

The palace guard had cleared a large space in the middle of the square, and Yi went straight to the centre, took the red bow from his shoulder, drew out an arrow, and stood waiting for the first sun to rise.

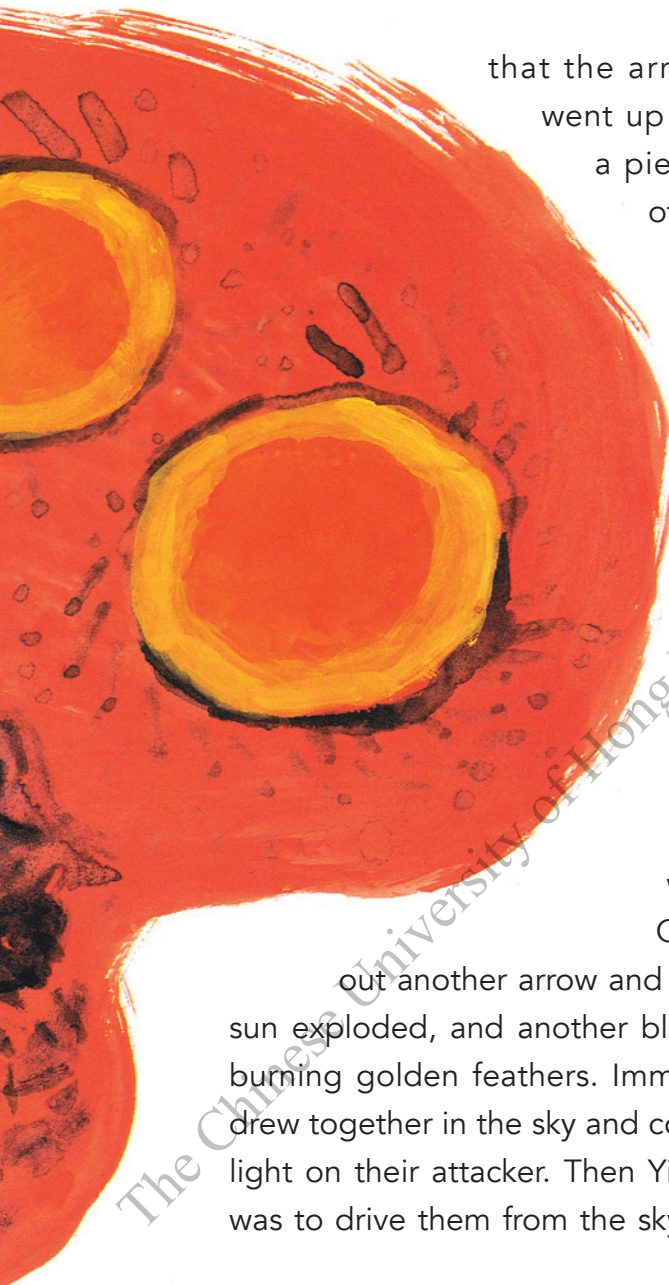
A shining rim sparkled on the horizon; Yi drew his bow to its fullest extent, and looked steadily into a light brighter than any mortal eye could bear. Carefully, he loosed a warning shot that grazed the edge of the glittering disc. It shuddered, hung back a moment, then sprang up, flaming angrily, to be closely followed by a second sun. Yi took aim once more. This time he clipped a sliver of light from its rim. The second sun staggered to one side then roared on, belching flames as a third sun rocketed up, to be joined by another and another till all ten suns were in the sky once more. Yi could see them glaring down at him, recognizing him, jeering and mocking him, confident that not even Yi the Great Archer would dare to harm the inviolate Sun Children of the God of the Eastern Heavens.

When they saw the ten suns in the sky once more, the people groaned in despair. Yi looked at their desperate state and felt an icy fury against the mindless arrogance of the Sun Children. His eyes glittered with anger. Now he drew the great bow in earnest. His whole being one with his arrow, he sent it singing its deadly song into the sky. The first of the suns was blazing triumphantly, so high above the ground that only a soundless explosion of blinding light revealed



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that the arrow had found its target. A roar went up from the crowd when they heard a piercing screech, and saw the body of a three-legged crow, the spirit of the sun, dropping through the air, its golden feathers scorched and burnt black by the searing heat long before it touched the ground.

Yi looked up, hoping that the punishment of their brother would be enough to frighten the other suns away to the safety of the Fu Sang Tree. But still they blazed down, cursing and taunting him. No longer mischievous children, they were revelling in their power.

