

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Dragon Horse

Peter Ward

Contents

Cover
About the Book
Title Page
Dedication
List of Characters
Map
Prologue

Part One: Maracanda, 818 AD

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10

Part Two: An Lushan and the Darhad

Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Part Three: Initiation on the Road East

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Part Four: Rokshan and the Horsemen

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Part Five: Paths to the Summit

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Part Six: War and Sacrifice

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Part Seven: Summoning and Transformation

Chapter 40

Part Eight: Death and Rebirth

Chapter 41

Chapter 42

Chapter 43

Chapter 44

Chapter 45

Chapter 46

Chapter 47

Chapter 48

Acknowledgements

Author's Historical Note: The Silk Road

Bibliography and Further Reading

About the Author

Praise

Copyright

About the Book

‘The sleeping dragon awakes!’

Aeons ago, winged dragons spread terror across the Chinese empire. Their descendants, magnificent horses bred and ridden by the Wild Horsemen, are known as *dragon horses*.

But now an ancient evil is stirring – and two brothers, Rokshan and An Lushan, are about to be drawn into battle. Rokshan must travel to the Valleys of the Horsemen – and on to the Plain of the Dead where the great stallion Stargazer, lord of the horses, is waiting for him.

While his brother, An Lushan, chooses a different path entirely ...

Rich, vibrant and full of the myths of old Imperial China.

DRAGON HORSE

PETER WARD

CORGI BOOKS

*This edition for my mother and father, with love and
gratitude*

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Gods, Immortals and Guardian spirits

The Wise Lord, supreme deity, creator of Heaven and Earth and all things in them

Chu Jung, Spirit of Fire and Heavenly Executioner
(first servant of the Wise Lord)

Corhanuk, higher guardian spirit and messenger to the Wise Lord

The Shadow-without-a-name, fallen higher guardian spirit (formerly favourite of the Wise Lord)

The Crimson King, fallen higher guardian spirit, keeper of the Gates of Hell

The Jade Spirit, fallen higher guardian spirit, keeper of the Wheel of Rebirth

Beshbaliq, fallen lower guardian spirit, accomplice to the Shadow

Spirit of the Four Winds, spirit of nature

Kuan Yin, goddess of mercy and protector of travellers

Guan Di, god of merchants, scholars and warriors

Shou Lao, storyteller

Horses and Dragons

Stargazer, lord of the horses, grey stallion, servant to none

Breeze Whisperer, chestnut mare, Cetu's mount

Storm Gatherer, black stallion, brother to Breeze Whisperer and Zerafshan's mount

Han Garid, lord of the thunder dragons

The Wild Horsemen

Cetu, Waymaster, mentor to Rokshan and unelected leader of the Fifth Valley clan

Draxurion, clan leader of the Plains Horsemen

Gandhara, clan leader of the First Valley of the Horsemen

Akthal, clan leader of the Second Valley of the Horsemen

Mukhravee, clan leader of the Third Valley of the Horsemen

Sethrim, clan leader of the Fourth Valley of the Horsemen

Lerikos, brother to Gandhara, a scout

Kezenway, his son, a scout

Salamundi, a young warrior of the First Valley Horsemen

Sisters of the Serenadhi, horse-singers

Sumiyaa, lead horse-singer

Maracanda

Teeming capital of China's Western Empire

Naha, founder of the Vaishravana trading business

Zerafshan, his brother, formerly military attaché to the imperial court and commander of the Imperial Cavalry Corps

An Lushan, Naha's elder son

Rokshan, Naha's younger son

Jiang Zemin, leader of the Council of Elders

Kanandak ('Kan'), an acrobat and Rokshan's best friend

Ah Lin, the family servant

Vagees Krishnan, the head clerk

Gupta, his son, head cameleer

Chen Ming, caravan master and friend of Naha

Qalim, caravan escort

Bhathra, caravan escort

People of the Darhad, wandering nomads of the north

Sarangerel, spellweaver and shamaness

Lianxang, her granddaughter, friend of Rokshan and An Lushan

Dalgimmaron, lawsmith

Zayach, tracker
Mergen, tracker

The citadel monastery at Labrang

The abbot, First of the Elect, governing body of the
Fellowship of the Three One-eared Hares
Sung Yuan, warrior monk

