

# UNDER HEAVEN

GUY GAVRIEL  
KAY



A ROC BOOK



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*Lord of Emperors*

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*Ysabel*

*Beyond This Dark House*

(poetry)

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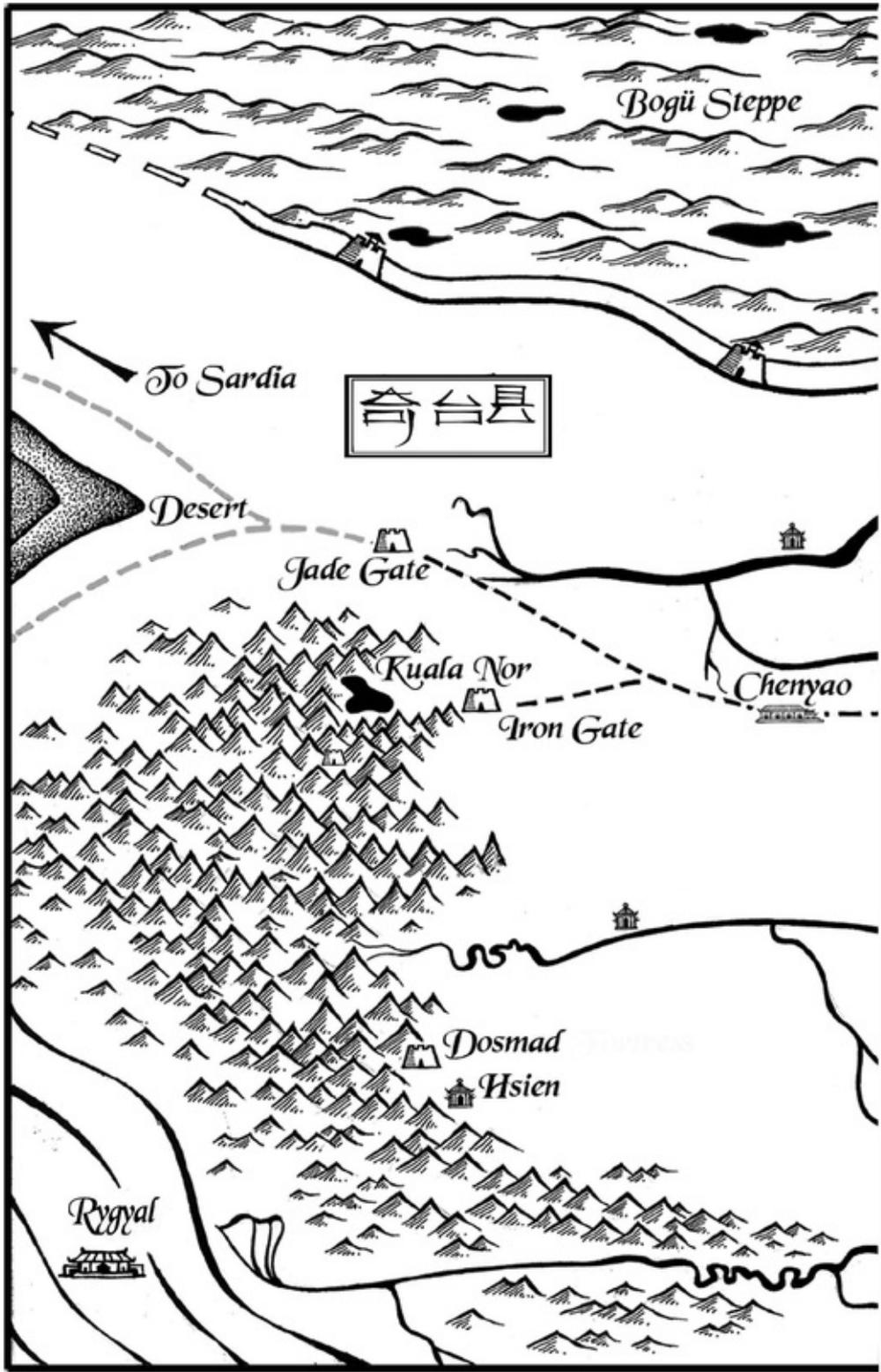
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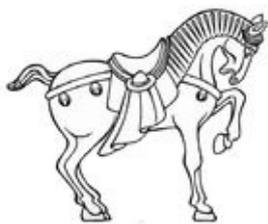
*to Sybil,  
with love*





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# PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS



