

# "The Insatiable, Exceedingly Fat but Handsome Panda" by Matias Travieso-Diaz



The panda Pàng yòu chǒu (Pang for short) had eaten his way through most of the three-square miles of his territory. Now, food supply nearly exhausted, he sat upright on the forest floor, struggling over his massive beer gut. His powerful jaws and strong teeth crushed a bamboo stem into bits. He relished the food ingestion, the strength of his jaw, the anticipation of a full stomach.

Soon there was no bamboo left, however, and he was still hungry. The urge to chew, to swallow, to feed, haunted him. The impulse to eat was a constant itch that Pang was unable to scratch away. He thought of virtually nothing but food. He survived almost entirely on bamboo, which he had to eat in prodigious quantities, twenty to thirty pounds a day. But bamboo provided very little nourishment, so he had to keep eating to get enough energy for him to lumber from morning to dusk, from bamboo stand to bamboo stand, always solitary, shunning social interactions to limit energy expenditures, eating being his sole preoccupation.

As he surveyed again his depleted territory with an eye out for non-existing food, Pang considered his options. He could migrate in one direction or another and try to find another corner of the mountain where bamboo still grew in abundance. But migration was chancy and required the expenditure of a lot of energy. He did not know in which direction the food abundance would lie. Plus, he was by nature slothful and resented having to do anything more than was necessary to make it through life. At his age, he thought, he should not have to find a path in the world, the world should come to him. He deserved it.

Pang concluded that the solution that would be best and would require him to do the least would be to get others to bring him bamboo in sufficient quantities to keep him going in a style that was to his liking. That was the preferable solution, though he was sure he had much thinking to do to make it happen. But that was not a major problem, for he had a good brain. Maybe the best brain, with the most brilliant ideas, and those would come to him because he was so smart.

The answer to his predicament came to him as he bent over a limpid pool to get a sip of water. His image, somewhat blurred, was reflected in the waters. "Am I handsome, or what?" he thought, for he was quite vain. "I bet nobody is as good looking as I." He admired his round face, the luxuriant white fur with contrasting black ears, black eye patches, and dark muzzle. He moved himself about to admire his legs, arms and shoulders cast in black, contrasting again with the pure white of the rest of his corpulent body, and a thought occurred to him: "I bet that if there was a beauty contest, I would be the winner." And another thought rushed in at once: "Why don't I organize a beauty pageant, and get the other contestants to ante up food as the stake for the winner to get. I, of course, will win, and then I will have my fill of food!"

The more he thought about it, the more he liked this idea. There were a host of problems, though. If he was going to be a contestant, he could not be the judge. Also, he needed help organizing and promoting the event, and needed to make sure the contestants would bring food to be given to the winner. Finally, he had to make sure that the judges would rule in his favor; if experience taught Pang anything, it was that one should never leave anything to chance, and there is no better election than one rigged in one's favor. His thoughts were interrupted by a strange hissing sound. Raising his head, Pang saw, curled around a branch of a tree not far from the pool, a large iridescent black snake staring at him. He had a small head and a neck that broadened into a hood and narrowed again into the chest and a slightly flattened body covered with smooth glossy hexagonal scales. The eyes had irises of a dark yellow dappled with blue-black and the pupils were round and jet black. His stare was fixed and had a predatory look. The snake appeared to be sizing Pang up as a potential dinner.

Pang stared back at the snake. He knew the type; he had seen many of them in his years of roaming the highlands of Sichuan. "Hello, snake. What brings you to this corner of the mountain?"

"I came looking for toads in that pool and found you instead. You're like a very big, very, very fat toad." As the snake answered, he darted out a blue-black tongue and showed a row of fangs that protruded from the upper jaw. He slowly uncoiled himself and raised his head, showing spectacle-like markings on the back of the upper face of the hood. It was an imposing sight.

Pang could see how the appearance of the snake would have frightened smaller animals, but of course not him, although Pang did not like the looks of those teeth. He decided that he could use the snake's looks to his advantage, as ideas blossomed in his brain. "You are actually very nice looking, with the markings on your hood and those yellow stripes all along your body. What's your name?"

"My name is Naja. And you are not too bad looking, if one cares for that sort of thing. You are also very fat; you could keep me fed for a long time."

“Well, I *am* very handsome. In fact, I was just thinking that if there was a beauty contest for all the animals on this mountain, I would surely be the winner. As for feeding off me, you would get far more to eat among the losers if we held such a contest.”