Elsewhere in the Empire

Emperor H'sien-tsung, despotic ruler of China and all
Known Lands, 'Son of Heaven'

General Arkan Shakar, of the Imperial Light Cavalry
Brigade

Vartkhis Boghos, rich Armenian merchant and bitter rival
of Vaishnavana's

Currency: *celehks* and *taals*

Measurements: *li* - the Chinese mile, approximately one
third of a mile

yin - approximately one metre

1 candle ring = 1 hour

... In the beginning the Wise Lord was alone. Master of all creation, He longed to share the wonders of the world He had wrought, and He looked anew at the five precious elements from which He had shaped all things - water, earth, wood, fire and metal.

He breathed afresh on each of them, and conjured countless colours, shapes and feelings from the elements, and they danced a wild dance of life. But the Wise Lord grew tired of the dance, and made spirit creatures of them. He called them dragon spirits, because they burned so brightly with the fire of life.

He sent them to live in the world, where they became invisible spirits of the forests and mountains, rivers and streams, lakes and oceans, valleys and plains and deserts. The Wise Lord then created guardian spirits to serve Him; some of these guardian spirits He sent into the world, where they became men and women. But in time they forgot the dragon spirits with whom they had shared the world in the beginning. The dragon spirits became jealous, believing that mankind had turned the Wise Lord away from them; and in the madness of their envious rage, they turned into monsters.

The dragon spirits of fire were the fiercest and most powerful of all of them. Shedding their invisibility, they assumed the most terrifying countenance and grew wings, commanding the skies and terrorizing the people as dragons ...

Source: unknown, but believed to be part of *The Book of Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord*; partial scroll found in 807 AD

by an imperial envoy en route to Maracanda.

PROLOGUE

MANY AEONS AGO, AT THE DAWN OF HISTORY

Chu Jung, Spirit of Fire and Heavenly Executioner for the Wise Lord, stood like a colossus straddling the oceans and continents of the world as he confronted the last and mightiest of the rebel dragon spirits. Consumed with jealousy of mankind, Han Garid and his kind had become monsters, killing and devouring those who had once loved them as spirits of nature.

‘Why have you risen against the Wise Lord?’ Chu Jung thundered. He held his Talisman high as he moved his arm over the oceans, and the distant cries of a thousand demon gods erupted from the depths. At Chu Jung’s command, they drew the water of the oceans upwards, higher and higher into a shimmering, towering cascade that reached the sky. The world turned dark as the sun was blotted out, but Han Garid roared his defiance.

‘I am Han Garid, lord of the thunder dragons! Not even the waters of all the oceans of the world shall ever quench my fire. Join us, Chu Jung, and together we will rule the Earth and hold sway over the Heavens!’

Han Garid loosed a fearsome bolt of fire that roared and crackled around them, but Chu Jung’s own mantle of fire protected him, and in the jagged half-light he looked upon the monster that Han Garid had become.

The lord of the thunder dragons was huge – at least nine horses’ lengths long – and his wingspan must have been five across. There were bony ridges across his face, and his

long reptilian head had a single horn the length of a man's outstretched arm, which swept back and curved into a peak. His piercing red eyes shone with a cruel intelligence, and the brilliant coloration of his skin – a shimmering gold and green, shot through with the palest blue – was the only reminder of the beautiful spirit creature he had once been.

'You joined forces with the rebellious guardian spirit who was once the favourite of the Wise Lord. He and his two fellow spirits sought to bring evil into the world and banish good for ever, but he has been vanquished,' Chu Jung told Han Garid. 'Even now he awaits his punishment. You must also come before the Wise Lord to learn of your fate and to witness his.'

Han Garid snorted a derisive bolt of fire as he spread his wings, but Chu Jung brought the cascading towers of water crashing down on him, swirling them around like an enormous net. Han Garid struggled in vain as the waters of all the oceans of the world extinguished his fire for ever.

Chu Jung then gathered the fiery dragon up and took him before the Wise Lord, who waited for them, unseen, at the edge of the universe.

