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## Piao Bo and the Fog Demon

The fire light danced, casting an eerie glow on the fine flowing murals intricately painted on thin rice paper walls. The paintings depicted dragons robed in clouds, their scaled bodies changing seamlessly into the waters of a white river, manes stretching into the heavens. The river seemed to smolder, the rice paper caught the light in such a way. A heavily robed man with a sword and a wide farmer's hat cast his eyes across the wall.

“A fine illustration, yes?” The elder sat across from the robed man, pouring tea. “When the fog rolls in, you can lose track of where the painting ends and the mist begins.”

“How did you come by such a piece of art?” The man asked.

The elder smiled. “My son, before he left for the war, painted it. He aspired to become an artist.” The smile faded. “...he died...in battle...”

The elder sighed. “Pardon, but I feel I must get down to business.” He sipped his tea. “You must be anxious to discuss the matter for which I called you, master Piao Bo?”

The man nodded. “You spoke of a curse?”

“Since the end of the war, once a month, the night before the full moon, a heavy fog, heavier than most, rolls through the village.” He poured more tea, the steam mixing with the air and dissipating almost as soon as it rose. “When it passes, one member of the village is found dead, brutalized, as though by a wild animal.”

Piao Bo gazed at the wall, eyes flowing over the fine curves of the dragon's bodies. Creatures of myth; benefactors of mankind. During the long war he'd traveled across the great empire, seen almost every river rumored to house one of the mighty Serpent Kings, and seen not a one.

“And you think this, heavy fog...” he turned his eyes to the elder. “...is some demon?”

“We think it is killing us, and we want you, for a handsome reward, to stop it.”

“How?” He leaned forward. “How do you expect me to stop something you don't understand? I kill men, I don't uncover their secrets.”

“Two days from now the full moon will rise. Go up the mountain tomorrow night, the fog always descends from the peak along the goat path. Intercept it, and stop whatever comes. If there is nothing, we'll give you enough food to make it down the mountain and to the next village, and some coin for your trouble.”

The warrior leaned back and crossed his arms. “You mean to sacrifice me to your superstition.”

“Heavens no!” The old man was taken aback. “We mean to have you stop it. You were so feared during the war that men wouldn't dare speak your name for worry you would hear their voice on the wind, and come to slaughter them.” The elder bowed his head. “If the rebellion had five more men with your power, the Old Empire would have been overthrown in a month's time. We had hoped, if anyone could save us from whatever plagues our village, it would be you, Master Piao Bo.”

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Piao Bo set out the next morning, sword on his hip and coat wrapped tightly about his shoulders. It was white, embroidered with red clouds. A lord's daughter had stitched one into the fabric for each battle her father had won. Piao Bo had killed that lord, and taken the coat as his trophy.

The path up the mountain was steep, paved by goat's hooves through the wood. It was narrow,

and sometimes vanished in the denser parts of the forest. Always it reappeared, jutting at random angles, as though built by a madman. The warrior saw a few goats as he climbed, farther up the trail. Always they darted out of sight as he approached. No other creatures presented themselves. This man had the stench of death on him. He walked like a killer, and the beasts feared him.

As the morning matured, the warrior climbed, the air thinned, and drifts of snow dotted the ground. The forest had vanished by midday, and the drifts rose above a solid frozen sea. The goat trail persisted, hoof prints in the snow, leading up the mountain. It was harder to follow, no longer cut from the woods. Twice the warrior lost his way, once so he found himself descending the mountain. The stolen lord's coat shielded his body against the biting cold as he retraced his steps and rediscovered the trail.

The afternoon wore on as the warrior climbed higher, winds began to beat at his body as he ventured across the face of the mountain. He never saw them, but he could sense the white snow foxes darting about him, playing, hidden, in the frosty gale. He heard their yelps, their claws scraping the ice which lay beneath layers of powder. They had no fear of him, nor he of they. In their minds he was a fellow fox; a fellow hunter, fellow killer of the weak.

Soon the coat lost its value, the winds broke through its woven shield as the sun dipped toward the western horizon. Swirling gusts of snow passed over the warrior as he climbed, raking his core with icy fingers. He shivered, his hands and feet were numb. The trail was impossible to find, obscured by snow. Or perhaps even the goats, lords of the mountain, wouldn't dare climb this high. The wanderer kept moving, to stop would be to seal his own death.

“What're you doin' here?”

A voice; young, childlike, playful, came from behind him. He turned to face the speaker. The blizzard obscured his vision, hid the source of the voice.

“I am sent by the village at the mountain's base!” he called into the wind.

Laughter wafted through the air, from all sides.

“Show yourself, speaker!” he roared, reaching for his blade.

He felt a tug on his coat sleeve and turned. A boy, nine or ten years old, stood at his side, grinning. The warrior was taken aback.

“Where did you come from?” he asked.

