

THE HUNGRY GHOST OF PANAMINT

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High in the forested Panamint Mountains rising from the western side of Death Valley, Horn Gahgit paused between two of his crewmates chipping and fitting stones as they built an unmortared retaining wall. Wearily, he wiped the sweat off his forehead with the rolled-up sleeve of his black cotton shirt, swaying the long, black, braided queue down his back. The sun had fallen behind the western ridge and evening brought relief from the heat at last.

"All right, boys," Josiah Forrester, the crew boss, called out as he walked along the Chinese crew lined up at the wall. "That's it for today. I'll have this week's pay at the tents." A burly man in a brown, brimmed hat, sweating through his blue shirt, he passed without stopping.

Next to Gahgit, Wong Wanli lowered the small steel hammer in his hand and spoke in See Yup, their native Chinese dialect. 'Have the stinking hungry ghosts bothered you yet? Eh?' He grinned, showing crooked teeth.

"No, I haven't had any bad luck. Is it time?" Gahgit shrugged.

"The seventh month is just beginning."

"Maybe there aren't any hungry ghosts here."

All Chinese spirits roamed the land of the living in the seventh month of the Chinese year. Those with relatives went to visit them and were put to rest by sacrifices of food, wine, and spirit money. Spirits without relatives to make such sacrifices became disruptive and even dangerous to the living, out of resentment. Since most of the Chinese laborers in this land were single men, they rarely had immediate family here. When one died, he was usually buried with the intention that his bones would later be freighted to San Francisco for shipment back home again. However, Gahgit had never worried about ghosts much.

With the other twenty-two members of their crew, Gahgit and Wanli gathered their tools in dirty, sweaty hands and plodded through the small, crowded town toward their tents. All of them wore the long, braided queue down their backs required by the Manchu emperor in China; none of them cut their queues off, because they intended to return home someday. Most still wore the woven, conical Chinese peasant hats they had brought from Chinatown in San Francisco, though some had since lost theirs. Gahgit sported a small black bowler he had bought from a trader.

In the gathering darkness, white miners were hiking and riding into town from their

claims in the slopes around Panamint. Mule drivers, prospectors, and drifters also walked up and down the main street, many of them toward the saloon. Lit kerosene lanterns swung over the saloon doors.

Lei Yin, a stocky, muscular man, impatiently brushed past Wanli.

Wanli grinned down at Gahgit and spoke quietly. "I have the cinnabar."

"Keep your voice down!" Startled, Gahgit glanced up as he worked his right hand, stiff from hours of hammering on stone. "Show it to me."

"Not here! After dinner, we'll talk behind the saloon, eh?"

Gahgit nodded. While the Chinese were not welcome inside, the saloonkeeper would sell them full bottles out of the back door. However, they usually left the saloon's drunken white men and returned to their tents.

"It's time to celebrate. We'll share a bottle, eh?" Wanli paused. "I know you're discouraged about our chances here in this country. But you told me how your uncle died unnecessarily because he made a mistake. Without it, he might still be... younger than we are now, eh? And I can correct the mistake. A fortune will be coming our way."

Gahgit did not press Wanli, who had watched over him for years like an elder brother. As he followed Wanli to their tent, however, he shook his head doubtfully. Legends of Daoist elixirs for immortality were as common in China as other superstitions were among the white men on the frontier. His uncle had died from one.

In their tent, Gahgit stowed his tools under his bunk. Outside, he drew his pay from Forrester. Then he joined the others at the stream that flowed behind the town. Lei Yin joked loudly with Chun Guan, a tall, skinny, quiet man. Gahgit set his bowler aside and, like them, rinsed his hands and face in the stream beside rocks rounded and smoothed by the water.

Soon the evening cookfire blazed behind the tents. The cook was steaming fish he had caught that day and rice that the crew had brought from San Francisco. In a large wok, he stir-fried greens he had found in the general store. Lei Yin talked raucously. Gahgit squatted among them near the warmth of the fire with his chopsticks and his bowl as the night chill of the mountains came on to replace the day's heat.