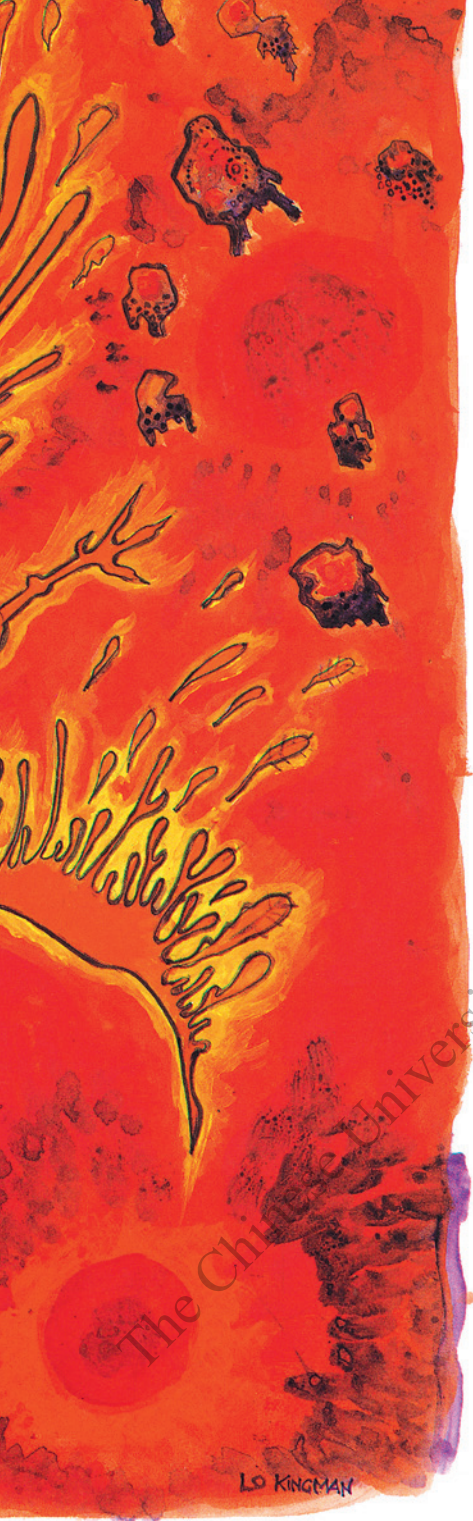
Coldly and deliberately he drew out another arrow and took aim. In a moment the second sun exploded, and another blackened crow fell amid a storm of burning golden feathers. Immediately the eight remaining suns drew together in the sky and concentrated all their rays of burning light on their attacker. Then Yi knew that he had no choice if he was to drive them from the sky and bring the disaster to an end.

He raised his bow. One after another the arrows flew; to east, to west, to south, to north, so fast that the watchers could hardly see them.

Emperor Yao was standing close to Yi, shading his face and watching the sun-crows fall. Suddenly he started, looking at Yi's almost empty quiver; silently he removed one arrow, and held it in his hand. At last just one sun, pale with terror, hung alone in the sky afraid to move. Yi reached back for another arrow, to find his quiver empty. Then Yao put his hand on Yi's shoulder and held out the arrow he had taken. "My friend, we need one sun to light and warm the earth," he said.

Yi nodded grimly, and looked round him at the carpet of scorched





feathers and the blackened bodies of the nine suns. He sighed, "It was the only way. The suns were mad with power; they would never have gone away."

The Emperor bowed. "Blessings upon you Great Archer Yi!" he said. "You have saved my people." The crowd knelt down, and shouted Yi's praises as they watched the Emperor lead their hero back to the palace.

There they spent the day together, planning how best to search out and kill the beasts that were terrorizing the country. After questioning all the messengers they decided that the first task was to hunt down the monster known as Chiseltooth, then the gigantic Wind Bird, and finally the huge serpent in Dong Ting Lake; and that Yi should take with him, Feng Meng, the best archer in the land, to be his aide, a guide who knew the country well, and four good soldiers to escort them.

That night Yi slept deeply, recovering his strength for the challenges to come.

Beside him Chang E lay awake. She had been frightened by the arrogance of the Sun Children, and she feared their parents might regret sending her brave husband to save Yao's land. But she hid her worries from him when they said their farewells next day.

As soon as it was light, the Emperor rode out with Yi through the crowds of people waiting by the road to wish them well, and said goodbye to him several miles outside the city. The party travelled fast, south across the Great Plain, over hills and through forests. Sleeping with weapons ready to hand, on guard against wild animals, and outlaws driven to desperation by the endless drought and pestilence.

When they drew near the monster's lair, abandoned farms with buildings half torn down, trees uprooted, and piles of drying bones, bore silent witness to the horrors suffered by the people. At midday Yi ordered the troop to make camp, and went to find the monster, taking with him only Feng Meng and the guide.

By evening they came to the top of a rise where the guide halted. He pointed down across a dried-up stream to a thick copse. "A party from my village followed Chiseltooth here," he said. "His den's in a cave in those bushes." And added grimly, "I'm the only one alive who's gone closer than this. The monster hunts in daylight and lies up at night."

Yi shifted his bow on his shoulder and looked at his companions. "The wind's in the west. Can we make our way to the east side of the wood now, before it comes back?"