

Evening of the Discovery – 23:44

Thin scarlet ribbons wrapped around bamboo posts, excess thread flitting in the humid wind, as they stood on either side of the bar entrance. A mock pagoda overhung above, beset with large Chinese symbols and underscored by a tapering red dragon. “Shennong’s Rest”, the symbols read. Local chatter rang loud from within the lantern-lit hut and dissipated into a hissing silence in the thick-jungled night beyond.

Four young men, conspicuously western to look at and clothed in ragged Indiana Jones-style adventuring garb, were hunched around a small table of drinks where the lantern light faded. Three were covered in dust and cobwebs, raucously toasting to success – while the fourth was much cleaner and sat picking at one thumbnail with the other, nursing a sore-looking lip.

“So, boys, the plan tomorrow is simple...” Otis summarised, bringing the volume down a little and readying his finger to point. “We need to get samples of the ornamental finds over to the museum for clean-up and categorising. Quicker they see what we’ve got here, quicker our names are on the exhibit – Henry, you take them over.”

“Yes boss.” Henry snorted, with friendly sarcasm.

“Seth. The media interest is going to be huge on this one – and we need to be ahead of the ‘cultural appropriation’ squad. Let’s get the angle sorted on what we can learn from these finds. You know – how does it benefit our understanding of this *ancient* and *precious* civilisation... yada-yada etcetera... Put that silver tongue to good use, yeah?”

“Naturally, this revelatory contribution to the field will elucidate a great many behaviours of the Divine Farmer’s followers. It will allow us to shine a light on the opaque and preserve this culture for future study and reflection. Or some shit, right?” Seth smirked.

“Some shit indeed. I’ll leave that to you.” Otis turned to the cleaner-clothed, fidgeting man. “Brian – I guess you can pack up the kit at the site.”

Brian sat, still picking at his thumb while his eyes vacantly searched the ground.

“Brian.” Otis waved from across the table. “Brian!”

“Huh? Oh – Otis, sorry.”

“Still shaken, huh? Well, snap out of it bud. This is the big one and we’re right at the finish line. Just pack up the kit and we’re out of here – back home to a nice, chilled, sparkling glass of fame. And a chaser of riches!”

“Of course – it’s just... I can’t help but –”

“What?”

“Nothing. I’ll sort the kit.”

“Good man!”

Otis had shot up from the table and taken up a broad-shouldered stance next to Brian. He smacked him on the back twice and hoisted his cup to his mouth, lapping down the last of his drink before bashing it back down on the table like a judge’s gavel.

“They’ll have to rename this place, boys. Old Shennong isn’t resting anymore!”

The wind picked up, ruffling through loose clothes with a warm, stifling air. The scarlet ribbons erratically whipped from their bamboo peaks as the gust carried the four men back to their rustic hotel rooms.

Morning of the Discovery – 08:47

“Ready to make history, boys?”

Otis stood gawking upward at the vine-covered monolith before them, as the three other men emerged from the dense foliage behind him.

“Unbelievable... it’s...” Brian began.

Seth interrupted: “The tomb of the Divine Farmer. Final resting place for Shennong of the South Peak – the Red Dragon. The Stellar Phoenix. This is just... superlative.”

“How many titles does this guy need?!” Henry exclaimed, sneering.

“Well, ‘this guy’ was worshipped as a god – so, how many titles do gods usually have?”

“Depends on your deistic perspective. If you think there’s only one god, then you could say he has as many titles as there are religions.” Brian droned, eyes descending back down the vines and fixing on the crooked stone stairs that disappeared into an inky-black abyss. The entrance.

“Thanks for that Brian. So then, let’s find out what all the hype is about.” Otis stepped forward before Brian grabbed at his shoulder.

“Wait!”

Otis’ eyes narrowed at Brian’s cautionary delay.

“What?”

“Why is it just... open? Yet no-one has ever explored it?” Brian shuddered.

“Brian... bud. Did you happen to notice that jungle we *just* spent the whole night cutting through? And remember the helicopters we needed to even get to the nearest village before that?”

“I know – it wasn’t exactly easy to make it here, but still...”

Suddenly, both men were bowled aside as Henry charged through the middle of their debate and toward the entrance.

“Enough of the tip-toeing – let’s get in there! *Now!*”

Otis shrugged, dropping the heavy gear they’d been carrying and followed. Brian looked up at the great edifice once more, pulled at his shirt to waft some air against his chest and scurried forward.

Day after the Discovery – 10:32

“Ohhhhw – crap! What time is it?”

Otis spoke to himself while yawning wide and fighting his tongue, which seemed to crimp at the sides as he did. He peeled back the covers that he'd curled his body beneath and looked toward the netted window. The sun was high in the sky and shining fiercely into the small hovel. He'd overslept.

"Shit!"

He scrambled for his phone, sniffing at the sheets as he dug through them. Unlocking it, he saw a number of missed calls from Henry, plus a text from Brian an hour ago.

'Anything seem a bit strange this morning?' it said.

"Pfft. Bloody Brian... always so... paranoid..."