The third son in a family of five surviving children, Gahgit had left his village at the age of twenty-two to reach the Mountain of Gold, as Chinese workers called this land. Hungry and desperate on the docks of Guangzhou, he had been befriended by Wong Wanli. Then twenty-six, Wanli had the name of a man who paid their passage to San Francisco in exchange for payments to be made later; Wanli also had known that two workers would offer the job broker a more attractive deal than one. For four years, they had worked together and paid down their indenture, first grading the roadbed of the Central Pacific Railroad, then of its branch lines.

They had joined Forrester to come south here to Panamint, a silver mine

boomtown. The crew's experience had served them well in clearing the narrow road up to Panamint alongside the mountain stream. Now they were building a retaining wall against a loose, rocky slope.

Unlike many men in Panamint, Gahgit did not squander his pay on drink, women, or gambling. Soon he could pay off his first passage and also buy a ticket home to Sunning, a district of Guangdong Province, giving up his dream of finding wealth here. Gahgit missed his mother and father, but not the village life to which he would return. He and Wanli had spoken often of the bitter labor back home in the muddy rice paddies, where the grueling routine would be broken only by monsoons, plague, and famine as they worked in endless cycles for the rest of their lives. Gahgit had hoped to come home wealthy enough to break that cycle, and able to care for his aging mother and father, but now he had given up. Wanli, however, had often declared that he would never return without gold in his pouch.

Gahgit knew his decision would deeply disappoint his friend.

After dinner, most of the crew drifted to the saloon. Gahgit just wanted to get Wanli alone so he could see the cinnabar. However, by the time Gahgit and Wanli arrived behind the small wooden building next to the general store, several of their crewmates blocked the rear door, laughing as they passed a new bottle around.

The door opened. Josiah Forrester came out with Linc Hanford, a mule driver who brought supply wagons up the steep road from Death Valley.

"Evenin', boys," said Forrester. "You know Hanford, here."

"Howdy," Hanford said gruffly. The lamp hanging over the door shone down on his long, unkempt gray hair and beard.

"I'll get right to the point." Forrester shoved his hat back on his head. "Hanford's made a new silver strike south of here."

"That's right," said Hanford. "Fact is, it's rough ground and I'm too old to work it." He held out a few blue-streaked rocks.

"I told him you China boys was a hard-workin' bunch." Forrester frowned. "You know our job here is almost over."

Gahgit adjusted his bowler and glanced at the rocks. He could recognize silver ore now. Of course it could have come from anywhere. He nudged Wanli. "Come on, let's go talk by ourselves," he said in See Yup.

"Not yet." Wanli switched to English. "What you want, Hanford?"

"Here's the deal," said Hanford. "I'll sell the map for fifty dollars."

"Fifty dollar?" Wanli sneered. "Then Chinaboy get there, no silver."

"No silver." Chun Guan grinned, his thin form throwing a long shadow.

"Me, I'm headin' back north ag'in," said Forrester. "I'm no miner. You boys could chip in together, though, for less than two bucks each."

Wanli took the bottle from Lei Yin. He raised it to take a drink, but it inexplicably

slipped out of his hand and smashed on a rock at his feet, splashing liquid. "Aiee! Hungry ghost!" Wanli shouted angrily in Chinese.

Gahgit and the other Chinese laughed. Chun Guan shook his head.

Forrester and Hanford glanced at each other and went back inside.

"I'll buy another," said Wanli. "No fifty dollars, no two dollars. I can do better." He banged on the back door of the saloon.

The saloon door opened and the bald, white-bearded barkeeper leaned out, holding a bottle of cheap whiskey by the neck. " 'Nother one, boys?"

"I take one." Under the shining kerosene lamp, Wanli opened a pouch hanging from his waist on a cord. He picked out some coins. "Here, eh?"

"Me too." Lei Yin pushed forward next to Wanli.

Gahgit, watching impatiently, noticed a bit of dull, reddish-brown inside the pouch. Lei Yin stood next to Wanli, looking down as he fumbled with his own coins.

"Here's to the hungry ghosts," Lei Yin called out in Chinese, holding up his bottle. 'I hope I never become one!" He took a swallow of whiskey.

Wanli, the lamplight throwing his shadow, laughed derisively. "If you never died, you'd never become a ghost at all!" He drank from his bottle.