There He who had created the Heavens and Earth, and everything in them, first pronounced His terrible verdict on his favourite among the guardian spirits who had dared to rebel against Him:

'From henceforth you shall be known as "the Nameless One", and you will be no more than a shadow, a sigh of the wind in the dark. I expunge all memory of you from every mortal creature. My messenger, Corhanuk, will bear witness and tell your fellow guardian spirits what has become of you.'

Then the Wise Lord spoke the sacred words and created an Arch of Darkness between the fallen guardian spirit and the living world, sealed with the recitation of his name, which would never again be spoken. And the fallen

guardian spirit, thenceforth known only as the Shadow, was banished for ever.

The Wise Lord then turned to Han Garid, sorrow in His eyes as He looked upon what the foremost of his glorious creation had become. But the Wise Lord could not bring Himself to destroy him and His first-born creatures.

‘Take Han Garid to the Pool of Life, to be with the dragon spirits of air and water and all his kind,’ the Wise Lord commanded Chu Jung. ‘There you will raise them up, to be born again.’

Chu Jung did his bidding, and his master in His wisdom wrought the essence of the dragon spirits of fire such that they would never die, placing the smallest spark of Han Garid’s immortality deep in the souls of the gentlest and most beautiful of his creatures, which came to be called *dragon horses*.

Meanwhile Corhanuk hurried to witness the Wise Lord’s punishment. But something had stirred in him as he witnessed the terrible fate of the Shadow – and a raw hunger for the power he had so nearly succeeded in wresting from the Wise Lord began to gnaw at him. A very different plan was forming in the scheming heart of the Wise Lord’s messenger: a plan so ambitious he realized it might take many aeons to bring about. He knew he must be patient and cunning if he was to serve a different master – one who surely would reward him well if he, Corhanuk, succeeded in releasing him from his perpetual imprisonment.

From that moment on, above all things he bent his sole purpose to bringing the Shadow back from beyond the Arch of Darkness – to be free once more to stalk the Earth and rule the Heavens.

PART ONE

MARACANDA, 818 AD

CHAPTER 1

THE UNEXPECTED RETURN

Kan raced through the deserted, dusty streets of Maracanda as the first slanting rays of the sun cast long shadows over the capital city of the Western Empire. He leaped over the sleeping bodies of the street people in the Grand Bazaar, gulping in the cool air. In an hour or two the extreme heat of the last few weeks would be settling like a pall over the city.

It was high summer, and the maze of winding alleys that surrounded the Grand Bazaar were overflowing with uncollected piles of waste. There had been no wind on the plains for many weeks now, so that the summer grass, usually so lush and green, was turning a scorched brown colour. The cooling northerly winds had not come, and Maracanda baked in the heat – the people muttered that it was a bad omen, another troubled sign of the times.

Kan was an acrobat. He was only thirteen but had travelled with his circus people up and down the trade roads that crisscrossed the Empire longer than any of his friends. His best friend, Rokshan, was the younger son of one of the city's richest merchants, a powerful trading family headed by the formidable Naha Vaishravana. Kan couldn't wait to tell him that their favourite storyteller, Shou Lao, known to everyone as the Old Man of the Markets, had travelled back with the circus people from their last show.

Shou Lao had not been in Maracanda for many years – and now he was back, right here, and Kan was prepared to bet ten silver *taals* that he had plenty of wonderful new stories to tell.

Kan rapped on the heavy double-fronted doors of Rokshan's house. The house servant, Ah Lin, heaved one of the doors open a crack to see who it was at such an ungodly hour; her wrinkled old face creased into a delighted smile of welcome when she saw who it was.

'Kanandak, master acrobat, is returned at last to the Western Empire's City of Dreams,' Kan sang out in his best ringmaster's voice, bowing low and beaming at her after executing a perfect circle of cartwheels.

'Come in, come in, before you wake the whole household – *master acrobat* indeed,' Ah Lin chuckled.

'No, I can't stop. Is Roksy up? He must come straight away to see somebody he hasn't set eyes on for years and years! Tell him Shou Lao, the old storyteller, is here. I'll meet him outside the school in two candle-rings.'

