

# The Empire of T'ang Lang

By Alan Dean Foster

It was not the sun that woke Tang Lang. Concealed as he had been for the night, the sun would be well into the heavens before he rose. It was the growing warmth of the air, passing maternally across his body, the heat in the soil, the pitch-change in the world. In a hundred ways, he smelled Day.

Which was as well. Sunrise was not the best time to move a-hunting. The night-men were long asleep, the day-folk not yet stirring.

In truth the sun had been skyward for some time. Nearby, two of the city-builders were inspecting the shell of a small armored Crawler. The Crawler had given out recently. Probably it had failed to return to its resting place in time and was caught by the night. Not fragile, it still had not coped with the extreme change in temperature by daybreak, young as it appeared to be.

It would have been a pretty prize for the city-dwellers. But they saw T'ang Lang awake. They were not cowards, no: not the city-builders. But they were wise. They turned and ran, leaving the ruined Crawler for whoever might chance on it. Wise ones took no chances with T'ang Lang. He was not famed for his pleasant humor.

He, of course, had no interest in the dead thing. A being of his temperament disdained such carrion. He would kill for himself.

It was true that the city-dwellers thrived—in their own fashion. Their superefficient towns and cities exploited the possibilities of the environment better than anyone. But it seemed a pitiable way to live. All city-builders were enslaved by their own system, their precious regimen. T'ang Lang had never tried one of their well-fortified centers. He could do so if he wished, of course. But such was not the way of his folk, as it was not their way to build cities.

He yawned, if such it could be described. Jerkily, he climbed to his feet. It had been rather a wet night. He could feel the dampness in his joints. Carefully he washed his face, cleaned his eyes, then preened himself, making sure his sensors were clear of grime and dirt. As befitted his talents, T'ang Lang was a fastidious killer.

He did this without bothering to glance behind, unconcerned. T'ang Lang did not feel much need to guard his rear. There were none in his realm who would try him unless terribly, terribly desperate. Only the Great Sky People troubled him. They could drop down almost silently, without warning. An unsporting way to fight. But most of the sky-folk he feared not at all.

The Rite of Clean Knives followed. Each stiletto had to be kept honed and spotless. It was important to make a clean penetration the first time. T'ang Lang took great pride in his skill. True, even he missed now and then. But not often. And when he struck home, his victim always died. He rinsed his mouth and cleared some mud from his feet. It had been a damp night.

He stretched, and looked around. His magnificent senses could feel movement and life all

about. It was a fertile, green world. The vibrations in the earth beneath his feet, the odors trundling past on the humid breeze — he could read them all.

The sun was getting higher, the air hotter, he hungrier. There was little wind. A good day for hunting.

Should he stay and wait for clumsy ground-dwellers? It was not a particularly good place. And the city-folk would rarely approach him. What to do?

Well, it was a lovely day to bask in the sun. Why not combine both? And there was always more challenge to hunting the sky-folk.

There were several great light-eaters about, in addition to the one whose body he'd borrowed for shelter. On a whim, he sauntered casually over to the next one, testing the footing around its somnolent body. The night's dew had left it chill and moist here. But T'ang Lang, an expert and experienced climber, would have no trouble. He began to wend his way upward.

This particular light-eater rose about a hundred times T'ang Lang's height. But he was not subject to vertigo. Heights held no more fear for him than his neighbors. He had other reasons for not climbing to the very top. The platform there was usually unstable. So while it afforded a better view of his lands, the increased wind and smaller blind made prey harder to come by, strikes more difficult.

He rose slowly, patiently, without the hurry that afflicted most climbers. Others who shared the light-eater's body gave him plenty of room.

About twenty body-lengths up, he passed a Retia-rius. The gladiator had snuggled himself comfortably across the way. He waved to T'ang Lang as the other passed. T'ang favored the creature with a long stare, putting only token power into it. He was clever with his net, was the Retiarius. But it was not intended for the likes of T'ang Lang and the Retiarius knew it.

Even despite it, T'ang could still kill the gladiator and shred his precious net.

T'ang moved higher. For a moment, a plump tube-man crossed his path. But the clumsy being was moving rapidly in the opposite direction. He was on a far platform with too much open space between them. Perhaps it sensed T'ang Lang's presence. Perhaps not. T'ang stared hard at it, opening his mind and focusing the strange power behind his mesmeric eyes.

But the tube-man was out of range and knew it.

It turned once, to glance back at where T'ang fumed impotently on his temporary platform. The ultimate insult.