Otis murmured his dismissal of Brian's message as he placed the phone back down, stretched himself all over and slipped out of bed onto his hands and knees. Wondering what the missed calls could be about, he crawled toward the makeshift bathroom – which was basically just a ring-stool placed over a hole in the floor.

'It's too early for the museum to have finished up, even if Henry took the helicopter before dawn – and not even Seth could spin a story that quickly... maybe something's gone wrong?' he thought, stopping when he reached the toilet stool and blinking with surprise as he saw that his nose was level with the rim.

"Huh?"

He looked down at his hands, both contacting the ground, and tilted his head to the side.

"Why am I...on the *ruff*?"

His eyes peeled wide as he felt his ears prickle to the sound of his own voice. He quickly rocked back onto his feet and shot to standing. He opened his mouth slowly and deliberately to speak.

"Did... I just..." he winced, "*rruff!*?"

Morning of the Discovery – 11:08

"Shut up, Brian!" Otis snapped.

"Okay, okay. But don't you think that it's pretty obvious we're not supposed to get in?"

“First off, you wonder ‘Oh, why’s it open? It’s too easy – we should turn back!’ And now – you’re giving it all this ‘They locked it for a reason guys! Let’s turn back!’ You’re full of –...”

“Otis!” Seth interjected, “Look at this.”

Otis and Brian both diverted their attention toward the huge slab of porous stone that had thwarted their advance deeper into the tomb. A crude pattern was carved into its surface, depicting lizards arranged around a central point – all of them crawling toward it and with one making contact with the symbol via its tongue.

Seth continued: “So, they’re all crawling toward the central point, agreed? That point seems to resemble the symbol for agriculture... as in – farming. The ‘Divine Farmer’. You understand?” Seth glanced around to meet three vacant stares. “To get to Shennong, we need to be like the lizards!”

“Meaning?” Otis prompted.

“On our bellies and facing the symbol.”

“He’s lost it.” Henry declared. “Maybe it’s the heat or something – but seriously, he’s gone crazy in the coconut. Mad in the...”

Henry’s sentence trailed off into a confused and reticent hum, as he observed Otis lowering himself to the damp ground.

“Maybe. But we’ve been stuck at this door for nearly two hours now and we’ve come too far to turn back. So, I’m honestly going to try anything at this point.”

Seth had already joined Otis on the ground. The other two men complied after a moment’s delay, as if to further signal their scepticism.

All four men now lay on the damp ground facing the stone slab as a moment of silence passed.

“What now?” Otis craned his neck round and quizzed Seth with his glare.

“See? I told you – he’s lost it!” Henry shouted, vindicated, as he motioned to stand.

Seth clasped the larger man’s shoulder.

“Stop! Wait... just one moment...”

“Huh?” Henry descended back onto his belly, guided by Seth’s rumination.

“One of the lizard’s had its tongue out – touching the symbol. So...” Seth shuffled forward, still on his belly, as the others watched – breath held. “What happens if I...”

Seth, careful to keep his belly to the ground, lifted his neck and stretched his tongue forward – pressing the tip against the stone slab. An abrupt rumble, like rocks grinding together, could be heard a second later as a layer of dust fell free from the huge slab.

“You’ve got to be joking.” Henry whispered.

The four men remained prone as the patterned blockade rose up into the stone ceiling, hoisted by some unseen mechanism. Immediately, as it clicked into place, another rumble echoed down the dark passage. Two solid stone lattices, studded with ivory tusks, flung out from either wall as if a rope holding them in place had snapped.

They came to rest where the stone slab had been. The tusks skewered the air ahead of where the door had stood, all but the bottom foot, where the four men lay – eyes shut and trembling.

Brian opened his eyes, looking up at the mesh of sharp ivory.

“We’d have died. Definitely.”

“But we didn’t.” Otis reminded him, already beginning a commando-crawl under the spiked barricade. “Thanks to Seth. Nicely done, mate... Seth?”

“Yep! All good, tongue’s just a bit prickly. Strange sediment on that door or something I reckon. Anyway, let’s go. The path to Shennong is open.”

Day after the Discovery – 12:28

The deafening whoosh of the blades spinning above easily breached the cheap noise-cancelling headphones Otis had been issued with. It made him feel uneasy, as he stared out over the mountainous green mass beneath. More disconcerting, however, was the battle raging in his head since he had awoken that morning. He had practiced speaking a few more sentences aloud in the bathroom, only barking once or twice. Then, after coming to terms with that fact – he cocked his leg to empty his bladder. He was halfway finished before he realised what he was doing.

His mind wandered as the copter drifted lazily through the sky. It was as if a coin existed in his brain, one side bearing an image of Otis the Human and the other side emblazoned with an effigy of Otis *the Dog*. For every action he took, the coin was flipped, and Otis' body took its cues from how it landed. Dog-side-up and he'd bark instead of talk, crawl instead of walk. It was automatic.

With some effort, he found he could resist it, though it required intense concentration which often resulted in some other unwanted behaviour rising to the surface. It was inevitable that Otis *the Dog* would slip out – somehow.

