



THE WORLD WALKER

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Sample Chapter – The Panda and the Mountain Fox

Jen King had been dwelling in the dream world, talking to his previous self, Zaigan, for several nights. It was strange looking at the wrinkled face of the old man and every now and again a pang of nostalgia would return, almost like Jen was looking into the mirror of the past.

“I still don’t understand about the *world walker*,” he said to his reflection. “You have told me about the dream and spirit worlds but I don’t understand how such a person can *walk* between them.”

“That’s just it,” Zaigan said. “People can’t usually understand. The world walker is special in that they are fully aware of how to transcend worlds. The world walker travels to where they are needed.”

“How do you know this?”

“The real question is, how do *you* know this? Whilst you think you are talking to me, you are really talking to yourself.”

Jen was silent for a while whilst he tried to make sense of the conundrum.

“What about the six realms?”

“It’s time for you to go deeper into the mountains,” Zaigan said to Jen. “Only by dwelling there by yourself can you discover the answers to all your questions.”

“But there is so much that I wish to ask you about. How did you die? Who were you? I know what you say, I mean... I say, is true. I was once you.”

Zaigan smiled at Jen but then got up from his seated position on the rock and started to walk away. As he did, he faded, finally disappearing all together.

Jen was alone. He contemplated travelling back to the lake where the hermit woman could be, but decided instead that he would journey on into the giant mountains ahead. That's when he realised he was still in a dream world and he began to panic, not sure how to wake up.

But am I really dreaming? he questioned. Everything looks so real.

No sooner had he asked that question did he wake up with a sore back, leaning against an apricot tree. It was dark but dawn was breaking on the horizon to the east. He just sat there gaining his bearings, staring at the mountains ahead.

They look like gods, he thought, as he gazed at the colossal structures, intricate and complicated, with their grooves and mysterious shadows.

From his current vantage point, Jen could make out six mountains, but the range looked like it stretched on behind them into perpetuity. With a surge of determination, he pushed himself to his feet and set off into the unknown.



The next several months were filled with hardship for Jen King. He crossed paths with not one human or animal. The conditions were cold and wet at times. The higher he climbed into the mountains, the more stark and barren it became. He mainly lived off a type of berry that he found growing on trees in the mountains, red and plump with a bitter taste. He collected them every few days when he would be fortunate to come across yet another tree, as if it were the same one waiting for him. He lost a

lot of weight during those months, and he grew a mighty long beard, bushy and wiry.

Then, after three months and seven days of travelling, he came across a small cave, about halfway up the second great mountain. Jen had slept in smaller enclaves than this most nights. It was a blessing to him.

As he entered, he realised that the cave was already inhabited. In the shadows at the back, was a large presence, only round, luminous eyes giving an indication that it was not afraid, not hostile.

Jen decided not to go in, still unsure of what the creature was. Instead, he sat down by the entrance and before long had fallen into a deep sleep, the reassurance of life present in this mountain a great comfort to him.

When he awoke, a giant panda was sitting next to him, meticulously chewing away on sticks of bamboo. Jen was so surprised by its vivid presence that he fell back, almost seeing pools of water everywhere.

The creature was beautiful, with snow white and coal black fur merged like cloud and night sky. Jen watched the panda eat for a while. It seemed out of breath, working hard to get the nutritious innards of the bamboo from its sturdy casing. Every so often, the panda would stop and look up at Jen, almost smiling with its eyes. Then it would go back to work.

When it became dusk, the panda left the cave area, climbing high into what looked like a mountain forest. Several hours later, it returned, carrying numerous bamboo canes in its mouth.

This routine continued for several days and Jen began to enjoy the panda's company. It allowed Jen to sleep in the doorway of

its cave, yet at the current altitude the weather was much calmer for some reason, so Jen had little need to.

Jen would sometimes venture up to the forest where the panda often travelled, laden with bamboo and little else. Jen wondered how such a large creature had ever adapted to survive on this hardy plant.

Similar-sized creatures in Raicema survive solely by hunting, he thought.

It seemed like it was against the norm of nature for this giant being to spend most of the day and night extracting what it could from such a plant.

But otherwise, the creature would surely die.

After several days of coexisting together, the panda did a very unusual thing. Whilst Jen was standing, observing the colossal view of Neoasia, it stood on its hind legs, an act it rarely performed, and put its paws on his shoulders.

It looked deep into Jen's eyes, with kindness, with appreciation. Jen felt touched, like he'd broken a barrier that he'd placed between himself and every other living thing. The panda dropped down back onto all fours and went back to its necessary task.