The boy giggled and tugged at a fox's tail tied in his hair. He was dressed lightly, wearing naught but a suit of goatskin with a fur collar. His sleeves were too short, and his hair lay in a tangled mess. His feet rested bare on the snow.

“I've been followin' you.” the boy said.

The warrior stepped back. “From the village? How did you avoid being seen?”

Only a giggle.

The warrior was annoyed, and cold. Now that he'd stopped his march, the numbness in his extremities was climbing toward his core. He felt the icy chill of death in his shoulders. “What do you want? Speak your piece, I have an errand.”

The boy reached inside his shirt and pulled something from beneath it: a feather, tied about his neck by a string. He pressed it into the warrior's hand. Instantly, a warmth flooded his fingers, heating them to the bone. It was a calm heat, pleasant, not burning. Soon the numbness had gone out of his body, his veins burst with renewed life.

“What is this?” he asked, mystified.

“A feather I found, it fell from a great Firehawk. It'll shield you from th' cold.”

“A Firehawk?” the warrior ventured. “What do you mean, Fireha...” the boy jumped, wrapping his legs about Piao Bo's waist and one arm around his neck. He pressed his free hand to the warrior's lips and grinned. His canine teeth were pointed.

“If ya understood, it wouldn't work.” he laughed, and sprung from the warrior. Piao Bo fell to

the ground, as the boy bounded off down the mountain, soon lost in the gusting snow.

The warrior stood, dusting off his coat. As his hand passed over the snow, it melted, and lukewarm water splattered the ground. He examined the feather. It was red, with flakes of shimmering yellow and blue, like a candle flame, when he held it by the pinion. It was beautiful, and he knew, instinctively, that it held some ancient power. What that power was, however, was a mystery.

The sun dipped below the horizon.

The warrior saw the fog approach, rolling down the mountain like a cloud, against the wind. It was thick, unnaturally dense. He removed his hat and draped the feather about his neck, felt its heat on his chest; then drew his sword, bracing himself.

The fog hit him like a wall, pressing his coat to his body. His sword and clothes were coated with a layer of frost as the wet mist and freezing air enveloped them. But the frost would not hold to his body, it melted from his face and fingers.

A voice filled the fog, a grainy, coarse sound. It formed words, but they came from no language Piao Bo knew of, guttural syllables, like a boar's grunt, or a wolf's growl. The heat of panic filled his head. He lashed out at the mist, slashing madly at shadows.

Something grabbed his arm, something sharp. He felt monstrous claws dig into his flesh, and suddenly lift him from the ground, flinging him into the air. He tumbled through the fog, his body cutting tendrils in the mist. Breath escaped his lips as his back struck the ground. Like a rag doll he rolled, arms and legs bending at impossible angles, one knee snapped with a sickening crackle. He came to rest at the end of a long, smeared trail of reddened snow. Blood pooled at his knee, behind his head, in the small of his back. Pain lanced up and down his body, first like fire, then, slowly, it faded, till it was naught but a warm glow.

Then there was no pain.

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Piao Bo stood. His clothes were torn and tattered, the fine coat he'd won in battle battered all to shreds. His sword was nowhere to be seen, a piece of his hat rested close by his body on the ground.

His body.

On the ground.

There it was, his corpse, bent and broken, shattered bones jutting from flesh, jaw crushed, spine splintered. He reached out to touch it. His hand passed through the skewed remains of the dead body. He stepped back, mouth agape. Frantic, he rubbed his torso up and down, feeling his own body. His new body, the one in which he stood... It felt solid enough...

But the wind no longer whipped his coat...

Snowflakes blew right through his face...

He dropped to his knees, and blinked. Rapidly.

“Shocking, isn't it?” a voice, hollow, like a sickly old man, asked from behind him. “For some reason, the dead are always surprised.”

The ghostly warrior stood and turned to face the voice. He saw nothing. No snow, no mountainside, no sky; just a long emptiness, stretching from horizon to horizon. A darkness, impermiabile.

“Who...said that?” Piao Bo asked the black.

“Who? What. I am IT. I am the end of men like you. I am lack, I am empty, the gaping maw. I am nothing. I am death...” the emptiness was suddenly filled by the sky, the clouds, the mountains, the snow, all save a thin man-shaped partition. “...embodied.”

“You're death?” Piao Bo asked.

“In that I am an absence of life, yes.” The figure now stood directly beside the dead warrior,

though it had taken not a single step. “However, like my antithesis, I am far more...encompassing.”

“Your antithesis?...You mean Life?”

“Life, Nirvana, God. These are all names mortal uses for it. It prefers to be known as Origin.”

“But you're stalling. It's about time we get going. You've got an eternity of lacking to start on.”

The figure placed a hand-shaped void on Piao Bo's shoulder.

A light flashed, bright, blue and hot. The world seemed to burst into flames, a universal immolation, he felt his body burn away, watched his corpse turn to ashes. A horrible screaming filled the air, and the fire was gone.