Gahgit walked briskly away, eager to see the cinnabar. Wanli followed him to some trees and brush a distance from the saloon and general store. Their crewmates trailed after Lei Yin back to the barracks.

Wanli grinned, his faced flushed. "I have the real strike we need! And I have a map to the spot, drawn on leather."

"I saw the cinnabar in your belt pouch."

Wanli opened his pouch. "You said your uncle's immortality elixir required cinnabar." He pulled the map of folded leather out just enough to show it to Gahgit and tossed the small, red-brown rock to him.

"Yes." Gahgit caught the rock. "But he made a mistake. He ground up calomel into the drink because it looks so similar. The calomel killed him—I think from breathing the heated vapors as much as drinking the elixir." Gahgit knew that when red-brown cinnabar lay near the surface of the ground, exposed to the weather, it often had brown calomel with it.

"We know our rocks by now, you and I, don't we?" Wanli laughed and his crooked teeth shone in the faint light from the saloon. "We can mine the cinnabar and sell it for our fortune up north, in all the Chinatowns and Chinese mining camps and railroad camps. We'll pay off our indenture this year. Soon we'll have enough gold to go home as wealthy men—and I won't have to cut off your queue to keep you from returning!" He laughed again. "As I always said, I'll never go home without gold in my pouch."

Gahgit tossed back the cinnabar, choosing not to tell Wanli yet that he intended to ship home as soon as they returned to San Francisco.

Wanli thumped his back. "Don't worry! I'll always take care of you."

Dawn woke Gahgit through the canvas tent he shared with Wanli, who had already risen and left. The cook rang his little gong. Gahgit dressed and walked out, heading up the narrow, forested path toward the latrine.

A moment later in the trees, Gahgit stopped, staring at the form of Wanli lying face-down in the path. Blood matted the hair on the back of his head. Gahgit gasped and bent down, trying to turn his friend over.

At the same moment, Chun Guan came up behind Gahgit and he quickly squatted on Wanli's other side.

"He's cold," Chun Guan said gravely, feeling Wanli's face. "He must have slipped in the darkness and fallen. After getting drunk last night, he needed the latrine. Maybe a hungry ghost tripped him."

Several more of their crewmates came up the path and stopped. They had all seen death frequently in their lives, from the sick and starving infants in their peasant villages to those who fell in accidents while blasting through the Sierra Nevadas for the Central Pacific Railroad. Death could come any time, especially when hungry ghosts walked.

"We will carry him," said Chun Guan.

Gahgit nodded numbly. The others knew Gahgit regarded Wanli as an elder brother. They picked Wanli up and took him back down to the camp.

As Gahgit turned, a smooth rock as large as a man's head caught his eye. He knelt. A dark smear of dried blood and some black hairs told him that this brown rock had killed Wanli. The other rocks here in the trees were rough and sharp-edged. However, this one had been rounded and smoothed in the stream, over sixty paces away. The grass under it was still green; someone had carried the rock to this spot very recently.

Suddenly angry, Gahgit rose and walked down to the tents, where his companions had laid Wanli under a blanket. Several were hiking out to find a burial site. Two more spoke to Forrester in their halting English.

Struggling to hide his anger lest he reveal his intentions, Gahgit went over to Wanli's body. The others politely turned away, allowing him a moment with his friend. However, Gahgit knew that Wanli's spirit no longer remained with his body. He had come to take a closer look.

Gahgit lifted the blanket and saw that Wanli did not have his pouch.

He walked back to their tent, keeping his eyes down as in mourning. Inside, he quickly glanced over Wanli's cot and in the burlap bag holding Wanli's few personal belongings. He did not find the pouch.

Wanli sent most of his pay with Gahgit's every week to the job broker who had

paid their passage. He never had much money on him and the entire crew knew it. Someone had killed him for the cinnabar and the map.

The white men in this boomtown cared nothing for cinnabar. Its only use to them was grinding it up to make red paint, and these men had come here for silver. Wanli had been killed by one of their crewmates.

Gahgit took off his bowler for a moment. He knew that the white men would not waste their time on Wanli's murder. Even his own crewmates might not believe Wanli had been murdered; in their lives of hard labor and risk, maybe they would rather just watch out for hungry ghosts and try to avoid accidents. If he did warn them, the killer would be on guard, too.

