had caused so much heartache to people of China. Wang had taken a more considered approach, treating the foreigner firmly yet fairly. He had been thoroughly impressed with the student’s attention to detail, commitment to the healing arts and astounded at his heroic battle to learn the Chinese language. The foreign student could now be trusted to prepare herbal formulas for patients in the hospital.

He was curious to know this “barbarian’s story. “When you have finished your shift at the dispensary, meet me at the staff to the hospital entrance”, he said. “I have need of an assistant for a very important patient, the Governor of the Port of Shanghai. See to it that you are not late.”

For Finch, it'd had been a long a tiring day at the Shanghai hospital doing the menial things a student must do if they are to ever hope to achieve the respect and counsel of their teachers. However Finch was communicated his consent and made sure he finished on time.

Never had Dr Wang showed him any degree of interest outside his duties as a student. As a foreigner he often felt left out merely due to his failure to understand the subtleties of the foreign culture. Having Dr Wang request his presence for such an assignment was from his perspective a significant milestone.

An empty rickshaw was waiting at the entrance. Fortunately for him, Dr Wang had not arrived so he had the luxury of examining the rickshaw and its driver in detail. The ornate calligraphy and picture on the side of the carriage was an exquisite design, with what appeared to be a golden dragon emblazoned upon a jet black flag flanked by two winged lizards. The driver wore a spotless silk black uniform with golden cuffs and the same dragon embroidered on his back.

Dr Wang arrived with a small sack that he promptly handed over to Finch with cursory nod. They climbed aboard the and proceeded down the paved road toward the harbour.

Dr Wang sat for several minutes then abruptly turned to Finch asked, "You speak Chinese like a foreigner and yet you know our written language, essential for our herbal formulas extremely well. How is this possible?"

Finch wiped a fly from his brow and replied, "I have my father's business to thank for that, Dr Wang. He was a merchant that imported porcelain from China directly and his right-hand man was Lou Pou, a Chinese refugee from the civil strife that occurred here early this century. Father had a passionate belief that our family was destined to become a trading dynasty, although it didn't quite work out that way, thanks to a certain nobleman. My father held the key to both our family's future was for us to attempt a fusion of the Orient and Occidental world. He insisted that I must be taught Chinese writing and reading by Lou Pou."

"A fusion of west and east eh?" remarked Dr Wang, "there are many in both empires that would seek that harmony but they are far more outnumbered by those that would preserve the old ways that have endured for ages. Perhaps your father was right but ahead of his time?"

"That's what I like to believe, Dr Wang" Finch nodded wistfully, "That's what I believe."

The Doctor and his pupil approached the largest residence near the port, that of the Governor. A huge stone wall divided the house itself from the bustling port traffic of carts laden with good set for elsewhere around the globe. Dr Wang again turned to Finch and said, "I have asked you here for a simple reason but there are some things I command you to do that you may find unusual."

Finch's eyebrows raised in expectant curiosity as he fingered the ring on his finger, an heirloom from his father, "Certainly Dr Wang".

"When we enter this residence, I will introduce you but after that time, I want you to behave as if I was the student and you were the master. You will pretend to have no

knowledge of Chinese and will address your questions to the patient through me and I will translate, you will nod and grunt like Dr Tsao does when he takes you students on rounds through the hospital and point to my herbs and acupuncture needles as he does also.”

Finch looked at Dr Wang for any smile. Dr Tsao had a fearsome reputation for being an angry, short tempered teacher. Although clinically renowned for his skill he was disliked by patients and students alike for his rude manner. “Really Dr Wang? I’m not sure I could treat you with such disrespect. I mean, in such a manner.”

Dr Wang remained inscrutable and replied, “For this function and this function only I have asked you to come student Finch. Make sure you do it well.”

“Very well, Dr Wang, “Finch wryly smiled, “Dr Tsao I shall be.”

Finch, it seemed, had a natural talent for acting. He embraced the role with alacrity.

Functionaries met and transported the learned doctors through the lavish residence to the chambers of Master Cheo Pai, governor of the ports who lay on his bed wracked in pain, moaning fitfully. Tapping his foot and grunting Finch commanded the space, pretending to ask pertinent and penetrating questions, whilst Dr Wang pretended to translate, asked his own questions and then explained to Finch what he observed. Dr Wang prompted Finch to direct him to examine the patient first then harrumphing with the observations Dr Wang found.

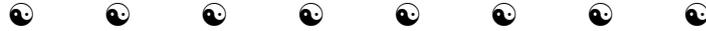
Pai became quieter the longer this charade continued. By the time Finch had pointed to various points on Pai to be needled extracted herbs from the bag and given to Wang to prepare, Pai was lying motionless resting, still in pain, but visibly relieved. Finch noticed that although some of the bags contained normal powdered herbs Wang muttered to the Pai “white barbarian medicine” to which Pai nodded enthusiastically.

With the decoction drunk and Pai settled Wang and Finch left the residence with instructions to Pai’s major domo that although there would be some incidents of pain Pai was to be reassured that this is what Finch expected and was essential if the patient was to recover. The major domo assured Finch through Wang that this would occur and that Pai would keep drinking the white barbarian medicine until Pai had urine had gravel in it, which was also a passing phase and to be expected.

Once they had left the gates of the residence Finch turned to Wang and said, “Master Pai case was simple and straight forward turbid phlegm with qi stagnation in the Bladder, what the west knows as Kidney stones. We gave him a standard course of treatment that works well....why did we need to pretend I knew more than you?”

Wang smiled, “You did well in there Finch, you may have missed your calling as an actor. Pai has travelled much and seen the outer world. He believes that all Chinese traditions are superstition and that we should fully embrace the western way of doing things using their “science”. But more than that his condition was of the Kidney/Urinary Bladder the organ most affected by fear. Since he had no faith in Chinese medicine and refused all treatment the only proper course was first to treat his fear, by establishing his faith in you which we

did by establishing you as an arrogant, know it all western Doctor. This then opened the pathway for him to be treated using the herbs and acupuncture we know to be effective in assisting the passage of small kidney stones and thus healing our patient.



Zhu smiled at the memory of his first real lesson in healing by Dr Wang and then turned towards Sara and asked her, “What does she mean ‘cupola’?”

Sara blanched, her eyes looking down at her feet. “I’m not sure what she means Dr Zhuit could be.....it just could be the fever”

It was evident that Sara knew more than she wanted to say, something that strangers should not know. “What about the Count? Would he know, I’m sure it must be important, I will call for him to return and ask him what he knows of the cupola and the Countess.”

“No!” Sara shrieked and clenched a small locket or key that hung around her neck, “that would be disastrous! The master would be furious.”

“Then tell me Sara”, Zhu persisted, “What does it mean? It may well help your Countess survive her illness if I understand”

Sara’s shoulders sagged and her head, “Very well but this is not discussed by anyone. The Countess found her and the Count’s only son there, five years ago in the cupola of Saint Bernando’s, our church. He had hung himself there.”

“Then I must see this cupola for myself”, thought Zhu. But first I need to do what I can for this Countess to replenish the Yin and Blood taken from her and subdue the heat that consumes more.

After needling the Countess and supplying Sara with Chinese herbs and explaining how they were to be administered Zhu asked to speak to the Count again.

“How is she? The Count demanded, “She looks no better.”

Zhu weighed his words carefully. He needed to get to the cupola without arousing the Count’s suspicions. “I have done what I can for her, but it takes time for the body to recover from this level of deficiency. Meanwhile there is a western herb, St John’s Wort that may be available that I want for the Countess. Normally monastic orders cultivate and use this herb.”

“But the nearest to us is two days’ travel” interjected the Count. “If you think I’ll let you leave here then I fear your more stupid than Punchinello!

“That will not be necessary Count,” Zhu assured. “Most orders share these herbs with the local churches in times of need. Chances are that one of the faithful from the church will know of this herb. All I need is to talk to the local priest to identify who that might be.”

“Very well,” The Count relented. “But I will send two armed guards with you as protection, of course. Some of my locals can be quite aggressive towards strangers, nor would I have you get any ideas of fleeing.”

Unhappy with the guards, but resigned to their company, Zhu made his way to the local church in search of the priest. The town, set high amongst the hilltop still for the large part confined itself to behind the perimeters of the natural cliff top and wall that had protected the townsfolk from bandits and armies throughout the centuries. Although only early autumn, the mountains meant there was still a chill in the wind as it blew some early leaves of the trees into the cobbled streets. It was not far from the Count’s residence to church and in other circumstances it would have been a pleasant stroll on a Sunday afternoon. Church had finished and the most of the townsfolk had gathered to swap stories of the week before. The Youngers gathered modestly together in small groups, exchanging glances, giggles and smiles towards those that looked pretty or handsome or daring whilst pretending to enjoy the performers that filled the piazza with music to dispel the chill in the air.

