

## The Golden Panda

By Fraser Ronald

No one would mistake Crew for a citizen of the Jade Empire—Human or Elf. She fingered the holy black metal blade. Her dark, red-rimmed eyes bore into the man standing before her. He squirmed, swallowed, and looked everywhere but at her face, with its green, bumpy skin and sharp fangs.

Her blue-grey tongue snapped out to touch the tip of her long, hooked nose. “I was having a nice spot of tea, and you’ve messed that up considerably.”

Behind the man stood five of his comrades, a thuggish lot watching Crew with poorly disguised ill-ease.

“She doesn’t like her tea disturbed.” Dog-brother sat while Crew stood. His shaved head marked him as maybe a monk and maybe a soldier. His scarred visage and cold stare marked him as a dangerous man.

The man cleared his throat. “Old Jinger is late with his dues. We’re here to fix that, that’s all.”

“I’m going to say this again, and I don’t intend to say it a third time.” Crew leaned forward, her brow knit, her eyes flashing. “You’ve messed up my nice, quiet tea. That’s annoying.”

The man looked ready to protest, maybe even ready to make trouble. Crew cracked him between the eyes with the pommel of her holy black metal knife—so long, some would call it a sword—dropping him to the ground. The five followers surged back. Crew growled, shifting the blade to ready, and moving a step forward. The thugs dissipated, out through the door.

“You think that’ll be enough?” Dog-brother held the intricate teacup between two massive hands, his nails chipped and cracked unlike the pure, smooth porcelain of the cup.

“I figure.” Crew sat down across from Dog-brother, dropping her blade on the table and taking up her cup. “This is good tea.”

An older man, bent and greying, approached the two. “My apologies honoured guests and patrons, but may I please implore you to depart. I have the money to pay Sherday.”

“Sherday?” Crew tapped the chest of the groaning and writhing man on the floor. The old man nodded.

“You’d be the guy running this place?” Dog-brother asked.

“I would be, sir.” He bowed from the hip. “My name is Yi Jinger, as Sherday told you.”

Dog-brother gestured to Sherday, who had ceased his writhing and lay in the pool of his vomit. “He someone special?”

“Not special, but he represents the Ox,” Jinger said. “The Ox is a dangerous man to cross.”

“I’m going to let you in a secret, Jinger,” Crew said. “It’s my time to die and I have decided this will be the place I’m going to do it.”

“You wish to die?” Jinger’s eyes narrowed. “You seem healthy, strong, confident. Why death?”

“I am healthier, stronger and confident-er than you’d imagine, old man.” Jinger touched the holy metal black blade, her eyes losing their focus. “The wars are done. The Jade Emperor has crushed his enemies and holds his friends tight. War is all I’ve got. I’m lost without it. So I’ll be lost—certainly, absolutely lost.” Her gaze returned to Jinger, and a smile cut across her face. “But save your tears for this one.”

Dog-brother frowned. Jinger’s eyebrows rose. “I lost everything to war, okay? Everything. But now I love it. I love it more than all that I lost. I forget their faces, the faces of my family. All I remember is the blood and the mud and the killing. It makes me feel alive, powerful. I don’t want to be that man. I’m better off dead.”

“And you see no hope?” the old man asked. “No hope in life? In change?”

“Hope is an illusion.” Dog-brother growled out the words. “The only change is from breathing to not.”

Jinger sighed dramatically. He looked to the door, then back to Crew. “And so I will lose my shop.” He gestured around. “My life. I will lose this. You desire loss, but not I.”

Crew kicked a bag out from under the table. It impacted with Jinger’s shins, rattling as it did so. “That’s full of sovereign, minted silver, lately taken from the treasuries of the Fang Goddess herself. That’ll buy you twenty places like this.”

After he inspected the bag’s contents, Jinger smiled. “Then this place is yours. May your wish be fulfilled.”

“What’s it called?” Dog-brother asked. “This place, what do you call it?”

“This is the Golden Panda,” Jinger said.

“Good enough.” Crew re-filled her cup. “I like it. Golden Panda. Good place to die.”

In through the door poured men. The motley herd of thugs, brutes, and bruisers carried cast-off swords, notched and rusted. They wore piecemeal armour, incomplete and inexpertly gird. In their midst strode a man whose belly out-proportioned his shoulders by a fair margin. He had a wispy beard and the eyes of a politician—shifting and dangerous.

Crew jerked her thumb at the belly. “The Ox.”

“That’s right.” He planted his feet firmly apart, scowling, pathetic sword in his hand. “And by the Pissing Heavens of Sadness, you will regret crossing me.”

“I’m starting to think this might not work.” Dog-brother pushed his chair back from the table. The screech made the assembled ruffians start. “There’s only about twenty of them, and they don’t look top drawer.”

The Ox waved his sword at Dog-brother. “Who are you talking to? Are you being insulting?”

“You may be right.” Crew rose out of her chair and took up her holy black metal knife. “But we work with what we’ve got.”

Dog-brother produced a flanged mace from beneath his robes. He held it loosely as he considered the surrounding churls. “I better not be left crippled.”

“Crippled?” The Ox shouted now, anger suffusing his voice and face. “You’ll be dead.”

Crew smiled. “Perfect.”

And the dance began.

None in that village ever forgot the Day of the Golden Panda.