Earlier, while carefully attempting not to literally *bark* his orders at the copter pilot – he neglected to prevent his butt shaking throughout the conversation, as if wagging a tail.

Otis was on route to the museum Henry had been tasked with delivering the ornamental finds to. The missed calls this morning had been from him, but once Otis had gained a measure of control over his canine side and attempted to return his calls, there was no answer.

'Probably just letting me know that everything's going smoothly', he reassured himself, as a faint whine lingered in his throat and was drowned in the white noise of blades swishing. 'But what about Seth?'

The eloquent media-man was the only one who he'd heard nothing from since last night. Doubts surfaced in Otis' mind. With all the weirdness he'd been battling since he awoke – could it be possible that the others were experiencing it too? Brian's text would suggest as much, but then... it's Brian.

'I have to call Seth' he affirmed in his head.

Phone service was non-existent this deep into rural China and the group had needed to rely on satellite phone boosters to relay a signal for communication. Even so, the technology was incredible – they could hook up their personal phones and even watch YouTube with only mild buffering delays. It was just a small grey box which he'd kept strapped under his shirt for much of the trip so far.

He tapped down his shirt. Not there. But he knew he'd brought the booster with him, somewhere... and before he could question it, he was following his nose to locate the metallic sweat-tinged scent within his overstuffed satchel bag.

'There!' Otis grasped at the box – with his mouth. He shook his head and tried again, grabbing it with his hand.

He threaded a pair of earbuds under his noise-cancelling headwear. Then, as he hooked the booster up to his phone, he briefly questioned how he could possibly have sniffed out its location by scent alone. Behaving like a dog is one thing, but he's still just human – with a *human* nose. It shouldn't be possible. Unless...

Pa-ting.

Otis' attention swung to his phone as a notification popped up. It read: 'Breakthrough Discovery as Ancient Chinese Tomb Finally Explored – Watch Live'.

'Yes!'

He quickly tapped the pop-up and began mumbling as the video started to buffer.

"Come on. Come on..."

As the spinning circle disappeared and the tracking bar underlined the screen, Otis' excited mumbling had transformed into a rhythmic panting – tongue out with anticipation.

An image of Seth appeared on the screen, slightly fuzzy. He was stood with a red-gold tapestry backdrop, a microphone pointed toward his face and the interviewer just out of a frame. Otis felt relief at seeing his friend was alright and began panting heavier as he listened.

Seth began hesitantly. Something seemed off. Otis brought the screen closer to his eyes as the normally well-composed wordsmith continued. He looked flustered as he spoke – but there was something else. He was struggling to pronounce the words. But why?

"...and a key finding isstth the sssheer exsss... extssstent to which... *urgh*... I'm sssorry... I..."

Otis' panting halted and his brow pulled up with equal parts surprise and pity at his friend's performance. This was a disaster. Why couldn't he get his words out? This was painful to watch. This was...-

“What the fuck...” Otis blurted out loud, bringing the screen even closer as the video stalled – buffering. He finished his thought, “...was that?”

Something had shot out from Seth’s mouth for a split second, but Otis couldn’t quite make it out. ‘Stupid satellite-booster’, he thought – growling with frustration.

The video resumed with a crackle and some visual disturbance while the picture crystallised. Seth stuttered through another broken sentence as Otis focused on his lips and then recoiled, blinking twice in disbelief.

A forked tongue shot from Seth’s closed lips, quivered as it tasted the air, and then quickly retracted.

Morning of the Discovery – 11:32

“Aren’t you guys worried?”

“About *what*, Brian?” Henry goaded.

“Umm maybe the *death-traps*! We could have died back there!”

“And like I said, we didn’t. We just need to keep our wits up and we’ll be sitting on Shennong’s own *Red-Jade Throne* in time for tea. This place can’t go much deeper, right?” Otis rattled off his upbeat pep-talk, as Brian’s pace slowed to a halt.

“Otis, I understand why you’re excited – and I am too! But I can’t just pretend that I signed up for this type of risk. We *are* in serious danger here. We can still turn back?”

Otis came to a sharp stop and swung around to face his complaining colleague.

“For fuck sake Bri...-!”

But his wrathful riposte was immediately cut short by the sound of a roaring flame erupting barely a foot beyond where he stood. Then another shot through the dark further down the passage. And another from the ceiling. Then two more from the walls.

“You were saying, Otis?”

Otis had turned back to face the flames and now stood silent as Brian's question hung heavy in the sulphurous air.

"It's a damned gauntlet! There's no way we can risk going any further!"

"Brian, I'm sorry. I..."

"Fuck all this whining." Henry stoically announced, lowering his stance and bashing past the other men, just as he had at the tomb entrance.

"Henry!" Seth shouted in protest, though all three already knew there was no stopping him as he charged forward down the passage. His outline was quickly obscured by the fierce orange-red flame licking out at all angles from the passage walls. The heavy man's footsteps could be heard thundering farther down the tunnel – a good sign.

All at once, the flames ceased – innocuous streaks of smoke wisping forth from where the eruptions had roared a moment earlier.