No one really cared about Wanli except Gahgit.

His anger rising, Gahgit put his bowler on again. Deciding to keep silent about his suspicions, he left the tent. In the morning light, he got a shovel and joined his companions in digging a grave for his closest friend.

Gahgit and his companions dug the grave and spent part of their pay on food and wine to sacrifice at a brief funeral. They joined in buying a wooden coffin in the town. At home in their villages, the Wong clan would have held a proper funeral and spent time in mourning. Here, in the midday heat, already covered with sweat, the crew merely picked up their tools and walked back to the unfinished retaining wall.

As Gahgit worked, he felt Wanli's absence. They had taken every job together since they had arrived from across the sea. Consumed by grief and anger, Gahgit hammered the stonework hard in a focused fury.

At sunset Forrester walked down the line as usual and called an end to the workday. Gahgit lowered his hammer, still angry but now weary, and turned toward the barracks. His crewmates did the same.

When Gahgit saw Lei Yin's muscular form lifting one last stone onto the wall, he suddenly recalled when he had first seen the cinnabar. Wanli had stood under the kerosene lamp at the rear door of the saloon and Lei Yin had come up next to him. Lei Yin, too, had had a clear chance to see it—and of course he could have lifted that big rock more easily than most.

Gahgit plodded back to the barracks with the others. As he washed his hands and face in the stream, he realized he could not be certain Lei Yin had killed Wanli. Yet he could approach Lei Yin and see how he reacted.

Rising from the bank, he walked to the blazing cook-fire. Right now, Lei Yin thought of him as Wanli's faithful younger brother. Gahgit decided he would have to shake up Lei Yin in order to draw him out.

As the crew took their chopsticks and bowls in the deepening darkness, Gahgit found Lei Yin close to the fire. Lei Yin glanced up warily as he approached. Casually, Gahgit squatted near him.

"Confucius said that if a wise man knew where one corner of a square was, he could find the other three," Gahgit said quietly.

Lei Yin continued to eat, not looking up.

"After dinner, I will sit alone by the stream." Gahgit stood up and strolled away, his heart pounding.

After returning his bowl and chopsticks, Gahgit walked to the stream. Anxiously, he drank with a cupped hand from the stream and sat down on a flat rock by the bank. He had rarely spoken to Lei Yin, whom he had first met working on this crew. Finding the big man loud and brash, Gahgit had avoided him. Now Gahgit waited to see if he had aroused Lei Yin's curiosity.

When Lei Yin's large shadow came toward him against the moonlight, he tensed. He glanced past the approaching silhouette to make sure the others remained by the cookfire. If he shouted for help, they would hear.

Gahgit decided to take the initiative, and spoke gruffly in a low tone. "You probably think the same as all the rest of them."

Lei Yin squatted several paces away, watching the current flow.

"Everyone thinks I loved Wanli like an elder brother," Gahgit hoped Wanli's spirit would not hear him smear their friendship with lies. "We could have been partners, but he wanted to keep everything for himself."

"Maybe a hungry ghost killed him," Lei Yin said casually.

"Hungry ghosts trip you or jostle your hand. They don't carry big rocks over sixty paces and smash people's heads with them. That takes a strong man." Gahgit felt himself shaking. ' I hoped to get a certain small rock from Wanli myself. You see, I know what it must be mixed with."

Lei Yin looked at him sharply.

"My uncle drank a liquid made with minerals. I know the mixture."

"What happened to your uncle?" Lei Yin's eyes remained on Gahgit.

"He never grew a day older." That was true, Gahgit told himself.

' 'Is it true?" Lei Yin whispered. He watched Gahgit for a long moment. "And you say you were not as close to Wanli as we believed?"

"I hated him," Gahgit said quietly, hating the words as he spoke them. "He would not let me share the drink we could have made, and I will not reveal the mixture unless I can share in it. So we never made it."

Moonlight shone on Lei Yin's face. "Why have you told me?"

Gahgit felt the time had come to tantalize Lei Yin again. "I have given you one corner of the square." He got to his feet, ready to walk away.

"I have it," Lei Yin said quietly.

Surprised, Gahgit stopped; he had not expected such a quick admission.