For a moment, maybe, T'ang Lang was angry. Then he sighed. Let the tube-man have his one moment of triumph. If ever he came within range of the smallest and lightest of Tang's weapons, he would die faster than he would be born.

It was not long thereafter that T'ang located what he wanted. An open platform, with the sun to one side, well-screened from above but open below and in front. A cluster of foodstuffs rested just ahead, on a slightly lower level. They would serve as excellent bait, attracting fliers and airborne city-folk.

Perhaps a young one would drift by, propulsors humming, straining with the awkward unit to stay near ground. Close by.

T'ang Lang settled himself, making an elaborate ritual out of it. Once set, he would not move again until it was time to kill. He tested the footing of the platform, found it pleasantly firm. T'ang was old and knowledgeable. This would be a good place. He carefully spread out and arranged his weapons, ready for instant use. Then he assumed the Ben-na, the position of contemplation. For T'ang was also something of a philosopher and had no intention of wasting away his waiting time.

It had been claimed by others, probably even the city-folk, that if T'ang's people had ever decided to pool the wisdom they'd accumulated over the millennia, they could form the most destructive society their world had ever known.

But there was a spark in T'ang Lang, an unquenchable streak of individualism that precluded any such cooperation.

Fraternalizing was discouraged. Besides, were they not rulers individually? How much better than to submit to a central authority, as the city-builders had done! Tang's people knew they were superior. And each considered himself superior to his brother.

A small base on which to try and raise a social order.

T'ang found much of interest and pleasure in the harmony of the world. The sun rained down steadily, wombishly wantful. An occasional breeze trekked across his platform. Across the great Green Plain that was the most dominant physical feature of his world, other light-eaters were busy at their work.

Placid and content in their stolid existence, they were rulers in their own way. But they could be killed. T'ang had yet to meet anyone who could not. Probably even the sun could be killed, but it was even further away than the end of the Green Plain. The opinion was held by some that the light-eaters were the stupidest of aU living creatures. Another school thought them the most intelligent. Assuredly they were dedicated pacifists. The light-eaters themselves did not contest these arguments either way.

Possibly this in itself was a sign of that very disputed intelligence.

T'ang Lang wondered, and stared.

One of the lancers flashed by. The lancer-folk owned the finest propulsive systems on T'ang's world. Superbly engineered, they could move at tremendous speed across the sky. Their equally amazing detection systems could spot prey many thousands of body-lengths away. They were capable of twisting, diving attacks few could avoid.

Once, their ancestors had been lords of the planet. Time had changed things and they had slipped back. But they were still a formidable factor in T'ang's world. Despite their speed and ability, though, T'ang would make short work of one if it darted too close.

The sky-man knew it. After a sharp glare at T'ang, he gunned his propulsors and shot off in search of prey of his own.

Yes, a good day to be alive and emperor.

There were many of the sky-folk about, cavorting in the downy-warm air. None flew near T'ang Lang. T'ang was not anxious.

He'd fed well the previous day. For the nonce he was mildly satisfied. High karma.

The great light-eater, the Bodikiddartha, rose many thousands of body-lengths above T'ang's present platform. Soaring toward the sun, it stood quietly on the other side of the Green Plain, breathing. Someday T'ang would cross that plain and climb the great bulk. If only to see the world on the other side.

Perhaps — a slip of motion caught his eyes. So intent had he been on the panorama in front of him, he had failed to notice the approach of a cyuma, a castle-man, to the cluster of foodstuffs.

It hadn't spotted T'ang.

With infinite slowness, slower than the planet aged, he shifted his head to gain a better view. The torpid creature seemed concerned only with the foodstuffs.

The castle-men were glamorous and daring, skilled weaponers with their deadly rapiers. They had speed and agility to support their arrogance. Some believed themselves kings of the world.

And Tang Lang? They found it convenient to avoid him.

It was an adolescent castle-man. He was edging uncaringly about the foodstuffs. Preparing to gorge himself, no doubt. Who would dare attack one of the castle-folk?

Pang leaned gently forward. He had gone into killing mode. Now nothing in the universe could distract him until he struck.

The castle-man grew until it swallowed the world, became the world. And it was going to die.

Knives at the ready, always ready. Superbly crafted and designed, they could penetrate with such speed and force that sometimes a victim would expire of shock.

The castle-man was stupid. His inferior genes would not be saved for transfer to others of his kind. No one would grieve for him.

T'ang Lang struck.