## **The Imperial Family, and Ta-Ming Palace mandarins**

Taizu, the Son of Heaven, emperor of Kitai

Shinzu, his third son, and heir

Xue, his thirty-first daughter

Wen Jian, the Precious Consort, also called the Beloved Companion

Chin Hai, formerly first minister, now deceased

Wen Zhou, first minister of Kitai, cousin to Wen Jian

## **The Shen Family**

General Shen Gao, deceased, once Left Side Commander of the Pacified West

Shen Liu, his oldest son, principal adviser to the first minister

Shen Tai, his second son

Shen Chao, his third son

Shen Li-Mei, his daughter

## **The Army**

An Li (“Roshan”), military governor of the Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth Districts

An Rong, his oldest son

An Tsao, a younger son

Xu Bihai, military governor of the Second and Third Districts, in Chenyao

Xu Liang, his older daughter

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Lin Fong, commander of Iron Gate Fortress

Wujen Ning, a soldier at Iron Gate

Tazek Karad, an officer on the Long Wall

## Kanlin Warriors

Wan-si

Wei Song

Lu Chen

Ssu Tan

Zhong Ma

## Artists

Sima Zian, a poet, the Banished Immortal

Chan Du, a poet

## In Xinan, the capital

Spring Rain, a courtesan in the North District, later named Lin Chang

Chou Yan }  
Xin Lun } students, friends of Shen Tai

Feng, a guard in the employ of Wen Zhou

Hwan, a servant of Wen Zhou

Pei Qin, a beggar in the street

Ye Lao, a steward

## Beyond the borders of Kitai

West

Sangrama the Lion, ruling the Empire of Tagur

~~Cheng-wan, the White Jade Princess, one of his wives, seventeenth daughter of Emperor Taizu~~

Bytsan sri Nespo, a Taguran army officer

Nespo sri Mgar, his father, a senior officer

Gnam }  
Adar } Taguran soldiers

*North*

Dulan, kaghan of the Bogü people of the steppe

Hurok, his sister's husband, later kaghan

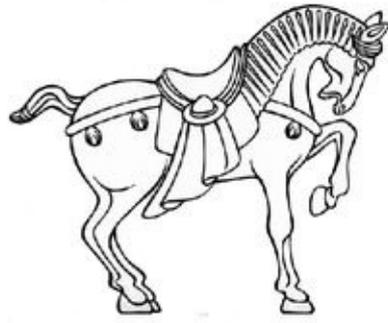
Meshag, Hurok's older son

Tarduk, Hurok's second son

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*With bronze as a mirror one can correct one's  
appearance; with history as a mirror, one can  
understand the rise and fall of a state; with good  
men as a mirror, one can distinguish right from wrong.*

—*LI SHIMIN, TANG EMPEROR TAIZONG*



## **PART ONE**

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# CHAPTER I

Amid the ten thousand noises and the jade-and-gold and the whirling dust of Xinan, he had often stayed awake all night among friends, drinking spiced wine in the North District with the courtesans.

They would listen to flute or *pipa* music and declaim poetry, test each other with jibes and quotes, sometimes find a private room with a scented, silken woman, before weaving unsteadily home after the dawn drums sounded curfew's end, to sleep away the day instead of studying.

Here in the mountains, alone in hard, clear air by the waters of Kuala Nor, far to the west of the imperial city, beyond the borders of the empire, even, Tai was in a narrow bed by darkfall, under the first brilliant stars, and awake at sunrise.

In spring and summer the birds woke him. This was a place where thousands upon thousands nested noisily: fishhawks and cormorants, wild geese and cranes. The geese made him think of friends far away. Wild geese were a symbol of absence: in poetry, in life. Cranes were fidelity, another matter.

In winter the cold was savage, it could take the breath away. The north wind when it blew was an assault, outdoors, and even through the cabin walls. He slept under layers of fur and sheepskin, and no birds woke him at dawn from the icebound nesting grounds on the far side of the lake.

The ghosts were outside in all seasons, moonlit nights and dark, as soon as the sun went down.

Tai knew some of their voices now, the angry ones and the lost ones, and those in whose throats stretched crying there was only pain.

They didn't frighten him, not any more. He'd thought he might die of terror in the beginning, alone in those first nights here with the dead.

He would look out through an unshuttered window on a spring or summer or autumn night, but he never went outside. Under moon or stars the world by the lake belonged to the ghosts, or so he had come to understand.