"I have Wanli's cinnabar." Lei Yin looked over his shoulder; the others had dispersed toward the saloon. "It will bring a good price back up in San Francisco. It

would be worth even more with the recipe of the elixir."

"Wait," Gahgit whispered, thinking frantically. "You must have the map, too. We could mine all of it. But first we must drink the elixir."

"Drink it ourselves?" Lei Yin stared up at him, surprised.

"The rest of the crew can go north without us and never know what we have. We will grow no older as we mine all the cinnabar. The *lo fans* won't care if we want to make red paint." He forced a hollow laugh.

"Can we get the other ingredients in this little town?"

"Yes!" Gahgit thought quickly. "The others are common. When our crew finishes the wall and leaves, you and I can mix the elixir."

Lei Yin stood, looming over Gahgit in the darkness. "Get them now."

"Eh? Now?" Gahgit held his breath. "I, uh..."

"Now! When the others return, they'll be too drunk to care what we're doing. We shall mix the elixir now and take it!" He grinned excitedly.

Gahgit wanted to protest. He wasn't ready. Yet he could not think of any argument that would not contradict what he had said already.

Lei Yin smiled down at him. "Bring them back here. The cook has gone to the saloon with the others. I'll stir up the fire again."

"I'll see if the general store is open," Gahgit said faintly.

Gahgit walked slowly to the general store, past his drunken crewmates behind the saloon. He had planned to trick Lei Yin, but he needed calomel for his plan. Lei Yin's eagerness had caught him off-guard.

Maybe Gahgit could mix a harmless drink now and persuade Lei Yin to swallow another with calomel later. Yet Lei Yin might not drink two—and Gahgit wanted to ship home soon. This could be his only chance.

At the general store's rear door, the storekeeper was startled by Gahgit's order for small amounts of soda water, salt, pepper, borax, and other routine powders. Gahgit carried his purchases away in a wooden box. Since calomel had no particular value here, the store did not stock it.

Gahgit took an indirect path back toward the barracks. He walked up along the trees away from the stream, desperately trying to think of a new plan. Soon, behind the barracks, he could see Lei Yin's blocky shadow standing by the roaring fire. Gahgit lingered in the shadows, but he could not delay so long that Wanli's killer became suspicious.

Still stalling, he walked up to the modest burial site where Wanli's body now rested. The rocks, dirt, and gravel Gahgit and his companions had dug out of the ground now lay in a long mound over the shallow grave, helping protect the coffin below from wild animals.

Gahgit paused sadly by the grave, looking down at it in the moonlight.

The silvery light glistened on a small reddish-brown rock on the mound. Startled, Gahgit set down his box of ingredients and picked it up. As Wanli had said, they knew their rocks now, after spending so many years digging, blasting, and hammering up and down this land. Dark in color, this rough gray rock had pores partly filled with an earthy substance of a reddish-brown color, That was calomel.

Gahgit's heart raced. Until this moment his plan to avenge Wanli's murder had been abstract, for the future. Now he could carry it out. Remembering Wanli's easy laugh and his unbounded faith that they would find their fortune here, he drew in a deep breath and put the rock in the wooden box.

His anger rising again, Gahgit strode back to the fire behind the barracks, where the flamelight flickered over Lei Yin's heavy torso.

"Did you get everything you need?" Lei Yin whispered in awe.

"Yes," Gahgit whispered back. "Heat water, enough to fill two bowls." He squatted, placing the wooden box on the ground. "You have the cinnabar with you?"

"Of course." Lei Yin hung the cook's metal teakettle over the fire.

Gahgit took one of the rice bowls and carefully poured into it small amounts of all the substances he had bought. Aware that Lei Yin was watching every move, he pretended to measure each amount precisely. Last, Gahgit slipped the rock containing the calomel into the rice bowl of mixed powders and covered it. Then he stood up, holding the bowl.

"Uncover the kettle," Gahgit whispered.

With a cloth, Lei Yin lifted the lid.

"Put the cinnabar in first."

With his other hand, Lei Yin dropped the reddish rock into the kettle.

Gahgit poured all the ingredients in the rice bowl into the kettle after it. "Be prepared. When the vapors grow strong, the elixir is ready."

Gahgit picked up two more rice bowls. ' "We can drink from these."

