

# BACKPACK ADVENTURES

## Episode 2

### *“The Jade Dragon”*

K.T. pulled her jacket collar up higher on her neck as a cold, wet wind howled through the gazebo in her backyard. Her braided hair hung like icicles against her dark skin and she shivered even with her heavy jacket. The gazebo served as a “clubhouse” for a group of friends known as the Back Pack Club. They shared a secret: their ordinary looking backpacks held powerful microcomputers with amazing capabilities. However, her backpack could not keep K.T. warm and she jogged in place while she waited for the newest member of their club, Jace Long.

Jace had moved to K.T.’s neighborhood last year as a fifth grader. His family was originally from China, but had emigrated when Jace was eight. K.T. liked Jace’s quick smile. Even though he was short, he was the fastest player in the Select Soccer League. It wasn’t difficult for K.T. to convince the other club members to let Jace join. A team member was building Jace’s computer in his father’s lab so Jace could communicate with all of them. I wish Roman would hurry up and finish Jace’s computer so I could call him right now. I’m freezing here waiting for him. I wonder why he wanted to meet out here, she thought.

“Sorry I’m late, but I had to stop at my house to get something,” called Jace as he jogged across the field that connected their backyards.

He pulled a letter from his coat, took a small photograph from the envelope and handed it to K.T.

“It’s beautiful! What’s it made of?” asked K.T., gazing at a picture of a dragon statue sitting on a pedestal inside what looked like a cave. Candles were set in front of the pedestal, throwing dragon shadows against the walls. Even in the photo, the effect was spooky.

“It’s made of jade, you know, the green stone. It’s ancient, my family’s most precious heirloom, and it’s about to be covered in 500 feet of water. My grandfather writes that when the Three Gorges Dam is complete, water will flood the shrine of The Jade Dragon where my ancestors have been honored for centuries. It’s just a small cave

near the base of the cliffs that tower over the Chang Jiang, Long River. That's what the Chinese call the Yangtze."

"That's terrible! You're not going to let it be destroyed, are you?" K.T. frowned. She couldn't imagine having a family heirloom that old, much less losing it to a flood.

"No, I'm not, but I need your help to save it. I want to borrow your backpack so I can go to China and find The Jade Dragon. Just tell me how to use the BPC and I'll do the rest," demanded Jace, his shoulders squared and chin up. BPC was their code name for backpack computer. His face was serious and K.T. thought he must be the bravest person in the world. When they first told him all the things their BPCs could do, he had doubted they could really time-travel. Now here he was asking to travel alone.

"No way!" exclaimed K.T. She added slyly, "No way...I'd let you go alone! I'll take you there and help you save The Jade Dragon. Do you know exactly where to find it?"

"Not exactly, but my grandfather in Chongqing knows. He's too frail to make the journey, but we could ask him. His address is on this letter." Jace showed the letter to K.T. and she typed the coordinates into the keychain attached to her backpack. K.T.'s teeth were chattering and Jace's face looked frozen, but neither of them heard the chill wind whistling through the gazebo.

"Whatever you do, don't let go," warned K.T. "Here we go!" Jace grabbed her hand as she pressed "Control," "Alt," "Delete" and "Backspace"; a swirl of color surrounded them. Wind whipped through an empty gazebo.

"Ouch! You're hurting my hand!" cried K.T. Jace was grasping her hand so hard she thought it would break.

Jace coughed and gasped as if to catch his breath. "Wow! I never imagined it like that! You could have warned me, K.T."

"Sorry, I didn't think of it," said K.T., wiggling her fingers.

K.T. and Jace gazed in awe at the hustle and bustle around them. They stood on a sidewalk jam-packed with people who spilled into a boulevard crowded with bicyclists, taxis, cars, trucks and double-decker buses. A river of traffic crawled by while vendors pushed carts with food and drinks against the current, further slowing the flow.

Tall buildings surrounded them and a thick brown haze hung above them like a threatening thunderstorm. But the only rumble they heard was the traffic and the fumes from the vehicles left a sharp taste in the back of their throats. Jace's body shook as he coughed deep and long. He took something from his pocket and, cupping it in both hands, held it to his mouth. He sucked slowly then coughed twice more, slipping the little bottle into his pocket before K.T. could see it.

"How many people live in Chongqing?" asked K.T.