And he was gone, disappearing down the street in a whirling flurry of forward flips and cartwheels.

Ah Lin remembered the last time the old storyteller had been in Maracanda. Not long after he had moved on, the young mistress of the house, adored mother of Rokshan, had caught a mysterious fever and died. Ah Lin had always thought it was a strange coincidence, and maybe that's all it was, but she hadn't been able to get it out of her mind then – and now it all came flooding back.

As she watched Kan go with a worried smile on her face, she absently made the sign of the dragon – an s-shape representing the coils of the mythical creature, drawn with the nail of her thumb on her forehead, mouth and breast to ward off evil spirits. Then she shut the door as quietly as she could and disappeared inside.

The Maracanda School for Special Envoys attracted scholars – girls and boys from all over the Empire – to train as envoys for top diplomatic posts throughout all Known Lands. At fourteen, Rokshan had another two years of study ahead of him.

The school was not far from the Grand Bazaar in the city centre. The buzz and hubbub from the great market provided a constant background hum that Rokshan found strangely comforting. To wake himself up, he shook his head and ran his hands through his thick brown hair, which he grew long to cover up a deformity from birth which had left him with only one ear. It didn't bother him – he could hear perfectly well through his good ear – but all the same he liked to cover the little stub of cartilage that marked where his other ear should have been. Right now he wished he could shave his head – it would have been a lot cooler in the heat, which even at this early hour was already uncomfortable; his linen tunic was damp with sweat and his feet were slipping and sliding in his light leather sandals. Where *was* Kan? Typical of him to leave an excited message and then not turn up.

He watched the steady stream of people making their way to the Grand Bazaar – absolutely everything from all over the Empire was bought, bartered, sold and exchanged here: a family of cotton traders went by, staggering under the swaying rolls strapped to their backs.

Trading, buying and selling was the city of Maracanda's lifeblood. It was Rokshan's family's business, and that of hundreds of others too. He helped out whenever he could get time off from studying, and loved to sniff out the bargains when the caravans came in from the east, or on their way to the imperial capital.

Rokshan's family traded not only in cotton but also in damask and silk, spices, herbs and garden produce. They bought and sold everything for the home too: tables and chairs, cupboards, couches, altarpieces, earthenware

pottery goods and the finest porcelain tableware for rich merchants' tables. They imported exquisitely carved ivory chess sets and chequers boards of hardest ebony, all the way from the jungle kingdoms of the Southern Empire, as well as intricately worked jade carvings of dragons of every shape and size, which guarded the entrances of all self-respecting households in Maracanda, bringing luck and good fortune. Dragon spirits were also considered harbingers of floods and rain, so there had been a brisk trade in the jade carvings.

'Roksy! Are you coming or are you going to stand there all day?' Kan had appeared from nowhere – an old trick of his – and was now standing on his head with his legs against the wall just a short way down the street.

'I'm coming!' Rokshan shouted, pushing his way through the throng of people. 'So what's this about Shou Lao?'

'It'll cost you two silver *taals*!' Kan replied, arching his back, leaping upright and running off as Rokshan shot out an arm to grab him. 'Follow me, Roksy – and keep up!' Kan laughed over his shoulder.

He ducked off the main street and sprinted through the maze of narrow winding lanes towards the East Gate of the city, which marked the beginning – or end – of the road to Chang'an, the imperial capital. With a shout of exasperation, Rokshan set off after him. They raced round the stalls and workshops that cluttered this part of the city, hurtling along as if their lives depended on it.

'Whoa, boys, whoa! Are you riding dragon horses?' a carpet-seller yelled at them as they slowed to take a corner. At that moment a bullock cart stacked high with tall wicker baskets came creaking around the same corner. Rokshan realized they had no chance of avoiding the placid beasts drawing the cart. *Kerrumph!* Kan gasped in pain, clutching his chest as he bounced off the great thick-boned skull of one of the beasts.

He landed in a crumpled heap – Rokshan couldn't avoid him as he came skidding round the corner and went head over heels. The bullock and its bemused partner stopped dead in their tracks for a split second before rearing back in shock and confusion.

