

Chrysalis

by Michael J. Allen

An Egyptian sailor in dark, salt crusted clothes hurried out of the surf from a ship anchored just off the beach. He gestured to his men after him with a long, curved knife. The sleeping Asian fishing village was dark. Distant buildings with pagoda-style roofs stood as darker shadows in a moonless night.

They fanned out, keeping one another in sight as they wove across a wharf to a large, fenced home and adjoining shop built abreast of the docks. Even had the doors of thin wood and thinner rice-paper been locked, it wouldn't have slowed the marauding crew.

Knives, lurid grins and dark scowls woke the home's occupants, dragging them all to a central chamber. A man in late midlife, his wife, one boy not yet to adulthood and several young women were lined up along the wooden floor, facing the single-stepped dais decorated with pillows.

The captain stepped between the gagged hostages. He offered the older man an exaggerated bow and dropped onto the large pillows centered on the dais. He picked his fingernails with the curved knife, holding it just above the carved, jackal-like head of Anubis. He tightened his fingers over the notches carved under the Egyptian God's chin.

He pointed the blade at the merchant. "You betrayed us."

The man said something muffled. At a nod from the captain, a sailor snatched the gag from his mouth.

The old merchant addressed the captain in Egyptian. "Honorable Ptioph, I have done you no such wrong."

Ptioph gestured to the man's son. Two burly crewman flanked the boy. Each grabbed his shoulder and placed a knife alongside his throat.

"Somehow you discovered our intentions. Somehow you knew we wanted writings to help us hunt your dragons, your people's precious *Zūn Lóng*, and sold us instead children's tales," Ptioph said. He pulled

open his shirt, revealing a series of scars on his shoulders. "Ptolemy was not pleased when his translators told him what we'd brought."

"There was no betrayal, Honorable Ptieph," the merchant said. "I sold you what I had on the Zūn Lóng."

"You, Ouyang Feng, do not care much for your only son."

The crewman on either side of the boy thrust their knives into his chest. Muffled shrieks filled the room, almost drowning out the boy's last wet gasps. Ouyang Feng struggled to his feet, but was immediately forced back to his knees.

Ptieph waved his knife at the prisoners. "Someone will tell me how you learned of our plans or you will all die one by one."

Ouyang Feng's voice filled with pain. He cursed Ptieph in his own language then spat at him in Egyptian. "They do not understand you. They cannot help."

"Then you had best become very cooperative, or there's going to be a lot of blood to clean up."

"There is nothing to tell. You murdered an innocent man's son."

Ptieph gestured and two men grabbed Ouyang Feng's wife. The Egyptian captain raised his eyebrows and waited. When Ouyang Feng said nothing, he nodded. The wife followed her son.

Ptieph shouted over the muffled cries. "I will spare whomever tells me the truth. Quickly now."

When no one spoke, one of the young women was executed. Still no one said anything.

Ptieph sighed. He put his knife to Ouyang Feng's throat. "So be it. Let's complete the set."