"There are over 30 million people in an area the size of Maine. It's China's biggest city, bigger even than Beijing. It's also the dirtiest. All of the cities in China are crowded. I guess when you've got the world's oldest continuous civilization, you get generation after generation calling the same place home. It's not as crowded in the countryside where our ancestral home is."

"Why doesn't your grandfather live there then?" asked K.T., looking at the high-rise apartments that towered before them.

"Money. As a young man, he moved to the city to work. He never had the chance to go back. Let's go inside."

Jace and K.T. took a creaking elevator to the 35th floor, the top floor of the building. Jace gently rapped on the door to his grandfather's apartment. A hoarse voice called from within for them to enter.

"He said to come in," translated Jace.

"I know," answered K.T. "The BPC has a translator built into it."

"Cool," whispered Jace hoarsely. Something about the quiet, cigarette smoke-filled room made them walk softly and cautiously into the one-room apartment. They could hear someone breathing in ragged, shallow breaths.

"Who is it? Come closer," murmured a tiny, thin man lying on a low couch. His labored breaths shook his frail body like dry grass before a cold front.

"Grandfather, it's me, Jace. I've come to see you and to save The Jade Dragon."

The old man frowned in confusion, then his face relaxed into a smile as he recognized his grandson. "My letter, did you get my letter?"

“Yes, it came yesterday and I, er, I flew straight here,” Jace mumbled. His eyes met K.T.’s and he winked. “Can you tell me where to find The Jade Dragon? I will bring it back to you.”

“It may be too late for that, but I will tell you where to look,” said the old man, struggling to get up. He fell back against the couch and coughed deeply, sucking air like a fish out of water. His eyes were round and large and he did not seem to see K.T. at all. All of his energy was focused on his grandson.

“Take the sub-express train to Fengdu, The City of Ghosts, our ancestral home. There is a suspension bridge there that leads to the hilltop. Directly below the bridge near the base of the cliffs is a small cave. There lies The Jade Dragon, the guardian of our ancestors. You honor them, Jace, in protecting their guardian.”

“Grandfather, you’re sick. Why didn’t you tell me? I’ll get help for you,” Jace said, kneeling beside his grandfather and holding his bony hand.

“No need of that, my child, no need. Save The Jade Dragon.”

K.T. and Jace made their way through the city to the train station, keeping to the crowded streets and staying together. They had less than ten dollars between them, but found that the train tickets only cost \$1.75 and included a meal.

“I guess I’ll have to learn to use chopsticks,” joked K.T. “I’m starting to get hungry.”

The Chongqing station was a madhouse of people, sounds and smells. The big locomotive that ran the Fengdu line was powered by steam and K.T. was excited to ride a real steam train. Jace’s enthusiasm was dampened by his concern for this grandfather.

“It’ll be OK, Jace. In a few hours, we’ll have the dragon back to your grandfather and we’ll be on our way home,” offered K.T. cheerily.

“K.T., are you never afraid?” Jace wondered aloud.

“Well, to be honest with you, that stuff about the City of Ghosts sounds a little spooky.” She was remembering the photo of the cave too. Those shadows! K.T. shivered as she boarded the train.

“It’s packed, but there are two seats together near the back,” said Jace leading the way through the cluttered aisle, stepping over wooden boxes and crates with live chickens to reach the open seats. They sank down in the hard seats, glad for a chance to

relax. The passenger car did not have heat, but it was warm and stuffy inside with all the people. K.T. and Jace took off their heavy coats and put them in the wire shelves above the seats. K.T. held on to her backpack, afraid to lose it in the clutter. Most of the windows were closed because of the cold, but K.T. wiped a clean spot on the inside of her window and peered through the outside grime.

“Would you look at all the trains?” exclaimed K.T. She gazed upon rows of electric trains, diesel engines and steam locomotives belching their hot energy into the frosty air. Clouds of exhaust filled the sky. The man seated behind K.T. began to talk to the person behind Jace.

“China has many railways and still uses the steam locomotives because we have so much coal. Coal produces most of the electricity. But it is very bad for the air to burn coal like we do. That is why the Three Gorges Dam means so much to our country. Clean hydroelectric power is better for the environment.”