With his two minders Zhu made his way across the piazza toward the church of Saint Bernando. He cut a sharp contrast to most in the square as he strode, his walking cane almost assuming a life of his own as it led his way through the crowds. His elegant travelling clothes that he had not changed since arriving in Monteroggerio were tailor made in Milan. Identified him as a visitor and heads turned as he made his way to the vestry beside the cathedral where Father Aleippo rested after mass and Sunday roast, in that order. Never do mass on full stomach for hunger mirrors the soul for the yearning of the divine he maintained.

At the entrance the priest’s housekeeper opened the door and bid them to meet the Priest in the cathedral to which he would Zhu shortly. Zhu turned to the guards and said, “This is the house of god, there is but one entrance for mere mortals such as you and I. There is no point you entering if you do not wish to.”

Both guards looked at each uncertainly. The older guard had no enthusiasm for church as he had not paid his tithe this year for his family and had no desire to explain his negligence to the Father. The other younger guard had far more of eye for the girls dressed in their Sunday finest than the inside of church he had visited each week since he was born. The older one nodded to Zhu, “Alright Dr, we will stand at the entrance to cathedral, but make sure you are our plain sight all the time.”

Dr Zhu entered the Church and proceeded toward the altar, admiring iconography against the side walls. Some of the art seemed recent but more was probably done during the time of renaissance judging by pigments used and stories they told. Of special interest was the small altar to the side, that looked very recent in construction and artwork, featuring a scene from the Old Testament celebrating the return of the prodigal son.

Dr Zhu’s silent meditations were broken by the swishing footsteps of Father Aleippo and moments later scattered to the winds by his deep voice. “I am relieved to find you of

evidently good Christian origin here for my servant had told me a Doctor of Oriental name, a heathen I feared had entered my church. Welcome Sir.”

Dr Zhu turned to Father Aleippo and bowed, somewhat ambiguously with hands clasped together and said “There are many Christian churches in the orient Father. Hence there are many of oriental origin that hold Jesus Christ of Nazareth as their saviour. Surely they would be welcome in your church?”

Father Aleippo smiled ruefully and shrugged with both arms, “To be sure Jesus would have the luxury to welcome all, unbeliever and believer equally but I on the other hand have a congregation that would just as soon turn into a mob as wolves as a pack of lambs, not to mention a Vatican that takes a dim view of collaborating with competitors for the souls of for Holy Catholic Church. Welcome to our church Doctor. What brings you here today” The priest extended his hand and the two men shook hands.

Father Aleippo had been in Saint Bernando for two years. This was his first posting after completing time as an assistant to another priest at place near Rome. His family were wealthy and devout parishioners who lived in Venice and when the opportunity arose he could still meet his parents, a rarity for many Priests scattered throughout the globe. He enjoyed his calling although the lack of experience sometimes showed in his dealings with others where a wiser tongue might hold its counsel.

“Father, I’ve come for information that may help the Countess who is gravely ill. I believe there is something to do with her son’s death in that may be of use to me in treating her.”

Father Aleippo’s face clouded, “Ah Giovanni Marco, a dark spot to be sure, although before my time here mind you. I can tell you what I know but you may be better to talk to my housekeeper, Maria Lenekia, she has looked after the cleaning of the church since before that time. However tell me how do you think this will help your patient, I fail to see a connection to her malady?”

“The connection, if there be one Father, at this time is unclear. My training teaches that both that strong emotions can affect the functioning of a number what we call meridians of what we call zhang-fu organs in various combinations.....since the Countess moans “Cupola” which I assume relates to the death of her son, I assume there is an emotional component affecting the ability of her body to heal itself. But because she is so weak the exact pattern and effect on the organs is unclear and it is too risky to make a guess as the wrong treatment may send her to the grave.” Dr Zhu scratched his brow, “So I seek more knowledge of her mental state.”

Father Aleippo said, “Come to my chambers so we can discuss this more thoroughly, I am fascinated at this theory of zhang-fu organs, I have never heard anything like it.”

“Unfortunately my friendly guides,” Zhu gestured to his guards waiting at the entrance, “Have me on a short leash, unless of course you enjoy their company in your chambers?”

“Oh, the Count,” Father Aleippo shook his head, “Not the most enlightened of host I’m sure. Many times I preach of a more civilized way to deaf ears – but I do hold some sway in the precinct of the church. You guards over here I need to you to hear this”

The two guards strode respectfully towards the approaching priest. They met at that atrium to the church. “Lorenzo and Beno I bid you welcome, it has been sometime to be sure since you have had entered the church Lorenzo and you Beno, I am sorry to distract you from the pretty autumn view of our piazza. I could see from how you gazed with rapt attention that many flowers still bloom in the square for you!”

Both guards looked down and blanched like schoolboys caught red headed by their teacher at some act of infamy. The priest went on, “I understand that you are to prevent this man’s escape from the Counts protection, shall we say, but whilst Dr Zhu is on church ground I give you my word he is my responsibility before god and he shall go where and when he pleases without you two shadows dogging his footsteps. But he shall not leave the church without collecting you two at the front entrance. Dr Zhu, do you give your word to abide by this agreement?” Zhu nodded his acceptance.

The guards cowed by the priest’s authority acquiesced and retreated to the entrance.

The priest guided Dr Zhu to his chambers, discussing some of the history of the fifteenth century church as he went, pointing out some of the damage that occurred in the 1743 earthquake that had levelled a number of old buildings in the town. He also pointed the area alcove directly beneath the cupola that had been repaired with a fresco of the prodigal son from the Old Testament. This painting was commissioned by the Count. You’ll note the face resembles our Count with some of the ravages of time and responsibility removed. The prodigal son also bears resemblance to his Giovanni in happier times.”

Dr Zhu stopped and examined the painting carefully. That the wealthy patron had their faces painted on the work of the artist they employed was in no way unusual in Renaissance Europe. Many artists did this as a matter of course as a way of symbolizing the wisdom and god given rights of their rich patrons. Some artists were also known to include sly digs at their patrons in some cases that only avid followers of art would be able to interpret and some a little less subtle.



A celebrated case occurred a several years ago one nobleman in France had commissioned a work of Noah and the Ark with a multitude of animals queueing to be saved. In his old age the noble was widely known to suffer from failing eyesight but nevertheless had proclaimed somewhat embarrassingly the exquisite beauty of his new young wife. It is said that love is blind and certainly this was double the case with the old nobleman, to most others they concluded that here was Shakespeare’s Shrew, untamed unless in the presence of her

husband whom she had sought, since coming of age, the way hunter baits a trap for its unsuspecting prey.

The artist was doubly unimpressed with his dealing with her as before the Noah picture he had been commissioned to first produce a portrait of the Shrew for the family wall. She had carped and moaned to the artist, not just about his work but about all around her for being fool's and imbeciles. The only time she became pleasant was when her doting husband visited her to check on progress of the portrait.

She posed for this adorned in the family heirloom a famous necklace known throughout France adorned with rubies and sapphires given to the nobleman's ancestors by the King of France for his services in battle as a young man. Beside her obediently sat her favourite dog, a miniature bulldog. The painter dutifully finished the first painting and adapted her visage to be beautiful a significant deviation from reality.

One can never be sure what madness made the Artist think he would get away with what he did to the next painting that he was commissioned to do for the nobleman; that of Noah. Was it the consumption of too much wine that the nobleman's vineyards were famous for, or was it sheer artistic flight of fancy that sometimes creates a masterpiece?

The world will probably never know but certainly the Noah Ark painting deserved thorough study. On first glance it revealed the face of Noah (unmistakably that of the old nobleman's) directing the animals up the ramp to safety of the ark from the gathering storm clouds in the distance. The face of his wife looks back (and is covered in shadows) towards the hundred pairs of animals entering the ark displayed in the painting. First glance was all it received by the nobleman and his wife and so it was hung in the local church for all the townspeople to admire and celebrate the foresight of the nobleman on par with Noah. The artist was paid his commission and promptly left the region in search of another patron elsewhere.

It was only after a few weeks of titters from viewers and unusual growing popularity of the painting that word reached some of the nobleman's circle of trusted advisors. The artist had done an excellent of portraying each pair of animals entering the ark two by two: the goats, the horses, the ducks and even the more exotic animals such as elephants and lions were expertly represented.

The feature that held everyone agog once it was pointed out was the exquisitely drawn dogs were miniature bulldogs, the bitch could be differentiated from the male quite easily as the male had both eyes closed whilst the snarling bitch wore an ornate necklace identical to the one worn by the nobleman's wife.

