**The Ba Jiao Gui.**

Yasmin looked out of the coach window at a mesmerising view. Mesmerising and vertiginous, because the narrow road clung to the side of a mountain on one side and dropped hundreds of feet into a wide valley on the other. Beyond the valley through which a lazy river undulated were verdant slopes giving way to a other range of purple, mist-shrouded mountains some miles away across the wide valley. She looked again at the river glittering in the sunshine and tried to contend with the mind-blowing natural forces that, according to her o’llevel geography lessons, carved out landscapes like this.

“And this definitely ISN’T pre-communist China?” she asked, just for confirmation as she looked at a wagon pulled by oxen and driven by what she tried not to think of as a ‘coolie’ in a wide brimmed hat because she was sure that wasn’t a politically correct term. The wagon halted with its wheels half over a roadside drainage ditch to make way for the coach belonging to a richer class of traveller. The man kept his eyes down as one who knew his place until they had gone..

“It is Xian Xian,” The Doctor answered. “A planet colonised by humans from China who, having arrived by deep space cruise ships then abandoned all technology and sought a simpler way of life such as their ancestors had known.”

“So…. All the traditional Chinese customs?” Yas asked.

“Everything except foot binding and dog-eating festivals,” The Doctor assured her. “Though the roles women are expected to play in Xian Xian society are rather better than they were on Earth. In fact, the Mandarin whose territory we are visiting is Lady Tseng. I’ve met her twice before, in two different incarnations, so she will understand my latest phase. I’m looking forward to seeing how things are since I helped rid her daughter of a nasty parasitical alien occupying her brain.”

“That can happen?” Yasmin asked.

“Rarely,” The Doctor assured her. “We’re nearly there. Look… Tseng palace is just another mile ahead.”

Yasmin couldn’t see anything remotely resembling a palace at first, then as the road twisted around the mountain and further down into the valley, she saw a cluster of tall pagoda like roofs that appeared to be clinging to the mountain. As they drew closer she could see that the palace was, indeed, built against the base of a sheer escarpment. A high wall surrounded it, and beneath that a village huddled. It was one of those places where work and leisure took place outdoors. Weaving, spinning, basket making, cooking, woodwork, forging of metal, all went on while children played and elderly people sat and watched.

Along the main road to the palace gate class distinctions were again obvious as the people paused about their work and bowed as in reverence to those who travelled by such a conveyance.

“You would think people starting again on a new world would have eradicated poverty,” Yasmin commented.

“They’re not poor. They have food and warm homes,” The Doctor told her. “Schools, medicines. Everything that poverty is measured against. What they haven’t eradicated is class distinction. There is still a strata of society who work by the sweat of their brow. But they are not unhappy.”

Yasmin wasn’t wholly convinced. But then how DO you define poverty. All that talk about kids going hungry without school dinners during the holidays always struck her as a bit off. None of the kids running around the estate where her parents and sister still lived looked hungry. Jamie Oliver might do his nut about the beans on toast/fish finger and chips style of fare they were filling up on, but they were ok.

And maybe these people, some of whom were cooking something far more complicated than fish fingers in huge pots over open fires in the street, ate rather better than that. And they probably didn’t need sixty inch TVs, automatic washing machines or X-box consoles so they wouldn’t feel hard up without them.

Inside the palace walls poverty and deprivation had never been heard of. Yasmin and The Doctor were escorted by servants in red and gold livery along corridors hung with fine silk hangings. These puzzled Yasmin at first, then she realised that, from the faux silk throws on her mum’s sofa through her local mosque, to the Baitul Futuh , the huge central mosque in London she had visited once with her family when she was twelve, she had mostly known interior décor as the non-figurative art of Islam with its intricate geometric patterns and abstract shapes. This palace was the polar opposite. It was ALL figurative. Dancing girls and gilded aristocrats were crammed onto every length of delicately embroidered silk. The only designs that weren’t of human likenesses were animals – dragons, lions, serpents of all sorts, huge insects that she really hoped had been drawn out of scale with the humans.

But very definitely a culture unlike her own.

The receiving room was a luxurious blend of red lacquer, gilding and even bigger and more magnificent silk tapestries full of that figurative art, all telling what Yasmin was sure had to be fascinating legends from ancient China if she had time to look at them closely.