He had set himself a routine from the start, to deal with solitude and fear, and the enormity of what he was. Some holy men and hermits in their mountains and forests might deliberately act otherwise, going through days like leaves blown, defined by the absence of will or desire, but his was a different nature, and he wasn't holy.

He did begin each morning with the prayers for his father. He was still in the formal mourning period and his self-imposed task by this distant lake had everything to do with respect for his father's memory.

After the invocations, which he assumed his brothers were also performing in the home where they'd all been born, Tai would go out into the mountain meadow (shades of green dotted with wildflowers, or crunching underfoot with ice and snow) and—unless there was a storm—he would do his Kanlin exercises. No sword, then one sword, then both.

He would look at the cold waters of the lake, with the small isle in the middle of it, then up at the surrounding, snow-draped, stupefying mountains piled upon each other. Beyond the northern peaks the land sloped downwards for hundreds of *li* towards the long dunes of the killing deserts, with the Silk Roads running around either side of them, bringing so much wealth to the court, to the empire of Kitai. To his people.

In winter he fed and watered his small, shaggy horse in the shed built against his cabin. When the weather turned and the grass returned, he'd let the horse graze during the day. It was placid, wasn't

about to run away. There was nowhere to run.

After his exercises, he would try to let stillness enter into him, a shedding of the chaos of life, ambition and aspiration: to make himself worthy of this chosen labour.

And then he would set to work burying the dead.

He'd never, from first arrival here, made any effort to separate Kitan from Taguran soldiers. They were tangled together, strewn or piled, skulls and white bones. Flesh gone to earth or to animals and carrion birds long since, or—for those of the most recent campaign—not so very long ago.

It had been a triumph, that last conflict, though bitterly hard-won. Forty thousand dead in one battle, almost as many Kitan as Taguran.

His father had been in that war, a general, honoured afterwards with a proud title, Left Side Commander of the Pacified West. Rewarded handsomely by the Son of Heaven for victory: a personal audience in the Hall of Brilliance in the Ta-Ming Palace when he returned back east, the purple sash presented, words of commendation spoken directly, a jade gift extended from the emperor's hand with only one intermediary.

His family were undeniably beneficiaries of what had happened by this lake. Tai's mother and Second Mother had burnt incense together, lit candles of thanksgiving to ancestors and gods.

But for General Shen Gao, the memory of the fighting here had been, until he'd died two years ago, a source of pride and sorrow intermingled, marking him forever after.

Too many men had lost their lives for a lake on the border of nowhere, one that would not, in the event, be held by either empire.

The treaty that had followed—affirmed with elaborate exchanges and rituals and, for the first time, a Kitan princess for the Taguran king—had established as much.

Hearing the number from that battle—*forty thousand dead*—Tai, when young, had been unable to even picture what it must have been like. That wasn't the case any more.

The lake and meadow lay between lonely forts, watched by both empires from days away—to the south for Tagur, east for Kitai. It was always silent here now, save for the sound of wind, the crying of birds in season, and the ghosts.

General Shen had spoken of sorrow and guilt only to his younger sons (never to the oldest). Such feelings in a commander could be seen as shameful, even treasonous, a denial of the emperor's wisdom, ruling with the mandate of heaven, unfailing, unable to fail or his throne and the empire would be at risk.

But the thoughts *had* been spoken, more than once, after Shen Gao's retirement to the family property on their south-flowing stream near the Wai River, usually after wine on a quiet day, with leaves or lotus blossoms falling in the water to drift downstream. And the memory of those words was the principal reason his second son was here for the mourning period, instead of at home.

You could argue that the general's quiet sadness had been wrong, misplaced. That the battle here had been in necessary defence of the empire. It was important to remember that it hadn't always been the armies of Kitai triumphing over the Tagurans. The kings of Tagur, on their distant, completely defended plateau, were hugely ambitious. Victory and savagery had gone both ways through a hundred and fifty years of fighting by Kuala Nor beyond Iron Gate Pass, which was, in itself, as isolated a fortress as the empire knew.

"*A thousand miles of moonlight falling, east of Iron,*" Sima Zian, the Banished Immortal, had written. It wasn't literally true, but anyone who had ever been at Iron Gate Fortress knew what the poet meant.

And Tai was several days' ride west of the fort, beyond that last outpost of empire, with the dead

with the lost crying at night and the bones of over a hundred thousand soldiers, lying white in falling moonlight or under the sun. Sometimes, in bed in the mountain dark, he would belatedly realize that voice whose cadences he knew had fallen silent, and he would understand that he'd laid those bones to rest.