One can hardly imagine the conversation amongst his advisors as to who would tell their superior what people found so amusing about the portrait. They faced a major dilemma in that the longer it went on the more people heard about the portrait. People were coming for "mass" on Sunday from nearby towns and staying on after to view the painting. The nobleman and wife were fast becoming the laughing stock of the entire province. Finally

they decided to tell the nobleman one evening once his wife had gone to bed after they had filled him with much wine.

The nobleman was so drunk that he was neither sure whether what he was told by his advisors was the truth or that he had but dreamed it. Needless to say the next morning, he visited church early in the morning and was heard shouting at the priest, who was also unaware of the real reason of the newfound attraction of his church. The painting was promptly removed and believed destroyed much to the dismay of many who subsequently heard the story. The nobleman was wise enough to say nothing to his wife who continued to breed bulldogs to the end of her life. It was rumoured that the nobleman put a bounty was put on the head of the artist but it was believed that he already fled to the New World and was never heard of again.

You can still see the portrait of the nobleman's wife in the Louvre but do not look for the bulldog, for the picture was cropped by children who resembled her, before it was donated to the museum.



The painting on Saint Bernando's wall was a quality work. An artist who trained in Venice was a friend of Giovanni Marco, who had also grown up in the district had been commissioned to do the work. Obviously choosing a theme such as the prodigal son, with the Count's son featuring had strong connotations that could not be dismissed.

The Priest knew this part of the story well. "As a youth of fourteen, Giovanni Marco was sent by his parents for finishing education in Venice. This was a normal part of aristocrat's education in the region. It provided an opportunity to network and meet others that would be his peers as grew into manhood. But as often happen the bright lights, balls, beautiful art and people of Venice proved too much of an attraction for young Giuseppe. By the time he was eighteen he was deeply ensconced in Venetian life and refused all demands from his family to return. It was only after his uncle, his father most trusted advisor and to whom the boy had been close to was on the verge of death that he decided return home."

The priest pointed to the pictures lower right corner, where could be seen a well-dressed frail and sickly man, cane in hand waving wildly to the Prodigal son whilst the son was greeted by his father. Dr Zhu looked closely. It appeared to him that the son's smile and eyes were not directed to the father but the sickly man instead. Interestingly, the mother stood her hands clasped at her heart mid-way between the uncle and father. Dr Zhu moved closer to examine her figure more closely at her feet appeared to be small box or chest with pattern on it that could have been a symbol or foreign writing but could not be made out clearly.

"Do you see anything of relevance Doctor?" queried the priest.

“I’m not sure”, replied Zhu. “Can you see that small box at the feet of that woman there? There seems to be something written on it but I can’t make it out – what do you think?”

“Hmmm....let me get closer.....well that’s extraordinary,” exclaimed the priest. “I never noticed that before. I haven’t seen symbols like this since Seminary College. I believe the script might be Greek but the writing appears indecipherable.”

“It’d be too much to suppose you have seen a box such as this?” asked Dr Zhu half-heartedly.

Father Aleippo shook his head, “You could ask around but for me no, nothing like it all.”

Dr Zhu nodded and asked the Priest if it was possible to speak with Maria Lenekia next to which the Priest replied, “Yes by all means. But only after that lecture in Chinese Medicine you have promised me!” The priest led him to his chambers where Maria was currently at work preparing afternoon tea for the Father and Dr Zhu.

The priest chambers were comfortable, but modest. It was evident that the Priest was well educated and that he seemed to have struck a delicate balance between his earthly vices and his spiritual duties; sadly a rare thing in many men of the cloth. A single painting adorned his wall, that of a scene depicting Saint Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of nature and all living beings. He was surrounded by leaping and frolicking dogs as he hands out bread to the poor whilst in the background shadowing the landscape was the huge Assisi huge chapel under construction. History tells us that although being built in his name it was against his wishes, as he thought it extravagant in the face of earthly poverty.

Father Aleippo bid Dr Zhu to be seated and introduced Maria. He mentioned to Maria that Dr Zhu would later ask Maria for details of the history of the Count, Countess and their son’s unfortunate accident after the mid-afternoon refreshments. At this statement Maria eyed Dr Zhu with a calculating gaze. After the food had been served and the wine poured, Father Aleippo said, “I apologise for the quality of the local wine Doctor, every year it seems to deteriorate in quality, some trouble in the vineyards I hear. Unfortunately for the region wine is one of its key products so what better quality wine there is tends gets sent elsewhere to keep afloat the reputation of the region. The locals suffer with the substandard batches unfortunately.

“The cheese is excellent however,” offered Dr Zhu as he chewed through his third slice. “Normally I avoid eating too much cheese but this has well rounded bite to it that makes it hard not to want more of.”

“Ah yes it has a well-deserved reputation indeed,” agreed the priest. “A number of attempts have been made to increase our supply by the Count whose takes personal control of the cheese production. But it seems that only a relatively small number of farms can produce the quality that this represents, similarly with the wine from this sub-region managed by young administrator appointed by the Counts uncle. I would have thought promoting this administrator might be a wise step but the Count resists suggestions to bring in an “outsider” to a position of responsibility.

“It seems the Count keeps a tight rein on many functions in the town,” commented Dr Zhu dryly. “And it seems, just my luck, that he appears more open to outside knowledge in the field of medicine, even to the point of knifepoint.”

“Ah yes, he does resort to violence when the return seems worth it,” the Priest apologetically agreed. “You should be honoured I suppose, most of the knifepoint work I hear ends in the owner being separated from his wealth and in instances his life into the bargain. It’s a pattern I have tried to advise against delicately with the Count but as his coffers become emptier with each passing wine season his dependence on plunder becomes more entrenched. He has even threatened to sell some of the churches paintings if I interfere in his revenue raising ventures.”

“I am surprised that this close to such a civilized city as Venice this behaviour is tolerated”, commented Zhu.

“Ah Venice” Father Aleippo nodded, “Beautiful jewel of the Mediterranean. City where you can find anything from the most priceless stones and art in the western world to the most depraved fleshpot you could imagine. Tell me Doctor did you happen to see the Bridge of Sighs?”

“Ah....no Father I had not heard of that, it sounds like a view so lovely I may have missed something special in Venice?”

“In one sense, yes, it is of bittersweet beauty but I think it may be one view you could well do without Doctor. The Bridge connects the judicial portion of Venice’s government on one side to the horribly dark and crowded jail cells where poor wretches are incarcerated, sometimes for months before their execution. It is the only opportunity for prisoners to gaze once more upon the beauty of Venice. The condemned prisoners cross this bridge twice, once on the way to their cell and once on their way to the gallows. It is said that every prisoner sighs as he crosses the bridge and sees earthly beauty for the last time on his way to meet his maker. This bridge is very, very busy Doctor. The Duke and government hold power on Venice only by ruthless brutality and rigid enforcement of their edicts. This city nation state has little inclination to meddle in the affairs of inland regions not critical for Venice’s wellbeing. Provided the sea lanes are kept open and free from pirates for their merchants they let the regions look after themselves. A few bandits or rogue Counts are but trifling issues to Venice.”

“Would that I had made more thorough enquiries then,” jokingly lamented Dr Zhu. “I think that my choice of leisurely journey through the regions of Italy probably would have been replaced with a quick and uneventful return cruise to Calais to catch the last of the autumn sun.”

“Perhaps our Lord saviour means you to be here to save the Countess’s life?” suggested Father Aleippo. “Do you believe in our god Dr Zhu?”

“Father, such a question could have us sit here and talk philosophy all day. If you wish to save my soul then yes certainly I faith in the spirit of Jesus Christ. As to why I’m here, are you familiar with oriental beliefs at all?” Finch asked Father Aleippo.

"I've study the heathen religions slightly," said the priest, "most of the multiple deities and pagan practices we are briefly taught about in seminary school to refute their underlying concepts if it turns out that we are to be posted to an area where they predominate. The Islamic and Jewish traditions are also dealt with in a similar way although in more detail, since these are the one in Europe we are more likely to encounter. I have not had too much exposure to other forms of oriental faith Doctor. I have been more interested in rituals of our own church and the care of my congregation rather than getting too involved in other people's businesses or beliefs. Yet I'm pleased to hear you believe in Christ."

"Well Father", Zhu equivocated, "belief is a funny thing that happens to lead to all sorts of places I am wary of going. In China there is a discourse by a famous philosopher Lao Tzu called The Way of the Tao. Lao Tzu was believed – there's that word again – to have compiled his treatise in the Tao Te Ching although some historians dispute this claim and propose the work might have had several contributors over a number decades. Regardless of whoever created it, Lao Tzu spent pages saying exactly what the Tao was not. In fact, a clear message from the text that when read from a western point of view is total nonsense is that to any attempt to define or confine to understanding what exactly is the Tao is doomed to failure or worse still self-deception. Hence from my point of view, to believe in the Christ is nonsense. Contrast this with what the Greeks understood to be perfection say early mathematics for instance $1 + 1 = 2$. I know and believe this to be true within our understanding of mathematics. Faith does not come into it. But mathematics is not the real world we exist in (although it can be useful) the Tao however is the real world but I do not have to have believe in the Tao or Christ I just have to have faith that my path will be shown to me.