For weeks, Jen contemplated. He thought about his life carefully, what he had achieved, what he wanted to achieve. Every negative thought made him ask questions, and every question always led back to frustration.

Why are there so many telling me I can change? Out here, alone, there is nobody to harm, but as soon as I am back in Raicema, back in reality, I will be back following the crowd, just like cattle led to slaughter.

He fluctuated in his ambitions, in his desires.

Maybe I won't go back, he thought. Maybe I can live out here until I die. I have cared for nobody, and nobody cares for me.

As Jen sank deeper into the wallow of pity, a strange thing happened. The panda, sitting down, resting in a slumped position, looked up at Jen and spoke words to him, clear and resonant like a young child.

“Do not be sad,” it said, jaw unmoved but eyes wide and full of gleam. “I have lived here for seventeen years and I feel happy that you have come to visit me.”

Jen was taken aback, shaking his head to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

“Did you just speak to me?” Jen asked the panda, quietly and unsurely. There was no answer from the great creature.

I must be going crazy, Jen thought, now concerned that he was hearing things.

“You are not hearing things.” The resonant voice spoke again, clear as sweet music. “You are simply *listening* to me”.

Jen looked around wildly, searching for another human that could be speaking such words.

“It is I you are listening to, this creature that you have been dwelling with here for many days now.”

Now Jen was still and silent, in shock that this non-human could communicate with him. He just stared at the panda for a while. The creature had now stopped eating and was in a slumped position, breathing lightly and looking at him.

Jen's inner ears were throbbing slightly, an unusual but comforting sensation. The strange pools of light returned and with them a bright light above his head, something that felt like the sun but wasn't.

“Why can I understand you?” Jen asked. “Am I dreaming? Are you a figment of my imagination?”

“I am real,” the panda replied. “It is clear that we are communicating now. The real question is – why do you have to question everything? Most of the time, things are just the way they are and we can just accept that.”

For a while, there was silence, and a strange sort of fear engulfed Jen. It was the sort of fear when one first faces something, a fear of the unknown.

“Why are you afraid of me?” the panda asked. “I shall do you no harm. I choose not to hunt, to leave the mountain creatures alone. We all rely on each other. I am sure things are the same where you come from.”

“No, they are not,” Jen said, feeling more at ease with what he was experiencing. “People kill each other, one way or another.”

“Because they feel fear of each other?” the panda asked.

Jen thought for a while and then smiled slightly. “Yes, I suppose they do.”

“But what is there to fear? Why would you be born if not to help each other?”

At that moment Jen realised the sweet nature of the creature before him.

“Once one loves, one’s world is changed,” the panda was saying.

“Then, you cannot imagine anything else.”

“Things are different where I come from. People are taught from an early age to want things so much that they are willing to kill for them,” Jen explained. “Or at least, support those who would kill.”

Jen hung his head in shame.

“I can sense your sorrow. Have you killed?” the panda asked.

“Yes,” Jen replied woefully. He glanced out into the distance, a hazy mist now blocking the tremendously vast land that lay before the mountains.

“I too have killed,” the panda admitted. The revelation somewhat surprised Jen, after the panda had talked about choosing not to hunt.

“I once killed a mountain fox that was going to eat my child. I had to choose whether to let go and let my child die, or fight back to save my child’s life.”

“I would not call that killing,” Jen said. “I would call that defending.”

“And is that what you have done?” the panda asked. “Defended? The ones you care for?”

“Not exactly,” Jen said in shame. “I have followed orders to kill.” The panda said nothing for some time and Jen could sense that it was contemplating their conversation.

“I believe there is no difference,” the panda said, finally. “You have done what you have done out of fear, the fear of not being accepted. I have done what I have done, too, because of fear. My fear was the fear of loss. But I can see that both of those fears are the same thing.”

Jen sat in silence for a while, thinking about what the panda had said, about how unbelievable the entire experience was. *How am I communicating with this animal? Everyone knows animals can't speak? I must be dreaming.*

He turned to the panda to ask it another question, but was surprised to find that it had vanished, without a sound.

The panda has probably grown hungry and gone on the search for bamboo, Jen thought to himself.

He waited, but it grew dark and the panda did not return. The mist had enveloped the cave area now and Jen was also growing hungry. He ate the last of the red berries he had gathered and entered the cave to go to sleep. He did not think that the panda would mind as they were now on speaking terms.

Before long, Jen was in a deep sleep.

He awoke to an empty cave, still no sign of the panda. He decided to go in search of the great creature, into the bamboo forest.

