
**DRAGON KING WITH SEVEN
STARS**



CHAPTER 1 – THE DEATH OF A MULTI-MILLIONAIRE

Part 1

April 15. Clear Skies. [1]

The day started like every other day. When Sun Jicheng got out of bed, his clothing was already prepared by Liu Jin'niang, a former Imperial maid responsible for dressing the Emperor, and the sixteen young women she oversaw. [2, 3] In the hall outside his bedroom, he drank some Oolong tea from the Wuyi Mountains in Fujian, and then got into his special carriage and began his inspection tour of the 79 businesses he owned in Jinan city. [4, 5]

He was not the type of person who conformed to the normal patterns of everyday life. For example, he would often stay out drinking with clients all night. And yet, he would never let this interfere with his daily inspection. In fact, the route upon which he traveled would never change.

Starting businesses wasn't easy, and maintaining them successfully was even harder. Anyone who wanted to achieve such success must pay a price.

Sun Jicheng understood that.

He loved his businesses in much the same way that a beautiful woman loves her good looks.

He would often tell his friends, "Wealth might not make you happy, but it's a lot better than being poor."

Sun Jicheng was about six feet tall. Stalwart and dashing, he knew how to enjoy himself, much unlike the other wealthy and powerful merchants who were his peers.

All the years of delicious food and drink had caused his belly to slowly protrude, but thanks to carefully tailored clothing, he looked much younger than his actual age. He could still race horses, drink liquor, and satisfy the most difficult to satisfy woman.

He would never forget to remind others about this, and they would never forget this fact.

Of course, a person like this had no death wish.

So every day when he left home, various experts from famous bodyguard agencies would accompany him. One of them was Qiu Budaο, also called “As Stable as Mount Tai,” who in past years had successfully accomplished 91 bodyguard missions with no losses.

Sun Jicheng’s carriage was specially manufactured, impervious to blades and arrows. The horses came from the stables of the “General Who Attacks the West,” every one exceedingly fine, with unmatched stamina and speed, capable of running over 400 miles in one day without stopping. [6, 7]

His enormous mansion was similarly protected. Day and night, multiple shifts of guards watched over everything, each one a top-notch expert.

To send someone like Sun Jicheng to the grave could not be considered a simple matter.

No one would try to do such a thing. No one would dare take the risk.

Who could ever imagine that he would die!

Part 2

Barring unforeseen circumstances, Sun Jicheng would usually eat lunch at the Great Three Yuan restaurant.

Perhaps because he worried about his growing belly, or because of constant drinking, he would usually eat or drink nothing else during the day other than his Oolong tea. So of course he was very picky about his lunch.

There were many reasons why he chose to eat at Great Three Yuan.

It was one of the 79 businesses he owned.

Its head chef was a celebrity, specially hired from South China [8]. His “Marinated Shark’s Fin” and “Grilled Shark’s Fin” both were secret family recipes, handed down through the generations, and as luck would have it, Sun Jicheng’s favorite dish was Shark’s Fin.

The manager of Great Three Yuan, Zheng Nanyuan, was not only picky about food, but when it came to wit and conversational ability, he was just the type of person Sun Jicheng liked.

The most important thing was that Great Three Yuan was a very successful business with many customers. Sun Jicheng liked to look at people, and he liked people to look at him.

Today was a day like any other. Big Boss Sun ate lunch at Great Three Yuan, drank a little alcohol.

Usually he would drink Chu Ye Ching, Maotai, Daqu, Nu’er Hong, Mei Kuei Lu, and sometimes even Barley wine or Gucheng liquor shipped from distant regions. [9]

Today, he drank something even more difficult to acquire: Persian Red Wine.

Great Three Yuan was the last stop on his inspection tour. Upon finishing his meal, he would go home. He would return to his room, which others rarely visited, take a nap, then once again resume his unique living routine.

— Being rich really was much more enjoyable than being poor.

Sun Jicheng was richer than almost anyone in the world, and happier too.

No one had any way to kill him, nor any reason to.

How could he possibly die?

Part 3

Sun Jicheng truly understood how to enjoy himself, and wanted everything to be very exquisite, including his clothing, his food, his residence and his business.

So of course, his bedroom was comfortable and resplendent.

Anyone with a brain could imagine that, but few could imagine what exactly his room was like. This was because few people had ever entered his room.

His room was a place for rest and sleep.

When it came time for rest and sleep, he never wanted women. And when it came time for women, he never wanted rest and sleep.

— A “wife” and a “woman” are different.

A “wife” is not merely a “woman,” but someone with whom to share trials and tribulation, bitterness and sweetness, a support, a comfort, a partner, and a friend during times of loneliness, pain, disappointment and old age.

Sun Jicheng had no wife, and neither did he have friends.

Strictly speaking, the friends he had were not truly his friends.

— It is lonely at the top; if a person manages to reach the pinnacle of something, that person will often find themselves quite lonely.

As usual, it was about dusk when Sun Jicheng returned to that room so rarely seen by anyone else, but if seen, became the source of amazement, praise and envy.

Usually, when he returned, he would take a short nap. But this time, he made an exception. From a secret compartment located next to his bed he pulled out a necklace crafted from Persian platinum, embedded with emeralds.

Outside the bedroom was a resplendent reception hall. On the walls hung paintings by Wu Daozi and calligraphy by Wang Xizhi [10, 11], and placed

on a shelf was a vase carved from pure white jade. Facing the door was a reception armchair said to have been used by the emperor himself in the Imperial palace.

As soon as he sat down, a musical clinking could be heard coming from outside. The person he was waiting to see had arrived.

It was Liu Jin'niang.

Liu Jiniang was a beautiful, gentle, mature and paid close attention to detail. Her skills in tailoring were unparalleled. She'd entered the Imperial Palace at the age of 11 and returned to at the age of 21 to manage Sun Jicheng's clothing, footgear and headgear. No one in the world was more familiar with his physique and body structure.

That of course is a requirement for anyone tasked with creating a comfortable set of clothing.

To truly, completely understand the body of a man is not easy, and she had used the most direct and effective method.

She was a beautiful woman, healthy and strong. The spring wind that night had blown oh so gently.

But from that night on, she never brought up the incident ever again. It seemed he, too, had forgotten. The two of them maintained a very professional working relationship.

Long ago in the deep recesses of the Imperial palace, she had learned to live in loneliness.

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The setting sun shone in through the window. Sun Jicheng looked at her cold, beautiful face, and let out a soft sigh.

"It's been ten years," he said with a sigh. "It's ten years, correct?"

"Just about."

Liu Jin'niang's face appeared completely cold and emotionless. A woman of her upbringing would surely never allow emotions to show.

And yet, she felt a stab of pain in her heart. She knew exactly how many days had passed since that spring night. She would forever remember, completely clearly. It was ten years, one month and three days.

"Have you been happy throughout these years?"

"I would say neither happy nor unhappy," she said coolly. "Now that I think about it, the ten years seem to have passed in the blink of an eye."

So many frigid winter nights spent alone, so many lonely spring evenings, could they really pass in the blink of an eye?

Sun Jicheng sighed again, then suddenly stood up and walked over to her.

"I know I've let you down," he said. He lifted up the necklace. "This is a little something from me. Would you allow me to put it on you?"

Liu Jin'niang nodded her head silently. And yet, as soon as Sun Jicheng reached her and placed the necklace around her neck, she suddenly wanted to weep.

Could it be that after ten years of indifference, he had suddenly recalled that one night of passion and tenderness?

Just as the tears began to pour down her face, he suddenly tightened his grip, using the beautiful necklace to send her to her death.

She did not die in suffering, because she truly did not believe that he would treat her with such vicious treachery.

No one could possibly figure out why he killed her, because, truthfully, he had no reason to.

The beautiful necklace hung from the beautiful neck. And yet, the beauty had long since passed.

The setting sun slowly began to fade, replaced gradually by evening gloom.

Sun Jicheng, steady and cool-headed as usual, slowly pushed open the rear window and vanished into the night like a wisp of smoke, disappearing into the darkness in the twinkling of an eye.

Part 4

The dark of evening approached. Qiu Budaο still lay on his bed. Last night, he had been on duty for the graveyard shift and hadn't been able to go to sleep until morning. When on duty, he gave it his all, just as he did when working bodyguard missions. Even though he knew nothing untoward would happen, he still refused to display the slightest negligence or complacency.

It had taken much blood and sweat to earn the moniker "As Stable as Mount Tai," but it would take only one moment of negligence to lose it.

After experiencing countless risks to life and limb, he truly had achieved the "stability." No matter what type of arrow or sword were thrust toward him, he would not become flustered. Even if his whole family's fate rested on the roll of a die, he wouldn't bat an eye if the roll turned out to be a one.

But recently, he often felt tired. In actuality, a 55-year-old man shouldn't be doing this type of work. Sadly, a force existed behind him which lashed him forward like a donkey chained to a millstone.

It seemed the wheel of life gradually was crushing his robust frame into a bloody slab of meat.

He sighed to himself, preparing to get out of bed and light the lamp on the table. He never imagined that just as he began to walk forward, a hand would suddenly tap his shoulder from behind. His entire body instantly turned ice-cold.

Somehow, someone had entered his room without him being aware of it and then sneaked up on him. This should be fundamentally impossible.

Cold sweat broke out all over his body.

The hand neither took advantage of the situation to strike at his jugular, nor did it stab further into his shoulder. Instead, a mild voice spoke: "There's no need to light the lamp. I can see you, just as you can see me."

Qiu Budao recognized the voice.

The monstrous demon behind him was none other than his employer, Big Boss Sun Jicheng.

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Sun Jicheng removed his hand, allowing Qiu Budao to turn around.

In the darkness of twilight, Qiu Budao's face was a pale white as paper, but his expression calm and collected. He had been through countless battles, and every time he bounced back from an unfavorable situation was by relying on "stability."

Sun Jicheng's eyes shone with admiration, but the warmth turned to coldness in a flash.

Not allowing Qiu Budao to even open his mouth, he asked a very strange question, one word at a time: "When did you find out?"

"Find out what?" he replied, confused. The question was so sudden, he didn't know how to answer.

Sun Jicheng laughed. But the laughter did not touch his eyes. He looked at Qiu Budao for a while, and then one word at a time said: "My secret."

"Your secret? What secret?"

"Since you already know, do I really need to say?"

Qiu Budao said nothing.

He could see that the person standing in front of him was not someone who could be fooled easily. Trying to put on a front would do no good.

“When did you find out?” he suddenly replied. “When did you realize I’d uncovered your secret?”

This question was also a reply of sorts.

Sun Jicheng laughed again.

“You’ve always been a poor gambler, always losing horribly. And yet, during the past two months you’ve slowly been repaying your debts. Who is helping you to pay off your creditors?”

Qiu Budao refused to answer, and Sun Jicheng didn’t press him further. Instead, he continued, “Of the 72 guards in the three squads you command, 13 have been replaced in the last two months. Every three to five days, you switch someone out. When on duty, you place them as far away from me as possible.” He smiled. “Did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

“I didn’t think so.”

At that moment, just before Sun Jicheng opened his mouth to reply, Qiu Budao’s hand shot out like a thunderbolt.

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Qiu Budao usually trained with a broadsword, and trained quite well. No one could call his technique anything but first-rate.

And yet he rarely used a broadsword.

His fists could be considered deadly weapons, even more powerful and fearsome than his broadsword.

He had always believed that if you use a weapon, there will eventually be a time when that weapon is not at hand. When his second uncle “Invincible Double Whips” Qiu Sheng’s trademark double whips had been stolen, he had subsequently died a bitter death in battle.

Fists could never be stolen. So from childhood he had trained in fist techniques. And even though it had entailed countless hardships and tribulations, he had trained under the banner of the Shaolin Temple.

Everyone acknowledged that Shaolin's "Dragon Subduing, Tiger Vanquishing Lohan Divine Fist" was an unrivaled fist.

His fist technique was fierce and potent, incredibly swift and strong. Especially the first form.

End things with one stance, a fatal fist. When experts fight, victory and defeat are usually decided in one stance.

He had always reckoned the first stance to be the most crucial, and this viewpoint was beyond doubt correct.

As his fist shot out, although he couldn't be completely certain it would strike his opponent, he believed that he would at least be able to open an opportunity to make an escape. Forty years of bitter, year-round training and three hundred blood-soaked battles gave him supreme confidence in his sense of judgement.

Sadly, this time he'd erred.

Even as his fist shot out with a power like lightning, he saw a blur, and the opponent he wished to devastate with his strike, was gone.

And in that exact moment, he felt his wrist being restrained. All the power in his body suddenly dissipated and his wrist was twisted around behind his back. He had no strength to resist.

Qiu Budaο was petrified.

His iron fists, which had smashed the noses and ribs and even souls of countless Shaolin Temple experts, had been restrained in the duration of one stance. Forty years of fist training seemed like child's play to this person.

Sweat poured down the shocked face of "As Stable as Mount Tai" Qiu Budaο. He had never dreamed that a multi-millionaire playboy would be so fearsome, and would possess such demonic kung fu.

Sun Jicheng sighed. "I made a mistake," he said. "This time it's my mistake."

The one who made a mistake was Qiu Budaο, wasn't it? Not him.

Qiu Budaο couldn't help but ask, "You made a mistake? What mistake?"

"You have no way to know."

"Know what?"

"You don't know my secret," he said coldly. "And you don't know who I am. I challenge you to make even one more move against me."

"Who are you?" said Unstoppable Qiu hoarsely. "Just who are you?"

Sun Jicheng didn't respond. Instead, he asked, "If you don't actually know who I am, why would you betray me?"

Most people would not be willing to answer such a question. But Qiu Budaο was an exception, because even more so than Sun Jicheng, he wanted to know the truth of things.

—Who was this mysterious and fearsome multi-millionaire? What was his secret?

The only way to find out the truth behind others' secrets, is to first be honest—everyone in Jianghu understood this truth.

"Although I never believed that you built your own fortune from scratch, I never even imagined that you would be a consummate expert of the martial world. And even more unbelievable was that you are a retired master thief."

"Why so unbelievable?"

"Because you don't look it," replied Qiu Budaο. "You're too ostentatious. You give off no hint that you want to hide from people."

He continued, "In the past twenty years or so, there have only been a view thieves who have amassed great fortunes and then disappeared. Among them, only four have yet to be caught. And yet, you could not be one of those four. As far as your age, appearance and stature, you don't match any of their descriptions."

Sun Jicheng smiled. "As of now you can surely see that my martial arts far exceed yours."

Qiu Budao conceded this point. Then he said, "Three months ago some people asked me about you! They wanted to know every last detail about your actions and movements!"

"Who are these people?"

"I met them at the gambling hall. They are neither young nor old, and as for their identity, it's complicated."

"You don't know who they are, do you?"

"I don't." He thought for a moment, then continued, "They are big spenders, and it seems that they possess some good kung fu, even though they try to hide it. I've never heard of anyone with their names in Jianghu before, nor seen anyone like them." His voice seemed to be filled with a strange dread. "They suddenly appeared, as if they'd arrived from a strange place that no one has ever been to."

Sun Jicheng's smile had disappeared; his pupils constricted. He knew that this time, he was dealing with a group of extremely mysterious, extremely fearsome opponents.

"My only hobby in life is gambling," said Qiu Budao. "I gamble hard and I lose all the time. They didn't require much of me. Just for me to allow them to place some people in my three squads. So..."

"So you agreed."

"Yes," he said. "I agreed. I don't like being in debt, and they were the only ones who could help me get out." With effort, he turned his head and stared at Sun Jicheng. "I'm telling the truth."

"I believe you."

"Do you know who they are?"

"I don't."

“Do they know who you are?”

Sun Jicheng was silent.

Qiu Budao yet again asked, “Just who are you?”

Sun Jicheng stood there silently in the thick, dark night. And then suddenly he laughed.

“I am who I am!” he said with a strange, mysterious smile. “I’m just a person who will die soon. Very soon.”

Why would someone like this have to die? How could he die?

Qiu Budao didn’t ask any more questions.

“Come with me,” said Sun Jicheng. “I’m going to take you somewhere.”

“To do what?”

“To see someone.”

“Who?”

“Someone you never imagined you would see. Even when you see him with your own eyes, you still might not believe it.”