"Critical to my path was learning Chinese medicine. Chinese medicine is deeply rooted in an understanding of the Tao, or Taoism as it is sometimes called and yet at no time is one compelled to believe in its precepts over empirical evidence. In fact a test of its usefulness is its ability to adapt and integrate harmoniously new discoveries or understanding. I interpret it as a naturalistic version of the scientific method - although of course western scientists might not see it that way!"

"So having experienced that faith in the form of the Tao in my own life and the amazing achievement of what they call Christ and having faith in their own lives of many of my patients how can I deny faith in Christ however they choose to define it." Finch concluded.

Father Aleippo nodded deep in thought, "It's true, he agreed. Many a long cold and lonely winter night I have wondered just what exactly I believe in. The Trinity? Christ? His sacrifice? His Example? What does it all mean? Many a night I've thought perhaps I'm wrong, I've made it up and been fooled by a great complicated hoax filled with meaningless catechisms and rituals. But always there's been something I can't describe pulling along my path like searchlight for the soul when all is dark. Something I can't see or feel or touch but it gives me faith to go on. To me I call it Christ and that is all I need to know."

Dr Zhu smiled in companionship with Father Aleippo. “And the Tao or Christ has brought us together to solve the riddle of the cupola and the chest. “Now that’s what I would like believe”, he added mischievously.



Maria Leneikia looked suspiciously at Dr Zhu as she sat uncomfortably in the Priest’s dining room flanked by Father Aleippo. She never sat in his presence, except of course in church. Maria was a childless woman in her late forties from a nearby village with a solid no nonsense approach to life and the responsibilities toward Father Aleippo. Her village had only been settled a few hundred years by her ancestors from Bulgaria fleeing one of the regular atrocities that plagued the Baltic region. The oldest of three daughters Maria had come to her present employ twenty years ago when her father finally realised he had no chance of marrying off such an unattractive daughter. Maria personally was happy to move. She had no interest in men and thought it unbearable to have to consider raising children to any of the eligible men in her area. She had for some time considered joining the nunnery as a protection from the opposite sex but had neither the depth of faith nor appetite for such an ascetic life. She found the opportunity to work for the old priest in nearby Monteroggerio almost too good to be true and packed her few belongings and clothes as soon as she learned from her local priest that the position was available.

Twenty had gone fast with the minimum of fuss. The earthquake that killed a score of villagers and damaged the church followed a few years later the by the death of Giovanni were the only bumps in an otherwise normal progress of church and priestly business in the village. Admittedly it took a little bit of effort to get used to Father Aleippo more easy-going manner after the strange eccentricities and demanding temperament of his aged predecessor Father Mareano but Maria had learned to relax a little over the couple of years they had been together.

But this Doctor with a Chinese name who looked English and wanted to know about the death of Giovanni Marco bothered her. She had put that miserable time behind her and had no wish to revisit it. Let sleeping dogs lie she believed.

Father Aleippo addressed her, “Maria, Doctor Zhu is here to help the Countess. He is looking for what he believes may be the key to reinforcing her will to live. I would like you to answer his questions about the Countess and the death of her son to the best of your knowledge please.”

Maria pursed her lips and replied “Certainly Father although I see no reason to dredge up the past and certainly not in the use of some foreign mumbo jumbo that will probably kill the Countess. It’s a complete waste of time you know it says in Proverbs Chapter....”

“Maria!” growled the Priest, “I think that’s quite enough. Scripture’s fine for the pulpit but I won’t have it used to challenge my authority in my chambers of all places by a maid for heaven sakes!”

After a few long seconds Maria’s shoulders dropped and she looked down and Dr Zhu spoke to Maria directly, “Maria, I understand that you worked here when Giovanni returned to Monteroggerio as a young man and met his untimely end?”

Maria agreed. Dr Zhu continued, “Was he a regular church goer?”

“No more than his family demanded,” Maria answered her eyes looking at a spot on the rug that she had missed when she cleaned yesterday. “He attended mass each Sunday and all the major religious festivals, but apart from that no, he attended no more than would be expected of him as the Count’s son.”

“You say his family demanded?” Dr Zhu queried.

“Well”, Maria conceded “Countess had always been more devout than her husband she used to attend mass at least once every day and would also visit Father Mareano to assist with preparation for the major Saints days and such.”

“You said used to Maria,” Father Aleippo added,” She certainly doesn’t now, I’ve rarely seen her in church since I’ve been here and I could certainly use the help on those Saints Days. Remember when you were sick Maria last St Peters day, I was so short staffed I had to sweep the church myself! And whenever I meet Countess she is courteous but she remains distant.”

Doctor Zhu lightly brushed his fine silk tie that had some crumbs of bruschetta on it and said softly, “So Maria, the Countess stopped being a regular churchgoer after her son’s death?”

Maria watched the crumbs fall to the ground under the small table, made a mental note of where they landed and replied, “Yes. “

Maria had little to add after that. She told how she had learned that Giovanni’s body had been found one morning by stonemason who was cleaning the cupola. His broken body was on the chapel floor directly beneath the cupola, his neck badly broken by the fall as if he had dove head first off the scaffolding. Officially was concluded that he had for reasons unknown the previous night he had climbed up the scaffolding setup by the stonemason and fallen to his death. But no-one believed it, not even his parents who were shattered by the tragedy after his return. The tragedy that day overshadowed the impending death of his Uncle suffering from a long illness who fell into a coma that same day from which he never recovered. For the sake of peace of community and family it had been decided by the Count that for some reason unknown Giovanni had fallen from the cupola by misadventure. Misadventure although deadly in this case, was no considered a mortal sin, as is the case with suicide. So Giovanni was afforded a Christian funeral and burial such that his soul might find its way to kingdom above and the town could recover from the shock of losing its heir in such tragic circumstances. Maria was thanked for her time and released to resume preparations for the evening meal.

Doctor Zhu and Father Aleippo discussed what to next. "I think it'd would be interesting to inspect the cupola before proceeding any further is there some way we can get up there?" asked Dr Zhu, sipping the last of his wine.

"There's access way from the roof to a small ledge that can be used for cleaning. It's not very safe however and is rarely used. Normally in winter when it's too cold to work outdoors the local stonemason sets up his scaffolding and cleans it each year. You can have a look and see what you think if you like." Father Aleippo rose from his seat.

They both climbed the modest belltower that connected to the roof of the church and then pushed open the sticking door onto the upper level, disturbing some nesting pigeons that had cooed angrily and having their sole tenancy of the upper church challenged by the two interlopers. Walking carefully across the tiled roof like they came to the side of the cupola where a small hatchway was located. After some pushing and shoving the old door relented and opened with a judder against the stone lintel.

Father Aleippo poked his head through and had a look at the interior of cupola, trying not to look down at the stone floor of the cathedral twenty metres below. His voice sounded strangely muffled to Dr Zhu by way of being inside the cathedral whilst the rest of him and Dr Zhu resided on the church's rooftop. "I can see the ledge around the base of the cupola. It appears solid and but empty – apart that is from cobwebs and dust. I wouldn't attempt to traverse it though; my love of wine and cheese has made me unsuitable to comfortably fit on such a ledge."

Dr Zhu took off his waistcoat and volunteered, "Let me try Father, my balance may be useful here."



When he had left Shanghai for Nanjing Finch had been given an introduction and glowing recommendation by Dr Wang, to his colleague and friend Professor Xie Nan at Nanjing Hospital. "I'm sorry to have you leave Alexander Finch", Wang said. "But it would be good for neither of us should it be realized by Cheo Pai that the learned western doctor who triumphed over Chinese medicine to cure him was an intern in the Shanghai hospital studying Chinese medicine."

It turned out well for Finch, Professor Xie Nan honoured his friendship with Dr Wang and he was accepted as intern to the hospital. The Professor held that good practitioners should practise Tai Chi. Finch took to it like a duck to water and showed a degree of proficiency that impressed his teachers and he was provided the opportunity to train under some of the best practitioners in Nanjing on retreats.

One teacher, Master Feng ran a training retreat in the countryside outside of Nanjing, emphasised greatly the concept of drawing qi from the earth, thinking of the legs as mere extensions of the earth. This generally helped both focus and balance.

Near the retreat there was small irrigation canal over which the local peasants would pass by the way of log, no wider than a foot in diameter. In summer the teacher used this log as an opportunity for some sport with some his students, requiring them to brush knee (step forwards) slowly across the log. Most students had little problem with this but many failed to repulse monkey (step backwards) across the log. For the more proficient students requiring a blindfold always resulted in a splash into the clear deep water followed bouts of laughter of all concerned. The teacher himself contributed to such mirth by tapping some of the students with a long staff if they looked like they were going to complete the challenge without falling.