There were too many. It was beyond hope to ever finish this: it was a task for gods descending from the nine heavens, not for one man. But if you couldn't do everything, did that mean you did nothing?

For two years now, Shen Tai had offered what passed for his own answer to that, in memory of his father's voice asking quietly for another cup of wine, watching large, slow goldfish and drifting flowers in the pond.

The dead were everywhere here, even on the isle. There had been a fort there, a small one, rubble now. He'd tried to imagine the fighting sweeping that way. Boats swiftly built on the pebbled shore with wood from the slopes, the desperate, trapped defenders of one army or the other, depending on the year, firing last arrows at implacable enemies bringing death across the lake to them.

He had chosen to begin there two years ago, rowing the small craft he'd found and repaired; a spring day when the lake mirrored blue heaven and the mountains. The isle was a defined ground, limited, less overwhelming. In the mainland meadow and far into the pine woods the dead lay strewn as far as he could walk in a long day.

For a little more than half the year under this high, fierce sky he was able to dig, bury broken, rusted weapons with the bones. It was brutally hard work. He grew leathery, muscled, callused, ached at night, fell wearily into bed after washing in water warmed at his fire.

From late fall, through the winter, into early spring, the ground was frozen, impossible. You could break your heart trying to dig a grave.

In his first year the lake froze, he could walk across to the isle for a few weeks. The second winter was milder and it did not freeze over. Muffled in furs then, hooded and gloved in a white, hollow stillness, seeing the puffs of his mortal breath, feeling small against the towering, hostile vastness around, Tai took the boat out on days when waves and weather allowed. He offered the dead to the dark waters with a prayer, that they might not lie lost any longer, unconsecrated, on wind-scoured ground here by Kuala Nor's cold shore, among the wild animals and far from any home.

**WAR HAD NOT BEEN CONTINUOUS.** It never was, anywhere, and particularly not in a mountain bowl so remote, so difficult for sustained supply lines from either country, however belligerent or ambitious kings and emperors might be.

As a consequence, there had been cabins built by fishermen or by the herders who grazed sheep and goats in these high meadows, in the intervals when soldiers weren't dying here. Most of the cabins had been destroyed, a few had not. Tai lived in one of them, set north against a pine-treed slope—sheltered from the worst winds. The cabin was almost a hundred years old. He had set about repairing it as best he could when he'd first come: roof, door and window frames, shutters, the stone chimney for the fire.

Then he'd had help, unexpected, unsolicited. The world could bring you poison in a jewelled cup, surprising gifts. Sometimes you didn't know which of them it was. Someone he knew had written a poem around that thought.

He was lying awake now, middle of a spring night. There was a full moon shining, which meant that the Tagurans would be with him by late morning, a half dozen of them bringing supplies in a bullock cart down a slope from the south and around the lake's level shore to his cabin. The morning after the new moon was when his own people came from the east, through the ravine from Iron Gate.

It had taken a little time in the period after he'd arrived, but a routine had been arranged that let them each come to him without having to see the other. It was not part of his purpose to have men die because he was here. There was a peace now, signed, with gifts exchanged, and a princess, but such truths didn't always prevail when young, aggressive soldiers met in far-away places—and young men could start wars.

The two forts treated Tai like a holy hermit or a fool, choosing to live among the ghosts. They conducted a tacit, almost an amusing warfare with each other through him, vying to offer more generosity every month, to be of greater aid.

Tai's own people had laid flooring in his cabin in the first summer, bringing cut and sanded plank in a cart. The Tagurans had taken over the chimney repair. Ink and pens and paper (requested) came from Iron Gate; wine had first come from the south. Both fortresses had men chop wood whenever they were here. Winter fur and sheepskin had been brought for his bedding, for clothes. He'd been given a goat for milk, and then a second one from the other side, and an eccentric-looking but very warm Taguran hat with flaps for the ears and a tie for knotting under his chin, the first autumn. The Iron Gate soldiers had built a small shed for his small horse.

He'd tried to stop this, but hadn't come close to persuading anyone, and eventually he'd understood it wasn't about kindness to the madman, or even entirely about besting each other. The less time he spent on food, firewood, maintaining the cabin, the more he could devote to his task, which no one had ever done before, and which seemed—once they'd accepted why he was here—to matter to the Tagurans as much as to his own people.

You could find irony in this, Tai often thought. They might goad and kill each other, even now, if they chanced to arrive at the same time, and only a genuine fool would think the battles in the west were over for good, but the two empires would honour his laying the dead to rest—until there were newer ones.