Part 5

Who was this person? Why would someone not believe it even if they saw him with their own eyes? Was it a person who shouldn’t be alive? A person who shouldn’t exist?

Qiu Budao couldn’t wrap his mind around it.

Nor could he wrap his mind around any of the things that would happen in the following hour.

It turned out Sun Jicheng led him back to that room of his, the one that no one ever entered.

Gentle and quiet Liu Jin'niang, who had never argued with a single soul, lay there, still dead.

Surprisingly, underneath the beautifully decorated bed were two secret cellars.

One of the cellar rooms was filled with books and the smell of alcohol and food. And a person.

A person Qiu Budaο never imagined that he would see. Even though he looked upon this person with his own eyes, he almost didn't believe.

Because this person was Sun Jicheng. A second Sun Jicheng.

Part 6

Qiu Budaο sat down on a bamboo chair in the corner of the cellar, as if he were worried he might collapse.

This person could not be Sun Jicheng. Two Qiu Budaοs could not exist in the world, and neither could two Sun Jichengs.

It couldn't be his brother.

Sun Jicheng had no brothers, and even twins could not look this alike.

The two of them looked exactly the same in every way. Figure, facial features, attire, manner. All the same. When Sun Jicheng stood directly in front of this person, it seemed as if he were standing in front of a mirror.

Who was he? What was his relationship to Sun Jicheng? Why would Sun Jicheng keep him hidden in this place? And why would he bring Qiu Budao here to see him?

Qiu Budao just could not figure it out.

Sun Jicheng seemed to be enjoying the expression on his face. He looked thoroughly pleased.

Finally he could show someone.

With a smile, he said, "I knew the first time you saw him you would be startled out of your skin. The first time I saw him, so was I."

He smiled joyfully.

"At that time, we didn't look exactly alike. If we stood next to each other, you could still tell the difference between us. But with the help of some strange and ingenious techniques, the situation changed quite a bit."

He added, "To achieve true perfection, there were a few areas that required special attention."

Qiu Budao waited for him to continue.

"For example, there isn't much room for him to move about. When not laying in bed, he will sit and read. In such circumstances, it's hard to avoid growing a bit of a belly." He slapped his own belly. "So I had to grow a bit of a belly too."

"What else?"

"If someone gets no sunlight for years at a time, his skin will become pale and strange looking. So, every day I take him up to my bedroom window to get some sun."

"So that's why you never let anyone into your bedroom." Qiu Budao's palms continued to sweat.

He now understood everything that had happened up to now.

A horrific conspiracy perfectly planned out by Sun Jicheng was now in motion, and no one in the world could stop it.

Sun Jicheng turned and clapped the person on the shoulder. "Your complexion has been good the past few days. You've been sleeping well."

His "shadow" responded in a meek and feeble voice: "Yes. I've slept quite well the past few days."

Qiu Budao suddenly called out, "No, there's something wrong."

"Oh?"

"His voice is completely different than yours."

Sun Jicheng laughed. "His voice doesn't need to be the same," he said casually.

Qiu Budao didn't bother to ask "why." He'd spoken up just now only to verify a horrible notion.

After verifying it, his heart sank.

Unfortunately, Sun Jicheng had used some strange technique to seal some of his acupuncture points and drain all of the energy from of his body.

Sun Jicheng seemed to be completely at ease. He suddenly started chatting randomly with his "shadow." "When I first saw you, your complexion was not good at all, as if you hadn't slept in a very long time."

"Yes, at that time I hadn't eaten for three days and nights, and hadn't even had a chance to close my eyes."

"Why was that?"

"Because I'd just experienced something tragic beyond compare." His voice suddenly became very meek and quiet. "My parents, wife, and children were all ruthlessly slaughtered by a great villain."

"Why didn't you try to avenge them?"

“Because I am weak, I would never in my life even be able to dream of hurting a hair on that monster’s head.”

“So you wanted to die?”

“Yes.”

“But you didn’t.”

“I didn’t die, because you saved me. You killed the villain and helped me get my revenge.”

“Did I ask for compensation?”

“No,” said the “shadow.” “You just had one requirement: that I wait until the time came for you to die, and then I would give you back the life that I owed you.” He stared at Sun Jicheng, and with an indescribably calm bearing asked, “That time has arrived, hasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

The time had arrived. His life would end soon.

The “shadow” had been expecting this end for some time. Qiu Budao had also figured out what was happening.

—Of course Sun Jicheng hadn’t built up a business from scratch into a fortune. And he actually was not rich businessman, picky about food, in love with doing business.

—He was someone entirely different, a person who for some reason, because he needed to keep his true identity hidden, had brought his ill-gotten hundreds of millions along with hands reeking of blood here, to hide from his foes.

—But he knew that the net of heaven is wide, and none can escape its mesh. [12] His secret would get out eventually, and so he’d already prepared someone to die in his place.

—This person looked exactly like him in every way. Only his voice was different.

—Because by the time others found him, he would be dead, and dead men cannot speak.

He did not die in pain, because Sun Jicheng struck him with a mortal fist blow. A fist blow swift, accurate and vicious.

Qiu Budao's face sank.

Sun Jicheng suddenly asked him, "Did you see which type of fist technique I just used?"

Of course he did. It was exactly the same fist technique that he had just used, that famous consummate skill which he had spent forty bitter years practicing, the Shaolin Lohan Fist.

"Well," asked Sun Jicheng, "what did you think of it?"

Qiu Budao couldn't speak, not even a single syllable.

He had trained in this fist technique for forty years, and yet the blow Sun Jicheng had just delivered in terms of energy, skill and efficacy, exceeded his own.

What could he say?

"A fatal blow," said Sun Jincheng, "inuring the heart directly. That is definitely the killing method that 'As Stable as Mount Tai' Qiu Budao would use. So this Sun Jicheng clearly died by your hand, and had nothing to do with anyone else. Everyone will be able to see that clearly."

He washed his hands in a silver basin and then dried them with a snow-white cloth. He suddenly sighed. "Although, they might wonder what motive you had to kill Liu Jin'niang."

"Liu Jin'niang?" cried Qiu Budao. "I killed her too?"

"Absolutely," said Sun Jicheng, sounding surprised. "Don't tell me you didn't notice the necklace used to strangle her. Who's necklace was it again?"

Qiu Budao was seized with terror.

Because of everything that had happened, his mind was in chaos. Up to now, he hadn't been able to see everything clearly. The necklace with the emerald pendants was actually his, something left behind by his deceased wife. He'd kept it for so long, not willing to part with it even during his worst episodes of gambling loss.

He didn't look at it often, because the memories it dredged up were sweet, yet too sorrowful. He didn't even want to touch it.

"How did you get that?"

"I have my ways." Sun Jicheng smiled. "At least a hundred of them, actually."

Anyone would have to concede that a person like Sun Jicheng would have ways to get just about anything he wanted.

"Why is it me who killed them?"

"You have your reasons."

Sun Jicheng continued, "There are probably at least a hundred reasons why a man might kill a woman and another man. Even if you can't think of one, others will come up with their own ideas for you."

He laughed. "They will probably all come up with unique ideas. If you ask 50 people, they will probably come up with 100 different versions. Thankfully, whatever ideas they have don't really affect you.

Qiu Budao stared at him for a long time, and then, one word at a time, said, "I understand what you mean."

"You should," said Sun Jincheng. "Sun Jicheng is already dead, as is Liu Jin'niang. You don't have much longer to live, either." Coolly, he continued, "I guarantee that others will figure out a reason for your death. So I've already prepared a glass of poisoned alcohol for you."

Part 7

So now, Sun Jicheng was dead.

No one imagined that he would die, but he truly had died.

On the evening of April 15th he, along with his most trusted bodyguard squad leader Qiu Budao and his tender, secret lover Liu Jin'niang, all died together in a secret cellar.

Of course, there were many rumors regarding their deaths. But regardless of what they said, it didn't affect Sun Jicheng

Because now, Sun Jicheng was dead.

Late in the night on April 15th, he left behind the city of Jinan as well his successful businesses and his hundreds of millions in wealth. Like a man discarding a mistress he'd grown tired of, he seemed to carry with him no nostalgia or tenderness.

When a multi-millionaire dies like this, is it possible for him to be resurrected?

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[1] Considering the story takes place in Ancient China, the months listed in the book would assumably be based on the Lunar calendar not the Gregorian calendar, but for sake of simplicity I will use the Gregorian calendar names.

[2] Sun Jicheng's Chinese name is 孙济城 sūn jì chéng.

[3] Liu Jinniang's Chinese name is 柳金娘 liǔ jīn niáng.

[4] The tea from Wuyi mountains is relatively famous. I remember hearing about this when I used to live in Chinatown. <http://tinyurl.com/24ebrvu>

[5] Jinan is the capital of Shandong province. It is a coastal city that has been an administrative and economic center for thousands of years.

<http://tinyurl.com/pf2akvf>

[6] "General Who Attacks the West" is actually one of the ranks achieved by historical General Huang Zhong, who worked for Liu Bei during the Three Kingdoms Period. However, based on later information in the story, it would seem the story doesn't take place during that time period.

<http://tinyurl.com/ygg3s8t>

[7] What I'm translating as "over 400 miles" is written as 1,300 li in the original Chinese. <http://tinyurl.com/pqwadt>

[8] What I'm translating as South China is literally referring to an area of South China covering Jiangxi, Hunan, Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hainan as well as modern northern Vietnam. <http://tinyurl.com/no7apxt>

[9] These are all different types of alcohol, some of them very famous. Chu Ye Qing is a type of fenjiu or perhaps made from bamboo. I couldn't find any articles about it. <http://tinyurl.com/pbntk64>. Maotai is probably the most famous baijiu in China. <http://tinyurl.com/5l5z2e>. Daqu is another type of baijiu <http://tinyurl.com/ouasl23>. Nu'er Hong is a type of baijiu, and if I remember correctly was mentioned in 7 Killers. <http://tinyurl.com/ol8xjfv>. Mei Kuei Lu is a type of rose-flavored baijiu <http://tinyurl.com/mbyrfy9>. The other two I was unable to find what exactly they are. Maybe Gu Long made them up, or maybe they are rare or obscure?

[10] Wu Daozi was a famous artist who lived during the Tang dynasty.

<http://tinyurl.com/kt7ylsc>

[11] Wang Xizhi is one of the most famous calligraphers of all time. He lived during the Jin dynasty. <http://tinyurl.com/3fvxyd8>

[12] Yes this is the same quote from 7 Killers.

CHAPTER 2 – INGOT

Part 1

April Sixteen. Clear Skies.

The day started like any other day, the air clear and dry. Travelers streamed to and fro along the main road leading out of Jinan City.

But for some people, although the day started like any other day, the end of the day would be completely different.

Another way to put it would be to say that some people might look ordinary on the outside, but are actually anything but.

Wu Tao was one such person.

Wu Tao, an ordinary person, a businessman, appeared to be quite honest, yet wasn't the slightest bit stupid.

Neither fat nor skinny, neither handsome nor ugly, he wore a set of clothing which, though not crafted from the finest material, appeared to be very durable. Covered with dust from time spent traveling, he rode a mule that seemed to be as hard working as himself. Not young, he looked like the kind of person who had some savings somewhere. He just wanted to provide for his wife and children, and maybe make his own life a bit more comfortable when he grew old.

Who knows how many people like this exist in the world. The only difference between him and them is that before sunset on April 15th, no one had ever seen him.

No one had ever seen him before, not even a single person.

You could even say—

This ordinary businessman Wu Tao didn't appear in the world until after the death of the multi-millionaire Sun Jicheng.

Hadn't appeared at all.

Part 2

Outside of big cities are small towns, and small towns always have inns.

Liu Village outside of Jinan City had inns, and that was where Wu Tao was staying. [1] He'd arrived late in the night on April 15th.

At that time, the moon had already begun to set, and the inn's main gate had been closed. He'd called out for quite some time before they opened it.

He chose an inn in this village because at that hour, the city gates of Jinan Prefecture were all closed. As a traveler from another part of China, no matter how much you called out, they wouldn't be opened. So he had no choice but to stay at an inn.

—But was he really traveling from another part of China to Jinan Prefecture? Or was he actually leaving Jinan?

Thankfully, the innkeeper and staff had no interest in asking such questions, neither did they notice whether his appearance on the second day was the same as his appearance upon his arrival.

The clerk who had woken up in the middle of the night to receive him hadn't paid the slightest attention to what he looked like.

Similarly, no one paid any attention at all to what he did in his room that night.

The 16th was market day in Liu Village; early in the morning people flocked from everywhere to participate, bringing along their chickens, ducks, pigs, sheep, fruit, vegetables, seafood, flowers, rice, flour, and grain to barter for makeup materials, silk cloth, embroidery or pieces of silver to take back to their happy families.

Of course, pickpockets and beggars wouldn't miss this chance to take advantage of all the commotion.

By the time the inn opened its main gate, the square and main street across from it was packed with people of all sorts. There were even two Jianghu theatrical troupes performing, so the village bustled even more than usual.

Wu Tao couldn't help but go out to soak in the excitement.

And then he noticed something quite amazing. It seemed the beggars here were extremely organized; they quietly collected their gains into a specific area. If people didn't give them anything, they didn't ask for anything. If people gave a lot, they likewise did not call out, not even to say "thank you."

In every group, an older beggar with a burlap sack on his back sat in the rear, dividing up their spoils evenly amongst the other members.

Who would have imagined that beggars would have such systemized rules. Everyone found it quite interesting.

But one of the beggars, a fellow with rather large eyes, didn't seem to understand the rules.

This young man had a round face, and when he smiled, two dimples appeared. Whenever he caught someone's attention he would smile and stretch out his hands. Perhaps because of his charming appearance, or perhaps because of his ability to judge people's characters, when he stretched out his hands, they rarely came back empty.

And so he collected more and more money, all of which went into his own bag.

When his bag filled up, he began wandering amidst the crowd, and at one point he smacked into Wu Tao and sent him tumbling.

Wu Tao didn't give him a single copper coin.

He wasn't the type to give out charity. His money had been painstakingly earned, much more painstakingly than any money this beggar ever earned.

He knew that the young beggar had bumped into him on purpose. But he was more slippery than a loach [2], and immediately after hitting Wu Tao, he ran off, disappearing without a trace in a matter of seconds.

Wu Tao didn't pursue him.

He also wasn't the type of person to look for trouble or get angry about trifles. And yet, after getting smacked into, his excitement regarding the market disappeared.

He returned to the inn, mounted his mule, and headed straight for Jinan.

He really did head straight for Jinan.

Regardless of where he came from, this was a fact, and no lie. By noon, he had already arrived.

Part 3

Gongs and drums clanged and clashed in the marketplace. A young girl, seventeen or eighteen years old, her hair combed into two braids, was performing a tumbling act. Her legs, long, straight, and strong, seemed to be ready at any moment to burst out of the trousers she wore, which were sewn together from multiple pieces of colorful cotton cloth.

This area of the market was much more lively than others, with many people gathering to watch the scene.

The young beggar slipped like a loach through the crowd, then squatted down, panting.

He knew that the stingy old man with the gray, pointed face wouldn't pursue him. He probably still didn't realize that his coin purse was no longer at his waist, but in the young beggar's knapsack.

His coin purse was not light at all; there must be at least twenty or thirty shiny pieces of silver inside.

The young beggar, his large eyes drawn to the long legs of the girl with the braids, felt quite happy.

When she held out her copper gong and said, "Dear audience, please give a few coins," the young beggar, who just now been begging others for alms, suddenly became generous. He pulled out a few coins and tossed them into the gong.

The braided girl smiled at him sweetly, and the beggar suddenly felt a bit dizzy. Just when he was thinking of giving a few more coins, he suddenly felt hands clamp down on his shoulders.

It was two beggars, one pock-marked, the other crippled, and the force of their grip was not light.

The young beggar might be as slippery as a loach, but in their grip he could barely move.

The only thing he could do was smile at them with his trademark specialty smile.

Unfortunately, these two fellow beggars did not seem to be the least bit moved by his round face, big eyes and dimples. Not only did they refuse to release him, they grabbed his arms and dragged him up from the ground and away from the crowd.

Everyone around was paying attention to the long legs, and not a one seemed to care about the affairs of these three stinking beggars.