"Hen- Henry?" Otis shouted down the passage with trepidation.

"I'm fine!" Henry's voice tremored back, a hint of surprise at his own survival evident in its tone. "I think I turned off the flames!"

"Thank g...- wait, how can you be sure?" Otis quizzed back.

"I stepped on a loose tile and the last few flames shut off early, so..."

"MMPHHF – Guys, something's in my lip!"

Brian's frenzied voice clattered against their ear drums.

Seth and Otis rushed to verify his claim and cringed as they were met with a panic-stricken picture of their colleague, dabbing delicately at what looked like a 3-inch long thorn perforating his lower lip.

"What is it?! It stings! Get it out!" He cried.

Otis grabbed the flailing man's wrists, holding him still for a moment, while Seth tugged at the sharp thorn – first delicately, then with a firm precision that eased it free from Brian's flesh.

"You're fine, Brian." They comforted him as he shook off the shock and dabbed at the wound, extending his finger to assess the blood. "Must have shot out along with the flames and stuff, but it's not like it got you in the eye..."

“NONE of this is fine, guys. I’m turning back.”

“Brian, come on.” Otis motioned to pull him back by his shoulder, but the frightened man shrugged off the attempt and disappeared back through the dim passage.

“Everything okay back there?!” Henry enquired.

“Sort of…” Seth answered. “Brian’s heading back out.”

“Ahh, let that chicken do what he wants I say!”

Otis and Seth shared a concerned glance at the state of their dwindling team and carefully moved forward down the passage. Otis had almost prepared another optimistic speech, as they neared the end of the flame gauntlet and Henry’s face came into view.

“Whoa! Henry – can you seriously not *feel* that?!” Otis cringed again, eyes fixed on Henry’s scalp.

“What?”

Otis pointed toward the larger man’s head, prompting him to send his hand searching atop his skull. It brushed and broke off several more thorns which had been lodged there. They rattled against the stone floor.

“Some pointy twigs, huh? Shennong’s going to have to do a bit better than that.” Henry grunted.

Otis began laughing first, then Seth joined with a snigger as Henry shrugged.

“Good job you’re always charging in head-first, mate.”

Day after the Discovery – 13:19

Restless to get out and away from the hum of the blades, Otis perched as far forward as his safety restraints would let him – his cheek catching a gust as he dipped his head outside of the copter while it landed. His body betrayed his anxious thoughts as he playfully yapped at the wind filling his ballooned cheeks.

Deeper inside, his mind was churning over what the implications of Seth's forked tongue might be for him. He had spoken with him on the phone a while after the botched interview ended and agreed to meet at the museum to find Henry, who wasn't picking up his calls.

'And Brian – what about Brian?! He went back to the tomb.' he reminded himself. He had to check on him.

The copter landed in a circle of flattened grass within the museum grounds – its blades mercifully winding down their spin. Otis was already primed with his phone in his hand and Brian's number dialled – no need for satellite boosters now that he was back in a proper city. He pressed the dial button and the call connected after a few rings.

"Brian?"

"..."

"Listen – I'm sorry I didn't reply sooner. My morning has been *ruff*... aghm-rough, to say the least. What's your situation? And your message? What did you mean by weir...-?"

"Bawwk bawk bawk... baww-kawwww..."

Otis withdrew the phone from his ear as the abrasive sound rang out from its speaker. It sounded like... clucking. A chicken... clucking. He held the phone closer again and listened until the clucking ceased.

"Brian – is that you?"

A moment passed before the clucking started again.

'It doesn't mean anything', Otis reconciled. 'Clearly, Brian left his phone near a... chicken coup or something...' He continued in his head, trying not to imagine how the *clicking* sound in-between each *cluck* sounded like a hard beak chattering. A large, hard beak. Otis took a shallow breath and interrupted the racket.

"Bri- Brian! ...If that *is* you... I'm coming back. I'm just meeting Henry and Seth at the museum and we'll be right back on the copter. We'll sort this out – just... stay calm. Ok?"

The clucking din continued. Otis hung up, slightly panicked.

He turned toward the grand white-stone building, striped with red-and-gold embroidered tapestries that hung from its upper windows. He wondered what he would find inside. He was trembling a little with the stress of everything and felt a faint curling pressure at the base of his spine, above his rump.

‘Probably just my arse waking up after those hard seats that put the hell in helicopter’, he joked to himself, attempting to disperse the tension he was feeling. There it was again – the sensation of something pressing down and forward between his butt-cheeks.

“Fuck. Okay... stay calm... Fuck!”

He readied a jittery hand and ran it lightly over his rump, flinching as he felt something he simply couldn’t describe. A more deliberate touch followed. There was some kind of lump – a bulge, hanging between his buttocks. Only maybe four inches long. As he grabbed it, he could feel his hand’s grasp through the fabric of his shorts, like the lump was a part of him – but how?

As his thoughts turned to the obvious truth and blackness started to encroach from the corners of his vision, the lump pressed again, trying to bury itself deeper between his cheeks.