Naja said nothing for a while, and kept swinging his head right and left as if deep in thought. "I'm not sure you would win," he finally said. "I'm slim. That's far more beautiful, don't you think? I can slide around and in and under rocks, and you are a very large clod who can only go around by tripping over everything. You are not as beautiful as you think."

“So you say, snake, but beauty is in the eye of the beholder, don't you think most animals would find me more beautiful than you?”

“Well, so *you* say, but there is only one way to find out,” retorted the snake. “Let's have that contest you mentioned. But I get to eat any losers I choose, except yourself.”

“I would like that,” said Pang, “but we need a judge and someone who can organize and give publicity to the event so contestants will come.”

“All right,” answered Naja. “For a take in the proceeds of the contest, I will be the judge, though I would have loved to participate and prove you wrong. And I can get you a great public relations expert.”

“Who would that be?”

Naja did not answer, but slithered away. Turning its head, it just said: “Stay here. I'll be back soon.”

Pang felt like he had been waiting for a very long time, and kept pacing back and forth the entire perimeter of the pond. As he was rounding off yet another circle, he simultaneously heard a hiss and a loud squawk. Entering the other end of the pond was Naja. Above the tree tops, following Naja's trail, flew a large dark bird. As the squawker got closer, Pang noticed that he had a black head, with a short, curved bill and coal black eyes. The rest of the plumage on the bird's body was a sooty grey color.

“Who is this?” asked Pang, who had never seen such a bird before. Naja responded:

“This is Perisoreous, but we call him Peri for short. He is a grey jay. Sorry it took me so long to get here, but Peri dwells along the evergreens on top of the other side of the mountain and I had to climb up and look for him.”

“That explains why I have never seen him before. I don't go to high places. How's life in the heights?”

Peri gave out an unpleasant caw. “Well, things are not as good as they used to be. Men have started to come and have cleared my woods, and logged the trees where I used to perch. There is hardly a place to live or build a

nest and it gets harder each day to find bugs to eat or even fruits or berries. I often go hungry or must fly long distances to even get a morsel.”

Pang thought: *a hungry fellow like this is someone I can turn to his advantage*. “It seems that we all have the same problem, friend jay. What I want is to get us in a situation where animals like you and I can get the food that we deserve.”

“We three could be the rulers of this mountain. We are smarter than the other animals, and could make others do as we please. All creatures would be our subjects, and bring us food to eat.”

The jay questioned where the panda was going with this: “And how do we get ourselves in that situation?”

Pang had been thinking a lot as he walked circles around the pond, so he had a reply ready: “If we play our cards right, you can have all the insects and fruits you want, Peri.

And you, Naja, can have all the toads and rodents and other beasts. The mountain will feed us all to our stomachs’ content. Everyone will bow before our greatness. We will win bamboo, we will win insects and grubs and berries, and we will win toads and rodents. All the winning, it will be the best winning you have ever seen. We will make this mountain great again, and none of us will ever have to worry about having to forage.” Peri cawed in approval. “So, when do we start?”

## II

Naja had not exaggerated Peri’s skills at propaganda. Loud cries announcing the beauty contest were soon resounding across the mountain, as Peri and another half-dozen grey jays crisscrossed in flight over every corner of the land singing:

“Listen you all! This is the opportunity of a lifetime! Become the most famous creature on the mountain! Enter the one and only beauty contest! Open to all residents of Mount Qingcheng! No matter your size, no matter your age, no matter your species, you know you are beautiful! Show it to everybody! Make everyone appreciate your beauty! Come at full moon to the registration meeting at the shore of the lake! Fame awaits you!”

And the jays cross-crossed the mountain carrying that message, over and over again.

As the full moon approached, curiosity grew among all creatures that dwelt on the mountain. Most were excited. Only a few -- like the torpid two-toed sloth -- remained indifferent to the upcoming event: when the jays insisted on asking prospective contestants whether they did not think that they were exceedingly handsome, very few demurred.

When the moon rose over Mount Qingcheng, a motley crowd had assembled by the edge of the lake. There were animals of all kinds, sizes, and denominations. Only the fish were unable to participate.

Peri sat on a tall evergreen and surveyed the surging crowd below. He cleared his throat to get everyone's attention and began to speak in a loud, penetrant voice:

“Welcome! My heart soars to see so many gorgeous animals gathered here. I feel that this mountain has the best-looking creatures on this earth! This beauty pageant is designed for you to shine and show the world how wonderful you are. Soon, the pageant will open for contestant registration. To have your chance to show the world your splendor, we only need to get a few things out of the way that will ensure that the competition is fair. There are five rules to the contest:

“Rule Number 1: All contestants must live, or have their nest or main area of habitation, within the boundaries of Mount Qingcheng in order to compete.