The gongs and drums sounded out again, and a new show started.

Part 4

The young beggar was not small. Looking at his face you might put him at between 14-16, although judging on his physique he was probably between 17-19. But in the hands of the pockmarked and crippled beggars, he was like a baby chick, his two feet not even touching the ground.

He wanted to laugh, but couldn't.

He also wanted to cry out, but the pockmarked beggar had already scooped up a handful of mud from the ground. "If you cry out, I'll stuff your mouth full of this."

Getting your mouth filled up with a big handful of mud was no fun, so the young beggar could only make a bitter face and say, "Dear sirs, I didn't do anything to offend you. My are you treating a poor kid like me in this way?"

"We didn't want to have to deal with you," said the crippled one. Though his face was stiff, his voice was mild. "But you need to come somewhere with us."

"Go somewhere? Where?"

"To see Uncle."

"Uncle? Ever since I was young, I never had a mom or dad, where could an Uncle come from?" The young beggar seemed on the verge of tears. "Sirs, I think you must have made some kind of mistake."

They ignored him. The sound of drums and gongs from the marketplace grew more and more distant.

They had already reached a small hill outside the village.

On the hillside stood a large, bluish-green tree. Underneath the tree lay a bluish green slab of stone. And on the stone sat a man wearing a bluish green garment.

The garment, dilapidated, covered with patches, was nonetheless quite clean.

The man's face too, was clean, but expressionless, seemingly without any color whatsoever, almost as if he were dead.

Thankfully it was the middle of the day; were it the middle of the night, anyone who saw him would either be scared to death or scared so bad they would jump three meters into the air.

It seemed as if the man in bluish-green hadn't noticed them. He just sat there, his head tilted at an angle, staring off into the distance, seemingly lost in thought. Perhaps he was recalling some bittersweet memory, or perhaps some unforgettable person.

And yet his ashen face showed no expression, and his cold eyes truly looked like a corpse's.

The pockmarked beggar and the crippled beggar stood in front of him, not daring to even breathe.

The young beggar seemed to have lost his usual nerve, and was too scared to say anything.

Quite some time passed before the man in bluish-green garment spoke. And when he did, he only said three words: "Let him go."

The two beggars immediately released their pincer-like grasp on the young beggar. Even as he let out a sigh of relief, he took a closer look and suddenly noticed that the right sleeve of the man's bluish-green garment was empty. Completely empty and tucked into the waist of his garment. On his back he carried several large burlap sacks, all empty. It looked like there were at least five, and maybe even seven or eight. [3]

Another burlap sack lay on the bluish-green rock, and it seemed to be bulging with something, although who knew what.

Anyone with experience in Jianghu should be able to tell that the man with the bluish-green garment and missing arm was someone of immense power and influence, with countless disciples under his control. He was clearly one of the esteemed and venerated Elders of the great "Beggar Sect."

But the young beggar didn't seem to realize this.

He didn't understand rules, and didn't understand the ways of the world. And what's worse, things that he shouldn't understand, he seemed to know a lot about.

Other than stealing chickens and petting dogs, showing his dimples and feigning cuteness and innocence, and making off with other's money, he also seemed to understand how to appreciate women's legs.

The one-armed man continued to stare off into the distance for a while before suddenly saying, "Do you know who I am?"

The young beggar shook his head vigorously. And then, he suddenly started nodded his head.

"I know who you are," he said. "These two sirs said they were going to take me to see Uncle. You must be him."

The man didn't reply.

The young beggar sighed. "Unfortunately, you aren't my Uncle. I don't even have an uncle. So whose Uncle are you?"

He suddenly clapped his hands. "I know. You aren't anyone's Uncle. People just call you that. It's your nickname."

The man didn't reply.

The young beggar laughed, pleased to find himself so intelligent. Even a difficult question like this one was no problem for him.

Unfortunately, the next question wasn't so easy.

"Do you know why I had them bring you to see me?"

"Why?" When unable to answer a question, the best thing to do is to ask a followup question, a trick often used by worldly-wise people.

And it turns out this little bastard knew the trick too.

At long last, the man in bluish-green turned his head, staring at the young beggar with cold eyes. In an icy voice he said ten words.

“It’s because you violated the rules of the our Sect.”

“Sect?” The young beggar didn’t seem to understand. “What Sect are you?”

“The Poor Family Sect.”

Everyone in Jianghu knows that the Poor Family Sect is none other than the Beggar Sect. But it seemed the young beggar didn’t know.

“You made a mistake. I’m not in the Poor Family Sect. I mean, I’m poor, but I don’t have a family. If I did, then maybe I wouldn’t be poor!”

“It doesn’t matter if you aren’t a member of our Sect.”

“Why?”

“Because our Sect governs everyone in the world who makes their living by begging.” His voice, though cold and detached, carried the feeling of frightening power.

The young beggar laughed again, a laugh of pure happiness. And then he said two words that no one could possibly have imagined he would say: “Good bye.”

Usually people only say good bye when the time has come to leave — sometimes when they truly must leave, or other times when they don’t at all want to. Sometimes it’s just for show, a way to cajole others in to urging you to stay.

But the young beggar really did mean to leave. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he made to depart.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t.

Before he could move a meter, the two beggars with their pincer-like grasps grabbed him.

“What are you grabbing me for?” protested the young beggar. “There’s nothing here to do with me. I’m not in your Poor Family Sect, and I’m not a beggar.”

“You’re not?”

“Of course I’m not. I recently changed professions.”

“Changed professions to what?”

“I’m a thief.” The young beggar spoke with utmost confidence: “Even if you’re the ancestor of all the young beggars in the world, you aren’t in charge of me, because I’m a thief.”

What he said did make sense. Nobody could say it didn’t.

The armless man in the bluish-green garment again stared off into the distance. “Things that other people might not be in charge of,” he said coldly. “I take charge of.”

“Why?”

—“Because I’m not other people.” “Because I am stronger than other people.” “Because I am more powerful than other people.”

He didn’t say any of these things.

He neither wanted nor needed to. Sometimes saying nothing is the best thing to say.

He pointed to the bulging burlap sack which lay next to him on the bluish-green rock. “Take a look,” he said. “Take a look at what’s inside.”

The young beggar had wanted to look inside from the very beginning.

He knew that whatever was inside, it wasn’t anything nice, and it wouldn’t do him any good whatsoever to look. But curiosity crawled around inside his heart like a caterpillar.

Of course he wanted to look. He couldn’t not look.

And after he did, the crawling caterpillar of curiosity in his heart didn’t leave. Instead, it suddenly turned into a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand

caterpillars. Wriggling not just in his heart, but also his stomach, his intestines, his pores, his blood vessels, and even in his bones.

Wherever caterpillars of curiosity could crawl in his body, they did, until he wanted to kick and curse and cry and vomit.

Actually, there wasn't anything special about the things in the bag. They were things that everyone can see everyday, all the time.

The bag was filled with some noses, some ears, and some hands.

Human noses, human ears, and human hands.

It is a world of people

As long as you live in the world, and are not blind, then other than when you are sleeping, you will see these things all the time. It would be hard not to see them.

But things like this should not be packed into a burlap sack.

The man in bluish-green, his voice cold, said, "Threaten to blackmail, have ears and nose sliced off. Steal wealth, have hands cut off. Rape wives and daughters, be slaughtered without mercy. Regardless of whether you are a member of the Sect."

"Who set this rule?"

"Me."

"Did you ever stop to think that perhaps this rule of yours is a bit too ruthless?" said the young beggar. "Furthermore, you don't have the authority to set such a rule!"

"No, I never thought about it."

"And no one ever told you?"

"No!"

The young beggar sighed. "Well, someone is telling you now. I advise you to change your rule as soon as possible."

The man in bluish-green turned his head, looking at the young beggar with icy eyes. "Your luck is not bad," he said suddenly.

"What do you mean?"

"Because you're still a child. Otherwise you would already be dead by my palm."

His gaze once again shifted to far in the distance. Ignoring the young beggar, he gave a cold order: "Chop off his left hand."

The young beggar took to his heels immediately, running as fast as possible.

A young man like this would always be prepared to flee. He might not have any other abilities, but he sure could run away quickly.

As he ran, he shouted, "It's because you're missing your left hand, isn't it! So you want to chop off other peoples' left hands!"

He dared to shout this because he'd already checked to make sure no one was behind him following.

There wasn't anyone behind him. But there was in front of him.

It was impossible to determine when it had happened, but the man in the bluish-green garment now stood in front of him. Not even looking at him, the man said, "From now on, you might only have one hand, but if you agree to be a good person, you can live on. And you might even have a better life than when you had two hands."

The young beggar shook his head vigorously.

"No way. I'll pass. Two hands is always better than one. There's no way I'll let you chop my hand off."

As he shouted urgently, there suddenly could be heard the sound of someone dashing up the hillside. And then from behind him, two shiny, black braids appeared.

She ran quickly, mostly because of her long, strong legs.

As she ran, she shouted, "He's just a poor little kid, please forgive him!"

The man in bluish-green frowned. "Who is he to you?" he asked her.

"I don't even know him. I just know that I feel pity for him."

"You pity him? Why don't you pity the person whose coin purse he stole? Maybe that coin purse contained all his money in the world. And now his parents, wife and children will have no money to live on. Why don't you pity them?"

The girl with braids seemed at a loss for words. "Maybe it is like that," she stuttered. "But you should first try to find out the truth for yourself."

"I don't need to find out anything." His eyes suddenly shone with an indescribable hatred. "I would rather kill a hundred in error, then let one go free."

"But..."

Before the girl could even finish her sentence, she felt herself pulled to the side. And then she felt a small knife at her neck. It was none other than the young beggar.

Pressing his knife against the girl's throat, he said, "If you don't let me go, I'll kill her. And her death will be because of you. What is the punishment for harming innocents? I bet it's to cut off all your limbs."

The man in bluish green didn't appear to be angry. His expression didn't change. Without even thinking, he said, "You may go."

Part 5

And so the young beggar left with the braided-hair girl, his two hands still intact.

They descended the hillside and left Li Village. They walked a long way until they reached a dense forest out in the wilderness, and when the young beggar was sure they weren't being followed he finally released the girl.

The girl with the braids instantly turned around, her beautiful eyes flashing angrily. "Are you human?" she asked furiously.

"Of course," replied the young beggar with a chuckle. "From head to feet."

"If you are, then how could you do such a thing? How could you treat me like that?"

She was clearly very upset, but the young beggar just laughed happily and retorted, "Didn't you go there to rescue me?"

"Of course."

"Well, you rescued me. Your wish came true. What did I do wrong?"

She seemed to be stumped by his question, and had to admit that what he said did make a little bit of sense.

He asked her another question: "What are you going to do to express your thanks to me?"

"Express thanks to you?" cried the girl. "You want me to express thanks to you?"

"Of course you should express thanks," said the young beggar assuredly. "The man in the bluish-green garment and one arm is the type of person who makes decisions quickly, and his martial arts are ridiculously high level. Furthermore, he's some kind of eccentric freak. If I hadn't used that method, how exactly were you going to get me away from him?"

The girl with the braids couldn't think of anything to say.

The more the young beggar talked, the more he made sense. "You wouldn't have rescued me, and then you would have been very sad. I gave you the chance to be happy, and for such a service, how could you not express thanks?"

The girl laughed, and as she laughed, she looked a lot like the blooming white flower buds that grew at the edge of the forest.

“You little bastard. You really are full of sneaky tricks.”

“If you have problems coming up with any, I’m happy to help you think of some.”

“What sneaky trick are you talking about now?”

“A way for you to express your thanks.”

“What way. Tell me,” she said with a wink. She wanted to hear what tricky plan this little bastard would come up with.

The young beggar coughed a couple times, then, with a completely deadpan expression, said, “If you just let me kiss your pretty lips, it will count as you thanking me, and I’ll call things even.”

The girl’s face turned scarlet. The young beggar seemed completely intent on this method.

“You dare! You dare to try to kiss me, I’ll...”

“What, what’s wrong?”

The only thing she could do was run, quickly, her braids flying back behind her. The two bows looked like two butterflies dancing in the air. [4]

The young beggar laughed heartily, so hard that he bent over laughing.

It was now April, and Spring had come to the world.

Part 6

The mulberry grove was thick and dense, as thick and dense as the falling spring showers and the sorrows that come with them.

The young beggar didn't chase after those two butterflies. He liked beautiful butterflies, but he had no desire to once again run into any pale, death-like faces.

The forest would be a much safer place.

He turned to head into the woods, hoping to find a lush tree to curl up under and sleep for a while.

Who would have thought that he couldn't find such a tree, because someone else had already found him.

Actually, five people found him, and they surrounded him, making it impossible for him to flee.

Five large, scary-looking men, strong and fierce; they didn't appear to be ultimate martial arts experts, but for them to kill a few kids like the young beggar obviously wouldn't be a problem.

One of the men had a huge goiter on his neck and carried an enormous broadsword; he seemed to be the boss of the group. Grinning hideously at the young beggar, he said, "Hey kid, do ya understand the rules of the road? Us bros saw that fat little sheep first, why'd ya steal it away?"

"Fat little sheep? Where is there a fat little sheep?" The young beggar had an extremely strange expression on his face. "I haven't run into any skinny little sheep, let alone any fat ones to steal."

"If ya smell the sweet fragrance of money, ya half to split it in half. Do ya understand this rule?"

"Nope," said the young beggar. "I haven't bathed in at least fourteen or fifteen days and my body stinks to high heaven. I don't smell any sweet fragrance."

He pulled at his clothes and smelled them, then immediately plugged his nose and frowned. "Super stinky. So stinky it might kill you. If you don't believe then come on over and take a whiff."

“Look kid!” said Goiter-man angrily, “don’t pretend ta be stupid.”

He rotated his wrist, and his blade glittered. His comrades suddenly called out, “Let’s take care a this bastard, see if he wants ta give us his money or his life.”

The young beggar suddenly seemed to understand what was going on. “Oh, you guys are bandits, and you want my money.” He sighed. “Bandits out to steal money from a beggar. Bandits like this aren’t very common.”

Goiter-man let out a shout and began to swing his blade. The young beggar hastily waved his arms and said, “There’s absolutely no reason to get angry. If you get angry, your goiter is going to swell up. Who’s to say it might not get bigger than your head, and that wouldn’t be any fun.”

He put on a smile, and once again his dimples appeared, “As long as you don’t get angry, I’ll give you anything you want.”

“Us bros don’t want anything except shiny white silver! That’ll keep us from getting angry!”

“I don’t have any silver. But what if I give you an ingot?” [5]

“Ok.” Goiter-man’s anger changed into laughter. “Of course that’s okay.”

“Do you want a big one? Or a small one?”

“A big one, of course. The bigger the better.”

“Well, that’s easy,” said the young beggar with a laugh. “I don’t have any other kind. I just have one ingot, and it’s super big.”

He suddenly dropped to the ground and lay back, resting his head on his hands. “The ingot is right here. Come and get it.”

There was nothing that looked anything like an ingot anywhere to be seen. “Where is it?” they said eagerly.

“I’m the ingot. Because I’m an ingot.” He pointed at his nose. “Don’t you want to have an ingot this big?”

This time Goiter-man was really pissed off, and the goiter on his neck really did start to bulge and get bigger. "Ya little son of a bitch!" he cursed, "Ya dare to mess with yer elders?"

This time, he really did attack with his sword, and as he raised the enormous blade, it was clear that if it landed on the young beggar, it would cleave his entire body in two.

Goiter-man's comrades also rushed forward, awls, daggers, hatchets all seeking out the young beggar. Even though their attacks were not nimble, and the weapons they wielded were not the type used by high level experts of the martial world, they could still easily chop the young beggar into pieces in a matter of seconds.

The young beggar seemed scared out of his mind, so much so that his entire body trembled. And yet, deep in his eyes, no fear could be seen.

In that exact moment, what appeared to be four or five flashes of dazzling light shot out from the forest. Some of them, the brightest, shone with what seemed to be a silver light, although it was impossible to see clearly.

That was because they were just too fast, impossible for human eyes to track clearly.

The dazzling light shone, and then disappeared. Five strapping men fell to the ground.

They fell to the ground in an instant, never again to get up, never again to stand.