The Mandarin, Lady Tseng, was an elderly woman, perhaps in her seventies, her face lined deeply, her hair silvery white. But she had an elegance about her when she stood to greet her honoured guests and a haughty, aristocratic air when she sent an attendant to fetch refreshments. She was dressed in what Yasmin knew, though she wasn’t sure why she knew, was called a cheongsam. It was a silk dress that closely hugged the Lady’s slender figure from a little round collar to just above her silk slippers. In a dress like that, foot binding wasn’t needed to ensure short, dainty steps. The servant girls who shuffled back into the room with wine served in stemless gold goblets and trays of exotic food had about twenty centimetres of slit in the side seam of their cheongsams to allow them to get around quickly but the Mandarin herself had no such concession. People moved at her speed when she walked.

It must have been her own fashion choice, Yasmin reasoned. Lady Tseng was the boss, in charge of a whole district, like a landlord, mayor and judge all rolled into one. Nobody, surely, told her what she had to wear or how to walk.

Yasmin and The Doctor were invited to sit at a long, low table where the refreshments were set. Silk cushions were their seats. Yasmin watched Lady Tseng half lying, half sitting - ‘side saddle’- with her legs together beneath the tight dress. The Doctor in her usual culottes and braces sat straight backed with her legs crossed yoga style. Yasmin chose something of a compromise, sitting upright but with her legs to one side, a police officer’s posture from which she could spring up quickly should the need arise..

The wine was heady and the dainty finger food a variety of sweet, savoury and spicy flavours, none of them anything like the aperitifs at the all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet in Sheffield city centre that Yasmin had occasionally visited with friends.

The conversation mostly went over her head as The Doctor and Lady Tseng talked about the problems of being a Mandarin. A lot of it seemed to be a daily round of people bringing disputes and grievances for judgement. Mostly they were of the ‘which brother owns that ox’ sort of complaint. There were rent quibbles and apprentices demanding better payments from their masters. Once, last year, a dispute about ownership of a horse had led to murder and Lady Tseng had to have the man sent to the prison at Xian Xian city under sentence of death. The Doctor agreed that she had no choice.

Yasmin was a little shocked. Capital punishment wasn’t something she was accustomed to, growing up in twenty-first century Britain, and she had rather assumed that The Doctor’s views on such things would have been more on the liberal side.

“On my world there was instant vaporisation or a minimum ten thousand years in cryogenic prison,” The Doctor said. “Xian Xian’s crime and punishment IS liberal by comparison.”

It wasn’t exactly an answer, but before she could question either The Doctor or Lady Tseng further a gilded servant announced the entrance of Madame Li Su and her daughter, Su Ling.

Daughter Su Ling had little to say since she was about a month old and wrapped in so many layers of silk only a patch of face was visible until her mother was seated at the table and had dutifully handed the child to Lady Tseng, the very proud grandmother.

The coming of a baby into any group of women has a predictable effect. Even The Doctor, for whom motherhood probably wasn’t going to happen any time, smiled widely. Yasmin, who considered it a possibility for her future once her career as a police officer was assured and she found somebody she wanted to raise children with, but very certainly not yet, couldn’t help hoping she might be allowed to hold the baby for a little while.

“I’m glad to see you well and happy,” The Doctor told Lin Su, and Yasmin recalled the almost throwaway line about ridding Lady Tseng’s daughter of an alien brain parasite. “And happily married?”

“Lord Changming… the Mandarin’s brother and trade ambassador from ChengChang district,” the young lady explained. “He and I….”

“He came to negotiate a trade agreement with my counterpart on the other side of the mountain,” Lady Tseng said with an indulgent tone. “He spent far more time walking in the gardens and sitting by fountains than he did in my presence, but the agreement was completed and he returned to his brother with a rather different proposal to be brokered. The match was eminently suitable, of course, and I am pleased to see my daughter happy. Mandarin Cheng is unmarried and childless, therefore little Su Ling embodies a future merging of the districts under the House of Tseng which is also agreeable to all.”

“Very agreeable,” The Doctor agreed. “May I….”

She reached and took the baby in her arms. Yasmin knew The Doctor wasn’t a medical doctor, as such, but she got the feeling that she was performing a little subtle paediatric examination as she held the baby. All must have been well since she allowed Yasmin a brief cuddle before the mother was allowed to reclaim her child.

