

Legend of the Jade dragon

Several millennia ago, at a time when the continent of Lung Shu was divided between rogue factions that cared nothing about conquest, but mere survival, a simple farmer by the name of Jin Tong lived with his wife, Lian, in the heavily forested area of Tingnodeshu. They were poor farmers, but managed to eke out a meager living by trading their harnessed crops with nearby towns. It was an arduous life, yet the couple was content with what they had, spending days farming and evenings mitigating their weary bones with only true love as an encompassing blanket.

The only issue that perturbed Jin was Lian's sickness. Ever since they had met by chance at the Stone Forest 10 years prior, Lian had been ill with a disease that baffled physicians and medics alike. The disease eluded all treatments and could not be pinpointed to a certain location in her body. Despite this, Lian fell in love with Jin at first sight and took her for his wife, even at the young age of sixteen. "Your illness will not dissuade me," he said. After their marriage, the pair moved to Tingnodeshu and settled in a neatly-built cabin constructed by Jin as a wedding gift for his spouse.

As the years progressed, so did Lian's sickness. She became gaunt with jaundice and could barely get out of bed without wincing in discomfort. Her days in the fields became limited until her frail body couldn't keep up with the workload anymore. Confined to her cot, Lian became delirious at times, shaking with fever during others, and breaking out in coughing fits nearly everyday. Regardless, Jin worked harder than ever to provide for her, saving up every bit they had to pay for skilled doctors in the region. They would come and observe the ailing woman, doing what they could, but offering grim projections to Jin in private. "She is not bound for this world," one of them said somberly. Jin refused to believe it, though, and toiled ever more to build up a greater income for better medicine, despite their poverty and low standing. Something had to be out there that could cure his wife.

One day, Lian called for Jin in such agony, it even pained her husband. Using the last of their money, Jin called the doctor who knelt by her bedside for an updated prognosis. Turning white, the doctor took Jin to the side and told him the disease was accelerating to a point in which Lian only had three more months to live. Stricken by this admission, he begged the doctor to do something- anything- for his wife, but the doctor was adamant: there was no known cure for whatever afflicted Lian. The only thing the doctor could do was administer an

anesthetic that could dull the pain for Lian. Once the former departed, Jin was left to suffer internally over his wife's imminent death and ran into the forest, sobbing and screaming that it wasn't fair, that he had done everything in life as virtuous and morally as he could, and this was how fate rewarded him.

Collapsing against a tree, Jin remained motionless for several minutes before noticing he was not alone; an old man was observing him from the other side of the trunk, his inspection unyielding but noticeably kind all the same. Stating he had been collecting berries nearby, the old man couldn't help but overhear Jin's cries and proceeded to inquire what was wrong. Jin explained the situation with his wife, stating that every doctor he had brought in related the same thing: no cure existed for her. Breaking down again, Jin didn't see the old man bend down next to him and place a warm, withered hand on his shoulder. Experiencing a strange sensation of peace, he looked up into the old man's eyes who told him something extraordinary.

"There is a cure."

"There is?"

"Oh yes, one for every alignment that has ever existed; the Jade Petal."

Jin was floored and after a slew of moments, began to laugh. The old man raised his eyebrows, yet retained his fixed exterior while Jin shook his chortling head.

"The Jade Petal? There's no such thing!"

The old man's eyes shone. "Oh, but there is."

Jin's amusement suddenly shifted to aggravation at the old man's mockery. The Jade Petal was a mythical object sent down to Lung Shu by the gods, long sought by treasure hunters as an item that could potentially bring the continent together with its power and the one who harnessed it. Jin's anger was palpable now; his wife was dying and this old man was making light of the situation.

"How dare you deride me with such drivel. Leave me alone, old fool."

Jin began to walk away, leaving the old man rooted in his spot. He didn't look back until he heard a whistle and an object coming toward his head. Catching it midair, Jin was surprised to see that the old man had thrown his a scroll. Staring back at the latter, Jin was confounded as the man winked and uttered something so quiet that no one else would have been able to hear it.

“The rest is up to you.”