“Rule Number 2: All contestants must pay an entry fee. Such fee will consist of bamboo stalks, fruits, edible plants or the roots thereof, or other comestibles in an amount equal to half the contestant's body weight. The entry fee must be paid in full before a contestant can compete in the Beauty Pageant.

“Rule Number 3: All contestants must compete in the three main areas of competition to be selected as the Beauty Pageant winner; these areas include the Platform walk, the Glamor Display, and the Interview.

“Rule Number 4: No contestant shall challenge the judges' decisions and scoring.

These are final and will not be changed or subject to challenge. The identities of the Beauty Pageant judges will NOT be released.

“Rule Number 5: If a contestant becomes the pageant winner, he or she will receive all the food submitted as entry fees for the contest, and all other animals taking part will pay homage to the winner and obey his or her commands fully for the space of one full year.”

At this point, Peri stopped to catch his breath and gauge the reaction of the crowd. For the most part, the animals were impressed by the formality of the rules, which should assure the competition was fair. But many of the beasts did not understand the rules very well, if at all, and were disquieted by what appeared to be a lot of talking about things that had nothing to do with their beauty. Others were daunted by the steep entry fee, which they felt they may be unable to deliver. There was a steady murmur, as the beasts broke into small groups and held energetic discussions.

Peri let the conversations go on for a while to let the animals feel that their opinions were valued and appreciated and, at large, uttered a shrill summation: “We will set up this clearing as the office where applications must be submitted together with the entry fees.

We will meet here at the next phase of the moon to recognize the contestants and initiate the selection process. Good night to all.”

Most animals ended up declining to enter the beauty contest. The strict rules and, particularly, the need to supply a large quantity of food as a registration fee, served to discourage all but the vainest from applying. In the week that followed, less than two dozen hopefuls registered. They included five large birds: a golden eagle, a black-necked crane, a pheasant, a vulture, and an owl; three monkeys: a snub-nosed monkey, a gibbon, and a macaque; a wolf, a wolverine, and a snow leopard; a deer, a takin (also called a mountain goat), and a bristling boar; and Pang.

On the night that the moon started to wane, Peri addressed the contestants that had signed up for the pageant and declared the event officially underway. The first step in the contest was the walking of the platform: the clearing had been further expanded and covered with logs set close together to form a rustic stage. At one edge of the platform was a high boulder, behind him sat the judges, unseen (there was only one judge, Naja).

Each contestant was to parade slowly, making a circuit of the stage, walking in the manner that showed his or her attributes to the best effect. The black-necked crane and the golden pheasant were ground walkers, and thus managed the parade without difficulty. The other birds, though, were unaccustomed to walking on the ground, so the eagle, the vulture and the owl kept tripping themselves and leaving an impression of awkwardness; likewise, the boar, the wolf and (surprisingly) the deer showed themselves too clumsy to make the cut. All six were immediately disqualified by Naja, who hid behind the boulder and announced the “judges” decisions from there.

The macaque seemed not to take the test too seriously, for she kept jumping back and forth and then sideways, showing off her dexterity. When she was disqualified, she showed her displeasure by standing on all fours with the tail sticking straight out behind the body while issuing an impressive series of screeches, screams, squeaks, growls, and barks. To no avail, of course. Peri ordered the unruly simian off the platform.

The last contestant, Pang, lumbered on gracelessly around the platform and at one point tottered and seemed about to fall off the edge, but managed to stay on. Naja, again speaking offstage, declared that the Panda had made the cut and would join the remaining contestants.

The second walk of the first phase of the pageant required each contestant to walk the platform again, this time turning and twirling around to better display their natural beauty from all angles. The crane and the pheasant had no trouble with this, for they were vain and loved to display their plumage; the snub-nosed monkey managed to look cute despite the short stump of a nose on its round face and the fact that his nostrils were arranged forward. It was his lush, multicolored fur, which seemed to hang from the shoulders and drop back like a cape, what attracted attention. The other monkey, the gibbon, was perhaps too plain: his fur was a dull black, with some white markings on the hands, feet, and face.