‘What do dogs do when they’re worried?’ Otis asked himself rhetorically, before he answered his own question aloud.

“Their tails tremble between their legs... *Shit*. No time to waste.”

He started a sprint toward the museum-building, stumbling as he fought the urge to fall to all-fours.

Inside, Otis rushed through the grand reception – passing the ticket-desk and various antiquities displayed in gold-rimmed glass cabinets. He was concentrating intently on staying upright, avoiding barking and ignoring the feeling of his tail-stump wiggling around atop his rump as he jogged. He was barely into the first gallery room when he heard a huge crash together with someone dispensing angry cautions in half-Chinese half-English shouts. He would have bet his wavering humanity that it had something to do with Henry, and swiftly tracked the sound to its source.

He ran for longer than the volume of the noise would have suggested he’d need to, before arriving outside the offending room. Clearly, he was benefitting from the enhanced hearing that dogs enjoy, though this also confirmed that it wasn’t just a burgeoning tail and some barking – other changes were taking root within his body too. This explained his sniffing out the booster box earlier.

‘Speaking of which’, he thought, ‘...what the hell is that smell? Like a... bull?’

He thrust the mahogany door open wide and laid eyes on the chaotic state of the desecrated room. The ornamental finds from the tomb were scattered and smashed into shards, littered across the ground – while red tapestries hung ragged from the walls, torn and mauled. Stood, slightly hunched forward, in the centre of it all was Henry – a huge set of imposing horns affixed to his head.

“Henry?!”

The bull-man charged, horns-first, toward a scampering Otis who pressed his eyes shut in fear.

The heavy trampling footfall ceased just short of Otis’ crumpled frame. He slowly opened his squeezed-shut eyes and looked up from the flat-to-the-floor position his body had adopted. Henry stood tall, horns proud, nostrils flared and grinning down at him.

“Get up Otis – I’m just playin’ with ya!”

The coin flipped in Otis’ brain and landed *dog*-side up. He sprang from the floor, panting happily at the sight of his bullish friend and set about licking at his face affectionately.

“Whoa now! Down boy!” Henry snorted, air escaping his nose and making him sound exactly like a disgruntled bull.

Otis faked out and pulled back, his face turning a rosy shade of red. Then he looked back at the state of the room around them and furrowed his brow.

“I guess you were just *-wuff-* playin’ with all of the priceless exhibits in here too, huh?”

Henry sighed, his face portraying an indignant guilt.

“Well, these horns sort of had their own ideas. And they’re not exactly easy to keep in check. You should know too – or do you always greet people with your tongue?”

Otis hummed in agreement with the challenge as Henry continued and pointed at his horns.

“So... Bull, obviously. Let me guess what you got... Dog, right!? Ha ha! You stink like one!”

“Hey, I could smell you all the way from outside!”

“You both smell like sthweaty mammalsss to me.”

Seth slunk around the corner, his forked tongue slipping from his mouth as he spoke. The faint indentations of tough scales crept across his face.

“Seth!” Otis shouted happily.

“Sstop right there, doggy – I’ll passss on the tongue treatment.”

Otis obliged and did his best to stand still on the spot, despite his tail-stub bashing around excitedly at the back of his shorts.

Henry spoke up, “You too, Seth? Makes sense. And Otis, I was going to ask what part you got – but I guess I don’t have to... Let’s see it already.” He pointed at Otis’ wagging waist-bulge.

Otis blushed harder and began lowering his shorts at the back, farther than he thought he’d have to... and it still wasn’t enough. He reached into his shorts and fished the hyperactive tail out from its confines, letting it hang over his waist band. It wagged harder in a flurry of fur – swishing side to side in appreciation of the freedom.

“Wow – look at that thing! And the fur too, looks like it goes all up your back! Can I touch it?” Henry poked at Otis’ tail with wonder while stomping the ground as if with a hoof.

“Watch it – I didn’t just grab your bloody horns!” Otis snapped with a gravelly growl. Though, he wasn’t actually angry with Henry’s intrusiveness, more the realisation that his tail had now grown to full length.

‘How far can these changes go?’ he sombrely asked himself as his tail grew still behind him.

Afternoon of the Discovery – 12:42

The chamber stretched forward, lit by a faint luminescence that seemed to emanate from the smooth-stone ceiling. Its modest size betrayed the diversity of the trinkets and ornaments that lined every surface, all glinting in the pale light. Carvings, pictures and symbols sporadically adorned the length of the walls, leading up to a red-jade throne planted at the centre of the chamber’s conclusion. The depth of its scarlet glimmer was magnificent, as subtly different hues wove into and around one another – catching the diaphanous glow from above.

Otis, Seth and Henry drank in the splendour with their eyes, mouths agape.

“This is what it’s all been for, boys.” Otis spoke through a widening grin.

Henry was first to step further into the resplendent room – quickly stooping to examine the exquisitely preserved ornaments. Seth followed and sidled up to the walls, retrieving a small brush from his pocket and tickling the sprawling carvings, as he began deciphering their meaning. Otis stopped still a moment longer, eyes fixed solely on the red-jade throne.