“Assuring your family’s future through healthy progeny is the best of ambitions,” The Doctor commented. Perhaps there was a hidden reference to Lin Su’s past trouble…. Or not.

“Where is Changming this afternoon?” Lady Tseng asked.

“He and his retinue rode out to meet the Honourable Inspector of Taxes on the road from Xian Xian,” Lin Su answered. “A man with such important duties must be honoured by an escort.”

“Indeed, he must. They will all be here by nightfall, I trust. There will be a grand banquet in tribute to The Doctor and Yasmin as well as the Honourable Inspector.”

The term ‘grand banquet’ promised much. In preparation Yasmin was introduced to bathing with no less than four attendants. She was then carefully dressed in a silk cheongsam of pale green with yellow butterflies flying around in a spiral from neck to hem. Her hair was piled up on top of her head and decorated with more silk butterflies, and the effect when she saw herself in a mirror was impressive.

“I’m Madame Butterfly,” she said, though suspecting that probably wasn’t a good thing to be in any literal sense. She had never seen the opera, but she had a vague idea that the girl probably died in the end. Still, she felt wonderfully feminine in the costume. She spent a lot of her time in police uniform or practical clothing for running around alien planets. It was good to feel like a girl for once.

The Doctor was not in a cheongsam. Instead she was wearing loose silk trousers and a long overshirt with wide, bell like sleeves. It was something like what Yasmin’s grandmother would call a Salwar Kameez, but there was probably a Chinese name for it. Like the Salwar it was a gender neutral choice, though The Doctor managed to look feminine in it all the same. Her theme was lotus flowers on the silk and in her hair.

“High born ladies of Xian Xian,” The Doctor said as they were escorted to the banqueting hall by male servants in purple silk with ornamental swords at their hips.

Lady Tseng and her daughter looked like versions of ‘traditional’ Chinese willow pattern plates, the older woman in translucent blue with white detail, the younger in white with blue patterns.

The men wore silks, too, but they had no chance of outshining the women. Nor did they seem to want to do so. Lord Changming was very attentive to his wife and mother-in-law. The honourable inspector of taxes, by name of Lei Jing Geo, looked like a civil servant dining with ‘old money’ aristocrats might look anywhere in the universe, keen to mind his manners and impress his ‘betters’.

There was entertainment during the sumptuous meal of many courses in the form of a musician playing a ‘pipa’, a Chinese lute, and a very pretty young woman who told traditional stories in song.

It was mostly just background sound, but Yasmin found herself paying attention to one of the stories as The Doctor and Lady Tseng talked intergalactic economics. It concerned a supernatural being called the Ba Jiao Gui.

“Did I understand that right?” she asked the Honourable Taxman. “The Banana Tree Ghost?”

“You did, Madame,” Lei Jing assured her. “The Chinese Banana Tree was transplanted to Xian Xian many generations ago and grows in most districts, though its fruits are not edible as you might imagine.”

“And the ghost?”

“It is to be hoped that we did not import those along with the seeds of the trees,” Lei Jing answered.

Yasmin agreed. The ghosts, according to the song were not to be trifled with. They could be summoned with gifts and promises and in old China they were often consulted over matters of chance like lottery numbers. How many people actually got the big win that way is uncertain, but if, having been given such fortune by the Ba Jiao Gui, proper thanks were not given, then there were terrible forfeits, usually the life of a loved one.

Harsh, Yasmin thought, but perhaps not surprising. It was never wise to double cross a fairy in any culture.

But it was just a story, she reminded herself. Such colourful tales turned up everywhere, some of them remaining buried in the past, others given a new shine by Disney. Either way, nobody took them seriously.

Nobody except Lord Changming. Yasmin noticed his face as he stared at the singer. If she didn’t know better she would have thought he was actually scared. His face was pale and waxy, his lips trembled and his eyes were wide as if in shock.

The song ended and the pipa tune quickened in tempo. The next offering was a comical song of a young man who asked another kind of demon or ghost for a love potion and ended up in a situation much like Titania in a Midsummer Night’s Dream, except he was doomed to permanently declare his love for a long haired mountain goat.

