



## The Mountain

Mountains always have secrets.

And this one had more than most. Tall and majestic, with jagged peaks that punctured the sky, it appeared unknowable and immovable.

And yet, if you were to watch it, and not just glance at it – really watch it – it would sometimes appear to be breathing.

If you stared long enough, you'd start to think that it was a different mountain altogether.

One person had been watching this mountain for a very, very long time.

And he had decided it was time for the mountain to show him its secrets.

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Deep within the mountain, a great creature stirred in its sleep. Its eyes rolled back in its head, and its wings jerked wide open. It suddenly sat up straight, trying to remember what it had seen in the nightmare.

Darkness. All it saw was darkness and desolation.

The creature shuddered and closed its eyes, trying to go back to sleep.

It had been waiting for something, for someone, for a long time. It could wait longer.



## Arrival

Billy Chan was certain of two things. He had great hair and he was the best surfer in the 11–14 age bracket in all of California.

He did not think either of those things were going to help him in his current situation. He was by himself. On a train platform. Somewhere in middle-of-nowhere China. The train ride had felt like for ever. He didn't even know what time it was. He reached into his pocket and gripped his lucky seashell. At least he had a small piece of home with him.

All around him were huge mountains wrapped in green foliage, climbing to dizzying heights. Even the

Hong Kong skyscrapers he'd seen just a few days ago would have looked tiny here.

The only indication of *exactly* where in China he might be was written in peeling, faded yellow Chinese characters above the station doorway. Chinese characters that Billy couldn't read.

He really, really hoped he was in the right place.

Billy looked around, trying to find the staff for the summer camp he was going to. The summer camp his parents were forcing him to go to so he could 'improve his Mandarin' and 'learn more about his Chinese heritage'. Even though what Billy *wanted* to do all summer was go surfing with his friends.

He did not see any camp staff. The only people nearby were two old Chinese women playing mahjong on a rickety table, cackling as they swirled the green tiles around.

'Hello?' he called out. '*Ni hao?*'

One of the old women looked up and waved him towards the tiny station.

Billy nodded his thanks and went inside, dragging his suitcase behind him.

Billy's eyes took a moment to adjust to the dimness inside the station after the blisteringly bright sun outside. He breathed a sigh of relief. Clustered around the room were about a dozen kids his age.

A slightly older Chinese boy with slicked-back black hair sauntered over, holding a clipboard. He looked Billy up and down, and appeared distinctly unimpressed.

'You must be Billy Chan,' he said.

Billy nodded.

The boy sighed deeply, as if meeting Billy was the most annoying thing that had happened to him all day. 'Finally,' he said. 'It took you long enough to get here.'

Billy flushed. He was already off to a terrible start. 'Well, this place is a *really* long way away from California. And my train was delayed . . .'

'*Ni shuo putonghua ma?*' the boy interrupted, his eyebrow raised.

Billy paused. He understood the boy was asking him if he spoke Mandarin, and he realized he said this as a challenge.

'*Yi dian dian,*' he replied, being careful to get

his pronunciation right of the phrase meaning ‘a little bit’.

The older boy frowned. ‘I guess you’re not as Chinese as your name suggests, Billy *Chan*.’

Billy was used to this. Used to people trying to figure out where he was from. He knew what the boy wanted to know. ‘My dad is Chinese. From Hong Kong. And my mom is white,’ he explained. ‘My parents sent me to this camp to improve my Mandarin.’ He tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice. He still hadn’t forgiven his parents for making him spend his whole summer at a language culture camp in China. He looked at the other kids, who seemed to have gathered round them. ‘That’s why we’re all here, right?’

The responding nods and smiles made him feel slightly reassured.

‘Whatever,’ said the older boy, sounding bored.

‘And who are you?’ said Billy, summoning as much confidence in his voice as he could muster.

The boy looked down his nose at Billy. ‘I’m JJ. My grandfather runs the camp.’

‘Got it, boss,’ said Billy, hoping JJ would pick up

on his sarcasm. Billy made a note to avoid him at all costs.

Just then, a wizened old Chinese man with a long white beard burst into the station, moving quickly, considering his age. He looked ancient, as if he'd stepped out of the past.

'Welcome, everyone! I'm the head of the camp. It is a pleasure to meet you all. You can call me Jin *laoshi*.'

A short girl with long blonde hair, almost to her waist, shot her hand up in the air. 'As in "Gold Teacher"?' She had a southern accent. Billy thought she must be from somewhere like Alabama.

The old man laughed. 'Yes! I can tell someone already knows a bit of Mandarin.'

Billy wished *he* had remembered that *laoshi* meant teacher. It was one of the first things he'd learned at Chinese school back home in San Francisco. He was hit by a wave of worry that everyone here was going to be better than he was. And, to make things worse, the other students might expect him to be really good just because he was part-Chinese. It didn't matter that his dad's side of the family was from

Hong Kong and they spoke Cantonese, a different dialect of Chinese. He looked around at the eager faces of the other kids. They all seemed happy to be here. His palms started to sweat and his neck felt hot. He wished he could jump back on the train and then a plane and go all the way home again.