'Whoa, whoa!' the basket-trader cried, desperately trying to control the animals. 'Idiots! Get away from them!' The two boys were trying to calm the frightened animals.

'Cursed spawn of dragon's breath!' the basket-trader swore as he cracked his whip at them. The bullocks' sudden movement had upset the load and launched a tumbling cascade of wicker.

The furious basket-trader leaped down, whip in hand, and gave chase – the two boys had wisely decided not to hang around and help clear up the chaos they'd caused.

'Clumsy oafs! By the fiery whiskers of Han Garid – get back here!' the basket-trader bellowed after them, but they had disappeared.

'Fools! I'll skin you alive if I ever catch you ...' they heard faintly as they sped laughing on their way.

They were nearing the East Gate barbican now. Its double towers were twenty *yin* high, each flanking the enormous fortified gates that were tightly barred every night at dusk. As they approached, they could see guards with spears raised patrolling the walls. There were eight barbican gates to the city, all heavily guarded.

They jostled their way through a steady stream of people to the caravanserai – a maze of winding alleyways, teashops and guesthouses with open courtyards that lay just outside the city walls. It was home to a shifting population of hundreds of traders and travellers who passed through Maracanda every day – any storyteller worth his salt would find a ready audience here, and the boys knew that Shou Lao was one of the best.

They soon found where he was. A crowd had gathered in the large courtyard of one of the grander guesthouses. It

was shady and cool, with a fountain splashing in the centre. Mothers and small children, boys and girls, old men and women, travellers and even some market traders taking a break – all waited patiently for the Old Man to appear. There was a hum of expectant chatter. The two boys settled down on the steps of the covered balustrade that enclosed the courtyard.

‘Look – over there by the entrance.’ Kan nudged Rokshan. ‘Your brother – and Lianxang! I haven’t seen her for a while.’

Rokshan followed his gaze and waved a hand in greeting, but they were deep in conversation and hadn’t spotted them. An Lushan – everybody called him An’an apart from his father – was three years older than Rokshan and had just finished his last term at the School for Special Envoys. But he wasn’t going on to the Han Lin Academy in Chang’an, to continue studying to be a diplomat; he lived for the family business. One day when they were both very young, he’d solemnly told his little brother that he was going to be even richer and more important than the great Vartkhis Boghos, a merchant famed throughout all the Known Lands, and so rich, it was whispered, he only had to breathe on something and it turned to gold. Rokshan was surprised to see An’an there – his brother always dismissed the old tales with a sneer; business and trade were what he lived for.

The friend he was with was a girl from the school called Lianxang. She was a year or so older than Rokshan, and was from the remote north of the Empire; she had only been at the school for a year but had impressed everybody with her quickness. Slight and light-footed, she wore her hair cropped short and carried a long stiletto dagger at her side. Rokshan had often asked her about her people, the mysterious Darhad, wandering nomads of the north, who had always kept themselves apart from the rest of the Empire, but she always gave an evasive answer, or laughed

and gave a little shrug. But Rokshan knew that Lianxang – just like him – loved the old stories. He had often seen her in the library, immersed in the scrolls, and he suspected that the old myths and legends meant more to her than she would like to admit. Doubtless her being there explained why his brother was amongst the crowd.

A hush descended as a little boy in the front of the crowd pointed towards one of the arched entrances surrounding the courtyard. There was a shuffling of feet and clearing of throats as everyone wondered when the Old Man was going to appear. A minute or two passed before there was an intake of breath and the crowd strained to catch a glimpse of the renowned storyteller as a faint tap-tapping beyond the archway could be heard ...

CHAPTER 2

THE STORYTELLER

All eyes were on the Old Man as he made his frail, shuffling progress along the covered walkway. He leaned heavily on a carved ivory staff, which struck the stone floor with every step. He would have barely reached the shoulders of even the younger boys in the crowd, so bent with age had he become. Rokshan was as amazed at his appearance now as he'd been at the age of eight or nine when he'd last seen the storyteller – he could have sprung out of any of the paintings on the scrolls in the city library that depicted the emperor's courtiers of long ago. He probably smelled of the library too, Rokshan thought: slightly musty.