A flashing, dazzling light; a deadly concealed weapon.

Five men as strong as oxen, killed so quickly they had no chance to call out in pain or terror.

This type of concealed weapon is too fast, too accurate, too fearsome.

Whoever used such a weapon surely must be a top expert of the martial world. Only ten or so such experts existed in the world, and just now had appeared at least two.

This was evident because the dazzling light had actually shot out from two different directions, and the color they emitted had been different.

Why would two peak-level experts appear here, together?

Could it be that they came just to save the young beggar?

The dazzling light had disappeared; so had any trace of the two experts.

The young beggar hadn't seen the flashes of light, nor had he seen anyone standing in the woods.

He had no idea who had saved him, but in any case, his life was back in his hands. Surely he should express thanks.

Wind blew through the leaves in the silent forest.

He suddenly stood up, seemingly without the slightest bit of thankfulness. In fact, he appeared to be extremely angry, his face flushed red.

"Who are you, you bastards?" he cursed. "Who asked you to save me? You think I can't handle some eighth-rate bandits?!"

He gets saved, and then he curses his saviors.

If you had to pick a baffling bastard who doesn't know what's good and bad, you would be hard pressed to find a better candidate than this kid, don't you agree?

Thankfully, his saviors were gone, otherwise they would most likely be furious.

Talking, singing or even cursing without an audience is really tiring and boring.

The more the young beggar cursed, the more pointless it seemed. He just wanted to find a tree and get some sleep, then think of a way to take care of the five bodies.

—Even though they were eighth-rate bandits, he couldn't let them die without coffins.

This time, he found an appropriate tree, and prepared to lay down. Because he had turned around, he had no idea what had happened behind him, and would never have imagined that one of the five dead men had come back to life.

Part 7

Dead people can't come back to life. There weren't five dead people, there were four.

Goiter-man wasn't dead, and as soon as the young beggar turned around, his "corpse" started to move.

For some unknown reason, even though he had been injured, his movements were very dextrous, even more so than just a moment ago.

The young beggar had already reached the tree.

Goiter-man stared at him with bloodshot eyes. The goiter suddenly began to turn red, and then it changed from red to purple, and then it started glowing, glowing like a chunk of transparent amethyst.

And then, his body flew forward like a leopard, straight toward the young beggar.

His moves now were those that an eighth-rate bandit could only dream of doing. In fact even seventh-, sixth-, fifth-, fourth-, third-, and second-rate bandits couldn't do them. His moves had suddenly become first-rate.

Despite being injured, but as he charged forward into attack, his speed, momentum, stances and power were all first-rate.

He'd dropped his huge broadsword upon being injured, but now it seemed his two fists were even more fearsome than the sword.

Blue veins pulsed on the backs of his hands, and then turned purple, and then started to glow.

Even someone with the poorest eyesight could see that this fist technique had been trained to the pinnacle of perfection.

Unfortunately, the young beggar couldn't see, because his eyes were focused in the opposite direction.

The fortunate thing was that he had very sensitive ears, and he could hear the sound of the attacking fist as it sped through the air.

Then a cracking noise sounded out as Goiter-man's fist collided into the thick tree trunk.

The young beggar stood there, scared half to death. He wasn't hurt, not in the slightest. But his whole body dripped with cold sweat.

As of now, he knew that this man was not eighth-rate, but definitely first-rate. Before, he had been putting up an act.

A first-rate expert would never become close friends with eighth-rate men, so Goiter-man's comrades must also have been first-rate.

To mistake first-rate martial arts for eighth-rate was a very dangerous thing; if someone hadn't saved him just now, would he still be alive?

He now understood that he shouldn't have cursed them.

But what he didn't understand was why first-rate martial world experts would pretend to be clumsy fools in an effort to kill a young beggar. And why did they want his life in the first place?

**

[1] Liu is the character for Willow

[2] A loach is a type of fish <http://tinyurl.com/lfbt9o9>

[3] In case you're not familiar with the Beggar Sect, I'll explain the bags briefly. Ranking in the Beggar Sect is usually indicated by how many bags the beggar carries. The highest rank, held by Elders, is usually eight or nine.

[4] This simile sounds better in Chinese because the word for "bow" literally means "butterfly knot."

[5] An ingot is a large, crescent-shaped gold piece.

<http://tinyurl.com/kyj9wu7>

CHAPTER 3 – FLOWERED FLAGS

Part 1

April 16. Afternoon.

For Song Changsheng, the day started like any other day. But after lunch, something happened that would never again happen in his lifetime.

Song Changsheng owned the only coffin shop in Liu Village. [1]

Perhaps because the residents of Liu Village lived simple lives, and had relatively long life expectancies, business wasn't very good. Sometimes income wasn't even enough to cover expenses. Who would have ever thought that he would get some business after lunch?

He sat drowsily behind the counter. The april wind blew in through the window and across his old, languid frame. It seemed as if it were not content.

Even more annoying, just when he fell asleep, he got woken up by a young beggar.

Usually, when beggars came calling, he would at least give them a couple copper coins. But today he didn't give anything.

Who could have imagined that the beggar would pull out a bunch of silver pieces and hand them over.

It turned out the young beggar hadn't come to ask for alms.

"I want to buy some coffins. Five of them. Is this enough silver?"

Song Changsheng stared in shock.

To be wrapped in a straw mat after death was usually good enough for a beggar, yet this young beggar wanted, not just a coffin, but five coffins.

Song Changsheng had been in the coffin business for thirty years, and had never encountered a situation as strange as this.

Even more strange, after loading the coffins onto the cart, he traveled with the young beggar outside of the village to a mulberry forest to collect the corpses, except there were no corpses to be seen.

“No corpses? Why did you buy the coffins?”

He wanted to ask this of the young beggar, but he’d already disappeared. And he’d left behind the over twenty pieces of silver he’d paid for the coffins.

You might think the young beggar was playing some kind of practical joke, but the pieces of silver were no joke.

The more Song Changsheng thought about it, the less it made sense.

Even more unimaginable, just when he returned to his shop with the five coffins, another person came looking to buy.

This time, the buyer was another beggar. And he also bought five coffins!

This beggar had a face covered with pockmarks, and looked much fiercer than the earlier young beggar.

Song Changsheng didn’t dare to ask any questions other than, “The deceased you intend to place in the coffins, where are they? Where shall I send coffins to?”

With an expressionless face, the pockmarked beggar said, “That’s a secret. A secret worth your life.” His manner of speaking solemn, he continued, “If you knew who the deceased are, I’m afraid you wouldn’t live another day.”

With that, he procured his own cart to take the coffins away. Song Changsheng was so scared he couldn’t speak.

He couldn’t sleep the whole night.

Part 2

The young beggar was as confused as Song Changsheng as to why the corpses by the mulberry forest suddenly disappeared.

When he'd left, they were there. And they were definitely dead.

Goiter-man had put every last drop of power into his fist, apparently expecting to die together with the young beggar. So when his attack hit the tree, he'd dropped dead.

The other four corpses were already growing cold.

Before leaving, the young beggar examined the bodies closely.

He didn't really want to buy coffins for them.

They'd tried to steal his money and kill him, and it wasn't easy to get silver. He'd prefer to spend silver on sweets, bread, alcohol and meat. Or maybe put into the the gong of the girl with the braids and long legs.

But he still went to buy the coffins.

If one wants to live, it's hard to avoid situations where you have to do something you don't really want to.

It was impossible for the young beggar to guess who had taken away the corpses. And even more impossible for him to know that the pockmarked beggar went to Song Changsheng to buy five coffins.

He just wanted to get away from this place as quickly as possible.

By dusk, he'd reached Jinan. After wandering around for a while, he caught sight of Wu Tao.

It seemed these two had some sort of predestined connection.

Part 3

The corpses in the mulberry forest had been taken away by the man in the bluish-green clothing.

That happened when the young beggar went to buy the coffins.

The man in bluish-green had of course not truly let the young beggar go free. He had continued to follow him, just hadn't made any move on him.

When the young beggar returned and found the bodies missing, he didn't go looking for them.

By purchasing coffins for them, he'd done all that he could. He didn't care who took the bodies away; it didn't have anything to do with him, and he'd lost interest in the matter.

But the man in bluish-green found the five bodies extremely interesting. He called his subordinate to go purchase the five coffins and place the bodies inside. And then he let the young beggar go.

What did these five people have to do with him? Why would he take care of their bodies? Why did he suddenly let the young beggar go?

His subordinates didn't dare to ask any questions, and he didn't plan to explain anything to them. He just gave a simple order.

"No matter where you see that kid in the future, don't do anything to him." He had a very serious expression on his pale face. "Now get these coffins to Jinan, immediately."

By the time the young beggar saw Wu Tao, the coffins had already entered the city.

Part 4

Night. For most people, it was quite different than most other nights. The business situation in Jinan was desolate. Many big shops that normally were quite successful, had long since closed their doors. Even customers that had made appointments days in advance were turned away.

Even two families who had reserved rooms for weddings at the “Great Three Yuan” restaurant had to find different locations.

No one knew why this was happening. The managers and clerks kept their lips sealed.

The only clue available was that all of the businesses were owned by the famous multi-millionaire Sun Jicheng. That, and strapping men on fine horses were constantly speeding in and out of his tightly guarded mansion.

When the young beggar caught sight of Wu Tao, he sat in an average sized eatery, looking a little depressed. Two dishes of fine food sat in front of him, as well as a cup of alcohol, none of which had he touched.

The young beggar stood in the street across from him, just looking at him, for quite some time. After a while, he decided to join him, try to cheer him up, and of course at the same time help himself to some of the food and alcohol.

Unfortunately, the sharp-faced man didn't seem to appreciate his intentions, and in fact completely ignored him. It was as if he didn't even see him standing there.

The young beggar laughed, showing off his dimples.

He was not the type of person to give up easily on the chance to have some good food and alcohol.

Even though this old fellow was stingy to death, the young beggar was confident he had a way to deal with him.

So he sat down in front of the man and said, “Did you lose your coin purse?”

He'd thought for a while about what to say, and knew that with this sentence, Wu Tao wouldn't be able to ignore him any longer.

And of course Wu Tao fell right into his trap. He suddenly looked up and asked, "How do you know I lost my coin purse?"

"Of course I know." Then he retorted, "Do you want me to get it back for you?"

As he spoke, he grabbed some chopsticks from the bamboo tube on the table and helped himself to the platter of pig ears and offal. [2]

Wu Tao watched him eat.

The money in the coin purse was enough to buy a whole pig.

"You can really get it back for me?"

"Absolutely. No joke."

"When can you get it back?"

"Right now," he said. "I can get it back immediately."

By this time, he had already half finished the platter of Mushu pork and fried bread.

"Okay, where is it?" asked Wu Tao eagerly.

"Right here." The young beggar continued to eat with his right hand, and pulled out the coin purse with his left. "Is this it?"

"That's right, it's mine."

The coin purse was his, but sadly, it had no money in it.

"It used to have twenty three silver and change in it."

"I know," said the young beggar, eating even more quickly. "I promised to get the coin purse back, I never said anything about the money inside."

“What happened to it?”

“I spent it all.” Before Wu Tao could get angry, the young beggar continued, “I’ll make a bet with you that you can’t guess what I spent it on.”

With the silver gone, there was no point in getting angry. Wu Tao just shook his head and sighed. “You could live for a month on twenty three silver. How did you possibly spend it all at once?”

“I bought something.”

“What did you buy?”

“I bought five coffins.”

Wu Tao couldn’t even heave a sigh if he wanted to. He stared at the young beggar in shock, wearing the same expression on his face that he might wear if he suddenly stepped into a pile of dog poop.

“Why did you buy coffins?” he blurted.

“I wanted to help you do something good with your silver,” replied the young beggar. “I just happened to see five dead people on the road. So I bought coffins for them and at the same time helped you build up some good karma.”

The young beggar sighed. “These kinds of opportunities don’t come along very often. You’re really lucky to have suddenly have such a chance.”

Wu Tao stared at him, gaping, not sure whether to laugh, or cry, or bite the kid.

After a while, he laughed bitterly. “When you put it that way,” he said, “it seems I’m actually really f*cking lucky.”

It turned out the man could curse.

The young beggar laughed.

“I knew you were the kind of person who can tell the difference between good and bad.” The young beggar was purposely trying to get under his

skin. "If another opportunity like that comes along, I'll do the same thing again."

It seemed like he was trying to drive the man crazy.

Wu Tao stared at him for a while, then suddenly slapped his palm down onto the table. "Bring alcohol," he called loudly to the waiter. "I want twenty pounds of your finest cabbage and five appetizer dishes, the finest type, nothing cheap."

The young beggar was shocked.

The stingy old man must have gone crazy, otherwise why would he suddenly become so generous and extravagant?

When the alcohol came, Wu Tao, drank three cups in a row, then put the cup down and let out three laughs. He slapped himself on the chest and called out, "I'm happy! It's been a long time since I've been able to drink so happily!"

He poured a cup for the young beggar. "Come, drink with me," he said. "Whatever you feel like eating, just order it. Today we're going to eat to our hearts' content."

The little beggar picked up the cup and poured the alcohol into his mouth.

When crazy people say crazy things, it is best to just go along with them, lest you earn yourself a beating.

After drinking three more cups, Wu Tao asked, "Do you know why I'm so happy today?"

"I don't know."

"Because of you." Wu Tao laughed heartily. "You've made me happy. I've never before met a little bastard like you."

The young beggar also laughed heartily. "There aren't many little bastards like me."

At this point, he could see that the old man wasn't crazy. No, his everyday life was just too restrictive, disciplined and rigid. Now that he had the opportunity, he wanted to relax and enjoy a bit of happiness.

Wu Tao drank another cup, and then suddenly slapped the table again. "Those bastards really are good-for-nothing," he said. "If it weren't for you, I would have been so pissed off by them I wouldn't have been able to sleep tonight."

"What bastards are you talking about?"

"Those sons of bitches from the old Xiang Tai Chou Silk factory," said Wu Tao angrily. "I made an order of Shandong silk from them a long time ago, and the delivery date was today. I even paid for it already. But they weren't open today. Not even a single person was there. I called out until my throat was sore, but nobody showed up."

The young beggar slapped the table. "Those bastards really are bastards. Forget about them. Come on, let's drink."

"Right!" said Wu Tao, looking happy again. "Forget them. Let's drink."

Unfortunately, his alcohol tolerance wasn't very good. After drinking two more cups, his tongue began to swell, and his face looked redder than a monkey's ass. When he spoke, it sounded like he had an egg in his mouth.

But it seemed his head was still quite clear. "My surname is Wu," he said to the young beggar. "I'm called Wu Tao. What's your name?"

"I'm called Ingot," said the young beggar. "You know, everyone likes ingots."
[3]

"Ingot." Wu Tao laughed. "That's a really f*cking good name!"

Part 5

By this time, the man in the bluish-green garment had arrived in Jinan.

The two coffins were being pulled along on two flat carts, not by pack animals, but by people.

Disciples of the Beggar Sect did not use horses or carts or sedan chairs. No matter what the endeavor, they relied only on themselves. They sweated their own sweat, used their own energy.

The pockmarked beggar and the crippled beggar pushed the carts, and the man in bluish-green walked slowly behind them, his hollow eyes staring off into the distance. Though he walked behind them, it seemed as if his heart were in another world, a world no one had ever entered except he himself.

They walked down a gloomy, remote road.

Even though the moon was full this night, its light did not shine on this place. The rickety carts creaked under the weight of the coffins. Soot along with the stench of garbage filled the air, and the face of the man in bluish green appeared even more frightening.

Where was he taking the coffins? And what did he plan to do with them?

No one knew, and no one dared to ask.

The cart wheels rolled along in the ash, and the beggars pushing the carts dripped with sweat in the cold wind.

Suddenly, seven or eight spears stabbed out from the darkness, jamming the wheels of the carts. Several large men in fancy costumes leaped out, surrounding them. Each and every one of them appeared to be extremely quick and agile, and their drawn swords glittered dazzlingly.

Because of his slow pace, the man in bluish-green was now cut off from the carts. Pockmark's face changed; it seemed almost as if the pock marks on his face had begun to glow.

But he remained motionless.

