

THE GREAT BAMBOO MAZE

THE BAMBOO ROSE ABOVE MEILIN, FAR ABOVE, BLOCKING OUT the sun and casting deep shadows on the intersection of two narrow paths below. Meilin stopped and glared at yet another crossroad in the Great Bamboo Maze, yet another choice of ways. She did not want to admit, not even to herself, that she had gone wrong somewhere several miles back and was now hopelessly lost.

It had seemed like such a good idea when she first thought of reaching Zhong through the Maze. The bamboo forest had been specially grown as a defense where the Wall did not run, and only selected messengers and senior officials knew the secret ways through the miles and miles of fifty-foot-high bamboo. Meilin's father, General Teng, knew the secrets, of course, and long ago he had told Meilin how to get through from the Northern Entrance.

"Always turn left the first ten times," whispered Meilin

to herself. “Then ten turns always right, then left, right, left, left, left, left, right, right, right.”

But she had followed those instructions and had *not* found herself on the other side of the Maze. Even worse, she had counted on getting through in the single day it was supposed to take. The leather bottle of water she had filled from a stream at the entrance, plus two rice cakes should have been easily enough to sustain her.

Now it was the morning of the third day. Her water bottle was empty and the rice cakes were distant memories. This, coming at the end of a week’s long trek by boat and caravan across Eura, often smuggled away in dusty crates and rat-infested holds, left her feeling frustrated at her failure, as well as hungry and thirsty. Only the distant hope that her father might still be alive, and that she might somehow live long enough to find him, kept her from giving up.

Angrily, Meilin struck the stem of the nearest bamboo with her quarterstaff, the blow so powerful that it cracked the four-inch-thick bole. The bamboo fell among its fellows, but there were so many it might never have been there in the first place. There was nothing but impossibly tall bamboo all around, the narrow path, the sun high above.

For the first time, Meilin thought she might actually die in the Maze. The daughter of General Teng, to die of thirst in a bamboo forest! It was unbearable!

An itch on her forearm diverted Meilin’s thoughts. She slid up her sleeve and looked at the tattoo of a sleepy panda. She had kept her spirit animal, Jhi, in her dormant state in the Great Bamboo Maze, fearing the panda would hold her back. Now that was the least of Meilin’s concerns.

“Come on, then!” ordered Meilin. “Come out and do

something useful. Maybe you could *eat* a way through the bamboo for me!”

There was a flash of light and sudden movement. A furry weight pressed into her side as Jhi appeared and leaned against her, pushing her against the closest stand of bamboo, making it shake.

“Hey, watch it,” protested Meilin. She felt something touch her face, and thinking it an insect, brushed it aside, only to feel more of whatever it was land on her hand. She looked up and saw delicate white flowers falling from the tips of the bamboo high above, like tiny warm snowflakes.

Bamboo flowers.

Meilin had never seen bamboo flowers before. She knew the plants only flowered once every fifty or sixty or even a hundred years, and then they died. All the bamboo plants, all at once.

“The Maze is dying,” she whispered, staring up at the tops of the bamboo. Every stand of bamboo she could see was flowering. In a week or two, the bamboo would begin to dry out, crack, and fall. Before that, the floor of the forest would be covered in flowers, attracting great hordes of rats and other animals to this once-in-a-century feast.

With the Maze gone, yet more of Zhong would be completely unprotected. The Conquerors had overrun her poor country through the Wall, and now even its lesser defenses were being torn away. Perhaps even this flowering had been caused by the Devourer somehow.

Jhi sat down heavily and reached up to drag Meilin down next to her with one big paw.

“I can’t sit down!” protested Meilin. “I have to find a way out!”

She pushed the panda's paw aside and took a few steps along the left-hand path. Then she hesitated, turned, and took a few steps along the right-hand path. Jhi made a kind of snuffling noise.

"Are you laughing?" demanded Meilin. "This is very serious! I'm lost. I have no food or water. I could die here!"

Jhi patted the ground next to her. It was a very human gesture, and it reminded Meilin of her father, when he wanted her to sit next to him and receive some wisdom. What she wouldn't have given to see him now.

"I haven't got time to sit down!" she rasped. "Come on!"

It really didn't matter *what* path she took now, Meilin thought. She was totally lost. What was important now was speed. She had to get out of the Maze before she died of starvation and thirst.

She set off at a loping run, sure that this time there would be an opening in the tight ranks of bamboo, that the path would lead to a clearing, that she would be in the open lands of Zhong.

Jhi made another noise behind her, but Meilin ignored it. Once again, her spirit animal was proving useless. If only she had Essix! The falcon could fly up and spot the way out.

"You would think a panda might be of *some* use in a bamboo forest!" muttered Meilin. She ran on another fifty yards, and came to yet another intersection of paths. She could go left, right, or straight ahead. They all looked exactly the same: long narrow tracks between great stands of bamboo.

Meilin stopped and looked back. Jhi was following her slowly but steadfastly. As the girl looked, the panda

reached up and pulled down a bamboo stem, effortlessly bending it until it broke. The topmost stems came down near the path just behind the girl, showering her once again with flowers. Jhi sauntered along and began to eat, stuffing huge pawfuls of bamboo stems, leaves, and flowers into her mouth.

Meilin felt her own hunger, a pain in her middle that was difficult to ignore. Her mouth would have watered, but it was too dry. She had tried eating the bamboo on the second day, and it had caused stomach cramps that only made her feel hungrier. It was too dry, and there were no soft, new shoots that would have been easier to digest.

“There has to be a way out,” she whispered. She looked wildly at the different paths. There really was no difference between them. She had gone right last time. Now she would go left, Meilin thought. Left and then right at the next intersection, and so on. Zigzagging. That would work. She would get *somewhere* that way.

“Come on,” she said to Jhi.

This time Meilin didn’t run. She just didn’t have the energy anymore. But she walked fast, ignoring her hunger pains and rasping throat, the heat and the humidity.

“I *will* find a way out,” she whispered. “I *will* get to Zhong. I *will* fight the Devourer and our enemies.”

But against that, there was a small voice in her head that whispered a hopeless, constantly repeating thought.

I’m going to die. I’m lost and I’m going to die.