In bed on a mild night he listened to the wind and the ghosts, awakened not by either of them (not any more) but by the brilliant white of the moon shining. He couldn't see the star of the Weaver Maiden now, exiled from her mortal lover on the far side of the Sky River. It had been bright enough to show clearly in the window before, even with a full moon. He remembered a poem he'd liked when he was younger, built around an image of the moon carrying messages between the lovers across the River.

If he considered it now it seemed contrived, a showy conceit. Many celebrated verses from early in this Ninth Dynasty were like that if you looked closely at their elaborate verbal brocades. There was some sadness in how that could happen, Tai thought: falling out of love with something that had shaped you. Or even people who had? But if you didn't change at least a little, where were the passages of a life? Didn't learning, changing, sometimes mean letting go of what had once been seen as true?

It was very bright in the room. Almost enough to pull him from bed to window to look out on the tall grass, at what silver did to green, but he was tired. He was always tired at the end of a day, and he never went out from the cabin at night. He didn't fear the ghosts any more—they saw him as an emissary by now, he'd decided, not an intruder from the living—but he left them the world after the sun went down.

In winter he had to swing the rebuilt shutters closed, block chinks in the walls as best he could with cloth and sheepskin against the winds and snow. The cabin would become smoky, lit by the fire and candles, or one of his two lamps if he was struggling to write poetry. He warmed wine on a brazier (this, also, from the Tagurans).

When spring came he opened the shutters, let in the sun, or starlight and the moon, and then the

sound of birds at dawn.

On first awakening tonight he had been disoriented, confused, tangled in a last dream. He'd thought it was still winter, that the brilliant silver he saw was ice or frost gleaming. He had smiled after a moment, returning to awareness, wry and amused. He had a friend in Xinan who would have cherished this moment. It wasn't often that you lived the imagery of well-known lines.

*Before my bed the light is so bright  
it looks like a layer of frost.  
Lifting my head I gaze at the moon,  
lying back down I think of home.*

But maybe he was wrong. Maybe if a poem was true enough then sooner or later some of those who read it *would* live the image just as he was living it now. Or maybe some readers had the image before they even came to the poem and found it waiting for them there, an affirmation? The poet offering words for thoughts they'd held already.

And sometimes poetry gave you new, dangerous ideas. Sometimes men were exiled, or killed, for what they wrote. You could mask a dangerous comment by setting a poem in the First or Third Dynasty, hundreds of years ago. Sometimes that convention worked, but not always. The senior mandarins of the civil service were not fools.

*Lying back down I think of home.* Home was the property near the Wai, where his father was buried in their orchard with both his parents and the three children who had not survived to adulthood. Where Tai's mother and Shen Gao's concubine, the woman they called Second Mother, still lived, where his two brothers were also nearing the end of mourning—the older one would be returning to the capital soon.

He wasn't sure where his sister was. Women had only ninety days of mourning. Li-Mei was probably back with the empress, wherever she was. The empress might not be at court. Her time in the Ta-Ming had been rumoured to be ending, even two years ago. Someone else was in the palace now with Emperor Taizu. Someone shining like a gem.

There were many who disapproved. There was no one, as far as Tai knew, who had said as much openly, before Tai had left to go home and then come here.

He found his thoughts drifting back to Xinan, from memories of the family compound by the stream, where the paulownia leaves fell along the path from the front gate all at once, in one autumn night each year. Where peaches and plums and apricots grew in the orchard (flowers red in spring and you could smell the charcoal burning at the forest's edge, see smoke from village hearths beyond the chestnut and mulberry trees.

No, now he was remembering the capital instead: all glitter and colour and noise, where violent life in all its world-dust and world-fury, was happening, unfolding, would be *erupting*, even now, in the middle of night, assaulting the senses moment by moment. Two million people. The centre of the world, under heaven.

It wouldn't be dark there. Not in Xinan. The lights of men could almost hide moonlight. There would be torches and lanterns, fixed, or carried in bamboo frames, or suspended from the litters borne through the streets, carrying the high-born and the powerful. There'd be red candles in upper windows and lamps hanging from flower-decked balconies in the North District. White lights in the palace and wide, shallow oil lamps on pillars twice the height of a man in courtyards there, burning all night long.

There would be music and glory, heartbreak and heart's ease, and knives or swords drawn sometimes in the lanes and alleys. And come morning, power and passion and death all over again.

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