When Naja sibilantly dismissed him as not graceful enough, the gibbon inflated its throat sac and let out a stentorian shout of protest that resonated throughout the mountain. Nonetheless, the gibbon was eliminated and soon was gone.

The takin was coming right behind the gibbon and had made its way along most of the stage when the monkey was dismissed. The takin stopped, shook its head in disbelief, looked right and left, and then ponderously turned its back, urinated on the stage, emptying his bladder in disdain, and then retreated. He coughed loudly, gave a lugubrious bawl of discontent, emptied his bowels, urinated again and ambled away without looking back.

The last three contestants to make it to the platform were the wolverine, the snow leopard, and Pang. The wolverine resembled a small, long, and low bear. He was a stocky and muscular animal with short legs, broad and thick head, small eyes and short rounded ears and a muzzle full of sharp teeth. He had a silvery facial mask and a pale buff stripe, which ran from his shoulders along his side, crossing his rump just above his bushy tail. As he swaggered in, his fur stood on edge, making him seem nearly twice as large, and he uttered a menacing growl, displaying powerful jaws and scratching the platform with his sharp claws. Naja immediately declared him qualified.

The female leopard was a magnificent beast, as large as Pang. She had long, thick smoky gray fur, with contrasting black open rosettes on her body, small spots of the same color on her head, and larger spots on her legs and tail; her eyes were pale green with a piercing stare. As she glided effortlessly on the ramp, she announced that she had come all the way down from the snowy heights of the mountain and was expecting to win, as all could see her superior beauty and grace. Again, without hesitation, Naja pronounced she had made the cut.

Pang came next and, even though he felt he was as handsome as a panda can be, he became concerned that he would be overshadowed by the snow leopard. What assured him Naja would judge him best?

He needed not have worried. Halfway through his parade, Naja hissed in approval, and said: "You make it too. Everyone, we are down to the final six!"

#### IV

There was a short break before the final event, the climactic Interview section of the contest. Pang's accomplices set out to discuss how to plausibly eliminate the remaining contestants so that Pang could win. The birds, of course, were no problem, and eliminating them and the monkey would be straightforward, for what could they do if they did not like the outcome? But Naja and Peri worried that the snow leopard and the wolverine would not take defeat well and could turn the pageant organizers into bloody ribbons.

Pang listened to their discussion with growing concern. Could he be forced to yield the title to one of these ferocious beasts? "I have an idea" he said at last. "Get them to fight each other. That way one or both will be killed and we should be able to dispose of whoever remains standing, for he or she will be weakened after the fight, plus how beautiful could a bloody survivor be?" As he said that, Pang marveled at his own cunning, as he often did.

The snake and the bird, after consulting briefly, returned to their respective places: Peri, to the top of the tree; Naja, back behind the high boulder at the edge of the stage. The bird then sang:

“Now comes the final, and maybe the most important, phase of this wondrous pageant. The winner of the contest must not only be beautiful, as all these finalists are, but also needs to be charming and wise, for he or she will represent Mount Qingcheng and will show to one and all that, of the animals in this sacred mountain, he or she is the most beautiful and excellent of all.” Peri stopped two heartbeats for dramatic effect, and then continued:

“Each contestant will be asked a question by our judges out of the hearing of the other finalists. In answering the question, the contestant must display wisdom, tact, and character. The contestant giving the best answer, combined with his or her score from the previous phases, will win.” Then, Peri announced: “The crane is our first finalist. Will you please come forward? The others please remain outside the stage.”

The black-necked crane waddled onto the stage. She was indeed a beautiful bird – large, whitish-gray, with a black head, red crown patch, black upper neck and legs, and white patch to the rear of the eye. Naja summoned her to come closer: “Madame crane, please approach the boulder so I can whisper to you the question.” The crane did so, and waited for Naja to speak again, pecking nervously at the ground in search of non-existent grubs. Naja said: “What would you do, hypothetically, if you saw that a raven was trying to steal one of your eggs off the nest?” At the very idea, the crane first uttered a short, subdued nasal “kurrr” as if beckoning her fledglings to her side, and then exploded in a barrage of trumpeting calls: “Who would dare steal one of my precious eggs? Who would do that? Well, I would chase him to the end of the earth, if necessary; I would clip his wings and then I would peck him to death; I...” She stopped, befuddled and seething with indignation.

“Thank you, madam. You made your feelings quite clear. Please go back offstage and await the judges’ decision.”