“These are amazing... Seriously – I’m not exaggerating.” Henry roared with a rarely deployed tone of awe as he tapped the pots and vases, “...the markings look like... these ornaments were made to hold people’s spirits? No – their *true* spirits. Whatever that means...”

“I don’t know, but the carvings are finished with a particular skill rarely seen from this era. They depict Shennong, the Divine Farmer, at the head of flocks of animals – but not just cattle – all kinds!” Seth chimed in. “The wolf at Shennong’s side seems to hold special importance – leading the other creatures. And... if we follow the picture along... it seems they are being led... *here*. To this tomb – or *temple*, as it once was. But for what purpose?”

Otis stepped forward, one foot in front of the other. And again. Transfixed on the throne. His legs whirred into motion – speeding him up toward the object of his attention.

“Otis – what do you make of it?” Seth asked as the mesmerised man passed by him. “Otis?”

“Huh? Oh – yeah, incredible. Especially that throne – I need a closer look...”

He approached the elaborate chair, which seemed to radiate grandeur far beyond its size and drew him deeper as he gazed into the scarlet waves across its surface. Without thinking, he raised his foot over the step it was perched upon and turned to face away from his prize.

Otis slowly lowered himself into a seated position, savouring the moment as he ran his fingers along the cold red-jade throne-arms.

“Ack! ...the fuck?!” He thrust back up out of the seat, hips first and clenching at his behind as a sharp twinge pierced his left buttock.

Turning to examine the throne, he saw that all across the area where one would sit, the surface prickled with tiny protrusions. Miniscule auburn thorn-tips that blended well with the throne’s colouration.

“Son of a...- Damn Shennong had to have the last laugh, huh?”

Otis clenched his rear and motioned for Seth to join him at the throne.

“More thorns... intriguing...” Seth started, brushing the seat. “But even more interesting is the inscription above the throne – didn’t you notice?”

“What...? Oh...”

Otis looked away from the throne for the first time since he’d turned to sit on it – higher up to behold intricate symbols, also carved in red-jade, etched into the wall.

Seth recited their meaning, “**Shennong’s Faithful shall sit. As she commands it. Yours are her treasures.** Hmm...”

“So, whoever sits here gets all of the vases? Fine by me!” Otis joked, before Henry butted in.

“Shennong’s a *she*? Wow.”

Seth sighed and responded only to Otis, “That’d be nice, but no. It reads more like... a prophecy? Or a warning?”

“Warning us that we’re going to be rich? And famous? Consider me warned.”

“Ha!” Henry propped up Otis’ defiance.

“We need to get this stuff bagged up and back to the village – as much as we can carry. The day’s early, we’ve still got plenty of time. And then we can drink to our success.”

Seth did his best to ignore the cold feeling that crept through his veins and nodded in agreement with Otis while Henry set to work packing away the ornaments.

Day after the Discovery – 16:01

“You sure the *wroof*- booster is plugged in properly, Seth?”

“Yesth – of course!”

“But there’s no answer from Brian?” Henry checked.

Seth shook his head, eyes tracing the strands of grass that had been flattened as the helicopter landed back in the village.

Pa-ting.

“Wait! Hssth-something hasttth come through!”

A notification popped across the top of the screen, beginning with the words ‘Breaking News’.

“Give it here Seth. No offence, but you can barely speak with that tongue slithering in and out of your mouth.”

“None thaken, misster Bull.”

Henry grabbed the phone, tapped the notification clumsily with his fattened digits and began announcing the news story.

“Shocking scenes are unfolding in southwest China as chaos has broken out around the Yunnan Regional Museum and people are behaving like animals...-“

“So *wruff*- we’ve made the news again after your museum rampage, Henry. -*Arf!* Brilliant.”

“No, it’s not us! It says: There are reports of people imitating horses, cats and other creatures following an interview this morning with archaeologist, Seth Princeton, where he was observed by some viewers to have a forked tongue.”

Seth would have gone red with embarrassment at the idea of his disastrous TV interview, if the tan-green scales now covering his face and head hadn’t made that impossible.

“Horses and cats!” Henry repeated.

“*Grrrgh-ruff!* So, it’s spreading to other people?”

“Yessth – or... *we* are sssspreading it.”

Otis let loose a pathetic high-pitched whine at the thought.

“There’s no time to think about it. *We wrooff*- have to find Brian.”

“Wasssn’t he packing up the *sstthh*- kit... back at the...-“

“*Ruff*- at the tomb. Yes.”

17:40

The animal-men emerged from the thick jungle, which seemed to have grown back unnaturally fast - such that there was no sign they'd cut their way through the same path only one day earlier. Seth placed his scaly hands onto his knees and huffed with exhaustion while Henry trudged his way through the foliage, having discarded both shoes in favour of using his hooves.

"Arf! Ruff! Argroof-wuff- Ahem, I mean - hurry up, Seth! Wuff."

Otis was now struggling to get through even a few words before a glut of barking fell from his throat and he spoke while absent-mindedly licking himself everywhere he could reach.