‘You can simply call me Lao Jin or Old Gold,’ the old man went on. ‘You aren’t required to speak Mandarin outside your language classes. But I’ll explain all that when we get to camp. Now come with me,’ he said. ‘Our adventure is about to begin.’

Billy followed Old Gold and the others into the parking lot where a faded yellow-and-green van waited. Billy thought the car looked at least twice as old as him. Old Gold flung the door open, revealing two rows of six seats, like a miniature bus.

Billy clambered in and sat at the back. A boy with short brown hair, glasses and more freckles than Billy had ever seen on anyone flopped into the seat next to him, breathing heavily.

‘It is *hot* here,’ he said, wiping his brow. His green eyes were wide behind his glasses. ‘I’m Dylan O’Donnell, by the way.’ He stuck out his hand. Billy

stared. He'd never seen someone his age introduce themselves with a handshake.

Billy blinked at the boy, trying to place his accent. It wasn't American, and it wasn't British, but it seemed strangely familiar.

'Um, hi. I'm Billy Chan,' said Billy, awkwardly shaking Dylan's hand.

'Nice to meet you! I've got a cousin named Billy,' said Dylan, grinning as if this was a very interesting fact.

'Cool,' said Billy. 'Er, I don't know anyone named Dylan.'

'Pleasure to be the first!'

The van revved to life and, with a start, hurtled forward.

'Seat belts, everyone!' shouted Old Gold from the front.

'So, where are you from?' asked Billy, still trying to place Dylan's accent.

'The Emerald Isle! Land of saints and scholars! Home of poets! And yes, a lot of sheep.' He said this last bit with a wry grin, as if he was making a joke.

Billy stared at him, still confused. Dylan sighed.

‘Ireland. I’m from Ireland.’

Billy wracked his brain and tried to remember if he knew anything about Ireland. ‘Dublin?’ he attempted.

‘I’m from the west coast, actually. Galway. It’s by the sea.’ Dylan’s voice went up an octave as the van flew round a corner.

Billy’s stomach churned as the van swayed, but he took a deep breath and tried to keep his cool. ‘Are you a surfer?’ he asked Dylan, glad that his own voice stayed steady as the van took another wild turn.

Dylan laughed. He had a musical laugh, the kind you’d want to keep listening to long after it stopped.

‘Me?’ he said. ‘Oh, no. Too many jellyfish. And I burn easily, even in Ireland.’

Billy tried to keep from visibly wilting. His suspicions about not having anything in common with the other kids at camp were right so far.

‘Do *you* surf?’ asked Dylan.

Billy nodded.

‘Cowabunga, dude!’ said Dylan in an atrocious American accent, making the hang-loose sign with

his left hand. He grinned, showing a gap between his two front teeth, and Billy found himself grinning back despite himself.

As they zoomed along narrow, winding roads, Old Gold rolled down the window and howled with glee.

Billy looked out of the window, watching the world hurtle by. Amidst flashes of green foliage and pockets of blue sky were glimpses of jagged yellow cliffs and stony peaks. Every time they swerved, he tensed, certain the van was going to tumble down into the ravines below.

He imagined the headline in the local news at home: Local Surf Champion Plummets to Death in China. He bet his parents would be sorry then for sending him here all summer.

Dylan was clearly feeling the same way. ‘Going a bit fast, aren’t we?’ he said, looking panicked.

‘My older brother likes to race cars,’ said a girl with long blonde hair, the one who had known what *laoshi* meant. ‘So this is totally normal to me.’ Her pale face said otherwise. ‘I might even be a race-car driver one day.’

‘If we survive this journey, you mean,’ said Dylan, looking a little green.

Even though Billy had been thinking the exact same thing, he put on what he hoped was a reassuring smile. ‘I’m sure we’re fine,’ he said.

Right then, there was a thump and a scratch as a large branch hit the side of the van.

‘Just a tree!’ Old Gold hollered. ‘Nothing to worry about!’

The van whizzed on higher and higher and the landscape changed. Every bump in the road – and there were a lot – sent the van flying, giving Billy that same weightless feeling he got on roller coasters. They wound up and up until they were level with the clouds, and then . . .

‘Whoa,’ breathed Billy. They were inside a cloud. All around them was a grey fog.

‘I can’t see anything!’ screeched Dylan. ‘How can Old Gold see where he’s going?’

‘Don’t worry,’ called Old Gold. ‘I can do this drive with my eyes closed!’

‘Please don’t!’ Dylan cried back.

Old Gold just laughed.

They rumbled on, and with a sudden burst of sunshine they were through the cloud cover and above it.

Billy was certain that if they went any higher they'd be able to touch the sky. In the distance he could see even higher mountain peaks, their jagged points covered in snow.

'Is the camp on top of a cliff?' asked the blonde girl.

'It's over this mountain,' said JJ. 'We're almost there.'

The van zoomed down a steep incline, plunging them back into the cloud cover, and then out again, but instead of jagged cliff faces they were now surrounded by trees in every direction. Billy thought he glimpsed a waterfall, but they were going too fast for him to tell.

As the trees opened up into a clearing, with a collection of small cabins scattered around, the van screeched to a stop, flinging them all forward against their seat belts.

The van door slid open, showering them in sunlight.

'Welcome to Camp Dragon,' said Old Gold.