The old man rounded the tree again and vanished from sight. When he didn't reemerge, Jin slowly backed up and fled home, the scroll still in his grasp. When he arrived at the cabin, Jin was still so worked up, he tossed the scroll into a corner and let it sit there, choosing instead to stroke the head of his wife, now asleep from the doctor's anesthesia. It wasn't until that evening did he calm down and reconsider the object presented to him by the old man, still laying in the corner, unfurled and untouched. Picking it up and unfolding the parchment, Jin was floored. He was holding a torn section of the painting, the fragment itself that of a location he recognized: the Stone Forest and a red line that seemed to materialize at his touch and

started at the Stone Forest's base, continuing past the edges of the ripped parchment and onward to another location. His heart racing, Jin began to slowly believe the old man's words; perhaps there was something more to this ancient fragment. Maybe, just maybe, this painting could be part of a map that led to the location of the fabled Jade Petal. Jin started going over scenarios in his head, deducing that if he were to undertake the journey of scouring for these remaining parts of the painting, he would only have three months to do so before Lian succumbed to the disease. As she woke up the next day from her medicine, Jin explained the situation to her and expressed his desire to find the Jade Petal. While dubious it was real, she saw the hope in her husband's eyes for the first time in years and did not want to take that away from him. She approved of his search and agreed that a neighbor of theirs several miles away could come take care of her. Jin knew time was limited, so he quickly amassed everything he needed. Once their neighbor had accepted the invite and arrived two days later to care for Lian, Jin bid farewell to his beloved wife and set out to the Stone Forest, embarking on a journey with a vague outcome.

When he arrived several weeks later, Jin asked various locals if anyone had seen the remnants of a painting in the vicinity. Many couldn't say that they had, though one spoke of a slip of parchment that got lodged on top of one of the Forest's stone pillars centuries prior, inaccessible to anyone who dared retrieve it. Jin took that gamble and scaled the formation, slipping and nearly tumbling several times before reaching the top and spotting a worn piece of cloth, blowing in the breeze and caught in brittle shrubbery. Jin snatched it and climbed back down, connecting it to his original shard and spotting the red line now miraculously extending

into the newly obtained fragment, its path coursing into the so-called Enchanted Forest that lay southwest of the Stone Forest by several weeks.

Jin raced toward the former and arrived at its edge with two months to spare until Lian's untimely demise. He braved the Enchanted Forest's boundaries, catching fleeting glimpses of shapes and shadows in the thick brush, but never anything that confirmed the tales of strange creatures that lived in its depths. Jin, ultimately, came across a rundown shack nearly overgrown with brush and vines. Inside was another piece of the map, held up on the wall with an ancient blade. Jin connected it to the other two parchments and, with a jolt, realized it was the final piece of the map. He observed the red line grow, running across the continent and toward the Wolanggwō Mountain Range, right up to the top of Lung Shu's tallest mountain, Yuquan Peak. He left promptly without any lingering.

Jin got to the towering range of summits almost two months later and with just four days left until Lian's demise. He scaled the frigid cliffs and icy plains, slowly climbing further and further upward and toward the crest of Yunquan Peak. His numbed hands and shivering body threatened to give up on him numerous times, but the vision of Lian's faltering form kept the young man going. Following two days of grueling, near-death experiences, Jin made it to the top of Yunquan Peak and was shocked to find a grand temple situated at its summit with two giant statues of dragons flanking the entrance. Undeterred, Jin stepped into the building and

made way toward its center, calling out for anyone who might've been present but received no response. He noticed a beautiful, emerald shrine located in the middle of the temple and walked toward it, hoping and praying this was the final stop in his journey to find the Jade Petal, yet as he got closer, he started to feel woozy and his vision blurry. By the time Jin stumbled to the shrine and placed his hands on it, he collapsed and passed out.

Opening his eyes an undetermined amount of time later, Jin could see nothing but white all around him. The temple was gone and he appeared to be in a blank void, but as he turned on the spot, there was an elongated, dark shape coming toward him, curling and unfurling all at the same time, with a monstrous head and blazing eyes. Smoke emitted from its nostrils and heat radiated from its being. Jin was able to discern as the creature got closer that it looked just like both dragons that guarded the entrance to the temple; yet, that shouldn't have been possible, such things were fables! The animal-like entity bent over him and studied Jin for a

moment, its snorts and growls filling him with uncertainty but a sense of calm all the same. His intentions were noble, and Jin felt like this creature understood that. He wanted to reach out and touch the giant figure, to feel its scales just once and experience something that transcended human understanding. Braving the odds, Jin reached out ever so slowly and placed his fingertips on a rough scale that felt balmy and bumpy mingled into one. Going further, he allowed his palm to graze the creature until a grip was formed on one of its scales, every finger grasping the plate like holding onto something precious. The creature then swooped its head down toward Jin's and blew warm breath into his face. As the sense of tranquility increased, Jin fell backward in a newfound daze but could still feel the scale in his grip, never relenting, nor relinquishing.