"It'sss okay for you to ssay, Otisss. You weren't the one sssth- hacking through the jungle!"

The newly sprouted triangular ears protruding through Otis' hair flopped forward, as he held up his paw-pads in self-deprecating disappointment.

"I couldn't wruff even hold the machete if I wroof- wanted to!" A pitiful whine punctuated the sorry picture.

"Me neither. So - stop complaining Seth!" Henry added, tapping his *front* hooves together to make a clopping sound.

Seth looked down at his scaly-yet-functioning hands and inhaled deeply. He followed the sight of Otis' mischievous tail as the other two men disappeared down the crooked-stone steps and into the inky-black abyss once more.

They arrived at the central chamber in short order, all of the traps from the day before still sprung and rendered harmless. There, glimmering in the soft light, at the end of the plundered chamber was the red-jade throne, surrounded by all the ornaments they hadn't had the bag-space to remove for study.

"Bawwwk! Bawk-bawk-bawk bawkaawww!" A shrill clucking pierced the calm.

"What the fuck is that?" Henry demanded as he instinctively lowered his mighty horns.

"Brian", Otis sighed.

Still clucking as it pecked the ground around it, the small rooster turned its head sideways to focus a single eye on the trio.

"How do you know, Otisss?" Seth questioned.

"Called him earlier - wroof- and he was already clucking. No -wruff- words."

“Why didn’t you say anything?!” Henry shot back.

“How was I to know he was *arf*-this far gone...”

The ambient light filling the chamber grew brighter, almost imperceptibly.

“*BAWK - BAWK! Bawk!*” Brian suddenly flapped his feathered wings and clucked up a storm, as if trying to signal something. Henry shooed the flustered bird aside with a heavy hoof.

“Still can’t shut up, huh? That’s definitely Brian alright. Damn.”

“Sso what do we do now, Otiss?”

Seth’s question garnered no response. The three men just stood there, as the eerie light washed over their deformed features.

Finally, Otis took a step forward and put forth every ounce of his concentration to speak in unbroken English.

“Shennong! What should we do?... How can we reverse what you have done to us?!”

Seth translated his words into a hissing dialect of Chinese.

Silence rang loud in the chamber as the pale glow shifted ominously. Otis spoke again – concentrating so hard on his speech that he didn’t notice his paws splayed limp in front of him, like a dog begging.

“Please! Shennong – help us to understand how we can stop this! *Wuff!*”

Nothing. Otis turned to look at the other two in defeat, tail poking forward through his legs.

“You cannot.”

The voice filled the room, gentle in tone but filling the group’s senses like a clash of cymbals.

“*Wrooff!?*”

“Otiss! The throne...”

Seth gestured toward the red-jade throne, where the pale glow was coalescing into a more solid shape. Waves of light melded and swirled into one another, like the scarlet hues of the throne itself, before approximating a slender female frame sat upon it.

Despite their predicament, the sight of this celestial figure still stunned the altered men into silence. Empty translucent eyes stared back at them, unblinking.

Henry clopped a hoof forward on the ground to draw the figure's attention and flared his huge nostrils as he spoke.

"Who the hell do you think you are?! You can't just..."

"Quiet, bull."

Without averting its gaze, the figure raised a single finger from where it was resting upon the throne-arm. Not even a moment later, Henry's words were cut short and replaced with a hideous bellow as his body contorted – inflating to bulbous proportions, skin rippling with fine brown hair and hooves flailing at the air his beastly form fell on its side. Henry's human eyes shot a fearful glance back at Otis and Seth while the face that surrounded them mangled itself into a bull's head and snout, finally matching the horns on his head.

Henry bellowed guttural mooing sounds again as he willed his new body to stand on its four hooves. He lowered his head toward the celestial figure and let his front-left hoof grind the stone beneath him. He began to charge.

The figure let the same finger it had lifted to invoke the transformation rise once more and the charging bull simply evaporated into strands of pale light, similar to those that had joined to form the omnipotent figure.

The strands drifted for a moment in the darkness of the chamber, before being pulled toward one of the ornate vases nearby. The faint light that had been Henry's huge bullish form only seconds earlier was sucked wholly into the vase as the chamber dimmed again.

"No! I'm sssuch a fool!" Seth cried out.

"What-rrf do you mean?" Otis replied in monotone, still processing what had just happened to Henry.

"The warning behind the throne – the picturess – the markings on the ornamentsss!"

The light of the celestial figure bloomed and shone with greater intensity, as if in response to Seth's words. Otis glared at the lizard-man with an urgent expectancy, willing him to spell out what he'd pieced together.

"Yourss are her treasuresss – iss wrong! In *this* contexsst, the ssymbol meanss... *you!*"

"Arf- you? As in... us? We are her treasures?"

"After she doess what she'sssth- just done to Henry and trapped uss in an ornament – yesss!"

Otis shivered, turning to face the blinding red-tinged figure of light.

"Is that true? You -ruff want to turn us into -wroof- animals and trap us in vases? Wrfff-why?!"