His progress was slow, so everyone had a good stare. His wizened head was completely shaven apart from the long plaited ponytail, white with age now, that hung all the way down his back. His hooded eyes looked as if they were almost shut. His nose was large and fleshy and his long grey-white beard was oiled. He wore a belted wide-sleeved silk coat of faded crimson, long enough to cover his sandalled feet. A small perfume bottle hung from his belt on each hip.

At last, at the top of one of the sets of steps that led down to the fountain, the Old Man stopped and turned slightly.

'My greetings, people of Maracanda; may Kuan Yin, goddess of mercy and protector of travellers, always watch over you.'

Shou Lao spoke in a surprisingly clear voice, offering the traditional greeting of travellers on the ancient trading routes before making his way down and eventually settling himself on the cool marble bench around the fountain.

In the midday heat, the hubbub from the caravanserai and the Grand Bazaar had quietened to a low murmur. The audience hardly dared breathe as they waited and wondered what the Old Man of the Markets was going to say. A mother hushed her young child, who had begun to cry. Kan started to say something but Rokshan jabbed him with his elbow to be quiet.

‘People of Maracanda,’ Shou Lao began, his voice echoing around the courtyard as he gestured towards the younger children at the front of the crowd. ‘Girls and boys. Some of you have heard me tell of the old myths and legends, of when the Earth was young and all Known Lands and Unknown Lands were one. Remember them well, for one of them tells a tale which may be taken up by some of you here today.’

The old storyteller paused for breath, looking sternly at the smallest children who’d wriggled through the crowd and gathered at his knees, their faces alight with expectation as they fidgeted impatiently. Rokshan smiled as he recalled how excited he had always felt, waiting for the storyteller to begin one of his tales.

‘But perhaps I should begin with the story of how the fallen guardian spirit who became the keeper of the gates of Hell got his name.’

Shou Lao’s eyes twinkled as the children clapped and cheered in anticipation of one of their favourite tales. Rokshan remembered how frightened he had been when he’d heard it first: he couldn’t have been more than four or five years old, but the story of the Crimson King – so-called because, chained close to the roaring fires of Hell, his skin was perpetually alight as he suffered his eternal

punishment for rebelling against his divine master, the Wise Lord – had made a deep impression on him.

Shou Lao told the familiar tale; the older children – if An Lushan was anything to go by – would now tease their younger siblings mercilessly with scary imitations of the fiery but fallen guardian spirit.

Now the old storyteller produced a battered-looking leather basket, which he passed into the crowd. The clink of coins being tossed into the basket was the only sound as the old man addressed them again.

‘People of Maracanda – I said that one of the tales of long ago might one day be taken up by some of you here today. You may think this is just an old man’s fancy – you will tell me that the history of our ancestors, which became legend and then passed into myth, has been forgotten, along with the prophecies, and are now lost for ever ...’ Here Shou Lao paused, wanting, it seemed, to fix everyone in the crowd with his hooded, beady stare. Rokshan looked away as his gaze fell upon him and lingered.

‘... or so some of you may conclude from your studies here at the famous Maracanda School for Special Envoys!’

‘He still remembers us – or you at least.’ Kan looked in amazement at his friend. Rokshan jabbed him with his elbow again; he didn’t want to miss a word of what the Old Man was saying.

‘And that is what I am here to tell you about today, for there is much our ancestors knew that should not have been forgotten, but not all of it is lost. Listen now, for this, of all my stories, you should heed.

‘You have all heard tell of the story of Chu Jung and his vanquishing of the ancient dragons ...’ At this the children again clapped and cheered, thinking they were going to hear another of their favourite stories. Nods and murmurs of agreement rippled across the rest of the crowd.

‘Of how the evil of the ancient dragons was crushed; after mercifully being reborn in water, they once again

became the spirits of nature with which you are familiar to this day. The legend recounts how some of the dragons were reborn as “heavenly horses” – or so the ancients called them – part horse, part dragon, able to fly; creatures which, so our emperors have always believed, would take them to Heaven when their span on Earth was done. The legend lives on in the dragon horses of the Kingdom of the Wild Horsemen. This much you all know.’

Shou Lao had his audience spellbound, even though he was only telling the very end of the story now.