“The next finalist is the golden pheasant. Pheasant, please come forward.” The pheasant, a medium sized bird with blue, dark red, and black feathers spotted with cinnamon, resolutely marched to the center of the stage, basking in the glory of his own self-importance. He had a golden-yellow crest with a hint of red at the tip; his face, throat, chin, and the sides of his neck were rusty tan. The wattles and orbital skin were yellow, and the ruff was light orange; the upper back was green and the rest of the back and rump were golden-yellow. His tail feathers curved downwards and accounted for half his length. He was spectacular, or at least he thought so.

Before Naja could ask a question, the pheasant hopped to the edge of the platform and screeched: “I don’t know why we are bothering with this charade. I am famous and admired all over the world. There is no prettier bird, nay, no prettier animal than I. Please declare me the winner right now and waste no more time.”

“Not so fast, sir” hissed Naja. “You are very, very handsome, but our question now has to do with brains, not beauty.” The pheasant went quiet. “Here is the question:

“A monkey, a squirrel, and a bird are racing to the top of a coconut tree. Who will get the banana first, the monkey, the squirrel, or the bird?”

The pheasant puffed up his head and answered proudly: “If I am the bird, the bird.”



Naja gave out what could have been a laugh, if snakes could laugh: “That question was to test your intelligence. The correct answer is none of them will, because you can't get a banana from a coconut tree. Please go back offstage and wait for the final results.” The pheasant, crestfallen, drifted away.

The wolverine was called up next. He came in with the same menacing strut as before and planted itself squarely before the judges' boulder. “Your courage has been put into question” suggested Naja. “How and by whom?” growled the wolverine, his fur bristling. “Another of the contestants has said you are a scavenger, a carrion eater, a thief, and a coward that eats the dead or steals food and only faces easy prey, like animals caught in traps, newborn animals, and those that are weakened. That you do not dare face a strong animal capable of defending himself.”

The wolverine responded with a louder growl. “Who says these things about me?”

“Communications with pageant officials and judges are private. All we want from you is confirmation that if you win you will not dishonor the mountain through craven behavior.”

“You all can rest assured that I am not craven and that I can take good care of myself.”

“Fine. Now go backstage and wait for the judges' decision.” The wolverine headed back grumpily.

The snow leopard's approach, when summoned, was all elegance and grace. Standing in front of the boulder, she asked in a polite manner: “Is this the end of the show? Are you ready to crown me the winner?”

“The contest is not yet over,” responded Naja. “Just a final question or two. But before the questions, we have to ask, for your own good: are your cubs safe?”

“What do you mean?” asked the leopard, an edge of menace in her voice. “I left them playing in the den. Why do you ask?”

“Well, we have learned that another of the contestants is a scavenger that preys upon young left unattended.”

“Who is that? Tell me and I will kill him right now.”

“Communications between participants and contest officials are private, not to be disclosed to third parties” stated Naja firmly.

The ruff rose on the leopard's neck. “Screw the rules. Will you tell me who is the miserable beast that must die?”

“You are not a dumb cat” hissed Naja. “You can figure this one by yourself. Neither pandas, nor birds, nor monkeys threaten the offspring of big cats. Who is left?”

The moment these words left Naja’s mouth, the leopard bolted offstage to an expectant silence, which was soon shattered by the sounds of fighting, accompanied by growls, barks, and yelps, and finally whimpers that subsided into silence.

Peri, who had flown out to see what the commotion was, reported: “The wolverine is dead. The leopard was bleeding from numerous gashes and withdrew to check on her cubs.”

“All worked fine, as I was hoping” said Pang, creeping behind the boulder. “Are we finished here?”

“No,” replied Naja. “We still have the monkey, and you also have to give a pro-forma interview.”

“Fine. Go ahead with it, but make it short. I am very, very hungry.”

## V

As she stood before the judges’ boulder, the monkey did not look like much, though she was presentable enough to have made the cut so far. Naja, hidden behind the boulder, glanced at her through a crevice in the stone and decided to go for the jugular: “Madame, considering your age, do you have the energy to be the leader of this mountain for an entire year?”

Her response was courteous but firm: “Granted, I am no longer in the bloom of youth. But I am wise, and still quite comely. I know what the inhabitants need and how to get it for them.” She then spoke for what seemed like an eternity, ending with “there, do you think I have enough energy?”

Naja replied: “Yes, ma’am. You certainly would make a fine queen of Mount Qingcheng. But this is only a beauty contest. Please go back offstage while we consider the final candidate.”