Finch enjoyed this as much as the other students. One day a bet was raised by some of the students as to who could cross the log at night using repulse monkey. Finch was one of the five favourites and along with the other conspirators decided to meet at the log at midnight by which time their teachers should be asleep and they could hold their competition without interference.

As planned they all met at midnight. It was a new moon cloudy and so dark the students could not see their hand placed in front of their face. One small lantern was placed at each end of fifteen metre log and competitors and spectators alike huddled in its dim illumination. Each looked toward the murky darkness along the log to the lantern at the other end. Each competitor proceeded to cross skilfully using brush knee their silhouette barely visible as they glided along line of darkness. After they had all successfully crossed the log they then drew straws to cross backwards using repulse monkey

Finch went first and was successful in his crossing. Then others attempted to cross. Each fell into darkness and then sound of splashing erupted from that same darkness to increasing levels of laughter and encouragement of the group of onlookers. It became apparent that might Finch win the competition. So noisy had they become that they had woken several of their teachers including the Master Feng who now stood on near the lantern on the side that Finch was standing on. A short distance away was a smaller figure that could barely be made out in the stygian darkness but unmistakably stood in angry, aggressive pose.

“Enough”, shouted Master Feng, “You have made so much noise that farm hands cannot sleep. Their foreman,” Master Feng gestured to the angry figure has ordered that the downstream sluice gate be opened. By now there will be no water underneath the log for you to play with. Your fall will only now be broken by the rocks that line the canal. You have all brought my retreat into notoriety and I find that unacceptable.”

“Mr Finch you seem to be enjoying the acclaim of your peers for your actions so you will be the first to make amends. You will now walk across the log and let fate decide whether you shall be punished for your actions and fall to the stones below.”

Gasp occurred from the students and some cries of “No!” could be heard, but the respect for Master Feng meant concerned silence soon fell upon the party.

Finch was close enough to see Master Feng's stony demeanour as he waited for Finch to cross the log. Finch had little choice but to compose himself as disobeying Master Feng was not something a student would do and not expect serious repercussions.

He had just completed two crossings at night and far more during the days training so he knew he could do it. Moreover, Master Feng had not specified what movement he had to cross with so he could go using the easier brush knee. Finch approached the log and centred himself as he had been trained to do. Slowly foot by foot he glided across the log. It was halfway along that he became aware of the cricket's chirping and wobbled on his back leg. Gasps could be heard from the opposite side but he regained focus and settled into his stance. He slid forward another few steps and began to think of getting to the other side. For an instant he thought about the rocks four metres or so below. He imagined their wet, deadly hardness and the *shwacking* sound he would make on the rocks as he fell to serious injury and pain. He felt fear grip him like a snake coiling around his being. His back foot slipped and he instantly fell from the log.

As if from a tunnel he could hear the gasps of horror and cries of dismay. Time slowed down and it seemed like an eternity as he counted the seconds until he would hit the rocks below. But instead of eternity, far earlier than that, he felt the cold thwack of soft water as hit the water, the same level it had always been.

As he surfaced he could hear the astonished gasps and relieved laughter from above drowned out by what sounded the thunderous laughter of Master Feng joined by another teacher who had masqueraded as the angry foreman. He had been tricked!

Finch shook his head in relieved astonishment "Chinese: he hoped to learn their medicine but he would never understand their sense of humour."

After they had returned to the retreat and were sipping their tea before retiring Master Feng beckoned to Finch to sit next to him. "Did you enjoy my joke?" asked Master Feng his eyes twinkling in the firelight.

Finch grimaced and said quietly, "I'm sure I'll appreciate it one day."

"After you had crossed that log so many times, why did you fall?" probed Master Feng.

Finch paused reflected on that question and replied, "It was harder to concentrate due to your anger, but ultimately it was the fear I felt at the prospect of falling and either badly hurting myself or dying on the rocks below. It consumed me until I was no longer one with the log."

Master Feng nodded, "You have been taught by me that you are rooted to the ground by your feet and the Kidney meridian that runs to the soles of your feet. You also know that the main emotion that affects the Kidneys is.....?"

"Fear" answered Finch.

“Exactly” concurred Master Feng. “Your fear of those rocks was nothing but an illusion. It stole you from your path along the log. Be sure to stay on your path wherever it leads without fear and you shall not fall.”



Dr Zhu crawled through the hatchway vacated by Father Aleippo and entered Cupola proper. The Father was right; it was dusty and full of cobwebs. It was also hot and stuffy as the cupola collected the warm air from the church. The hemispherical ascending walls of the cupola were painted white, with decorative gold leaf ribbing the walls every sixty degrees. The cupola’s top was some fifteen metres high from where Zhu crouched. The stone ledge itself was not designed to be walked upon, it was merely to be a footing that the copper hemisphere was to rest on. In either direction, it ran, no wider than twelve inches and sometimes as narrow as eight inches, around the cupola. Zhu could see a shadow on the far side that was the continuation of this ledge. It was too cramped to crawl so Zhu slowly raised himself to a crouching position, one foot in front of the other.

“Are you sure you need to do this now?” asked Father Aleippo. “I could have the stonemason begin setting up his scaffolding in the morning; it would only take a day to construct.”

Zhu grunted dismissively. “The Countess’s condition is too fragile to be left that long, we may lose her in the meantime. We need to solve this mystery today if we are to help her.

“At least you should tie a rope about your waist,” Father Aleippo urged, “In case you slip.”

Zhu glanced down to the cathedral floor some twenty metres down and scanned the circular wall of the dome for anchor points all the way to the other side, thirty metres across. “Any rope secured on this side would do me little good if I fell from the other side. I have done this type of thing before; it will be all right”.

Slowly Zhu crept around the cupola, his eyes and hands caressing the wall and ledge for any clue to the whereabouts of the case. When his legs started to ache, he found he rest somewhat by crouching into a ball and leaning against the wall. As he progressed further he disturbed some cobwebs and a large ugly looking spider fell on his arm and scuttled towards his neck. The rest of him motionless he gently allowed the spider to climb aboard his other hand that he placed on his opposite arm that the spider was exploring, then flicked his hand and sent the spider spinning away. By the time he got to the other side, he was damp with sweat and filthy with dust and discovered nothing. “A fine specimen of a cultured Doctor I am” muttered Zhu.

“What was that”, called Father Aleippo, “Have you found something?”

“Not yet.” Zhu replied.

Zhu continued a few steps more until his foot almost went through the stone slab in front of him. He dropped to like a cat onto his solidly rooted back foot just as material he had about to stand on splintered. It was not solid at all but a hollowed out one that had been covered by a small flat piece of wood.

“We have something here”, Zhu shouted. He very carefully leant over and lifted the wood cover; it had merely been placed on the hollow slab and was easy to remove. Beneath it was a small wooden box identical to the one painting. They had found the chest.

Zhu carefully lifted the chest by its handle. It was light enough and small enough to easily carried shut with one hand. Slowly he inched his way towards around the cupola.

About three-quarters of the way around a one of stones on the ledge gave way as Zhu’s weight settled. A skittering of stone shards and dust fell like a noisy rainstorm on the seats and tiled floor below. Zhu quickly transferred his weight to front foot and regained balance. As he started to move forward Father Aleippo let out his breath and muttered, “Maria will have a fit when she sees her church covered in in dust and stone. Still better than he if he fell, Maria would never talk to me again if she had to clean that before the next mass.”

When Zhu had completed his circumnavigation he passed the chest to the priest and clambered through the hatchway. It had begun to rain lightly and the tiles had become treacherously slippery so they inched their way towards church tower window. By the time they reached safety, dusk was in full swing, the wind had dropped off and the only sound they could hear was the squeals of children and music that carried from the thinning afternoon piazza.

They made their way back to the Priest’s chambers and examined the chest in the light. It constructed of a hardwood timber carved and sculptured with gold leaf and inlaid with semi-precious stones that together made an intricate pattern on the sides and top of the case. The pattern that was illegible and appeared on the painting was clearly to Greek letters. Father Aleippo examined the letters closely, “The letters are Greek for DM, it’s Donna Marco’s chest but it’s locked, I doubt we could open it without destroying the box. There’s a locksmith one days travel from here but that’s too far if speed is of the essence.”

Zhu looked at the chest and remembered his conversation with the Countess’s servant. I know who can unlock this for us. He turned to Maria who hovered in the kitchen next door. “Maria, can you ask Sara the Countess’s servant to come here? And Maria, tell Sara no-one else the reason of our request get her to make it appear she is going to Sunday mass to pray for her Countess.”