The castle-man shrieked once as he was hit. Tang struck with such power that several blades pierced clear through the castle-man's body. With easy strength, T'ang automatically absorbed the recoil. He pulled the mortally wounded youth toward him. Desperately, writhing and squirming, the castle-man shifted his rapier. He jabbed, missed, and jabbed again.

To the majority of inhabitants in Tang's world that rapier was death. Even the Moving Mountains, whose size would seem to protect them, feared that blade.

It hit once, skidding harmlessly off Tang's gleaming armor. It was a last pass.

T'ang inspected his pinioned, helpless victim. His method for the coup de grace was

efficient and rarely varied. He went for the skull. The castle-man was lucky. He died instantly. Others had not been so fortunate. T'ang was not especially concerned whether or not his victims were dead before he began eating.

The flesh of the castle-man had been good, juicy, and succulent, if spare. Having completed his meal, T'ang absently shoved the cleaned skeleton off the side of his platform. He did not bother to watch it go crashing to the earth below.

He finished cleaning his utensils, ascertained once more the position of the sun, and set himself again.

It was late afternoon, almost evening, when the encounter took place.

Two of the Moving Mountains came into view. Although they were not as tall as the light-eater T'ang sat upon, they massed many, many more times. Only the Bodikiddartha itself was greater.

T'ang had thought occasionally about the Moving Mountains. Were they intelligent? It seemed not. They moved about too much, with a great deal of wasted motion and energy. The city-builders were as active, but there was visible purpose behind everything they did. Not here.

Their great, mooning eyes were simple. None possessed a thousandth of the power of concentration T'ang could muster. He had seen them several times before, but they had not seen him. He feared only their clumsiness.

But today, with the sun dying near the horizon, it was to be different. Perhaps he still could have avoided them. Perhaps not. Each massed many million times his body weight. And although they could not move nearly as fast as T'ang, they had great reach. Still, it was their bulk that was most impressive.

T'ang never doubted the force of his mind. He would not run and scramble to avoid them! He'd picked his platform and he was going to stay there. If they wished a confrontation, so be it. He would not be the one to run and hide! He was T'ang Lang, the killer, emperor.

They saw him together, it seemed. In their ponderous, clumsy way they turned (so slow, thought T'ang, so slow!) and stared across at him. From his high platform, T'ang could return their stare eye to eye.

Those faces — monstrous, distorted, bloated things! Obscenities beyond imagining! T'ang did not flinch at the nightmare visions. Soft and flabby, surely for all their size they could not be much in the way of warriors.

Could they communicate, perhaps? He chose the smaller of the two Mountains, thought at it:

CAN YOU THINK? WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF THE UNIVERSE? ARE YOU IN HARMONY?  
FOR ALL YOUR SIZE I FEAR YOU NOT. COME AND FIGHT, IF YOU WILL.  
NO? YOU HAVE CROSSED THE GREEN PLAIN, I HAVE SEEN YOU DO IT. WAS IT FOR  
A PURPOSE? OR DO YOU ALWAYS WANDER AIMLESSLY? I AM T'ANG LANG, THE  
KILLER! STAY AND FIGHT, OR GO IN PEACE.

The Moving Mountain made no answer. Definitely, T'ang Lang was not impressed. In fact, he was by now a little bored. He still had hunting to do and these great, ludicrous beings

obscured his vision. Did they mean to stand there forever?

The sun, now that was impressive. The Bodikid-dartha was impressive. But these? They were simply big. Fagh!

The smaller Mountain of the two leaned forward, ponderously. Its bulk shut out the sun. A great misshapen limb extended itself toward T'ang's platform.

So it was to be battle after all? Come, then! T'ang steadied himself. All the power of his mind was directed outward in one great withering blast of mental energy.

The limb paused, hesitated. The huge saucer-shaped eyes blinked. Slowly, the limb was retracted. The Mountain looked at its companion for a moment. Then the two turned and lumbered off across the Green Plain, their size devouring the distance.

T'ang had won.

Giver of light and warmth, the sun had sunk lower in the sky. It was dragging the heat down with it. T'ang could sense the approaching chill. It crawled at his back armor.

He'd made another kill, a late one. A tube-man, this time, though not the same one he'd seen earlier. It had been fat and plump, a good meal.

Perhaps he would rest among the platforms of this light-eater tonight. It was a good spot.

He thought again on the Moving Mountains. Could he have been wrong? Mightn't they be intelligent, after all? If only he could compare thoughts with another emperor! Or even an empress. But that was quite unthinkable — for now, at least.

He sighed and turned, working his way back toward the heart of the light-eater. Intelligent or no, T'ang did not feel sanguine about the possibilities of contact.

It pained him.