A MALE goat, at that, which was the rib-tickling punchline of the tale judging by the laughter around the table. Yasmin thought Lord Changming’s laughter was a little bit forced. He was definitely shaken by the darker tale of the Ba Jiao Gui. Every so often as the evening wore on, Yasmin noticed the young Lord’s expression fade to something like anxiety, only to be fixed back into an attentive smile before his wife or Lady Tseng might notice.

She mentioned it to The Doctor later after they had dismissed their attendants and were settling down to sleep in their tapestry rich guest chamber.

“This would be in the way of a copper’s intuition?” The Doctor asked her. “Suspicious body language and the like?”

“Yes, you could call it that. Changming was worried about something… something that the story of the Ba Jiao Gui triggered. When the girl was singing he was absolutely petrified, and later he phased out all the time as if it was preying on his mind.”

“Mmmm.” The Doctor thought about the matter briefly then shook her head.

“Not our problem. He’s a Mandarin lord. He has power of life and death over a whole territory. He should know how to solve his own problems.”

Put that way, Yasmin had to agree. She slipped inside the silk sheets of a huge, luxurious bed and thoroughly appreciated the wealthy end of Xian Xian society even if she still wasn’t sure about the lower class lives she had glimpsed.

She slept soundly until just before dawn when a blood-curdling scream roused the whole household.

“It’s inside the palace,” The Doctor said as she and Yasmin leapt from their beds awake and alert.

There were no more screams, but as they ran along a corridor and down a flight of steps there were urgent cries for help. The Doctor pressed past two young serving girls in their night attire and knelt beside a figure stretched pathetically on the floor.

“Who was she?” The Doctor asked as she confirmed that the young woman was dead.

“She…. She is my daughter’s night nurse,” said Madame Li Su as she arrived at the scene. “Her name is… was… Ang Fu Wai. She….”

“Yas…. The nursery,” The Doctor ordered peremptorily, cutting off all other thoughts. Yasmin ran just a little slower than Madame Li Su and reached the nursery with her. The need for somebody in that room with her police experience if not her jurisdiction was obvious.

Her heart was in her mouth as she ran. The thought of harm done to the baby was just too horrible. When she saw the window drapes blowing as if somebody had entered or left that way she thought the very worst.

But a gurgling sound from the crib relieved her. After a brief glance at the child she ran to the window and looked out.

There was a long drop to the garden below and no sign of a rope or ladder. At first she was sure there was nobody around in the half light, then she spotted Lord Changming. He was half dressed, shoeless, but thrashing plants to pieces with a long sword as if he sought an intruder hiding among them. He was particularly brutal to what was either a short tree or tall shrub with big spiky yellow blossoms that he was hacking all over before taking a long swing and severing the whole of the bush from its stem like a swift beheading.

He almost looked as if he thought the tree was the murderer and he was taking out his revenge upon it.

There was movement behind her and Yasmin turned to see Madame Li Su lifting the baby from the crib. It was only then that the idea of a ‘changeling’ came into Yasmin’s mind, but the mother seemed to know her own child and The Doctor, hurrying to join her, quickly pronounced ‘no harm done’.

“But who killed the nurse?” Madame Li Su asked. Having assured that the child was well, she was justifiably concerned for the servant whose body, respectfully covered in a cloth, still lay at the scene of the crime.

“That still remains to be seen,” The Doctor answered her as they stood by the body. “Death was by ligature strangulation. There are thin marks around her neck from some kind of cord that was pulled tightly until she was asphyxiated.”

Yasmin shuddered. It sounded like something out of CSI. And perhaps it was exactly that. The Doctor was the crime scene officer, and she would be the one to find out who had done this terrible thing – with Yasmin as her assistant. She briefly wondered if it ought to be the other way around. Yasmin was a REAL police officer after all.

But The Doctor was the one with the Police Box and a dozen lifetimes of experience. She was in charge.

“The murder weapon isn’t here,” The Doctor continued. “And I can’t say for sure what it was. Not an ordinary rope or cord. The marks are a strange texture and uneven thickness. I’ll need to think about that.”

“Was she killed here?” Yasmin asked, looking around to see if something that could be the weapon might be lying unnoticed.

“I think so,” The Doctor confirmed. “There wasn’t time between the girl screaming and all of us reaching the corridor. She must have run from the nursery, drawing her killer away from the baby. But that leaves us with the problem of where the killer went. Ruling out the window where Lord Changming was interrogating the plantlife there are only two directions….”