After the evening mass had finished Sara was shown into the priest chambers by Maria. Sara clearly was agitated at being away from the Countess for so long and clasped her hands tightly together as she stood uncomfortably at entrance to the chambers. She began nervously words spilling over each over. “I swear there is nothing more I can tell you of the cupola since your search has turned fruitless Doctor.”

The Doctor moved sideways and revealed the small table he had been obscuring. Upon it sat the chest. Sara's eyes widened in shock and her voice trailed off, like some wind-up toy that had run out of spring "Oh you have found the chest".

Doctor Zhu cleared his throat and spoke sternly, "Sara I believe that you are only trying to protect the Countess but from your look of shock I think you now understand that the time for games is over. Can you please give me the key the Countess gave to you to keep safe that now hangs about your neck?"

Sara looked at the Doctor and then at the Father, who smiled and nodded. Sara said, "I have kept this since the Countess first fell ill. She made me promise that I would give it to no-one else but her. But I suppose now is too late that for that. Here, take the key."

She handed the key to Zhu who promptly inserted it into the chest. It may have not been opened for twenty years but the lock and tumblers turned like it had been made yesterday. The top of the lid popped loose and Zhu folded it back to reveal contents of the box.

Inside the box were three folded letters. Two are tied together by a piece of ribbon and one separate. There was also a small lock of hair. Zhu takes closes the small chest and squeezes it into his waistcoat and looks at the curious onlookers, Sara, Maria and Father Aleippo. "These are surely the property of the Countess", he stated. "I cannot let you know the contents of these letters I am bound by Hippocratic oath to keep the affairs of my patient confidential. Father, I know this must be especially galling to you given that you have been of invaluable help but I'm sure you understand given you practise the same thing in the sanctity of the confessional."

"Oh Zhu -hell's bells you are bandit! How can I ever rest with a mystery so close to solution I could snatch it out of your hands! You test my patience!" Father Aleippo exploded. Out of the corner of the eyes he saw Maria and Sara shocked at his blasphemy. After a few moments he regained his composure, Very well then, I agree to your request, for now. We will all be silent on everything that has happened and been said today won't we Maria and Sara. And I do mean everything", he emphasised for good measure.

Zhu nodded his thanks. He collected his two disgruntled guards at the entrance to the church. They were now wet, cold and considerably unimpressed with Zhu.

"Oh good to see you sir," the older guard welcomed sarcastically, "So glad you could make it. We have been out here in the rain and wind and were just wondering; are you skilled at treating frostbite?"

Dr Zhu eyed the guards levelly and replied, "I am surprised you even missed me. I felt sure that two of Count's finest would have easily endured a little early autumn weather. Never mind. We'll be inside your cosy castle soon enough. Perhaps you can get your sergeant at arms to give you a nice back rub whilst you tell him how cold you were?"

The younger guard sniggered at that, for which he received a cuff from the senior guard who cursed under his breath as they followed Dr Zhu towards the castle.



Dr Zhu went straight to the Countess's room and checked her condition. She was still dangerously weak as she had not been able to keep down any solids. He asked for some supper, which he received and while he waited did a small amount of gentle needling to St 36, to tonify true yin and yang. By the time he had done this Sara had arrived and taken over from her replacement. She eyed warily but said nothing as went into the Countess's sitting room and closed the door behind him.

The small lamp on the Countess's dresser glowed dimly in the night. Zhu extracted the letters from his waistcoat and read them in the room, the only noise coming from the small crackling fire that had been set and lit by Sara as he ate his supper. The first letter read:

*Giovanni, 16/8/1743
You have left me speechless with your news. You are the heir to our province and yet you continue to behave like a brigand.*

You are fool for falling in love with such a woman. She must have seen you coming a mile away down the canal. That you are about to spawn one bastard child that is stupidity enough but forgivable in someone of your age.

But the Count will be furious enough when he finds out that you intend to stay Venice at all after the completion of your education, much less than to find out that your main reason is you cannot stand him and that you would rather spend your life as a lowly clerk than live under the same house as he.

I refuse your request to tell him of your decision as evil can only come of it. When you grow up: after, she has had her fill of being a slut for a lowly clerk and leaves you for better prospects – as I'm sure she will - then write me a letter, apologise and tell me you want to come home.

Until that time the Count and I disown you and your stupidity.

Countess Marco.

Zhu looked up at the small portrait above the dresser of the Countess, Count and son in happier times. Giovanni could have been four or five in the painting and cradled a small wooden toy. His longish dark hair and blue eyes matched those of his mothers. As did his jawline. This was fortunate for the Count's features were far more unattractive, with close set eyes and a small priggish face. He wondered about cruelty in that letter and what could cause her to be so bitter about her son's position.

He got up and poked the fire, which was burning to one side too much and would rapidly go out without some tending.

Giovanni,

2/1/1746

It has been too long that I have let my anger at your actions rule my life. It has done me no good and my heart grieves to have no word from you in so long. There are things that I should have said before now but I had feared the Pandora's box that I would open should my husband ever discover its' contents! Oh how ironic that after having been so careful for years with this secret through desperation I send that secret to Venice locked in chest destined for my only son.

There is no way easy to put this: Uncle Alfredo, the Count's brother and most loyal and trusted advisor is not your uncle: he is your father.

There it is in my handwriting, the truth after all these years my son. Many times I had thought to tell you but fear of the anger of the Count terrified me. You know him well, although he loves me deeply and I still love him for all his faults – even though Alfredo and I betrayed that trust – his temper is deadly. I fear he would kill all three of us before reason took hold. And our region would be torn apart in chaos many would suffer and die for my indiscretion.

It happened only once. Alfredo and I had always been close but we never thought of adulterous implications of comrade until the day your father was away on a hunting trip in mountains. Too much wine and too cold a night made us mad with lust, may the Lord forgive me. After so many fruitless years of trying with the Count one night with Alfredo and I was with child! My one darling child!

I never discussed it with Alfredo but he must have known. He too would have been wracked by guilt. He was such a good man he redoubled his efforts to support the Count even in his foolish ventures that stripped the region of so much wealth. But you could see it in Alfredo's eyes every time he played with you. You two had a special bond that was plain to see. Alfredo felt it too and was cautious not arouse his brother's suspicions by doting on you too much. This I believe was why sometimes he suddenly changed from being affectionate towards you to being cold and stern.

But now I fear I have left this revelation too late. Alfredo is dying. The physicians say he only has a few weeks to live. You must home as quickly as you can come at least to make peace with your true father whatever the consequences.

I fear it will be difficult for us to communicate privately for several days if and when you return as the Count watches my every move these days and listens to every conversation I have. You will need to play the role of prodigal son for the Count or to allay his suspicious and jealous nature. I have however arranged a place where you can leave chest with your response until I can have one of my trusted people retrieve

it. The stonemason is about to set up scaffolding for the maintenance of our church's Cupola. As patron of the church I have offered to supervise this process. I will instruct him to insert a hollow stone at the base of the western side of the cupola. You can place your answer in the locked chest and place it there at night when and if you (I pray) you return.

My son I wasted years and hurt you immeasurably for which I am mortally sorry. I pray you give me the opportunity to repair some of the damage in my selfish fury I have committed. I am sure we can discuss a beneficial outcome for your son and her mother also.

*Your loving and contrite mother,
Countess Marco*

Dr Zhu leaned back and rubbed his eyes. It had been a long day and the thoughts and implications of the Countess's revelation required some digestion. He rose and paced the room occasionally stopping to bask in the heat from the now happy and crackling fire.

So the Countess had kept momentous secrets and passionate love for the good of her region and the love of fiery, tempestuous man. Yet in the end she had attempted reconciliation with her son who had returned home.

So what had led to the tragedy?

Dr Zhu settled down and opened the long unread final letter. It was written in a different hand. Towards the end of letter the writing was barely illegible. It said;

Dearest Mother,

5/1/1746

Last night when I received at dusk your letter I cried for so long that it felt like I had washed all the light from the earth, but for the pale distant Lady moon that hung suspended in the wintry sky.

Would that we were not fool mortals and could talk with our hearts rather than our tempers! So much time we have needlessly wasted! Many times I have thought of writing to you but had lacked the courage or wisdom to do so. Your first letter wounded me greatly but I now realize that it was just that, the first blush of anger.

Knowing now that my father is Alfredo is not as much a shock as you might think, I have little or no feelings towards the Count. He was a distant father although he tried in his way. He, mother is the reason I did not return earlier for I disagree with almost every decision he has had ever made and felt that every day would be blazing row.

But I weep for last time with my real father I will come and what might have been. The love of my life Angela died two years ago giving birth to our stillborn daughter,

who so I and my son now look after each other. Mother, I look forward to letting you meet your grandchild for he is a wonderful boy with keen curiosity and desire to learn. He reminds of you with his dark hair and blue eyes. I enclose a lock of his hair for you. I will leave in the care of my business partner will look after him whilst I am away and we can discuss his place in calmer times.