He could see that what was truly frightening was not these men. As far as he was concerned, even combined, the sharp swords in the hands of these nine or ten men could not compare to the cup of alcohol in the hands of another man.

This man sat in a red sandalwood chair, and was being pushed forward by another man.

The wood chair had two wheels; the man held a cup of alcohol in his hand.

Arriving in this fashion, it looked almost like he had made a special trip here just to drink. He didn't seem interested in anything at all other than the alcohol.

Someone else stood next to him, a person who seemed to be his diametric opposite.

Wearing resplendent garments and a smiling, indolent expression, he looked like a javelin, ready at any moment to shoot forth and stab you through the heart.

He stopped in front of the cart. "I'm surnamed Lian," he said coldly. "Lian Gen. These are my men, and they are ready to die for me at a moment's notice."

He spoke in a direct and succinct manner, somewhat aggressive: "Therefore, you, too, can die for me at a moment's notice."

Pockmarks laughed. "Fortunately, we neither wish others to die, nor ourselves. We're just two poor beggars."

"I can see that."

"We don't have any money, and there's nothing valuable on our carts, just five coffins. There are no treasures inside the coffins, just some corpses."

"I just want to borrow some things for a while, to look at."

"What do we have that we could lend you?"

"Coffins," said Lian Gen. "Those five coffins you have there on your carts."

"You think these coffins are good-looking?"

“No, they aren’t. And neither are the corpses. But I don’t need to look at anything good-looking. Things that don’t look good, however, I must examine.”

“You must?”

“Absolutely!”

“Are you sure?”

“Completely,” said Lian Gen sternly. “Even if your Beggar Sect leader Lord Xiao were here, I would still be forced to take a look.”

Pockmarks sighed. “Then you might as well ask these men to die for you right now!”

Lian Gen’s face twisted and he slowly lifted up his hand. Then his hand shot backwards, snatching the steel sword out of the hand of one of his men. He twisted the sword in his hands and it snapped in two.

Finally, the man in the wheelchair spoke up. “Very good kung fu. Very good.” He smiled. “Even Huainan’s Eagle King Clan doesn’t have anyone who can compare to you.” [4]

“Of course no one can compare to me.”

Gripping the broken end of the sword between two fingers, he waved his hand. Light flashed, and a thud sounded out as the sword fragment pierced into one of the coffins.

Pockmark’s facial expression changed. “Thankfully,” he said coolly, “the person in that coffin is already dead. Stabbing him a few more times won’t hurt.”

“He’s dead, but you’re not.”

Lian Gen still had half a sword in his hand. “This, I’m saving for you.”

As soon as he finished speaking, another person suddenly appeared between the two of them.

A man in bluish-green clothing, his face pale. It was as if he had just blown in on the wind.

Lian Gen took a step backwards. "Who are you?" he asked angrily.

It seemed as if the man in bluish-green didn't hear him, or even see him. From within his garment, he pulled out a handful of flags, very small flags, attached to a black iron flagpoles about six or seven inches long each.

—Were these little flags some kind of deadly weapon?

Even as he gripped the sword, Lian Gen's hand began to sweat. Everyone's hands began to sweat.

They all could see that the man in bluish-green could kill people with anything, even a twig.

But he didn't kill anyone.

He just stuck the flags onto the coffins.

Five coffins. Five flags.

After sticking the flags into the coffins, he began to walk off. Pockmarks and Cripple followed him, leaving behind the coffins that they moments ago had been willing to die to defend.

The sword-wielding men immediately stepped aside to let them leave.

They'd come only for the coffins. As long as the coffins stayed, they wouldn't look to cause any trouble. The sooner they could accomplish their task, the sooner they could return, have a drink, take a shower and sleep. At the last, that was better than risking their lives on a dark, remote road.

Who could have predicted that the beggars would leave? But they did, and left behind were five flags, stuck into five coffins.

Why would they do this?

No one could figure it out, nor did they think about it closely.

On the long, dark path, underneath the pale moonlight, amidst the cold wind, Lian Gen suddenly waved his hand.

“Let’s go!” he said. “Take the coffins and go.”

Four of the big men sheathed their swords and rushed forward to push the carts. However, after taking only two steps, they suddenly stopped. It was as if some unspeakable magic had stopped them, as if some invisible magical force had used eight invisible nails to affix them to the ground. They didn’t move in the slightest.

Their eyes of all four of the men stared at exactly the same thing.

At the flags.

Just now, a gust of wind had blown down the path and unfurled the flags from their small flagpoles. The flags fluttered in the wind; embroidered upon them were countless colorful flowers that appeared even more vibrant in the white moonlight.

After a long moment, the four men could finally move again; but they did not move forward, they moved backward.

Furious, Lian Gen blurred into motion.

He had always managed his subordinates with military discipline; never before had they defied his orders.

Several claps rang out in succession, and the faces of the four men began to swell and grow red.

They dared not resist, nor evade. They had utmost fear and respect for Lian Gen.

And yet they could not make themselves even touch the coffins.

Lian Gen’s iron palm once again stretched out, grabbing hold of the arm of one of the men; no matter how thick and strong the arm, it would be as brittle as charcoal in his hand.

He never issued an order a second time, and he had determined to prove so through his actions.

The sound of bone snapping in the cold wind was nothing but blood-chilling. The man whose arm had been broken screamed shrilly like a wolf.

Lian Gen glared sharply at the other men. One word at a time, he said, "Is anyone going to move these coffins?"

No one stepped forth.

Not even one.

The man in the wheelchair finally put down his cup and let out a very long sigh. "It's useless," he said. "Even killing them would do nothing. None of them will dare to move the coffins."

Lian Gen turned his head, his eyes furious. "Why?"

"Because of the flags. For thirty years, no one within four hundred kilometers of Jinan Prefecture has dared to move the flags of Old Master Tian."

Lian Gen laughed.

"What happens if you move them?"

"I don't know," said the man in the wheelchair. "Why don't you try and see?"

The veins on his forehead bulging, Lian Gen said, "That's what I'm doing right now."

The carts still lay on the road; the coffins still lay on the carts.

Lian Gen walked forward slowly, the veins on the backs of his hands bulging out like vipers.

And then he actually stretched out his hand to grab one of the flags.

With his kung fu, and the superhuman power of his iron palms, even were they large trees, he should still be able to pull them out.

And yet, he couldn't lift out these little flags.

Even as his had began to stretch out, an emaciated old man appeared in front of him. He wore black clothing, and had a head as bald as a condor. His hand, as skinny as a chicken's foot, shot out like lightning and gripped Lian Gen's hand.

Lian Gen's face twisted, and though he still stood there javelin straight, beads of sweat flowed down his face like yellow soybeans.

The bald-headed man looked at him indifferently, then asked, "Are you Sun Jicheng's chief steward, the man called "Superhuman Eagle King?"

"Yes, I am," said Lian Gen, his voice hoarse and filled with pain. "I am Lian Gen."

"Then you're mistaken," said the old man. "There are two areas in which you are mistaken."

"Oh?"

"First, you should not have tried to move the flags."

"And second?"

"Second, you think too much of your kung fu. It is a far cry from that of the Huainan Eagle King Clan's."

As soon as he finished speaking, the sound of shattering bones could be heard in the cold wind.

Lian Gen let out a wretched cry, and then shot away like a javelin into the night.

His men followed as fast as possible, leaving behind the man in the wheelchair. He smiled and clapped his hands. "Of the Three Kings of

Huainan, Old Wang is the most powerful.” True admiration filled his voice. “Old Mr. Wang’s Divine Eagle Claw truly is extraordinary.”

“Extraordinary, extraordinary.” The voice of another person rang out on the dark path. He too applauded. “I never thought that ‘Great Three Yuan’ restaurant’s general manager Mr. Zheng would have such keen eyesight. With one glance he identified old uncle Wang’s kung fu. That is truly extraordinary.”

This man was not old. Big and tall, he was also not young, but when he smiled he looked like a child.

He couldn’t count as good-looking. He had small eyes, a big mouth, a flat nose and a round face; when he smiled, his eyes disappeared. And yet, he couldn’t count as ugly either.

He too sat in a well-decorated wheelchair like Zheng Nanyuan’s [5]. He turned the wheels himself to push the chair forward.

General manager Zheng Nanyuan laughed. “So it’s Young Master Tian.” He clasped his hands in front of himself and gave a bow. “Greetings, Young Master.”

“General Manager Zheng, greetings.”

“Why is Young Master also using a wheelchair?”

“I’m imitating you,” he said, coming to rest next to the flags. “I’ve always wanted to have a wheelchair like this.”

“But, just two days ago you were as vigorous as a tiger or dragon. You could leap up the twenty or so stairs of the restaurant in just three steps.”

“My legs are as good as ever. Otherwise, how could the Old Master continue to call me Frogboy.” [6]

“Then why are you using a wheelchair?” Zheng Nanyuan asked again.

“Because I’m lazy,” replied Frogboy. “I think using energy to walk is really a horrible waste.”

Zheng Nanyuan laughed heartily. Both of them laughed.

“General Manager Zheng, don’t tell me you are also here for our five guests.”

“Guests? Which five guests?”

“Whoever the Old Master gives his flags to are our guests, regardless of whether they are dead or alive.” With a smile, Frogboy asked: “Would you mind allowing us to take them away?”

“Please do.”

Zheng Nanyuan immediately turned his wheelchair around to leave.

He was a sensible person, so he decided to leave immediately so as not to block the way of Young Master Tian.

He never imagined that Old Mr. Wang would call out, “Wait a moment!”

Zheng Nanyuan turned around and found Mr. Wang’s renowned Eagle Claws at his throat.

His two hands had just shattered Lian Gen’s iron palms with minimal effort; they could obviously pierce anyone’s throat.

Zheng Nanyuan didn’t even blink. “What is it,” he said calmly.

“Do you know who the people are in the coffin?”

“No.”

“Then why do you want them?”

“Because something happened last night at the residence of our Big Boss. Therefore, anyone who enters Jinan Prefecture today must be checked out, regardless of whether they are alive or dead.”

Part 6

By this time, Wu Tao was already drunk, really drunk, passed out like a grub on the table of the small eatery.

The young beggar called “Ingot” sat across from him staring at him, not sure whether he himself was drunk or not.

—In situations like this, for people who were in Jinan for the first time that night, perhaps being drunk was for the best.

Part 7

Everywhere could be seen huge stacks of lumber, shipped in from a multitude of locations. The fragrance of sawdust filled the air.

Everyone within 400 kilometers knew that no bigger lumber yard existed than “Forest Memory.” But few people knew it also acted as a subsidiary outpost for disciples of the Flowered Flag.

Behind the main square, which was piled full of lumber, could be found a large, spacious woodshed. The rickety carts had already been disposed of, and now the five coffins lay inside the woodshed.

On a long table nailed together from wood planks, a lamp flickered over a tray of meat, a jug of alcohol, and three sets of cups and chopsticks. But only two people sat there.

Condor Wang stared with eagle-like sharpness at Frogboy, who sat across from him.

“Do you really believe that that guy surnamed Zheng is just the general manager of a restaurant?”

“Nope.”

“Then you shouldn’t have let him leave.”

“What would you do if he stayed?” said Frogboy with a smile. “Invite him here to drink?”

“At the least, I could test out my kung fu.”

“There’s no need to try,” he replied resolutely. “His kung fu is definitely no worse than ours.”

The Condor said nothing more. Suddenly his pupils dilated, and then he flipped into the air like a bird. One hand protecting his chest, he shot out the window.

There was no one outside the window.

The person who had been outside had already floated in. A face as pale as a corpse’s, seemingly forever staring at a distant pair of eyes, a set of bluish-green clothing washed so thoroughly it had begun to fade. And a sleeve tucked into his waist.

Frogboy looked at him, and then looked at the coffins. With a shake of his head and a bitter laugh, he said, “Why do you always make deliveries like this to us?”

“Why don’t you ever ask someone else to?” retorted the man in bluish-green. “And why didn’t you ask those people why they were interested in the five coffins?”

“I did ask. He just said that something strange occurred last night in their Big Boss’s home.”

“Why didn’t you ask about the details of this strange occurrence?”

“I don’t need to ask, because I already know. Three people died there last night.”

“Which three people?”

“One was their chief guard Que Budao. Another was the middle-aged former imperial maid with incredible tailoring skills, Liu Jin’niang. And the other was none other than their Big Boss, Sun Jicheng.”

“Sun Jicheng is dead?” said the man in bluish-green, sounding surprised.
“How could he be dead?”

“They say that he fell under Qiu Budao’s Divine Shaolin Palm. One fatal strike.”

“And Qiu Budao?”

“He died after drinking a cup of poisoned alcohol,” said Frogboy.
“Apparently it contained so much poison it could kill an entire barracks worth of troops.”

“And who poisoned the wine?”

“Perhaps Sun Jicheng. Perhaps Liu Jin’niang. Perhaps Qiu Budao himself. They all had reason to poison the wine. As for what really happened, I’m afraid only heaven knows.”

The man in the bluish-green garment sat silently in thought.

The Condor had returned to stand next to him, staring with his sharp, eagle eyes at the vital point on the back of the man’s head, his hands pulsing with Qi.

It seemed as if the man in bluish-green hadn’t noticed. After a long time, he asked, “Where did they die?”

“They died in Sun Jicheng’s secret cellar.”

“Did anyone else know about the cellar?”

“Nope.”

“So, therefore, no one else could have poisoned the alcohol?”

“Correct.”

Frogboy added some more information: “The secret cellar is attached to his room. Last night, some of the guards on watch saw Sun Jicheng and Qiu Budao enter together. Afterwards, no one came out.”

A sharp light suddenly shone in the eyes of the man in bluish-green.

“In these circumstances, there is only one explanation for their deaths. A crime of passion, in which everyone perished.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” said Frogboy. “That’s what everyone is thinking.”

“Given that they killed themselves, and there seems to be no other assailant, why are Sun Jicheng’s subordinates investigating strangers who are in Jinan for the first time? Even corpses? Could it be that there is some other secret to be uncovered?”

That question pierced to the very heart of the matter, hitting the sweet spot.
[7]

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[1] The characters that make up his name Changsheng literally mean “long life” or “longevity.” For a coffin-maker to have this name seems a bit ironic, doesn’t it? Haha.

[2] Literally it says the platter of “pig ears and pig hearts and pig intestines and pig stomach and pig liver.

[3] I debated a lot about how to translate this. This is not his real name, it’s just an alias/nickname, so I opted not to transliterate it as Yuan Bao. This is not a situation like in Milford’s Deer and the Cauldron translation where I am taking a person’s name and giving it a meaning. In this case, based on the way it is used and how he came up with the name, using “Ingot” is the best choice.

[4] Huainan is basically modern-day central Anhui province.

<http://tinyurl.com/mbbj5hy>

[5] Zheng Nanyuan’s name in Chinese is 郑南园 zhèng nán yuán

[6] His nickname is very clever. His family name is 田, which literally also means field. When you add the character 鸡 or chicken, after that, it means frog. Another character 仔, is often translated into English as boy. I’ll always remember the apocryphal story of a Korean who moved to China, and kept eating “田鸡,” thinking that it was organic chicken, only to find out later (in horror) that it was actually frog. In any case, I know the name sounds kind of silly in English, but I think this is the best way to translate it in English. It sounds kind of silly in Chinese too. Also, Old Master Tian is clearly his father.

[7] In this sentence he makes a play on words that I don’t think can be translated into English. The original saying is “to hit a snake seven inches deep,” which means to hit a tender or important spot. Gu Long’s sentence was, “That question pierced to the very heart of the mater, just like a sharp knife piercing seven inches into the snake.” I decided to substitute for a relatively common English expression with similar meaning, considering the original has no meaning to native English speakers.

CHAPTER 4 – AN OLD MAN PLAYING A SANXIAN

Part 1 [1]

April 16th. Night.

A clandestine search expanded underneath the curtain of night. The number of people carrying out the investigation exceeded that which might have been mustered by the Governor of Jinan Prefecture himself. They included Sun Jicheng's bodyguard retainer, the employees of his many businesses, and their friends and family. Each person was intimately familiar with Jinan; every tea house, wine shop, inn and brothel lay within their realm of their influence.