‘And you all know how Chu Jung kept apart the Talisman he used to capture the fiery breath of the dragons and the Staff he made from the Tree of Heaven as a gift for the Wise Lord, so that they would for ever afterwards be powerless, the one without the other, and so it is that they must never be united.’ Shou Lao’s voice rose a little as he proclaimed the ancient verse that Rokshan had heard so many times before.

*‘Whosoever through the ages wields the Staff
Will be commanded by the evil one, grown bold –
“Seek, seek the Talisman of old!”
And he will be drawn, and lose his way.
Yet he who serves the Wise Lord
Treads the righteous path, and will never stray.’*

He paused for breath, and again, it seemed to Rokshan, fixed him with his hooded stare, before giving a little shrug and leaning forward with both hands clasped at the end of his staff.

‘So it is, and so it goes: a legend is just a legend. What does it tell us? The Wild Horsemen have their dragon horses, so called because they are venerated as the descendants of the heavenly horses, but ordinary horses they are, nonetheless.

‘But if this is all you thought the legend tells us, you would be wrong,’ Shou Lao said quietly. Now his eyes were blazing as he looked out fiercely over the crowd.

‘People of Maracanda, your kingdom borders the valleys of the Horsemen, and I tell you a shadow grows here in the west which is spreading across all Known Lands, and creeps even towards the Lands of the Barbarians. It seeks the ancient powers given to Chu Jung so that it can command a magic so great that even the Wise Lord trembles at its destructive powers. The ancient scrolls foretold this, and I tell you even now, events unfold that bear witness to their truth.’

The old storyteller leaned heavily on his staff and hauled himself up, summoning all his energy so that his voice rang out. ‘I speak of the end of empires, people of Maracanda! China and all Known Lands – even stretching beyond the Unknown Lands – all shall wither and die. The ancient power is stirring and shall be corrupted anew: the sleeping dragon awakes!’

‘What sort of story is this, old man? Who awakes the sleeping dragon?’

Shou Lao glanced to where An Lushan stood with Lianxang at his side – it was as if the old storyteller knew immediately who had asked the question that was on everyone’s lips. ‘You would want to know, An’an?’

Rokshan wondered with a start how the Old Man knew his brother – he couldn’t have seen him for nearly ten years, and then he would have been just another small, excited face in the crowd. His brother looked surprised too.

‘The servant of the Nameless One is the one I speak of,’ Shou Lao replied. ‘He serves the Shadow-without-a-name, the Lord of Evil. He pores over the ancient lore and is plotting to use the power of the dragons of old for his own ends. He must be stopped, before it is too late. But there is one small hope – an ancient scroll unearthed in the Kingdom of the Wild Horsemen, which foretold this very

moment: I speak of the riddle of the Staff – the Staff of the mighty Chu Jung himself, Spirit of Fire and Heavenly Executioner, first and most devoted servant of the Wise Lord.'

Exhausted, the Old Man slumped down on the bench and once more passed his leather basket into the crowd as everyone started to talk at once.

'I thought he was losing his touch there for a second,' a man behind Rokshan said; 'then as soon he talked about a riddle, I knew we were going to be all right. Well, you can't just end a story hanging in the air like that, can you? Wouldn't be a story then – I mean, with no ending – now would it?'

A young boy shyly handed the leather basket back to Shou Lao, who gave a small nod and rose to his feet again, a small scroll in his hands.

'People of Maracanda. Hear the riddle of the Staff:

*'The horse of Heaven has come,
Open the far gates.
Raise up my body, o beloved,
I go to the Mountain of K'unlun.
The horse of Heaven has come,
Mediator for the dragon.
He travels to the Gate of Heaven
And looks on the Terrace of Jade.*

'People of Maracanda, you have heard the riddle – it must be solved ... before it is too late ...'

Shou Lao carefully rolled up the scroll and tucked it into his belt, saying nothing more. Excited murmuring hummed around the courtyard.

Rokshan didn't hear it – the noise of the crowd seemed far away as Shou Lao's words echoed round his head; for some reason they seemed especially important, as if the storyteller had been talking to him and him alone. Was