“And people came running both ways,” Yasmin confirmed.

“I want to talk to everyone in the Palace,” The Doctor announced. She stood and pointed to a pair of guards making the huge mistake of being seen doing nothing. “You… see that the doors are all locked. Nobody leaves the palace. You…” She pointed to one of the serving girls. “Rouse the kitchen staff. See that everyone is given breakfast, then interviews will be held in the receiving room.”

The Doctor was only a guest at the palace, but the note of authority in her voice was obeyed by all. Even Lady Tseng herself made no objection and in the receiving room two chairs were set on the dais so that she and The Doctor sat in equal status. Madame Li Su and her husband were next in status.

Yasmin took a place beside the court recorder and the honourable Tax inspector. She watched with no little awe as The Doctor, who faced even the direst perils with a grin and a clever quip conducted the murder inquiry with a solemn tone and a stern expression that booked no dissembling while, at the same time showing gentle patience to nervous and bewildered servants.

Unfortunately, the result of a whole morning’s interrogation was a huge negative. Nobody knew anything that might identify the murderer.

The Doctor and Lady Tseng conferred in low voices, neither entirely sure what more could be done.

“Hold on,” Yasmin said, interrupting their conference. “There’s some people you haven’t spoken to. The entertainers from last night….”

“They did not remain in the palace,” Lady Tseng answered. “There is a house outside the walls where such visitors are accommodated. It… is a tradition.”

‘Mummers and acrobats must be outside the town boundaries by dusk’, thought Yasmin. A municipal rule found almost everywhere that travelling performers were associated with vagabonds and thievery.

“But they might know something,” The Doctor suggested. “Have them summoned.”

The summoning was done with alacrity. The rest of the household was sent about their duties as the pair of musicians were brought into the receiving room.

The pipa player looked bewildered by the summons and answered the questions put to him in a nervous but almost certainly truthful tone.

The woman, who identified herself for the court reporter as Mi Sang Miao, spoke with a confidence that ought to have convinced all present of her innocence, but, strangely it did not. There was something in her voice that caused consternation to anyone who had learnt to listen like a police officer.

And Yasmin had certainly learnt to do that. She was also very good at interpreting body language which was much harder to control.

Either way the woman was lying.

And something else. It was even more subtle than her attempt to deceive, but Yasmin recognised it from her years as a lowly probationary officer of the South Yorkshire Police Service.

Contempt.

In a world where social hierarchy was everything, standing in the presence of the ruling Mandarin, and The Doctor, who was a figure of authority ANYWHERE, this lowly travelling musician was behaving like a BMW driver in a sharp suit who didn’t think he had to explain to a female muslim in a constable’s uniform why he had parked in the disabled zone outside the leisure centre.

She wasn’t even looking at Lady Tseng. Rather she was looking to her left side where Lord Changming sat beside his wife, Madame Li Su, their baby cradled in his arms.

Changming rose from his seat, slowly, looking back at the singer with an expression that was very easy to interpret.

Fear.

The same fear he had displayed last night whenever he thought nobody was looking.

“The Ba Jiao Gui!” Yasmin exclaimed. Later she wondered if it was a copper’s intuition or a far deeper, primal instinct that let her put together all that body language and facial expression into a likely explanation. “Doctor…. The Ba Jiao Gui!”

The Doctor looked at Yasmin, then quickly turned to look at Mi Sang Miao – if that was her true name.. In the moment that took, the singer’s face turned a mottled green with a texture like cracked dry mud., Her eyes lost all their colour except a bloodshot yellow and her lips curled back to reveal sharp brown incisors. The whole face contorted into an expression of pure hatred directed at Changming. She let out a low keen that had little human voice left in it and thrust out her arms. The wide sleeves of her shirt fell back as thin vines shot from her wrists. Yasmin was probably the only witness who thought of Spiderman throwing out his webs. The The Ba Jiao Gui’s vines lashed out just as quickly, tangling around Changming’s legs and tightening until he could no longer stand. Yasmin rushed towards him, grabbing the baby from his arms as he fell to his knees. The Doctor put herself in front of them all, drawing her sonic screwdriver from within her gown and aiming it at the grey-green vine. There was a sizzle and an acrid smell as the vine was severed.