I will make preparations to leave for home tomorrow.

The note handwriting had become harder to read, Dr Zhu rubbed his hands together until they were warm and then placed them against his eyes to wake himself up.

So I am home! What a wild ride of emotions I have felt today! It was wonderful to see you mother today, with the Count. His manner is changed little but at least we only bickered over the taste of the wine and nothing more serious. It makes my head spin even now even though I drunk more than my fair share already and the night is still young.

I long to talk to you in private but alas this seems difficult as he watches you like a hawk these days.

I have some news to tell you also after talking to my father Alfredo who I have just returned from visiting. I have discussed the future with Alfredo and decided to take his advice and return to Monteroggerio. We will install my son under the watchful eye of Sergio Rugano, Alfred's trusted and skilled administrator of our some of outlying towns – You know mother the one's Alfredo manages - not the Count.

A rider has already been dispatched to collect him and deliver him Sergio. All Sergio knows is he is to be indentured as a trainee administrator.

Alfredo was very bright this night and I thought he looked that he might survive longer than we think. The physician who tended him did not agree and said he's been on the edge for some time and the end is nigh but what do they know?

This wine makes sleepy and I still need to place this chest in the chapel you have arranged tonight. One more task and I shall be forever home!

Soon I hope we can cease resorting to these Machiavellian intrigues.

Your loving son,

Giovanni

Dr Zhu folded the letter and put in the chest and sighed. So Giovanni had not committed suicide at all. From his point of view he had everything to live for. Being drunk on joy and wine, he must have accidentally fallen from the scaffolding after he had the chest there. The Countess, grief stricken and guilt ridden had never thought to look for another letter in the chest. She had taken his death, suicide she believed, as his answer to her pleas for forgiveness.

Dr Zhu stood up and checked on his patient in the next room she was sleeping restlessly. It was now about nine pm. He had another two hours before it would be the optimum time to drain the Liver/Gallbladder of the Countess, the organ that dominates the emotions and must have held to her grief and guilt for so long.

He asked Sarah to collect some more herbs from his saddle bags and also could someone be sent to rouse the local herbalist and ask her for her some of her best quality *taraxacum radix*. He checked the Countess again and gave her a light needling session once again to strengthen stomach and spleen (for absorption of the herbs) and calm her mind for what he was about to share with her.

By the time he had finished his preparation it was near eleven pm, the time when the Liver/Gallbladder became open. As the Countess was weak and barely *compos mentis* he asked Sara to stay with her whilst she was roused to drink the herbal decoction and awake enough to listen. Dr Zhu turned to Sara and said, "Sara, I can see by your devotion to the Countess that you are close and care for her deeply. There is something that needs to be done by someone she trusts implicitly. Can you be trusted to keep what transpires here secret for all time?"

Sara looked at the Doctor through her worry worn face, these last few weeks she had felt all of three score years. She flicked back her straw grey hair and said, "Doctor I was a young serving girl when the Countess was born. I helped the Countess into her wedding dress the day she married the Count. I held her baby whilst the mid-wife cut the chord when her son was born. I held her to my chest when she sobbed at learning of the death of Giovanni. I love this woman more than her Count ever could. If there is something you need to do for her trust me Doctor, I will do it."

Doctor Zhu, nodded he had thought as much. "Alright firstly you must rouse her gently mind, and get her to drink the decoction, you can explain who I am if asks. Then you must read her a letter I will give you to read that I found in the chest we recovered from the cupola. It will hurt her mind you. She will cry and moan but you must finish this letter, it is the only way do you understand?"

Sara nodded and did what she was told. She was firm and yet gentle with Countess, encouraging her to sip the brew slowly and rousing her with gentle conversation about the everyday occurrence of village life. Dr Zhu then handed Sara the second letter the Countess had written to her son, recalling him to his home. The Countess became quiet and alert, some tears welled up in her eyes and there was pain in her face. Sara then opened the chest again and extracted the third and final letter. As she began to read it to the Countess she too choked up as tears began to spill, the Countess sought her hand and squeezed it tightly,

as if from somewhere she had strength to give. By the time the letter had been read aloud they were both weeping and moaning miserably but holding comforting each other in their grief.

Doctor Zhu gently closed the door as he left the room with the two women still sobbing and settled down to sleep on the couch in the sitting room next door. He didn't think there was anything else he could do for his patient tonight.



Zhu woke in the morning to the sound of woman's laughter in the next room. He rose and groomed himself as best he could and proceeded into the Countess's bedroom. She was sitting up talking to Sara, whilst her made spooned her some thin soup that had been sent up from the castle's kitchen. The Countess in thin a reedy voice looked towards Doctor Zhu expectantly and said, "Doctor, I feel much better I am hungry thanks to your medicines."

Zhu nodded in appreciation but said nothing as he moved towards the Countess and to examine her. He was happy with what he saw but noticed that the Countess was still very tired and her pulse still thready and weak especially in relation to her heart. He gave Sara a preparation that would help keep the Countess relaxed and sleepy for a while yet so her body could become stronger. It worked rapidly and soon she was peacefully sleeping.

He then scribbled a note to be handed to Father Aleippo asking him to be ready to board a coach with him in an hour on an urgent journey of the utmost importance and to bring his ink, quill and church certificates with him.

Zhu then went to Count's chambers. The Count at this time was barely awake and still dressed in his bedclothes but he was happy to receive the Doctor as he been regularly updated on the Countess's state and was about to visit her when the Doctor entered.

"Doctor Welcome. I have heard already of the miraculous turnaround of my wife's health. You have done well and be rewarded handsomely", the Count said as he rose, his florid red face already beaming in the morning light.

"Thank you Count, but I fear it is too soon for me to take any reward apart from a short burst of liberty that I would appreciate."

"Whatever, do you mean Doctor", the Count puzzled inquired. "The Countess as we speak has eaten for the first time in weeks, she is on the improve surely?"

"She is still fragile Count", Zhu said in his most officious manner. "There is some medication that I still need to ensure her recovery. But fortunately, I have learned that it is within a half a day journey. I must go immediately to supervise its collection and preparation. I have asked Father Aleippo to accompany me as surety to you that I will return. All I require is fast coach so that we can supply the Countess with her treatment as soon as possible."

Given Zhu's current success the Count, against his natural inclination to say no, agreed to Doctor's request. In less than an hour the Doctor and the Priest were speeding toward the region of the province managed by Sergio Rugano and renowned administrator. Father Aleippo although relieved to learn that the Countess was improving, could barely contain sustain his priestly grace. "For all the gold in Vatican, Zhu please tell me what was in those letters and just what does this have to do with our jaunt to the countryside?"

"It is important as to what will occur when we arrive at our destination that I tell you nothing now," Zhu replied mysteriously. "For now, I wish to talk to you about a fascinating area of medicine that practitioners rarely talk about and gain your religious opinion on its application."

"Go on", said Father Aleippo, "For a supposed Englishman you have well adopted the habit of being the inscrutable Oriental wise man who talks in riddles."

When I studying at Nanjing Hospital one of the busiest areas for trainee Doctors is the outpatients ward. There is sadly always a long queue of the people looking for ongoing treatment for their condition or else new patients that need their ills addressed. For some time I worked in the dispensary as a herbalist, preparing other doctors prescriptions for patients and occasionally if it was a repeat prescription verifying that the preparation was still correct for ongoing use. There was a formulation that we prepared particularly for one well respected and senior Doctor that I was unfamiliar with. The herbs and minerals were rarely used in Chinese medicine. Although the ingredients were considered benign I was unaware that they had any action. One time I asked the prescribing Doctor about this formula and he looked at me queerly and said, "Oh come, you must see a typical patient suitable for this preparation."

He introduced me to the patient, and allowed me to examine her. Her description of symptoms she experienced when unwell was confusing in that it fit no clear pattern I had encountered before. After examining her, the Doctor invited me to read her file while and history. She had been coming weekly for many years, presenting with the same complaints and seen many Doctors and been prescribed many different formulas. Over that time her condition had neither improved nor deteriorated much and most Doctors now saw her as somewhat of a pest who took up their valuable time. Then this senior Doctor who had never seen her before but whose reputation for treating cases such as hers was renowned in much of China began working at our hospital. He prescribed her the formula I have described and forcefully told her that her symptoms would vanish if she kept taking it. The patient took the herbs that week and lo and behold next week on her return she sang the praises of the Doctor. She had the best week of health she enjoyed in years. The Doctor nodded sagely to the patient and told her to return every six weeks for a check-up where the prescription would be "adjusted" to keep her healthy.

"So he tricked her!" Father Aleippo said, "The old fox just gave her something she believed would help and it did, even though by rights it shouldn't have."