As of now, Wu Tao, as drunk as mud, had already been taken back into a small resting room by one of the waiters.

Ingot hadn't left either, because he was drunk, definitely drunk. The two of them were unconscious and covered with vomit.

The person in charge of inspecting this area was the Assistant Manager of Sun Jicheng's "Open Source Money Lending" business, Yang Kedong.

Able and efficient, as well as eloquent, he found himself at a loss when he encountered the drunk Wu Tao. He couldn't even think of a single thing to say.

A drunk like Wu Tao was of little importance; a truly important person would never allow themselves to get into such a state, especially with a young beggar.

So Yang Kedong chose to ignore them.

And yet, he had to continue his investigation. It seemed that he would have no opportunity to go back and sleep this night; his new bride would have to wait alone in bed all night for him.

He grumbled a bit in his heart. He didn't understand; Big Boss Sun's death was obviously a crime of passion, and the perpetrator had taken his own life. Whoever had organized this investigation wanted him to come and claim responsibility again?

What Yang Kedong found even more confusing was, what did strangers who had arrived in Jinan this day have anything to do with Big Boss Sun's death?

Part 2

No one could figure out the answer to the question posed by the man in bluish-green, so even though it hit the nail on the head, it had actually been asked in vain.

Frogboy stood up patted the coffins. "Are there really bodies inside?" he asked.

"There are."

"Are they friends of yours?"

"No."

"Then who are they?"

"I don't recognize them," said the man in bluish-green. "Not even one of them."

Frogboy looked shocked.

"You don't recognize them?" he asked. "Then what were you doing with them?"

"Bringing them to you."

Frogboy looked at him in amazement. It seemed his eyes might fall out of his head, so shocked was he.

“You went out of your way to buy five coffins for people you didn’t even recognize, to give to me?”

“Yes.”

Frogboy looked like he might faint at any moment. He rushed over and downed a bowl of alcohol; he drank so quickly that the last mouthful almost poured out of his nose.

And then, he let out a loud laugh. “If I didn’t know you, I would definitely kick you out.”

That was his usual method of dealing with crazies.

But the man in bluish-green was no crazy, nor was he drunk.

He seemed much more sober than the average person of the world, and seeing him this way, Frogboy couldn’t laugh any more. “Why are you giving them to me?”

Looking very serious, the man in bluish-green said, “I want you to take a look at them and see who they are, and how they died.”

The coffins had not been sealed.

Frogboy’s expression changed after he took a look the bodies inside, and their fatal wounds. He looked both solemn and astonished.

“What did you see?” asked the man in bluish-green.

Frogboy shook his head, continuously. After quite some time had passed, he softly murmured, “I can’t quite tell, not for sure.”

He suddenly clapped his hands loudly, summoning a well-groomed young man, to whom he asked, “Where is my father?”

“This morning, Master was in a poor mood,” said the young man. “He went out alone, and refused to allow anyone to accompany him. No one knows where he went.”

The current leader of the Flowered Flag Sect, Old Master Tian Yonghua, one of the few remaining of the elder generation of the martial world, would usually hide away in an unknown location when in a bad mood.

Nobody knew where he hid himself, except for Frogboy. The man in bluish-green immediately asked him, "Can you take me with you?"

"No, nobody can. Although, this time..." Frogboy looked at the bodies in the coffin and then let out a long sigh. "It seems this time I must make an exception."

The man in bluish-green slowly stood up and turned his head to face Old Condor Wang, who had been staring at the back of his head the entire time. "You picked the wrong place," he said coolly.

"What do you mean?"

He pointed at the back of his own head. "This place is bad. Really bad."

The Condor's expression changed, his pupils constricted.

Just now he'd flown out of the window for no reason. He was already angry with this pale-faced one-armed man, and the "Three Kings of Huainan" had poor tempers to being with.

Clenching his fist, he asked, "What's so bad about it?"

"Judging from your posture just now as you gathered your Qi, you were preparing a stance from your Eagle Claw Sect's 'Divine Thirteen Eagle Claws' to attack me, namely 'Tiger Contending Form.'"

Old Condor Wang laughed coldly. "Using that stance to attack is already showing you a lot of respect."

"Fortunately, you didn't actually attack, otherwise..."

"Otherwise what?"

His face expressionless, his eyes again settling off into the distance, his body suddenly spun agilely. A single arm shot out lightly, from an angle no one

could ever have predicted. In the middle of the attack, his hand's form suddenly changed.

He didn't touch Old Condor Wang, and yet the old man acted as though he had actually been struck. His swarthy, emaciated face turned as pale as death. Some time passed before he finally asked, "Who are you?"

"I'm surnamed Xiao," said the man in bluish-green. "As in the expression, 'Desolate Whistling Sword Qi.'" [3]

Old Wang impulsively took a step backwards. "Are you the Beggar Sect's new Torture Chamber Lord, Xiao Jun?" [3]

"Yes, that's me."

Part 3

By this time, Wu Tao and the young beggar called "Ingot" were fast asleep in the little room behind the wine shop. Dead asleep.

Part 4

Behind the wine shop lay a short street. Short, narrow, stinky and dirty — When summer came, it seemed as if all the flies and mosquitos in all of Jinan congregated there.

Other than the flies and mosquitos, people would congregate there too.

People who others looked down upon in the same way they did flies and mosquitos.

Lining either side of the short street were several rundown wooden shacks, providing the city's cheapest alcohol and women, twenty-four hours a day. Come nightfall, the air would be filled with all sorts of offensive and noisy sounds.

But this night, on that street's most dark and gloomy corner, from within the most rundown of the shacks, floated out an ancient and desolate sanxian tune. [4]

—Upon hearing this music, everyone on the street knew that “Old Sister’s” weird old customer had returned.

Old Sister had once been called “Skylark.” Not only had she been as beautiful as a skylark, she had also sang as sweetly as one.

But that was thirty years ago.

Thirty merciless years had worn her down. She who had in former years been the beauty of the town, was now a scary old woman.

Fewer and fewer customers sought after her wrinkled face. In fact, as of this year, she had no customers at all other than this weird old man.

But she had nowhere else to go. So, like a broken chrysanthemum, she stayed here, in the darkest corner of this short street, waiting to wither and drop to the ground.

Perhaps the only reason she kept on living was because of this one devoted customer.

An old man who loved to play the sanxian.

No one knew who he was, and no one asked. But behind his back, they all called him “Old Sister’s little old man.”

The old man played a bleak, ancient song on the sanxian, accompanied by Old Sister’s hoarse, sad singing.

The dark, shabby room filled with an unspeakable feeling of helpless distress, and yet, it also contained a certain kind of tranquility.

They both were aged; the beautiful woman past her prime, the hero’s hair white. All of the joys and glories and stimulations in life had nothing to do with them any more.

They had no need whatsoever to contend with others for those types of things.

Beneath the flickering lamplight, the old man gently plucked the strings of the sanxian. He listened to the sad lyrics sung by his partner, and the night seemed endless, morning, far far away. His face, marked by endless years of agonizing experiences and countless sufferings, suddenly shone with an expression you might see on a boy sleeping in his mother's arms.

Only here could he experience this kind of feeling.

Only here could he experience true relaxation.

That was because no one here knew him. No one knew that in the past he had been the famous "Flowered Flag" Tian Yonghua, of the "Four Great Banners Sect."

No one knew, except Frogboy.

The old man suddenly put down the sanxian and sighed. "I knew that little brat would show up here one of these days."

"Which little brat?" asked Old Sister.

"Other than my kid, who could it be?"

Old Sister laughed, and underneath the dim lamp light, her smile seemed to still carry some of the charm it had all those years ago.

"How do you know the Young Master is here?" she asked.

"If I didn't know, who could?" said the Old Master. "Is there anything in the world this old man doesn't know?"

"There is," came Frogboy's voice from outside. "I'm willing to bet there is." He chuckled. "I'm willing to bet you, old man. Bet that you don't know who I have with me."

"Who do you have with you?"

“One living man, and five dead men. The living one is here to see you, and the dead ones are here to request that the Old Master see them.”

Part 5

Behind the dilapidated shack was a high wall. And behind the wall could be found one of the city’s famous haunted mansions.

A haunted mansion frequented by ghosts.

The cold and dismal courtyard in the back of the haunted mansion grew thick with weeds; moss covered the stone pathways. The five coffins had been placed in a small eight-sided pavilion in the back of the courtyard. Two oil lamps swayed in the wind. From a distance, you might think they were will-o-the-wisps.

—Tomorrow, people would certainly claim to have seen ghosts here.

Frogboy and Xiao Jun each held a lamp as they stood on either side of the Old Master. The lamplight shone on their faces as it did the corpses.

The Old Master’s face suddenly twisted. He turned to look at Xiao Jun. “You brought these people here?”

“Yes.”

“Where did you find them?”

“In a forest...” Xiao Jun used the most concise wording to explain what had happened. He knew that Old Master Tian hated people who yammered on and on.

As Old Master Tian listened to Xiao Jun speak, he continued to stare at Goiter-man’s face. When Xiao Jun finished, he let out a long sigh. Speaking to Goiter-man, he said, “Niu Baozhu, Boss Niu, I haven’t seen you for twenty years. Who would have thought that the little bead on your neck had turned into a big ball.”

Frogboy looked at Xiao Jun, and Xiao Jun looked back at him. With exactly the same shocked tone, they both said, "This is the famous Northeast China bandit, Three Panthers Niu?"

"Yes, it is," said the Old Master. "A bead on his neck, a blade at his side, a head hanging from the blade. He's definitely Niu Baozhu, also known as Three Panthers Niu. Twenty years ago, anyone who tried to capture him would find their head hanging from his blade."

"He was a friend of yours?"

"No," said Old Master Tian. "But he wasn't my enemy either." He sighed. "Because I only have one head, and I didn't want it hanging from his sword."

"His martial arts were really that powerful?"

"His martial arts might have been even more powerful than they were rumored to be. And he might not have been as evil as people said he was. Even if he drank three hundred bottles of alcohol, he wouldn't try to steal some silver from a young beggar. Nor would he dress up as an eighth-rate bandit."

"But that is what happened."

"He must have done it for some other reason."

"Such as what?"

"That young beggar definitely is no ordinary beggar," said the Old Master. "Perhaps he isn't even a beggar at all."

"Perhaps the merchant whose coin purse he stole isn't a real merchant either."

"Very likely."

Looking at Frogboy, Xiao Jun asked, "Can you find them?"

"If they're in the city, then of course I can find them."

"When?"

“If I start now, I can find them before daybreak.”

“Then you had better send your men out immediately.”

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[1] A sanxian is a traditional Chinese instrument somewhat similar to a banjo. <http://tinyurl.com/pxfozs8>

[2] His surname Xiao literally means desolate or dreary. And yes this is the same Xiao as Xiao Leixue from Heroes Shed No Tears (although there is not connection between them.)

[3] This Jun means hard or severe. The funny thing is that it is the same Jun as Huang Jun from the book Kung Fu by Giddens Ko. When I was reading this I kept switching the names accidentally.

[4] Here is what I imagine the song to sound like
<http://tinyurl.com/nw9p4ur>. Just click the “play” button.

CHAPTER 5 – SILVER LIGHTNING

Part 1

April 17th. Before dawn.

Frogboy dispatched thirty-two competent disciples to make contact with Sun Jicheng's forces, who were currently carrying out their investigation in the thirty-two districts of Jinan. Had they encountered Wu Tao and Ingot during their search?

Disciples of the Flowered Flag Sect came from every social class, so of course all of them had friends who were part of the investigation.

Before daybreak, Yang Kedong, Assistant Manager of Open Source Money Lending, had been contacted, and the whereabouts of Wu Tao and Ingot ascertained.

By that time the two of them still lay fast asleep in the little room in the back of the wine shop. In the abandoned courtyard of the haunted mansion, Frogboy had already used a pair of silver pincers to extract the tiny weapons from the wounds of corpses, and had deposited them onto a silver tray.

Neither the silver pincers nor the silver tray had experienced any change in color; the weapons clearly were not poisoned. They could kill in one shot because of their accuracy, power and speed.

The five weapons were very thin, and yet had penetrated the victims' clothes, skin and muscle to lodge directly in the bones. It took quite a bit of effort on the part of Frogboy to pull them out.

They sat there on the silver tray, glittering. Three of them were jet black, almost like an iron nail.

The other two needles were silver colored, and shone even more brightly than the silver tray upon which they rested.

Everyone present stared at the five concealed needle weapons, and everyone carried a very serious expression on their face.

After a long time had passed, Old Master Tian let out a soft sigh.

“I never would have guessed. I really never would have guessed.” He shook his head. “I never imagined those old two freaks were still alive, let alone that they would make an appearance. No wonder someone as skilled as Three Panthers Niu didn’t stand a chance.”

“Perhaps that was because Three Panthers Niu never thought that they would show up. He was completely focused on dealing with the young beggar, and thus fell to their treachery.”

“Perhaps,” said Old Master Tian. “Or perhaps Three Panther Niu just never stood a chance.”

He picked up one of the silver needles and sighed. “I haven’t seen a concealed weapon like this in at least eighteen years. I remember, eighteen years ago, when their weapons appeared, no one could evade them. All the way until the end, at that battle on the shores of the East China Sea.”

“What happened then?”

“They finally met their match. After that, no one in Jianghu heard anything about them ever again.”

“Are you talking about ‘Soundless Thunderbolt’ Yun Zhongxue and his wife the Silver Lightning Immortal?”

Old Master Tian suddenly lost his temper. Glaring at his son, he roared, “When did you become so stupid? Other than those two, who else would be using Thunderbolt Needles and Silver Lightning Needles?”

Frogboy laughed. “Luckily, sometimes I’m really smart,” he said with a chuckle. “Things that other people can’t figure out, I can often piece together.”

“What thing? What did you piece together? Spit it out!”

“That young beggar is definitely no ordinary person, and not somebody easy to deal with. Therefore, Three Panthers Niu disguised himself as an eighth-rate bandit so that the beggar would underestimate him, which would lead to an easy victory.”

Old Master Tian was still irritated and just stared at him blank faced. But Xiao Jun had begun to nod his head.

Frogboy smiled at him and continued, “Unfortunately, Three Panthers Niu didn’t realize that two people were hiding in the shadows protecting the young beggar. And of course he had no way to realize that those two people were none other than famous figures from the Jianghu of eighteen years ago, the Thunder and Lightning Immortals.”

“It makes sense,” said Xiao Jun.

“It makes as much sense as a fart!” roared Old Master Tian. “Those two old freaks had no sons or daughters, nor any disciples. When they went into retirement, that young beggar hadn’t even been born yet. What relationship could he have with them? Why would they be secretly protecting him?”

“Perhaps they were on an assignment,” said Frogboy. “Perhaps they were especially dispatched.”

“Especially dispatched?” Old Master Tian seemed to be getting even more angry. “Who on Earth would have the seniority to dispatch those two?”

“At least one person.”

“Who?”

“The person who defeated them 18 years ago on the shores of the East China Sea.”

Old Master Tian suddenly wasn’t angry. He said nothing, and after a long time he suddenly slapped his son lightly on the side of the face. With a sigh, he said, “Sometimes I wish you were just a little bit stupider.”

Frogboy also sighed. “Even if I was a little stupid, I couldn’t be that stupid.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I’m the son of the Fourth Master of the Flowered Flags.”

The Old Master laughed heartily.

Just as he laughed with the most joy, his palm suddenly shot out.

This palm was filled with much more power and speed than the palm he had used just moments ago.

Even though Old Master Tian played his sanxian much slower than the blind musicians of Daming Lake, his attack speed was actually three times faster than most people in Jianghu. [1]

Not many people could evade a palm strike like this, but luckily, Frogboy was one of them.

Just as the palm struck out, he scurried up one of the columns of the eight-sided pavilion.

Then, Xiao Jun’s stretched out. With his fingers, he made seven dots on the dusty-covered column, then drew a wavy line between the marks. “Is it him?” he asked, his voice low and hoarse. “Was it he who defeated the Thunder and Lightning Immortals on the shores of the East China Sea?”

What he had drawn appeared to be a few meaningless squiggles. But when Old Master Tian laid eyes on the seven dots and the long line, a look of respect appeared on his face that no one had ever seen before, a look you would give to a person eminently deserving of respect.