The figure's glow diminished, and its voice began, louder than before – as if a chorus of others spoke in time with it.

"True spirits of all."

Seth and Otis' eyes met as the all-encompassing sound ceased.

"All? Meaning – woof- other people too. It *is* spreading!"

"Yesss, like the wall carvings – flockssth of animalss being led here by Shennong..."

"Shit-rrfff!"

Seth's tone hardened, as he finished his deduction, "...and at her sside – a wolf... or maybe a *dog*."

Otis tilted his head to the side – puzzled, one pointed ear flapping over with the motion.

"You. Otiss. The dog isssth you!" The lizard man began to mumble as he trawled over the warning under his breath, "Shennong'sssth Faithful shall... sssit..."

"Enough."

The celestial figure only needed to lift its finger a millimetre for Seth to work out what was coming. He screamed out his final words, fighting as the scales spread across his entire body.

*“Lisssthen – do *not* let her command you! Do *not*...-!”*

Before Seth could finish, his words devolved into unintelligible hissing. The scales around his lips hardened. Curled claws took the place of his fingernails while his torso flattened, and his eyes fled to the sides of his head. The large lizard that had been Seth rapidly shed its mass and disappeared into a pile of baggy clothes, before crawling out of a shirtsleeve on its belly, then standing stone-still.

Otis could only observe in horror, his tail trembling and ears drooping. He didn't even care that he was whining aloud anymore. 'What can I do against that?' he thought. The choral voice of the celestial light stirred in his sensitive ears.

“Faithful dog. Your offerings are accepted.”

“What? No! Grrrff- woof! This isn't my fault!”

Two fingers of solid light raised from the red-jade, prompting the small lizard and Brian the chicken – who had hidden on a low shelf in the farthest corner of the chamber – to dissolve into glowing strands and twist their way into separate ornamental prisons.

Otis' whining grew louder, and a single tear pooled in his eye, escaping and rolling down his face until it caught in the bristling muzzle fur that had begun to sprout across his cheeks.

“Now deliver all others.”

“No!” Otis mustered a growl and bore his sharp canine teeth at the celestial being, *“Ghrrrgh-wruff! I won't do this to anyone else!”*

“It is too late. You cannot choose.”

“I -woof grr-wroof- refuse to bring anyone else here! So you can turn me into a -ruff dog, I don’t care!”

“I will. Because dogs obey.”

“Huh-rrf?!”

A glowing finger lifted.

“Sit.”

Otis felt the coin flip in his mind – more heavily weighted than it was before. It was spinning in the dark void of his thoughts and then began to fall. He tensed up and focused everything on this one moment of resistance. He couldn’t risk obeying.

His wrists thinned and fur spread from his paws, sprouting up under his sleeves. He could feel its grain bristling against his cotton shirt as it met the thick coat already covering his back. His legs thinned too. He momentarily lost his balance – jerking a step forward and revealing foot-paws as his shoes slipped loose. His tail wagged furiously, trying to keep balance.

The coin descended, its rotation slowing as it inched closer to the barren floor of his scattered and reeling mind. ‘When will it land?’ he wearily asked the darkness.

He felt a muddling, numbing warmth spread across his face as he became aware of a twitching wet nose, pointing out between his eyes. The smell of the chamber was acrid and disturbing. His legs weakened. He fell forward – front paw-pads catching him on the cold floor.

‘No!’ he fought internally. The coin turned within.

He could feel his hind quarters re-arranging, joints coming unhinged, hips slotting into a more comfortable alignment with his spine. His ribs and chest wove into a barrel-shape, leaving him short of breath for a second. He felt the pull of his haunches as a twisted excitement welled up inside at

the notion of obeying. What reward would he get? He could wag his tail... The voice would be pleased with him...

'No! No! NO!'

The coin landed.

Otis' rump landed on the ground at the same exact moment. Paws proudly tucked in front of him, long tongue out and panting, ears upright and alert.

“Good dog.”

“Wuff wroooff!”

Buried beneath the deepest dark place in his mind, Otis the human sat despondently – alone. Next to him, the discarded coin that had sealed his fate – dog-side up. It was pointless now, he knew – but he had to check. He picked up the coin and thumbed it into his palm, confirming the image.

Dog.

He carefully turned the coin over and placed it back in the same palm – the pain of futility caught within his searching stare as he examined the other side.

One Week after the Discovery

“Emergency Broadcast: This is a pre-recorded state message. People are urged to stay in their homes and avoid contact with those who exhibit symptoms. Repeat: do not engage in prolonged contact

with those who show any signs of animalistic behaviour. Appropriate measures are being taken by global powers to contain the spread. Lock all doors and windows. Remain inside.”

A second of white noise sounded from the television as it sat blaring its message through an open window and into the abandoned street...

“*Emergency Broadcast:* This is a pre-recorded state message. People are urged to stay in their homes and avoid contact with those who exhibit symptoms. Repeat: do *not* engage in prolonged contact with those who show any signs...-”

The television fell silent and the screen fizzled to black. A lone dog withdrew its paw from the power button and padded away, continuing its search.

“End”