Upon waking up, Jin found himself lying on the temple floor with its shrine in front of him. As his vision cleared, he managed to make out a golden figurine at the center of the shrine itself: a twisting dragon with jewels for eyes and solidified fire pouring out its mouth. Even stranger, though, was that something was in his clenched hand. Opening it up, Jin was floored to see a large, green scale between his fingers, incredibly similar to the one he had grabbed from the creature. In an epiphany-like moment, Jin realized what he was holding was the legendary Jade Petal; the scale and petal were one! How he obtained it, he couldn't say, but Jin was eternally grateful that whatever the entity was he encountered, it had granted him permission to obtain the mythical object.

With little time to spare, Jin raced down the mountain and back toward Tingnodeshu.

Almost two days later under a star-studded sky, he approached the forest's boundary and sprinted within. There was very little time left until Lian succumbed to her illness and he needed to get to the physician immediately. Banging on the doctor's door, he was met by an irritated face, yet this faded into pure astonishment when both eyes met the Jade Petal in Jin's hand. Begging the doctor to help, Jin was led inside where the former crushed the Jade Petal with his grinder, remarking how simple it was despite the scale appearing tough and

unbreakable. He placed the powder into edible capuls and presented them to Jin, who thanked the physician and left swiftly without another word.

He arrived home just before midnight and excused the neighbor who was caring for Lian, shocked and taken aback by his wife's even more haggard and skeletal appearance. Barely

conscious and unable to speak, she moaned upon seeing him but obeyed as he fed her each pill one by one. Lian then fell into a deep sleep for several days, unable to respond to Jin's inquiries but living past the predicted date of her predetermined death. Jin stayed by her side every day, taking note of the yellow skin turning back to its normal pigmentation, Lian's sunken eyes returning to their former state, and her body growing muscle again and losing its emaciated outline. It wasn't until over a week later did Lian awake, new and refreshed, able to climb out of bed without pain and lively with newfound energy. Crying tears of joy, Jin and Lian embraced and danced throughout their cabin, unable to believe a miracle had occurred, unable to believe the Jade Petal had been real.

There was a sudden knock at the door. Opening it up, Jin and Lian were surprised to see hundreds of people standing before them, many with expressions of hope and joy, all led by the doctor who had crushed the Jade Petal into medicine. He grasped Jin's hands and spoke of the legend of the one who could obtain the Petal and bring Lung Shu together under a reign of peace and harmony. The physician declared Jin was bestowed, with Lian's miraculous recovery as proof, and proclaimed him their new ruler and "Chosen One" of Lung Shu. The entire crowd knelt out of respect and chanted that Jin was their leader. Stunned and unable to speak, Jin became terrified and rebuked the crowd; he was no leader and had no desire to be one. The doctor was able to convince him to hear out those who had journeyed to see Jin, something he tentatively agreed to upon Lian's urging. Over the course of the day, Jin listened to the people's stories, moved by their trials and tribulations of the land, slowly turning his mind around that something needed to be done to bring the population together under a unified front of love and acceptance. Why else would the creature have given him the scale? It clearly was because of his selflessness, he argued; otherwise, Lian wouldn't be alive. Perhaps this was his purpose: to aid the people. In the early hours of the morning, Jin stood before the crowd and announced he would accept the burden of leading them into a new era. The merry applause and clamoring hollers was enough to convince him he was doing that right thing. Jin even believed he spotted an old man near the back of the crowd, concealed behind a tree but smiling with pride, one that looked eerily familiar to the one who'd initially sent him on his quest; but his visage faded as soon as it had been spotted. The cheers reverberated off the trees and into a dawn that signaled a new day, in more ways than one.

Over the next several years, Jin and Lian traveled the continent, their followers growing

bigger and bigger with each passing stop. It came to be that over a million individuals were accompanying the couple by the end of their fifth year of navigating Lung Shu, each of them touched by Jin's words and proclamation that he would lead them to a better tomorrow. The poverty-stricken and destitute people of Lung Shu were inspired and followed him back to the

Forest of Tingnodeshu, where Jin ordered the trees cut to help build a town that could house everyone present. The operation took nearly a year, but the end result was a beautiful town that eventually conitung growing with each passing generation, a town Jin would eventually name Da Shu, its center housing a throne where he sat next to his beautiful Lian and ruled Lung Shu for decades to come, known to many as the "Jade Emperor".