“The same texture as the ligature that killed Ang Fu Wai – the nursemaid who we have all managed to forget about in all this drama,” The Doctor confirmed, grasping a piece of it in her hand. “Strong stuff, nearly unbreakable. We have our murderer.”

Lady Tseng’s guards had already surrounded the girl, two of them holding sharp swords against her wrists, just above the place where she had sprouted deadly vegetation. Another held a dagger against her neck.

“She IS the Ba Jiao Gui,” Yasmin confirmed. “The banana tree ghost. Though not so very much of a ghost, really.”

“She’s flesh and blood,” The Doctor confirmed after a sweep with the sonic in analysis more. “She’s also plant fibre and chlorophyll, which is actually not totally unique in a universe of amazing diversity. I was once flirted with by a tree called Jabe…..”

“Yes….” Yasmin quickly cut of one of The Doctor’s anecdotes. “But why? What does she want with the baby? Because it IS little Su Ling she wants, not her dad, not Ang Fu Wai who stopped her in the nursery.”

“Yes…,” Madame Li Su demanded. “Why HAS she been trying to take our baby?”

She directed her accusation at her husband, still kneeling, his legs still tightly tangled in pieces of the severed vines, his head bowed in unmistakeable shame.

“You were so ill throughout your confinement,” Changming said to his wife. “I feared the child would not be born alive. I… I made a bargain with the Ba Jiao Gui…. I did it for you, and for our daughter. I did it for you….’

“What was the bargain?” Lady Tseng asked in a quiet, controlled tone which nonetheless had an edge of suppressed anger that may yet be unleashed.

“He promised me the child if I assured it would be born healthy,” said the Ba Jiao Gui as Changming floundered for words.

“You’re kidding!” Yasmin exclaimed. “Who in their right mind would do that? Your own wife… your own baby…..”

Madame Li Su might have asked the same question if she was not holding back her anger in emulation of her mother.

“I never meant to keep the bargain,” Lord Changming protested. “I would never have given her the baby….”

The Ba Jiao Gui snarled incoherently, but her meaning was clear enough.

“So you are dishonourable as well as a disgrace to your father’s House,” Lady Tseng said to Lord Changming with a little more of the suppressed anger showing. “You do well to hang your head. You should rightly be ashamed of yourself.”

“Yes, he should,” The Doctor agreed. “But that is a family matter. What we must deal with here is justice for an innocent young woman who did nothing but try to protect the baby from an intruder.” She turned to look into the burning eyes of the Ba Jiao Gui and shook her head safely. ‘ For that, YOU should be ashamed and you SHOULD be punished. And I’m actually sorry about that, because it is actually HIS fault for making that bargain. Once it was made you were bound to fulfil it in every way – by making sure the baby was born fit and healthy and with all ten fingers and toes - and also by claiming the child as your end of the bargain.”

“It is a geas upon me to close every bargain I make,” the Ba Jiao Gui admitted. “The nursemaid… tried to stop me. But… you should know… her innocent death lifts the geas… the bargain is unmade. I cannot pursue it any longer. The child is safe from me.”

“That is honourably said,” Madame Li Su conceded. But….”

“But Ang Fu Wai is still dead,” said The Doctor, again with a sorrowful shake of the head.

The Doctor stepped back, knowing that the rest was out of her hands. Lady Tseng, still calm and controlled in her tone formally pronounced the Ba Jiao Gui guilty of murder.

“I can be merciful,” she added. “I will not have you executed., “But you will be jailed for the rest of your life. My geas on you is that you will not use any of your unnatural gifts upon your jailors, amd should you escape your jail your life will be forfeit. Is that clear?”

“It is clear, and it is a bargain,” the Ba Jiao Gui replied. Lady Tseng nodded. The guards took the guilty creature away. For a long few minutes nobody else spoke or moved, then Madame Su Li stepped towards her husband.

“For the sake of our child I forgive your dishonourable behaviour, and will not cast you from her or me,” she said. Lady Tseng nodded her approval of her daughter’s idea of a family intervention and smiled faintly.

“Ang Fu Wai will be given an honourable funeral. Her family will be compensated. Her name will be remembered and revered in this House.”

“Indeed,” The Doctor added in agreement.