

THE LEGEND OF THE GRANARY RAT

The Year 2008
(The Yellow/Earth Rat)

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Smoke from the incense censers traced eerie trails along the lines of the steadily lightening meditation room. The dawning of the day had been betrayed by the first furtive chirping of the lone bird in the courtyard, followed soon thereafter by the first dull lights from the horizon. Master Zhou had been startled from his meditations some time before, however. He was troubled by a vision he had seen in his reverie. In it his attendant was running - frightened, out of breath, his legs scratched from running along the dark pathways of the surrounding forest - exhausted. He came bearing news for the Master from the nearest kingdom. A shiver ran along the Master's spine as he recalled the vision, struggling to see what the upsetting news was that his young charge struggled so valiantly to bring him. He rose from his cushion to go outside and wash since he had been up since the early hours of the morning tending to his discipline and his blessings. He had sent his young disciple to confer with one of Master's old friends, seeking advice on a troubling matter within the kingdom. Some of the royal jewels had gone missing, and a few of those were highly prized, for they were talismans and held great power for the Emperor and the kingdom. Whosoever possessed them was said to be able to wield power over the realm, and they were thus jealously and closely guarded in a secret location. The jewels had been blessed and charged by holy men centuries before and their power was legendary. More than once they had brought aid to the ruler of the time when the kingdom was in dire need, and they were sorely needed now, for **there are always those who will seek to usurp the ruler of the domain**, and it was feared that there was a secret plot to overthrow the Emperor.

Master Zhou had been called to the palace by the Emperor himself some weeks before, seeking advice on the troublesome matter. The Master was held in very high regard, and he had taught the Emperor in his earlier years when the Emperor was but a young prince. As a reward for his service, the Master had been given his choice of quarters in the surrounding area and he had found a quiet place just out of view of the palace grounds, but close enough for safety and the convenience of the Emperor. On the day Master Zhou was summoned, he was asked by the Emperor to divine the outcome of the troubles. He was told the whole story. The Master's response was clear, immediate and direct: **"Beware of false friends and guard your resources well. Be prepared to take a firm stand. There will be a complete and sudden change of direction."** It seems that one-by-one, certain of the treasured jewels had begun to disappear beginning a month before. They were regularly checked by one of the Emperor's most trusted ministers - a family member - who was beyond reproach and vouchsafed by the Master himself. Master Zhou knew people on sight. He had more than a few times caught out the then young prince in fibs to his father and mother, the Emperor and Empress at the time. So, it was known that the minister had not absconded with the treasures. But Master Zhou could not see who had taken the jewels. Yet, his vision and inner guidance to the Emperor was beyond doubt - someone was out to usurp the Emperor. Perhaps there was black magic involved and his sight was clouded, keeping him from seeing the culprit. He did not believe so, but just to be safe, he had sent his young attendant to ask his old friend, who was an older Master himself, about the matter. The attendant now returned with the response, but Master Zhou was deeply troubled by the fear on the young man's face.

About the time that Master Zhou had finished his morning ablutions a rather haggard, exhausted, young man with sad-looking legs came running toward him up the foot path. He collapsed at the Master's feet. It was Master Zhou's poor young attendant. He was barely able to speak, he was so

out of breath. The Master regarded him for a bit, told him to rest quietly and then promptly doused him with the bucket of water he had used for his own ablutions. The shock of the cold water was enough to revive the young man and give him enough presence of mind to relate his tale to the Master. As it was, the lad arrived after several days' journey at the temple where the old Master was staying and he then proceeded to relate the meeting between Master Zhou and the Emperor, giving Master Zhou's response and the entire story about the missing jewels. The lad said the old man then sighed, went into a trance for a time and abruptly stopped - opening his eyes, looking directly at the young man - wide-eyed and with a look of absolute terror on his face. The young man said that once he had caught his breath the old Master spoke to him in slow and even tones, in the most solemn of voices and said "Your Master is correct, but he is in peril. There *is* a usurper in the palace and Master Zhou must find him out. Have your Master announce a date for a gathering of the court - a week after the announcement, and then have the palace guard gather everyone in the court together and parade them past the Master at the appointed date. He will soon find the usurper of the realm. I smell a rat. Yes, your Master is in very deep peril, for the Emperor will lose faith in him if he cannot find the jewels." The young man said there was a long pause after that wherein the old Master regarded him intently. It was the most uncomfortable moment of his life.