The void-figure appeared, about 10 feet from Piao Bo. The warrior stood, tense. He felt the wind tickle his skin, watched his coat dance in the breeze, felt the chill in the air, saw snow gather on his shoulder. He looked to where his corpse had been, now only a puddle of melted snow, outlined in black ash.

“Fascinating...” the void spoke. “Truly...fascinating...”

“What...what's happened...” Piao Bo's voice was emotionless, blank. He was too confused to feel.

The void appeared at his side. “It seems something has brought you back from the dead.” one of its spectral hands reached out and stroked a strand of Piao-Bo's hair, bleached a sickly white. “And it seems that something took only a single hair as payment.”

“How...”

“I suspect it had something to do with the feather around your neck. A Phoenix, those birds are notoriously hard to keep dead.”

The warrior grabbed at his neck, but the feather was gone.

“Oh, it's not there *anymore*. It burned away with your corpse, perhaps leaving some reviving magics in you. It's the most likely explanation, regardless, you've returned from death.”

“So...I'm...”

“You're immortal.” the void seemed to shrug. “Rather bizarre, actually. Never heard of anything like this before. A mortal turned immortal by a beast's magic...”

Piao Bo stood, staring at his body. It felt the same as his old one, sans shattered skeleton. He rubbed his arms, flexed his muscles. Everything felt natural, but... younger.

“Ahem...” the void mimicked clearing its throat; it had no throat to clear. “Weren't you on some kind of errand?”

The void grabbed Piao Bo by the hand, and they were gone.

They reappeared a ways down the mountain, just above the tree line, on the goat trail.

“How...why are we here?” the stunned warrior asked.

“That fog demon wasn't satiated with your death, it's still on its way to the village.”

“It slaughtered me last time, and now I have no weapon.” The warrior was frantic. “Are you going to throw me at it until I succeed? And why do you care?”

“I don't.” The void reached inside itself and withdrew a long, wickedly curved weapon. “Use this. It was forged by a giant from the rib of a forest god. That pathetic chunk of steel you called a weapon would have been useless against the demon.”

Piao Bo took the sword and felt its weight. “Why are you helping me if you don't care?”

“You're a phenomenon, and I'm fascinated. I want to see what you can do. ”

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The fog rolled through the woods, along the goat trail, over trees, enveloping them in mist. A skulk of foxes stood several yards above the trail, watching the fog pass. One of them snickered, grinning.

It delved deeper into the forest, unopposed, a force of nature, performing its natural function. The fog devoured everything in its path, only to spit it back out in passing.

A light breeze picked up, blowing against the established wind. The two currents struggled, briefly, before trucing, embracing, dancing in a spiral, kicking up snow, a whirlwind within the fog.

The gusty vortex expanded, growing, pushing against the mist, grabbing it up, casting it away. A growl erupted from the dank fog, a cry of protest and confusion. The winds pressed harder, spinning, twirling, circling.

Soon, the fog had been pushed back, the winds swirled, vicious, around a tornado's eye; not only fighting the mists, but pulling up the snow within their borders, revealing a twining circle etched carefully in the earth with a blade's tip. In the center of this circle, stood the hulking demon.

It pressed its body tight to the ground, four mighty claws gripping the earth, holding itself down, for fear the winds would cast it into the air. Its jowly mandible open wide, crying in the voices of the boar, the bear, the wolf. Tufted ears pressed flat to its skull, wispy, silvered fur standing on end. Terrified, exposed, the fog demon without its fog.

The warrior appeared, torn clothes rippling in the winds as he leapt from a tree branch, through the swirling ring; sword held to strike. He fell upon the demon, slashing along its flank, spilling its boiling demon's blood, inciting its wrath. He rolled to duck a retaliating claw. The demon turned to face him as he planted his feet.

It roared a challenge; he roared back.

The demon leapt.

The warrior thrust his blade into the cold earth, cutting a final rune into the mystic circle's design.

He dropped to the ground, flattening his chilled body against frosted earth as his magics pulled the spiraling winds toward the center of the circle. The air churned in protest as the gusts collided,

collapsed into a sphere the size of a needlepoint. The demon screamed as the ferocious and unforgiving wind closed around him, crushing his body to nothing.

Piao Bo stood, body shaking from adrenaline. His chest heaved, his arms went slack. He ran a hand through his hair, somehow able to pick out the one white strand from a sea of black. Immortal, he was. But his body still grew weary.

The void appeared at his side, surveying the scene.

“I feel you've underused my gift.”

The warrior chuckled. “Like you said, I could never win in a fair fight.”

“True.” the void began to shrink. “Hah. It seems too much time has passed since your death. Order won't allow me to interfere in your affairs any longer. Pity, you're a truly interesting pheno-” the void was filled.

Piao Bo stood, alone in the forest, cold. It was night, and he could barely see. He looked to the goat trail at his feet, sighed, sheathed his sword, and began the downhill trek to the village. In the distance, a young boy, with a fox's face, giggled at his most mischievous prank.