Not very many people alive on Earth could command the respect of Old Master Tian. What kind of person did those seven dots and the line represent?

He said not a word, but the look on his face had answered the question without a doubt.

“It’s really him?” Xiao Jun frowned. “Could the young beggar be connected to him?”

“He must be connected in some way,” said Frogboy.

“Why do you say that?”

“If he didn’t, even if that young beggar were being bit to death by stray dogs in the gutter, the Thunder and Lightning Immortals wouldn’t even glance at him. If the young beggar is really his disciple, then why would he steal a coin purse from a businessman?” Actually, he had already thought of the answer to this question. “Because that businessman is no ordinary businessman.”

“How would the young beggar know that he isn’t an ordinary businessman?” asked Xiao Jun. “If he isn’t an ordinary businessman, then who is he?”

“You shouldn’t be asking me these questions!” laughed Frogboy.

“Who should I ask, then?”

“Go ask them yourself. I’m sure we already have their location.”

He dared to say this because he saw that Li Dong had returned.

Li Dong was one of the Flowered Flag Sect’s most capable disciples, and one of the ones he had dispatched to gather information.

“Frogbro, we’ve already figured out where those two people are,” he said. “We got the information from Yang Kedong, and it seems reliable.” [2]

“Where are they?”

“At a restaurant called ‘Big Zhao’s.’”

“They’re together?”

“Yes, the whole night.”

“What were they doing together?”

“Drinking themselves half to death. They drank for five or six hours until they were as drunk as mud. They’ve been sleeping like the dead ever since then, in a little room in the back of Big Zhao’s restaurant.”

Old Master Tian suddenly laughed. "It looks like these two are no fools. On such a night, being drunk is better than being sober. The drunker the better."

Xiao Jun laughed coldly. "If they are who we think they are, I'm just afraid they aren't really drunk."

"Real or not, we need to go see them," said Frogboy. "I think it would be best if I went in first."

Li Dong barred his way.

"You don't need to go, Frogbro."

"Why not?"

"Old Pa Wang will bring them back."

"How does he know where they are?"

"He asked me just now, outside."

"And why would you tell him?" cried Frogboy.

With a forced smile, "Frogbro, you know Old Pa Wang's temper. When he asked me, how could I refuse to answer?"

"Did he leave already?" asked Frogboy.

"He left a while ago. I'm afraid he's probably already at Big Zhao's."

Frogboy leaped up, and shouted, "What a mess!"

Part 2

“What mess?”

“Condor King Wang’s temper is as hot as a piece of ginger, and it gets worse with age. If he said he’ll bring someone back, it doesn’t matter if he’s drunk or not, alive or dead, he’ll be dead set on bringing him back.”

“And if he doesn’t want to come?”

“Then he’ll have no choice but to attack.”

“And what if he’s not a match for that guy?”

“What a mess!”

By the time this interchange was over, Frogboy and Xiao Jun had already arrived at the room behind Big Zhao’s.

The restaurant was completely cloaked in darkness, without even a single bit of lamplight visible.

Luckily, Frogboy had been there before. He had gone drinking there, had gotten drunk, and had also spent the night in that little room in the back. So he knew exactly where to find it.

The room contained no light, nor any sound.

Frogboy sighed. With a bitter laugh, he said, “It seems the situation is really is a mess.”

He was right, it was a mess.

In the room was a person, one person. No trace could be seen of the supposedly ridiculously drunk Wu Tao and Ingot. And the incomparably sober Condor King Wang lay in the condor crushed into a pulp.

Part 3

April 17. Early Morning.

Sunlight had already seeped into the wood shed in the “Forest Memory” lumberyard. Lamps need not be lit to see.

Condor King Wang, one of the top three experts of the Huianan Eagle Claw Sect, lay flat on a freshly lumbered plank of pine wood, his limbs and facial muscles stiff.

Even though his muscles had begun to contort under the stiffness, the expression of dread as he faced death could still be seen on his face.

The Condor had always been an unyielding man, and Frogboy had never seen anything that could make him afraid.

But anyone could see that this was true fear, a deathly fear.

Frogboy sighed again. “I can guarantee you what he feared was not death. He never feared death.”

“Then what did he fear?”

“That person. The man who claims his surname is ‘Wu’ and his given name ‘Tao.’”

No one had ever heard the name “Wu Tao” before. “Wu Tao” was not a person to be feared.

“Of course, his real name is not Wu Tao,” laughed Frogboy. “Only the spirits know what he used to be called.”

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[1] Daming Lake is a famous lake in Jinan <http://tinyurl.com/oyhwhl6>

[2] People who are familiar with Frogboy call him a nickname that doesn't translate well, so I'm going with Frogbro.



CHAPTER 6 – DEN OF IMMORTALS

Part 1

April 17. Morning.

Within two hours of sunrise, every disciple of the Flowered Flag Sect had made contact with their street-level informants, and distributed a picture and instructions.

The picture had been drawn by one of the most famous sketch artists in Jinan, drawn based on descriptions provided by the staff of “Big Zhao’s” restaurant. It depicted two people.

A middle-aged man named Wu Tao, sharp-faced with narrow eyes, a long nose and a wide mouth, dressed up like a traveling merchant.

Another, a young beggar called Ingot, round-faced with big eyes and a smile that produced two dimples. Completely adorable.

The instructions had been dispatched with “Level 1 Flowered Flag” urgency: expend all effort possible to track down the whereabouts of these two people.

Within an hour, even the local bailiffs and constables attached to the Jinan local government had joined the search.

This was because the three squads of the Jinan constabulary had received an anonymous tip that the businessman Wu Tao was very likely one of the four famous criminals wanted in all parts of China. In fact, he could well be the famous bandit who had three times broken into the Imperial Palace to make off with treasures, a person people in Jianghu viewed as second only to the “Bandit Chief” Chu Liuxiang [1]. The “Laughing General.”

On the wooden bench sat a large tray of onion sauce and flatbreads, a big bowl of tender stewed meat, and a large plate of spiced, stir-fried vegetables.

Old Master Tian usually ate breakfasts such as this. He believed that if you ate a good breakfast, you would have plenty of energy to accomplish things throughout the day.

Today, he didn't eat much.

Today, he had something weighing on his mind, and felt somewhat emotional.

"The Laughing General, surnamed Li," he said. "He's really got guts. And skills."

"His name is Li... what?"

"I don't know. Nobody knows."

"Okay," said Frogboy, "Well then, why do people call him the Laughing General?"

"Everyone acknowledges that his skill and ability is only slightly lower than that of Chu Liuxiang, so they call him General."

"What about the 'Laughing' part?"

"After every heist, he lets out three big laughs." Old Master Tian sighed. "Back then, when people heard that laugh, some became so frightened that they actually pissed their pants."

"Then what?"

"Then, gone."

"Gone?" said Frogboy, confused. "What does that mean?"

"Gone means gone. By the time people heard that laugh, gone."

"What was gone?"

“Gold, pearls, jewelry, ancient jades and paintings. Anything and everything the General wanted to take, gone.”

Old Master Tian sighed again. “Ten years ago, he himself was gone. Like a bowl of alcohol poured down your throat. Suddenly, just gone.”

“Not gone,” said Frogboy. “When I pour a bowl of alcohol down my throat, it goes into my stomach.”

“Still gone. When the alcohol reaches your stomach, it turns into piss. The alcohol is gone.”

He didn’t laugh, because what he said was no joke.

Frogboy didn’t laugh either.

He understood what his father meant. “The Laughing General who went missing for so many years turned into Wu Tao.”

Old Master Tian suddenly turned and looked at Xiao Jun. “The Beggar Sect’s Torture Chamber was just founded. There should be countless affairs to handle. You shouldn’t be here.”

“Correct.” When one word sufficed to express his intent, Xiao Jun wouldn’t use two.

“And yet here you are.”

“Correct.”

“Why?”

Xiao Jun thought for a moment. “Because of the Laughing General.”

He spoke the truth. Never before had he lied, so Old Master Tian found his answer satisfactory.

“Of course you’re here for him,” said Old Master Tian. “And so must have Three Panthers Niu been here for him. I suspect many people in Jianghu now know he is in Jinan.”

Frogboy still didn't understand. "But, Wu Tao was not in Jinan before."

"In Jinan or not, it doesn't matter."

"Why is that?"

"Because the person they should have come after wasn't him."

"Not him? Who, then?"

"Sun Jicheng."

Of course it was Sun Jicheng.

After the Laughing General disappeared, he turned into Jinan's multi-millionaire Sun Jicheng.

It wasn't as if Frogboy hadn't considered this.

He was no fool.

He just liked to ask questions, questions of all sorts, even questions he already knew the answer to.

"If people should have been coming after Sun Jicheng because they suspected him of being the Laughing General, then why would they suddenly be interested in Wu Tao?" he asked. "Don't tell me Wu Tao and Sun Jicheng have some kind of connection?"

"I'm afraid so."

"A big connection or a small connection?"

"A big one. A very big one. A deadly one." He sighed. "Deadly for several people so far."

Xiao Jun, his eyes staring off into the distance, slowly, one word at a time, said, "Sun Jicheng is dead. His killer is also dead. Why have his subordinates instigated such a huge search in Jinan?"

This was the critical question, a question that had already been asked multiple times, but that no one had been able to answer.

But this time, it was different.

As of now, there was someone who could answer the question, and that person was none other than Old Master Tian.

"Actually, the answer to the question is quite simple," he said. "I can answer it in eight words."

"Eight words?" asked Frogboy. "Which eight words?"

"Sun Jicheng actually isn't even dead at all!"

This shocking statement would certainly surprise most people.

But Frogboy and Xiao Jun were not most people.

They were a minority amongst a minority.

And they were not surprised.

But Frogboy had another question to ask: "He clearly died, and everyone clearly saw his corpse. How could he not be dead?"

"Because Sun Jicheng didn't die," said Old Master Tian, "and that body was not his."

"Whose was it?"

"Someone who looked very much like him, no doubt specially selected and manufactured for the specific purpose of acting as his double in death."

"Specially selected, I understand," said Frogboy. "But manufactured... What does that mean? What sort of manufacturing?"

“He selected someone who looked a lot like him, and then, using some special technique, made some alterations to the face.” Old Master Tian continued his explanation: “According to the rumors in Jianghu, the Laughing General got along well with Hua Shiniang. Hua Shiniang’s appearance altering arts are the best under heaven. Surely he learned a thing or two from her.”

“So he hid the person away in his cellar, just waiting for the time when it was necessary to replace him in death.”

“Right.”

“And by necessary, you mean when his secret was exposed.”

“Right.”

“So he strangled Liu Jin’niang, used Qiu Budao’s Divine Shaolin Palm to kill his body double, then forced Qiu Budao to drink poisoned wine. All to convince people that it was a crime of passion.”

“Right.”

“So even if people suspected Sun Jicheng to be the Laughing General, after he died, no one would come after him.”

“Right,” said Old Master Tian. And then he said, “Wrong.”

Frogboy laughed bitterly. “Is it right, or wrong?”

“You are right, he is wrong,” said Old Master Tian coldly. “He picked the wrong person to kill.”

“I don’t think he was wrong at all,” said Frogboy. “Liu Jin’niang made his clothes so well that they fit like a second skin. She obviously knew his body structure quite well. She no doubt would have been able to see that the body double wasn’t him, because every person’s body structure is different. If I were him, I would definitely have picked Liu Jin’niang.”

Old Master Tian suddenly got angry again. Slapping the table forcefully, he said, “But you’re not him! You’re just a little bastard who understands shit. In fact, you don’t even understand shit!”

Frogboy said nothing in response.

He could see that his father truly was angry, and he didn't know why.

So he dared not open his mouth. But Xiao Jun did. "There's definitely a flaw in his plan."

He'd spoken seven words.

Actually, to express his full meaning would require probably thirteen or fourteen words, such as: "Sun Jicheng's plan was thorough, but flawed; therefore, people realized he hadn't died."

But he'd spoken only seven words because he knew Old Master Tian would understand his meaning.

Old Master Tian nodded. "Of course there was a flaw," he said. "Only lunatics believe in the perfect crime."

"Sun Jicheng himself could sense it, therefore, he couldn't help but return to check things out for himself."

Old Master Tian laughed. "He probably thought it was safe, that no one would guess that he might come back."

"So he came back," said Xiao Jun. "And thus Wu Tao appeared in Jinan."

That was the conclusion they reached.

But Frogboy had another question. "If Wutao is Sun Jicheng and the Laughing General, then who is Ingot the beggar?"

Old Master Tian, his face calm, said nothing.

Xiao Jun likewise remained silent.

"If Ingot has something to do with all of this, why is he with Wu Tao? Does he also know he is the Laughing General? How could he know?"

Old Master Tian yet again got angry. "Why don't you go ask him yourself?"

Frogboy sighed. "I want to, but I'm afraid finding him won't be that easy."

"Why?"

"If I were Wu Tao, I would get rid of him after he witnessed me kill Old Mr. Wang."

He looked at his father out of the corner of his eye, and then suddenly laughed. "Of course, I'm not Wu Tao. I'm just a little bastard."

Actually, Frogboy wasn't a bastard.

Intelligent, quick-witted, courageous and insightful, with quick reflexes, he possessed extremely refined judgement. Because of his spotless track record of good judgements, not a disciple existed in the Flowered Flag Sect who didn't admire him.

And this time, his judgement was once again seemed spot on. Neither Old Master Tian nor Xiao Jun could object to his conclusion.

And yet he was actually wrong.

Wu Tao didn't kill Ingot to silence him, and in fact seemed to have no inclination whatsoever to ever kill him.

And they hadn't fled.

They were still in Jinan. In a place where no one would find them.

Even if Frogboy were ten times as intelligent, he would never come to the conclusion that they would go to this place.

No one could possibly imagine that they would hide there.

Part 2

Jinan was an ancient and famous city, long since established as the seat of government, full of enriching places and sights.

Large and sprawling, the prefectural yamen looked much more dignified and imposing than the average yamen. [1]

The prison in Jinan was particularly sturdy, heavily guarded; for those locked away in this prison, escaping would be as impossible as climbing up to the heavens.

No one had ever researched how to escape it.

After all, who would want to be locked up in prison just to research that?

Actually, some people do. At least two.

Part 3

Every prison has a dark side, and Jinan's was no exception.

The inmates of this prison, upon hearing the three characters, "Den of Immortals," would be so frightened that their pants would be soaked with urine.

The Den of Immortals was of course not an actual den with actual immortals, nor a place immortals would ever visit.

The Den of Immortals was Jinan prison's most horrific cell block; only the most wicked devils would be locked up there.

Currently, two prisoners were locked up in the Den of Immortals; two people whose crimes piled up as high as a mountain, fiendish death row inmates who awaited execution in the fall.

Early on the morning of April 17th, during that time when it is most dark, the two prisoners were pulled out of their dreams to suddenly find that this most dark, ghastly part of the prison suddenly had two more people in it.

They couldn't clearly see who the people were, only that one looked to be quite tall.

The convicts were extremely happy, thinking they were fellow evildoers come to rescue them.

The tall, shadowy figure politely said, "I'm here to send you off."

"Send us off to where?" said one of the convicts, sounding even more happy.

"For people like you," said the man even more politely, "where else could I possibly send you other than the eighteenth layer of hell?"

The convicts were suddenly both nervous and furious. They wanted to leap up, but their bodies were immobilized.

The shadowy figure had used a single finger to immobilize them.

These two men had killed countless people; they were clearly not weak. But compared to this demonically powerful man, they had become like bedbugs.

Sweating, they asked him, "Do you have some grudge against us?"

"No."

"Did we offend you?"

"No."

"If there's no grudge and we didn't offend you, why would you take the risk to come here?"

The answer to their question was an answer they could never have predicted. Upon hearing it, they couldn't cry even if they wanted to, neither could they laugh. They could only die, with their eyes still open.

The man who had broken into the prison replied: "I want to sleep here for a little bit."

This demonic figure was of course Wu Tao. Other than Ingot, who else could be standing next to him as he killed the two prisoners?

The only strange thing was that Ingot hadn't been kidnapped and forced along.

He had come of his own free will.