Then, all of a sudden and without warning the old Master burst into a fit of laughter so severe that all he could do was to roll off the floor and clutch his sides, unable to even catch his breath between paroxysms of hilarity. He eventually caught his breath enough to motion the young man away, but as he did and between gradually diminishing fits of mirth, he gave one final message to the now terribly confused and terrified attendant: "Two days before the gathering, go before dawn with your Master to the small grotto near the treasury for the jewels and wait - and watch. There is a small path near the pond. Your thief will appear there. Follow him and you will find your jewels. They are all together and safe. Now, run! Run!! There is no time to waste!!" The young man thought the old Master was a bit out in the woods - bonkers, crackers - so he beat a hasty retreat. He could still hear the old man laughing as he ran down the path away from the temple. Master Zhou's fear was not helped in the least by the young attendant's news, nor was he happy at all that his young charge had not brought anything back with him from his old friend. This was not a good result at all - not at all what he wanted to hear! So, he threw another bucket of water on the poor, bewildered young man and stormed off into the hut to think on things. Later that day, when cooler heads prevailed, he gathered his grumpy attendant, calmed him down and made his way to the palace to carry out the behests of his old friend. Despite the old man's peculiar ways, he had always given Master Zhou good advice.

A few days later in the early morning before the dawn, Master Zhou woke his attendant and they made their way to the grotto near the treasury, following the old Master's advice. The lad fell back asleep. The Master sighed and settled in for what was to appear. He watched the path intently, like an owl watching for prey. Sure enough, just at the break of dawn, there was a rustle in the undergrowth at the path and Master Zhou's mouth dropped open in astonishment at what he saw. There before him across the pond was one of the biggest yellow rats he had ever seen and to the Master's astonished gaze one of the prized jewels was hanging from the animal's mouth as it scurried along. Master Zhou poked his attendant, grabbed him by the arm and said "Come! It's time to catch a thief!", and they took off after the Yellow Rat. Being careful not to spook the animal, they followed at a safe distance, trying to be nonchalant about it all. They had to find those jewels! Eventually the Yellow Rat disappeared into a burrow in the underbrush. The two men sat and waited at a safe distance, careful not to disturb the Yellow Rat, waiting for him to leave the burrow. Eventually it did, and to their surprise and delight, every one of the missing jewels was found there, safely tucked away. They gathered them up, trying the best they could to restore the burrow to its original condition and went promptly to Master Zhou's hut to wash the jewels.

On the day of the appointed gathering there was great turmoil in the Imperial court. One of the distant relatives had disappeared the night before, along with several of the palace guards. It was thought the guards had abducted him and were going to demand ransom for his return - perhaps some of the precious jewels. The Emperor was beside himself with worry, not just for the relative, but for the realm as well. It was a dark day in the kingdom. Master Zhou suddenly had a flash of insight upon hearing what had happened. "Could it be?" he wondered. He asked to go to the relative's quarters and then it was confirmed to him: Yes, indeed, the relative was the would-be usurper, along with the guards. In his hasty retreat the relative had carelessly left behind evidence that clearly implicated him in the plot. In triumph, Master Zhou went to the Emperor and informed him, bringing a swift decree from the Emperor for the capture of the now hapless and soon-to-be very sorry ex family member along with entourage. What of the jewels, though? The Emperor was keen to know about that, too. Master Zhou thought for a moment before responding, not wanting to appear to be a complete fool before the Emperor. How could he explain that a rat had taken the precious jewels? How could he have not seen the Yellow Rat in his visions? Indeed, he wondered to himself. It was a question that would perplex him for weeks later. Then, he had an epiphany. "Your Excellence, I have a story about the jewels that you can relate to your children and that will eventually become a legend throughout the land." As he laid the recovered jewels on the table before the delighted gaze of the Emperor, Master Zhou related his fantastic tale, all the while having to kick his attendant under the table to keep him from spilling the beans about how it all really happened. His story went something like this:

"Once there was a very wise man who possessed great vision. He could see the future and into the very hearts of people. One day he had a vision that the ruler of the realm was about to be overthrown from his rule by a devious and vicious minister in his court. The minister's plan was to steal the talisman jewels and take away the spiritual power of the ruler, thus rendering him helpless before the minister's attack on him. With the jewels thus in his possession the minister would then be all-powerful over the kingdom. The wise man liked the ruler, though, because he was kind and benevolent toward his people. So, he hatched a plan himself in order to thwart the evil minister. He searched with his mind's eye through the creatures of the forest and found one whose daring and craftiness matched the task at hand - a large and intelligent Yellow Rat. He sent a messenger to the rat and told him of the plan. The wise man's plan was for the Yellow Rat to break into the king's treasury by night and steal a jewel a night for a month, hiding them away in the forest until the wise man would send someone after them. "Ah, but there are cats in the treasury!" said the Yellow Rat. "Why should I get eaten to save a king who is nothing to me? What is in this for me if I go along with your plan?" The wise man said to the Rat "You shall have great honor in the land and have a festival named after you. I will make certain that you are cared for in the rest of your days. You will want for nothing." The Yellow Rat was pragmatic and no fool, so he accepted the offer and performed his task with great skill. When the minister eventually decided it was time to carry out his evil plan he went to the treasury and broke in, but the jewels were gone. He was found out and beheaded on the spot. The jewels were returned to the ruler, just as the wise man had foreseen. The king erected a shrine to the Yellow Rat and named a year after him for his cunning and bravery, making sure that food was left at the shrine every day. The Yellow Rat lived the rest of his days very happily indeed."

"What a delightful story!" said the Emperor. "Now, what *really* happened and who *really* took the jewels? I want his head!" "Now, now!" said Master Zhou. "It is enough that the jewels are back in safe keeping. I have taken care of the thief with magic. He will never bother the realm again. You can be sure of it. Some things are better left unsaid." The Emperor was not pleased, but he accepted the advice of the Master, for he knew he could trust him. Master Zhou's attendant could hardly contain himself. It was all he could do to keep a straight face. The Emperor saw the contorted

expressions of the young man and asked Master Zhou what the problem was. "I think he has problems with *rlung*" said Master Zhou. "I have given him some new disciplines and he is still adjusting to them. I had better take him back to my hut and see what I can do for him." and at that, they took their leave.

Some weeks later and after Zhou's attendant had been given instructions about court etiquette, a messenger arrived bearing a note and a package from the old Master at the temple. It was simple note. It read: "I am happy to hear that peace has been restored to the Imperial court and the precious jewels have been recovered. It pleases me that you told the truth to the Emperor about what really happened with the jewels. My little yellow friend performed his job very well, did he not? He deserves that shrine. He almost lost his own head to cats many times. Please accept these small gifts as gratitude for your services to the Emperor. I knew his father well in my younger years. The jar of pickled walnuts is for the boy. He needs to learn to laugh and to see through old men's trickery. It is time for me to go to the Golden Fields now. My work here is done. May all prosperity and attainments come to you both, my friend of old." The old man was gone. The other items in the box were the old man's ceremonial implements. He had left them to Master Zhou. "What a precious jewel has been taken from us this day!" Zhou said to the lad, as he shed a tear. The old Master had planned the whole scheme for the recovery of the jewels, and the Yellow Rat had indeed been his willing servant, as had Master Zhou without his knowing. "The old trickster!" Master Zhou thought to himself. His heart warmed at the thought, a smile breaking across his face. "He even planted the story to the Emperor in my head!" The shrine to the Yellow Rat stands by the grotto to this day.