Lei Yin took one, nodding, his eyes on the kettle.

Gahgit took a step back, certain that the calomel vapors had helped kill his uncle. When the vapor from the kettle began to grow thicker, he stepped back again. "Look inside. If you see globules of quicksilver, then pour the elixir into your bowl and drink it as fast as you can. It will be very hot." He remembered the quicksilver he had seen in his uncle's drink.

Lei Yin lifted the lid and leaned into the vapor as he looked inside the kettle. He tossed the kettle aside, gasping and coughing, and poured the liquid into the bowl. Then he raised it to his mouth—and stopped.

Instead of drinking, Lei Yin held his bowl out to Gahgit-

Startled, Gahgit shook his head. He bowed and spoke respectfully. "The cinnabar belongs to you. The first drink is yours."

"Drink it," Lei Yin commanded, holding out the steaming bowl.

"The... privilege should be yours." Gahgit eyed the vapors in terror.

Lei Yin stepped closer and held out the bowl at arm's length in front of Gahgit's face. "We are partners, are we not? Drink!"

Not daring to breathe, Gahgit tried to think of something to say.

Suddenly, without warning the bowl tipped out of Lei Yin's hand, spilling its liquid onto the rocky ground at their feet.

Avoiding the vapors, Gahgit gasped for breath and spoke quickly. "That's an entire dose! Only one remains—and I want it!" Bluffing, he dodged around Lei Yin and reached for the kettle.

"No!" Lei Yin smacked him to the ground.

His head throbbing, Gahgit raised himself up on his elbows and watched Lei Yin lift the kettle. Firelight shone on the stocky man as he threw back his head, swaying his queue, and then poured the hot fluid into his mouth.

Lei Yin's eyes grew large and his mouth opened, seeking air; however, he drew in no breath. He staggered and then fell on his back. As the bowl dropped from his hand, his body quivered oddly.

Gahgit picked up his bowler and got to his feet. He looked around for their crewmates. A few were weaving their way back from the saloon. He warily watched the vapors still emanating from the kettle. In the cool mountain night, the vapors dissipated quickly and vanished into the darkness. Lei Yin lay still, the edge of Wanli's folded leather map sticking out of the waistband of his pants.

His head aching and his pulse still pounding, Gahgit let out a long sigh. With a glance back at his approaching crewmates, he slipped the map away from Lei Yin. Then he picked up the kettle and bowl at arm's length and carried them to the rippling stream. He heaved all three into the cold current, where the mountain waters would return any residue of calomel harmlessly back to the soil.

By the time Gahgit returned to the wooden box by the fire, Chun Guan and several of the others had drunkenly stopped to warm themselves.

"What's wrong with him?" Chun Guan pointed to Lei Yin.

"He asked me to bring him this box of items from the general store. Maybe he had too much to drink while I was gone." Gahgit shrugged.

"No one likes him, anyway." Anger edged Chun Guan's drunken voice. "Maybe a hungry ghost tripped him, too."

"Maybe so." Relieved yet still shaken, Gahgit walked away.

Alone in the moonlight, standing by the long mound over Wanli, Gahgit considered how he would take Wanli's coffin with him on his way home to Guangdong. Then he remembered how Wanli always said he would not go home without gold. Gahgit had none to send.

Suddenly, his spine tingling, Gahgit realized that Wanli was now a hungry ghost with no relatives here to make sacrifices for him. The small sacrifices at his funeral would not be enough. His spirit could be walking.

Don't worry! I'll always take care of you. Wanli had said to him.

Gahgit abruptly understood that the calomel he had found here had not been a simple accident; the spirit of Wanli, the hungry ghost of Panamint walking in the seventh month, had made sure Gahgit would find it. When Lei Yin had pushed the poisonous vapors up to Gahgit's face, Wanli had knocked the bowl out of his hand. Gahgit knew it.

Wanli had always believed in this land. Gahgit decided to leave Wanli's body here. Maybe if Gahgit remained in this land longer, instead of giving up, he would find his fortune yet. Certainly he would make the annual sacrifices to the spirit of his friend so he would not go hungry.

Gahgit adjusted his bowler and walked back to his tent in the moonlight, certain that Wanli's spirit walked with him.