The mist had passed and a clear view of a sweeping valley was now present in all its glory. The shadows of the clouds projected on the spacious lands like the silhouettes of strange creatures. The sun streamed down in rays, a majestic and inspiring display of light creating warmth and a glow of prosperity throughout Neoasia.

As Jen climbed the steep rocks that led up to the edge of the forest, he began to wonder if he had been imagining things over the last few weeks. He had been alone for quite a while now.

Has my mind been playing tricks on me? Have I dreamt the entire thing?

The bamboo forest was thick and difficult to navigate. Some areas had tightly-packed groups of bamboo that grew so close together that neither light nor could air get through.

The forest was like a maze, certain pathways clear enough to proceed, whilst others were a dead end of bamboo mass. After a while of stumbling about the maze, Jen began to grow frustrated and slightly dizzy. He came to rest on a round stone, next to a strange-looking plant, orange and blue in colour, with long spikes and purple fruit. The fruit looked juicy and fully ripe.

Jen picked one carefully. He was about to take a bite when he heard a voice speak to him.

“I wouldn't eat that if I was you,” the voice said, gruff but a little squeaky.

He looked around and saw a short stout creature on all fours, with bushy light brown fur and sharp teeth.

“Those fruits are poisonous to most that eat them. I almost died once from eating one of those.”

Jen didn't even question how he was able to understand this creature. Instead, he decided to ask for the creature's help.

“I am looking for a panda,” Jen said, wanting to laugh at how funny the sentence sounded. “It usually comes into this forest to search for bamboo. Have you seen it?”

The words Jen spoke seemed to fill the creature with sadness and for a long while the creature sat on its hind legs staring into the air.

“Are you okay?” Jen asked. “Have I said something to upset you?”

The creature looked at Jen, its eyes lighting up a little.

“No, you didn't,” the bushy creature replied. “I was just feeling sad because you reminded me that my mother was killed by a giant panda.”

“Are you a mountain fox?” Jen asked, in disbelief, unsure if this was related to the panda's story.

“I don't really know what I am,” the creature admitted. “Why are you looking for the panda?”

“I'm not sure,” Jen said truthfully “But I feel very different since I came to this mountain. The panda I met can be no ordinary panda, just as you can be no ordinary mountain fox.”

The fox seemed amused slightly, its tail waving a little with excitement.

“Are you hungry?” the fox asked.

“I am,” Jen said, feeling his belly rumble with emptiness.

“Come with me,” the fox said.

It walked away, deeper into the maze of bamboo. Jen followed immediately, still fighting back the doubt that he was living reality. The forest was cool, almost cold from the shade. Only a few rays of light got through the bundles of giant bamboo.

The fox was travelling along an intricate path, very confusing and mostly a blur to Jen, but eventually, the pair emerged in a clearing with a wide path leading out of the forest. In the centre of the clearing was a large bush, laden with juicy fruits.

“These fruits are safe to eat,” the fox said. For a while, they both ate, sitting on the soft, moist moss that grew all over the forest floor.

“Why did you come to the mountain?” the fox asked Jen.

“I came here because I needed to escape,” Jen said, after some thought.

“Is something hunting you?” the fox asked.

“Maybe,” Jen replied. “I am running away from my life as a soldier. I do not want to kill anymore. All I want is to live in peace. Ever since I stepped onto this land, something has been helping me. First, a strange person shows up in the forest and tells me I should travel into the mountain. Since then I have met a hermit woman, dreamt a vision of my previous self and spoken to two animals. I’ve been in these mountains for months and it still feels like a dream.”

The fox was silent, clearly amazed by Jen’s account of recent events. It wagged its bushy tail, seemingly amused by his tale.

"The path behind us leads to a special part of the mountain. There are many humans ahead," it said to him slowly. "The panda lives alone, as do I, and in these mountains you should do the same."

With that statement the fox stood on all fours and walked back into the depths of the bamboo forest. Before Jen could utter a word, he was alone again.

Jen sat for a while, gazing at the magnificent bush next to him. It seemed to glow with a wonderful green aura. It reminded him of Angelo Orentus and the unique appearance he had, glowing and vivid. Jen stood to his feet, took one piece of fruit from the bush and headed along the mossy path.

The path ended after a short while, presenting Jen with a wonderful view of another mountain. Jen was about halfway up one side of a huge valley, made of the two mountains.

In the distance, down in the valley, Jen could see smoke rising. *I am home*, Jen thought to himself, the picture in front of him as familiar as his own face.