She did and, as she retreated offstage on all fours, she gave the boulder a hostile look and muttered: “I am onto you. I don’t know why, but you are bending the rules. I think this contest is rigged.” They ignored her.

Standing on his hind legs before the boulder, Pang was the image of self-confidence.

When Naja asked him the previously agreed question of why should he be declared the winner, he proceeded to tick off some of his numerous virtues:

“I am clearly the most handsome animal, and the greatest.”

“Nobody is as clever as I.”

“I have a gentle and genial disposition, and everyone who meets me loves me right away...”

He was still in his self-promotion litany when Naja suggested: “That is sufficient, sir. Let us now retire to our deliberations.”

After a short interval, Peri summoned all the animals that had remained to watch the end of the proceedings. Naja, still behind the boulder, gave the tribunal’s verdict. “The wolverine and the leopard had been disqualified. The remaining finalists were ranked as follows: Third runner up, the black-necked crane; second runner up, the golden pheasant; first runner up, the snub-nosed monkey; and the winner and king of the mountain: the panda.”

“Great,” shouted Pang jubilantly. “Despite those who have conspired to deny my magnificence, truth has won out.” And, almost in the same breath: “Let’s eat.”

## VI

And eat they did, Pang and Naja and all the jays, princely and in great quantities, at least for the first few days. The supply of bamboo stalks was only moderate, but there were surpassing quantities of fruits, nuts, roots, small crawly things, dead birds, and mice.

When the offerings made to as registration fees were exhausted, Peri and his band of grey jays flew all over the mountain announcing that Pang had decreed that there should be tax levies to support the new administration: each citizen of Mount Qingcheng was to provide, on the first night of each full moon, a food contribution equal to half each citizen’s body weight. To assure compliance with this decree, a force of black bears was being established to visit with recalcitrant animals and enforce their cooperation.

The news was alarming to the peaceful denizens of the mountain – not only would they be required to spend much of their time gathering food for Pang and his minions, but they also would be subject to being manhandled by crude, not too smart bears.

Spontaneous protests were held in front of Pang’s den, and several delegations sought to meet with him to ask for relief. Pang gave the same speech to all: the taxes were necessary to keep Pang and his forces healthy and able to defend the mountain from the foreign enemies that, even as they spoke, were drawing close. The required contributions were but a small sacrifice to the cause of making Mount Qingcheng great again. He assured them all that he was not only the most handsome, but also the smartest of all animals and only had their welfare in mind, and all they had to do was wait some time and they would see how prosperity returned to the mountain.

Things remained in an uneasy balance for one full cycle of the moon, but then the “takin incident” occurred. The takin, who by nature was a stubborn beast, had vociferously refused to ante up any more food to “fatten that Panda.” He was paid a visit by a pair of black bears that attempted to coerce him into cutting down some bamboo stalks to bring in as taxes. The takin resisted and, when the bears charged him, he gored one and threatened to run over the other. Soon the takin was dead and the bears had suffered significant wounds.

Following this bloody event, the mountain descended into chaos. Those animals that could escape, such as the birds, the bats, the deer, and the other ungulates began fleeing in droves. Soon, the food contributions to Pang decreased to a trickle and finally stopped altogether.

Pang was upset and frustrated by this turn of events. His plan for a lifetime supply of food had come to an abrupt end. With no more free food to be had, even his closest supporters started deserting him.

One day he noticed how the skies were silent and empty: Peri and his grey jay squad had flown away, in search of better places to feed. Since no more small animals came to pay tribute, Naja reverted to finding his prey the old way, by haunting ponds and bird nests and rodent holes. He paid occasional visits to Pang's den just to check on whether there were any more donors or donations but stopped coming, for he left with no loot.

And Pang? The aging panda Pang – now over twenty-five years old – had become weaker by the day; as food ran out, he did not have the energy to go searching for it. He spent the hours lying on his back, sleeping fitfully, dreaming of the time where everyone recognized that he was the most handsome, smartest, and greatest of all beasts in the mountain. And, as weakness drove him to delirium, he came at last to realize that in pursuing his insatiable hunger he had neglected to build ties of affection to others, and by doing so had forsaken the love that might have been helpful in his hour of need. True greatness might have been his, but ambition and gluttony got in the way.

He finally perished and Naja proceeded to consume his remains.

**Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over ninety of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies and paying magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. Some of his unpublished works have also received "honorable mentions" from a number of paying publications. A first collection of his stories, "The Satchel and Other Terrors" was released in February 2023.**