K.T. turned her head to see the person who thought Three Gorges Dam was a good thing. He was a young man in a business suit. Beside him sat another young man, nodding in agreement. Jace leaned back in the seat beside K.T. and closed his eyes. “He looks tired,” K.T. thought. “I’ll let him rest.” She was too excited to sleep. K.T. could make out the towers of factories rising like totems across the cityscape. Thin plumes of smoke billowed from their chimneys and spread like mud puddles in the air.

As the train wound through mountain passes and deep valleys, the city gave way to villages, fields and farms. They passed a freight train loaded with hundreds of cars heaped with black, glistening coal. Clackety-clackety-clackety. Jace jumped in his seat as his eyes popped open.

“I must have fallen asleep. Man, my throat is dry,” croaked Jace with a cough. “Where are we?”

“I think we just passed a city called Fuling. You’ve been sleeping for a couple of hours. They said it would take four hours to reach Fengdu, so we must be about half way. Look at all the coal cars.”

Jace leaned forward to look out the window. He could hear the whispered conversation of the two passengers seated in front of them. One was an old man dressed

in a faded blue uniform. The other was a middle-aged man wearing a ragged farmer's shirt and dirt-stained pants. They kept their voices low and Jace strained to hear.

"That train is from the Zhengshou coal mine. They say the dam will end our use of coal. Ha! The fools. True, the mine is a scar on the land and a curse to the air, but the dam is not the answer. They flood good farmland to make a filthy reservoir that still will not provide electricity because of all the silt," growled the farmer.

"Yes, it seems ironic that the government finally tries to provide clean energy to save the air and ends up destroying the water. Either way, it is the earth that suffers. Farms, coalmines, runoff, floods. Who knows the answer? But look, it is raining. Now they will close all the windows. Even the rain is not clean," the old man mused. "It's like the ancient horoscope with its five elements: air, water, earth, metal, fire. Only the fire remains undamaged by man."

As the train picked up speed, K.T. felt herself rocking gently, nodding off to sleep. She closed her eyes and heard Jace order hot tea to go with the bowl of rice the porters were serving. The stale air in the car reeked of leftover dinners and cigarette smoke. It took her appetite away. Maybe if she slept...

K.T. awoke to the sound of loud and constant coughing. Jace's body shook with each breath he took.

"Are you OK?" she asked nervously. "No wonder you're coughing. There's smoke everywhere! Are we on fire?"

Jace shook his head and gasped. "No, it's just the cigarettes."

"Here, let me crack open this window," suggested K.T. Cold air rushed into the car and K.T. changed seats with Jace. He gulped the icy air, but as soon as he stopped coughing, he began to wheeze.

"What is it? What's wrong?" pleaded K.T., genuinely scared. Jace seemed unable to catch his breath.

"I have asthma. I need my inhaler," wheezed Jace.

"Well, where is it?"

"In my coat. I can't reach it," Jace whispered hoarsely.

K.T. hurriedly yanked his coat down from the shelf. She fumbled through all the pockets until she felt a small plastic mouthpiece with a canister attached.

Jace reached out to take the inhaler and K.T. shivered as she felt how cold his hand was. She grabbed her coat and slung her backpack over her shoulder. “Come on, we’ve got to get you out of here.”

Jace put the inhaler to his mouth and sucked in deeply. He nodded in agreement and followed K.T. as she went to the door that led to the next car. They stepped out of the smoke-filled space onto a narrow platform sheltered from the wind by a canvas tarp. They could see the tracks blinking at them from between the cars as the train sped along. In the distance, they could see a high suspension bridge connecting two hilltops. It was wide enough only for foot traffic.

“That must be the bridge that leads to the City of Ghosts. We’re almost there,” uttered Jace, his breathing becoming easier.

“And that must be Chang Jiang, the Yangtze!” exclaimed K.T., pointing to a wide brown river snaking through the small city of Fengdu.

The haze that hid the tops of the cliffs floated like a spirit over the city and K.T. felt a chill run down her spine. This entire city would be flooded and even now, construction of the new city, higher up and across the Yangtze, was underway. But who would move the graves, the shrines, the ancient relics? Was it too late to save them?

“Uh-oh, we’ve got a problem,” groaned Jace, looking at the cliffs beneath the suspension bridge. Dozens of caves dotted the face of the cliffs. “How do we know where to look?”

“Man, I don’t ...wait...maybe that picture you have will help.” The train was slowing as they neared the edge of the city.