“Yes Father on one level he did, but ultimately she came to the Doctor to be well, and that’s what happened.” Doctor Zhu replied, “But let me ask this Father was it the right thing to do – deceiving the patient so that she might be healed?”

“Ah yes I see your point.” Father Aleippo furrowed his brow. “The age-old question whether the means justifies the ends. Well there is any number of treatises in the Vatican on this very point, each as hotly argued and strongly held as those by opposing factions. As a priest it often never boils down to wrong or right but what outcomes best serves God purpose to bring love and redemption. Man is an imperfect creature and can never be certain of his decisions. Ultimately he must look to his own soul for guidance.”

Doctor Zhu looked at the priest, said nothing and smiled. Father Aleippo shifted uncomfortably on the hard leather seats of the couch and murmured; “Now I know what it feels like to be a fish who has just taken the bait and is not sure what is to follow.”



They arrived at the region led by Sergio Rugano before midday. The streets were crowded with loaded carts full of barrels of wine and shoppers thronged the piazza with travelling merchants. A group of troubadours serenaded a small audience on the far side of the piazza. Their coach stopped outside the town hall in the piazza. The Counts crest of arms fluttered on a flag over the town hall. The town had a feeling of confidence that was nor apparent in in Monteroggerio.

They were ushered into the offices of Rugano once they had identified themselves. Sergio, a small balding man with a calculating eye shook their hands and invited to sit. He placed himself behind a large desk and asked us how he could be of service.

Dr Zhu explained briefly that he was here with the permission of the Count to obtain a cure that for the Countess. Dr Zhu apologized to Sergio for being somewhat mysterious and asked if they could speak directly to his administrator who Zhu was sure would be able to help him.

Sergio Rugano was nobody’s fool. He had been a Captain under Alfredo Marco in the last civil war and earned the trust and respect of Alfredo for his loyalty and courage as well as his organisational ability, a critical factor in a long campaign against their enemies when troops, ammunition and food needed to be at the right place at the right time.

After the war, Alfredo had been rewarded with the running of this region, under the Count’s flag. Whilst he handled the difficult political negotiations required to insulate the region from as many of the Count’s bad decisions as necessary, Sergio was entrusted with administering the day to day affairs of the region which he did extremely well.

At the same time he received news of Alfredo’s death he also was given a short note Alfredo had handwritten. It instructed him to provide guidance and protection for a youth that

would be arriving shortly. When the youth arrived Sergio found him to be a bright and capable lad who was also well liked by those around him. A natural leader, Sergio guided his time at the village and ensured he developed his skills until he took over as administrator.

Sergio never asked of the boy's origins and they were never offered. He suspected that one day someone might come for him – he just hoped it would not be an assassin.

Thus he was cautious but not surprised to emissaries from the Countess on what he suspected was a somewhat flimsy reason to meet with the administrator. That they were a man of the cloth and a Doctor was also reassuring.

Whilst they were waiting for the administrator he offered them both some local wine, the Father readily accepted he said “He had always been a great fan of this area's wonderful produce”.

They discussed the prospects of a good harvest – which was about to begin for most produce, except for the grapes had already been picked after a long hot summer. Sergio mentioned that the winemaker had been very happy with quality so far. Father Aleippo made a mental note to clear some room in the Churches cellar to make room for this year's vintage.

When the administrator Emanuele entered the room Father Aleippo sat straight upright and gasped. Doctor Zhu smiled and shook Emanuele's hand and studied his eyes and face carefully. He was well dressed but not ostentatiously. He had thick luxurious long hair that framed his face and on which rested spectacles required from long hours reading reports and accounting for the provinces turnover. But those spectacles did not obscure his blue eyes just like his mother, the Countess. The priest looked at Doctor Zhu and said, “ I see now why you are here.”

Emanuele looked quizzically at the Priest and then eyed with a raised eyebrow at Sergio for indication of how he should react to this strange visitation. Sergio nodded his approval. “How might I be of assistance?” Emanuele asked.

Doctor Zhu explained who he was treating and then asked Emanuele directly: “Do you know who your father was sir?”

Since he was a youth such a question had been the bane of Emanuele's existence in the village. Having been told to hide his lineage for his own protection by his father had resulted in him being unable to answer such a simple question truthfully. Being labelled a bastard in his time would have been fatal for his career so he answered Doctor Zhu, “Sir I am an orphan from our troubled border, I cannot say who my true father is. But Sergio Rugano has treated me like a father I am proud to say. Not that it is any business of yours, I might add.”

Doctor Zhu nodded and said, “Sirs, I understand the need for your subterfuge but that time is at an end we come here confirm your ancestry. We know your father was Giovanni Marco but more importantly we know that your grandmother the Countess Marco needs you at her side. I hope that once you know the truth you will decide that is your correct path to follow.

Dr Zhu then withdrew the chest opened it handing the letters in one by one along with the lock of hair to Father Aleippo to read and then pass on to Emanuele and Sergio to read consecutively. When they had finished the three letters he then said to them. Before we proceed there is a matter that is vital I discuss with Father Aleippo in private. I'm sure there is much the two of you need to discuss. Is that we might use for this purpose?

They were shown by a clerk to a small study that was empty. Once the door was closed Dr Zhu sat down and clasped his hands between his knees and said to the Father, "You recognised Emanuele straight away as the Countess's child didn't you?"

Father Aleippo scratched his balding head and smoothed his cassock. "Yes, I did. I suspected as much when you told me we heading for Sergio's region but wasn't sure. One look at that boy made me convinced and the lock of hair proves it conclusively."

Doctor Zhu looked penetratingly at Father Aleippo, "Then if you are absolutely convinced, I want you to write out a birth certificate for Emanuele to prove he is Giovanni's son."

Father Aleippo's face clouded a birth certificate in some cases could be re-issued by the Church but not without a Cardinal's approval. "So you want me to forge an official document Zhu? Now I realize why we had that little chat in the coach about moral ambiguity." He sighed, another black mark against him in heaven perhaps? "Very well, I have to make it look old too. Twenty-one years old in fact."

Zhu added quietly, "And a marriage certificate for the Giovanni Marco and his wife Elanora Loraini as well, Father. Twenty two years old, in fact", he added with a smile.

Father Aleippo bristled, "You push me too far Zhu, this is as close heresy as I have ever heard!"

Doctor Zhu stood up and walked to the window. "Do you see what's outside here Father? A prosperous village and people. A village that produces more than it needs in terms of wine and cheese. And who is responsible for that do you think? The Count; a thief, a drunk and one so foolish that he has let the rest of his region fall into disrepair? No, it's Sergio Rugano ably supported by Emanuele, the man who with a stroke of your pen be the legitimate heir to much or read Count's lands. Perhaps you have not travelled much or read about the history of nations and states but trust me Father, vultures will be eyeing this land ready to feed of its flesh when its government collapses. There will be great suffering if that is to happen. Here you have been blessed with an opportunity to install someone who can make a difference, someone who will keep your flock safe and healthy. If you were a Doctor would hesitate to end the suffering of your patient or not?"

Father Aleppo tapped his cross absently and stroked his forehead. He muttered "Peace on earth and goodwill among men - very well Zhu you are right I will do what you ask."



So that day both the Count and Countess became grandparents of a legitimate heir to their province. It took little to convince Sergio and Giovanni that for the good of the Marco region that Giovanni should return with them to Monteroggerio to meet his grandmother and the Count.

It did however take some more convincing by Zhu, Sergio and Giovanni that the best thing for the Countess's health was for her and the Count to take along holiday in the sea air to Sardinia and then to Rome. It was an opportunity for Sergio and Giovanni to revive the entire region's economy and administration system in the Count's absence. That absence also bought them time to create a ceremonial position for the Count to keep him from interfering too in the real administration of the region upon his return.

The Count and Countess finally agreed to when Doctor Zhu offered to join them in Rome as their personal physician at no extra charge. He had made a tidy sum in curing the Countess anyway including a small portion of the regions annual wine in which he asked Father Aleippo to maintain for him, much to the priest delight.

Dr Zhu was about to leave Monteroggerio so he and Father Aleippo said their goodbyes. Father Aleippo asked Zhu, "When we went to see Sergio and Giovanni we weren't really looking for a medicine for the Countess at all were we?"

Dr Zhu shook his head forcibly. "On the contrary Father we found the missing ingredient for the Countess - a future with hope."

Dr Zhu settled back in the coach bound for Rome and closed his eyes. The region had every chance to be safe and prosperous, to bring a little bit more civilization to the world he fell asleep just as the coach passed a small village.

In twelve months' time a young farmer flush with success at a bumper crop in peaceful times married a girl that he was now was had enough to marry. Nine months later they had a baby boy. His last name was Garibaldi and his one of his descendants would unite Italy. But that is a story for another time.