Jace took the photo out of his coat pocket and looked for clues. Just on the edge of the photo, he could make out symbols carved into the limestone opening to the cave. Maybe they could find the right cave after all. He showed it to K.T. “See it says ‘The Jade Dragon Shrine.’”

“I wonder if the BPC could get us there. That way we wouldn’t have to cross that bridge and climb down the side of the hill,” suggested K.T. “At least, it would be faster.”

“We know it’s in Fengdu and the name is marked on the cave,” replied Jace. “Is that enough?”

“It’s worth a try,” K.T. stated bravely as she typed the coordinates into the keychain. She swayed on the platform as the train slowed and Jace reached out to steady her.

“Here, you can press the activation keys, it’s your dragon.”

Jace smiled and took the keychain in his palm. K.T. held on to his arm. He pressed the four keys together and closed his eyes. The platform shook as the train suddenly braked. But there was no one there to fall.

Jace and K.T. stood before the rocky entrance to a small cave. It looked like the cave in the photo; the symbols on the door were the same. Jace turned to K.T. and asked apologetically, “Do you mind if I go in alone?”

“Sure, sure, ancestors, I understand. No problem. Just come out when you’re ready. Or if any ghosts are in there.”

Jace rolled his eyes. “I’ll call you.”

K.T. ran her hand over the carvings in the limestone. They were worn from centuries of rain and wind. Would the flood erase them, she wondered? Jace called out, “It’s ok to come in now. No ghosts.”

Cautiously, K.T. ducked her head and went through the low opening. Most of the cave was dark, giving the impression it was bigger than it really was. Jace knelt before The Jade Dragon, his head bowed, his hands covering his face. The statue was more beautiful in real life than in the photo. Even in the dark, its exquisite details made it appear ready to spring to life. Hardly bigger than an in-line skate, it looked powerful even in miniature.

“Is it heavy?” K.T.’s voice punctured the silence.

“That depends. It’s as light as the souls it guards and as heavy as the burden of centuries. It all depends on your point of view. But I can carry it if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Let’s go, Jace. This place makes you talk weird.” said K.T., her eyebrows raised. “Ready to go back to your grandfather’s? I added his apartment number so we could go straight there.”

Jace placed the statue beneath his jacket, zipped it shut holding his arms around his chest. “Can you tell I have anything beneath my jacket?”



“Not really, but what difference would it make? The Jade Dragon is yours.”

“K.T., this isn't the U.S. There are no individual freedoms, no property rights. The government owns everything, so you have to get permission for everything. That's why so many people are being forced to move where the government chooses. That's why my grandfather could never return to his rural home, why my parents decided to emigrate. If some local government official saw me take this treasure, he could make me give it back. We have to be careful,” Jace cautioned. “Let's go.”

A whirlwind of colors transported the two adventurers in a millisecond. But the door to the apartment stood ajar. Jace startled a plump, short woman who was taking the bed linens off the low couch. Her face was streaked with tears.

“Where is he?” Jace ran into the room.

“He's not here. He died a few hours ago. They have taken him to the morgue. I am his neighbor. I cooked for him when he became so ill last month. They say he has a son living in America. Do you know how to call him?”

Jace stood staring at the couch where his grandfather had lain. “He knew he was dying. ‘No need for that. Save the dragon,’ he said.”

K.T. stepped up to the woman, who looked puzzled by what Jace had said. “Jace, don't you know the phone number this nice lady should call? She wants to help.” K.T. put her arms around the lady and gave her a hug. “I'm so sorry.”

Jace nodded and took a piece of paper from K.T.'s backpack. He wrote his own phone number down, gave it to the woman, then turned and walked down the hall. Clutching his arms across his chest, he was racked with a sudden, raspy coughing fit.

“Thank you for calling,” said K.T. as she backed out of the apartment. “Jace, can't you take some more of that stuff?”

Jace shook his head and croaked, “All gone.”

“It's time to go home.” K.T. punched in the return coordinates and took Jace's arm. He stood silently clutching his other arm across his chest, The Jade Dragon snug against him. “I'll hold onto you this time.”

The storm of colors melted into a gray rain that beat upon the gazebo roof. K.T. was glad for the rain; it would hide the tears.

“He was giving the statue to me, knowing I would not be able to return it to him. He wanted it to stay in our family,” reasoned Jace, taking the dragon from beneath his coat.

“He wanted to save it for your family, for you. Maybe even for China.” K.T. could hear Jace’s mother calling him home.