In the dark little room at Big Zhao's, Wu Tao had used an incomprehensible technique to instantly slay the Huainan Eagle Claw Sect top expert Old Condor Wang. Then he grabbed Ingot and threw him out the window.

Before Ingot even had a chance to touch the ground, Wu Tao had already grabbed him again.

And then Ingot found himself seven or eight buildings away, on a rooftop.

"Holy crap!" cried Ingot. "Where did you learn your kung fu? Are you a man or a ghost?"

"Sometimes I'm a man, sometimes I'm a ghost," said Wu Tao coolly. "Sometimes half man half ghost, and sometimes neither man nor ghost. Sometimes I don't even know what I am."

There seemed to be some unspeakable sorrow hidden in his voice, but apparently Ingot didn't notice.

The young beggar was aware that he knew a lot more than he should, so he asked, "Are you going to kill me now to shut me up?"

"Kill you to shut you up?" he laughed lightly. "What do you know? What reason do I have to kill you?"

"Well, at the least, I know you killed someone."

“So what if I killed someone?” His voice once again seemed to be traced with sorrow. “Am I the only person in the world who has ever killed someone?”

Ingot looked at him and then sighed. “Actually, I know that guy wasn’t killed by you.”

“Oh?”

“He was frightened into death. When you attacked, you broke his two Eagle Claws, and then you whispered something into his ear. Then I heard him fart. It was pretty stinky.” He continued, “I heard a long time ago that when people are frightened into death, that is what happens.”

“It seems you know a lot.”

“I know that man was fated to die.”

“Why?” asked Wu Tao.

“He didn’t actually know who you are, he just wanted to take you back to ask some questions. But, to do so, he planned to use a critical strike to break your four major joints. A person like that, willing to use such ferocious, ruthless and sinister methods... Well, he was fated to die eventually.”

Wu Tao looked at him for a while. At first his face was expressionless, but then after a while, a strange look appeared in his eye, a look impossible to describe with words.

“Get out of here,” he said. “Quickly.”

“I’m not going anywhere. I can’t.”

“Why.”

“If people can track you down, then they definitely know that I am with you. If you leave and I don’t know where you went off to, then when they catch me, they’ll probably end up beating me to death.”

He grabbed Wu Tao’s sleeve. “So I’m going with you. We’re stuck together.”

Wu Tao again stared at him for a while. “Do you know who I am?”

“Nope.”

“I’m not an ordinary businessman.”

“And I’m not an ordinary beggar.”

“Don’t you want to know who I am?”

“Of course. But I don’t want you to know who I am. So if you don’t ask me, I won’t ask you.”

“Nothing good will come out of you following me,” said Wu Tao. “If I’m a person, then I’m not a good person. And If I’m a ghost, I’m definitely an evil ghost.”

His voice suddenly became very grim. “Originally, I just wanted to use you to help me pass the time. But I could also see that you have some kind unique background. Maybe when the need arises, I could use your family’s social standing to threaten people.”

“I know. Of course I know.”

“If you come with me, you’ll have to share all the sufferings and miseries and unfair hardships. I might even have to sell you out,” he said coldly. “If someone attacks me, as long as I have a chance to escape, I might use you to block the attack.”

“I know.”

“You won’t regret it?”

“Going with you is my idea, why would I regret anything?” Ingot suddenly laughed. “Maybe I’ll use you too. If someone attacks us, who’s to say I won’t use you to block the attack? It’s hard to say.”

Wu Tao wasn’t laughing.

At first, it seemed like he wanted to, but in the end he didn’t.

“Where are you going to go?” asked Ingot.

“I need to sleep. Build up my energy. Whatever I end up doing, I need to build up some energy.” He laughed coldly. “People must think I’m as exhausted as a stray dog. I want to give them a little shock.”

“Sleeping is always good,” said Ingot. “But is there anywhere in Jinan where you can actually get a good rest?”

“There’s a place they definitely won’t look for me. They would never think that I would go there.” He seemed completely confident.

“A place no one would think of?”

“No one.”

“Actually, there is one.” Ingot winked. “At least one person could think of it.”

“Who’s that?”

“Me.”

Wu Tao stared at him. “You know the place I’m talking about?”

Ingot laughed, and his dimples appeared again. “Not only do I know which place you’re talking about, I also know that getting in is a lot easier than getting out.”

And so Ingot followed Wu Tao into the Den of Immortals.

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[1] Chu Liuxiang is the titular character of Gu Long's Chu Liuxiang series.

<http://tinyurl.com/q4lvmqk>

[2] A yamen was a type of local governmental complex in ancient China.

<http://tinyurl.com/q2ssvr8>

CHAPTER 7 – WISP OF SMOKE

Part 1

April 17th. High noon.

The huge search for Ingot and Wu Tao continued in Jinan. More and more people were interested in the matter, probably because the Flowered Flag Sect as well as the local authorities had both offered huge rewards for information, rewards big enough to live for years on.

The targets of the search were currently fast asleep in the Den of Immortals, just the two of them.

Outside of Sun Jicheng's 79 businesses were pasted paper posters which read, "Closed, business on hold for five days." By now, people had heard about Big Boss Sun's deaths, so there was no need to try to keep it a secret any more.

—The true secret which needed to be kept was that Big Boss Sun actually wasn't dead.

Great Three Yuan was obviously not open for business. And yet, Zheng Nanyuan hurried on his way to the restaurant. Three important customers awaited him, guests he could not afford to ignore.

The guests included Old Master Tian from the powerful Flowered Flag Sect, and Huang Jun, the man who wished to reform the Beggar Sect, who had single-handedly founded its new Torture Chamber, famous in Jianghu and holder of life-and-death power in his organization.

Zheng Nanyuan was just now walking up the stairs of the restaurant.

He was no cripple; he used a wheelchair because of the festering rheumatism which had plagued him for years.

By the time he arrived, a table of appetizers had already been laid out in one of the elegant private dining rooms. The guests had already been seated.

There were three types of alcohol on the table.

A freshly opened jar of Guizhou Maotai, clear and strong, as well as Nu'er Hong from the Jiangsu/Zhejiang region, sweet and gentle, but with a strong delayed aftereffect.

And in a golden pitcher was what remained of the Persian Red Wine that Sun Jicheng had not finished during his lunch the other day. The golden pitcher had just been pulled out frigid cooling water; condensation dripped down its sides.

Old Master Tian drank a cup of each of the different types of alcohol, and then said, "We didn't come here to drink."

He could say something like that.

Once a person's status reaches a certain level, they can say anything, and others can only listen.

The things he said often weren't very nice; he usually left people unsure of whether to cry or laugh. Sometimes he shocked people, and sometimes left them in fear for their life.

"We are also not here to pay our respects," he continued. "As well all know, Big Boss Sun isn't dead."

It was quite a harsh thing to say.

Zheng Nanyuan didn't seem to have any reaction whatsoever. He merely poured some Persian wine into his crystal goblet. He poured just enough to fill the glass completely, and yet didn't spill a single drop.

Such steady hands!

Old Master Tian narrowed his eyes, staring at Zheng Nanyuan. He continued, "Your big search last night was not an attempt to find your supposedly 'dead' boss. To search for him in such a fashion would be fruitless. That type of search will only turn up drunks and thieves and idiots. The purpose of your search was to inform Sun Jicheng that you know the corpse wasn't him."

Zheng Nanyuan sat listening, much the way a student will listen to his tutor lecture about the Four Books and Five Classics, even though he has no idea what the teacher is talking about. [2]

Old Master Tian drank three more cups of alcohol. His son joined him.

"The reason we are here," said Old Master Tian, "is that we want to ask you a question." Questions asked by Old Master Tian always hit the crux of matters. "How did you figure out the corpse did not belong to Sun Jicheng?"

Zheng Nanyuan laughed.

"Actually," he said, "that is a question I should be asking you."

"And yet, I asked the question first."

"Can I refuse to answer?"

"No."

"Then let me start from the beginning."

He poured himself another glass of wine, took a sip, and then began his story: "The guards who protect Big Boss Sun's residence are split up into six shifts, divided under the leadership of Lian Gen and Qiu Budao. Recently I noticed that Qiu Budao had in succession dismissed thirteen men from his squads."

Old Master Tian knew he wouldn't speak about things unrelated to the matter at hand, and would recount everything in great detail.

"Who were the people he dismissed?" he asked. "And who replaced them?"

“The ones he dismissed were capable men, and the new arrivals all had sketchy pasts, strangers who had never been seen before in Jianghu, all of them roughly thirty years of age.

“Did you ever bring this up to Sun Jicheng?”

“No. But when he died suddenly, I immediately suspected that his death had something to do with the thirteen men.”

“They hadn’t left yet?”

“No, not yet,” said Zheng Nanyuan. “So, I decided to call back the thirteen men who Qiu Budaο had dismissed. Along with the men I sent to find them, I would have two men to deal with each one of thirteen with the sketchy pasts. I would capture them dead or alive.”

“That was the correct thing to do,” commended Old Man Tian. “What happened?”

“The people I sent to find the thirteen dismissed men came back quickly.” He drained the cup of wine in one drink. “They returned, twenty-six men.”

“Where are they now?”

“Downstairs, in the wine cellar.”

“All of them? And they haven’t left?”

“Twenty six men, none of them left,” said Zheng Nanyuan coolly. “I’m afraid they will never leave.”

Part 2

In the dark cellar, the corpses, covered with simple white cloths, had been lined up even more neatly than the jugs of wine.

Zheng Nanyuan followed Old Master Tian inside. He said, "I didn't place them in coffins because I knew that eventually I would invite you down here to have a look at them."

He lifted the white cloth off of one of the corpses. The muddled light of the cellar lamps shone dimly on the corpse, revealing a face contorted in terror, one arm dislocated, the elbow snapped, larynx smashed.

"Each one died in the same way," said Zheng Nanyuan. "Twenty-six men, all exactly the same."

Old Master Tian's face suddenly grew very serious.

"The joints and larynxes were not smashed by the same person," said Zheng Nanyuan. "The force exerted was different, although the technique was the same. This technique is strangely diabolical, and yet effective. There is no school or sect in Jianghu which uses anything remotely similar."

"You've never seen anything like this before?" asked Old Master Tian.

"Never."

One word at a time, Old Master Tian replied, "Well, I have."

His expression grew even more serious. Before Zheng Nanyuan could say anything, he continued, "Now I understand why Sun Jicheng would throw away his enormous fortune, feign his own death and flee for his life."

Of course, Zheng Nanyuan asked, "Why would he?"

"Because he surely noticed that his bodyguard squads had been infiltrated by the thirteen men, and he surely could guess where they came from."

Frogboy couldn't help but butt in: "Don't tell me the thirteen men scared him off?"

"Humph," said Old Master Tian.

"If he really was the Laughing General," continued Frogboy, "how could he possibly be frightened of them? When was General Li ever frightened by anyone?"

With a furious glare, Old Man Tian said, "How do you know he was never frightened by anyone? Is he a tapeworm in your belly or something?"

Frogboy didn't dare to respond.

Zheng Nanyuan did not ask about where the thirteen men came from, nor did he ask Old Master Tian why Sun Jicheng fled in fear.

He calmly continued his explanation.

"After my operation failed, I lost track of the thirteen infiltrators. When Lian Gen learned of the matter, he instigated a large-scale search to try to flush them out."

Old Master Tian let out a cold laugh. "It's a good thing you didn't flush them out. Otherwise, even were your wine cellar three times as large, it wouldn't be big enough to contain all the bodies."

"In any case, I just want Old Master Tian to understand that the purpose of our search yesterday was not to because we had learned the body was not Big Boss Sun's, nor was it to inform him of anything." As calm as ever, he continued, "The purpose was to track down the thirteen infiltrators."

He and Xiao Jun were quite different: He spoke in great detail, and in order to make things completely clear, he would even repeat himself multiple times if necessary.

Having explained things clearly, he now asked Old Master Tian a question. "So, how did the Old Master come to find out the corpse did not belong to Sun Jicheng, but was actually a body double?"

Old Master Tian, should he feel like being unreasonable, could refuse to answer the question.

If he refused, who could possibly force him to answer?

Fortunately, at this particular moment, he did not choose to be unreasonable. After someone answered his question in such great detail, he couldn't possibly refuse to reciprocate.

"Shall I, too, start from the very beginning?" he asked Zheng Nanyuan.

“That would be the best.”

Old Master Tian poured himself a cup of alcohol and then began his explanation: “I suspected from the very beginning that Sun Jicheng wouldn’t suddenly die like that, but I had no way to confirm the identity of the body. At first. Then I had a chance.”

“What chance?”

“Sun Jicheng left Great Three Yuan restaurant on the afternoon of April 15th, correct?”

“Yes.”

“On that day, he ate a bowl of chicken and abalone shark’s fin soup, did he not? For appetizers, he ate shelled walnuts, pine nuts, and dried fruits. For his beverage, the Persian wind you just served to us. Correct?”

“Correct.” Zheng Nanyuan laughed bitterly. “I had no idea the Old Master was so familiar with our operations here.”

Old Master Tian ignored the tone of ridicule in his comment, and continued with his explanation. “He died sometime after dusk, perhaps two hours after he parted with you.”

“How could the Old Master confirm that?”

“The chief coroner of Jinan, Ye Laoyan, happens to be my friend. As you know, he is one of the most skilled and experienced in his field. Who knows how many corpses he has examined in the past twenty years? His judgement is impeccable.”

“But we didn’t ask the government to examine the body,” said Zheng Nanyuan. “Old Mr. Ye never saw the corpse.”

“He did.”

“When?”

“Last night after nightfall, when you were mustering your men to begin your big search.”

“At that time, the Boss’s body still lay in the secret room.”

“Correct.”

“How did old Mr. Ye get into the Boss’s secret room?”

“Because I took him there.”

Zheng Nanyuan said nothing further. If Old Master Tian wished to take someone somewhere, it wouldn’t be a difficult thing.

Furthermore, upon mustering and dispatching the full forces of the Sun mansion, among those left behind to guard the estate, surely some were friends of members of the “Flowered Flag” Sect.

Old Master Tian continued on: “After Ye Laoyan determined Sun Jicheng’s exact time of death, a question occurred to me.”

“What question?”

“When a person eats food, how long does it take for it to become excrement?”

This was a superb question, a question which hit to the heart of the matter.

“In Ye Laoyan’s experience, food will remain in the digestive system for nearly two hours before becoming excrement. Walnuts, pine nuts and the like require even more time to digest.”

Without pausing, he spoke forth the conclusion of the matter: “That corpse’s stomach contained no chicken and abalone shark’s fin soup, nor any walnuts, pine nuts or dried fruit. On the contrary, it contained food that Sun Jicheng would never eat: dried fish strips.”

How exactly did they determine that?

Old Master Tian didn’t explain the details, but everyone could imagine how.

Even though everyone could imagine, no one seemed willing to actually question.

As of now, Zheng Nanyuan's face was no longer as calm and mild as it had been before. "So," he asked coldly, "the Old Master suspected from the very beginning that the person who died was not Sun Jicheng."

"Correct."

"How did that come to be?" asked Zheng Nanyuan, his eyes flashing sharply. "Our Boss and the Old Master were not close. Why were you so interested in the details of his death?"

Old Master Tian's facial expression changed.

Frogboy noticed that this change was similar to the change he'd observed when he brought up the matter of Liu Jin'niang earlier. Old Master Tian looked angry.

And yet, he answered the question.

"Of course I was interested, and of course I had my suspicions. Because," he said loudly, "I knew that Sun Jicheng was none other than Laughing Li. 10 Qiu Budaos couldn't stand up against a single of the Laughing General's finger. How could he possibly be killed by Qiu Budaos?"

This was a very reasonable explanation. Who could refute it? Even should one know that it was merely an excuse, one still could not refute it.

But Zheng Nanyuan had yet another question to ask.

"I've heard that the local government and the Old Master are currently searching for someone named 'Wu Tao.' According to the secret reports, he might be the formerly infamous 'Fear-inspiring Three Laughs' General Li."

"I assumed you would have heard."

"So, the Old Master's meaning is that Wu Tao is Sun Ji Cheng, Sun Ji Cheng is General Li, and General Li is Wu Tao?"

Zheng Nanyuan once again used his overly detailed method of communication, utilizing three methods to ask a single question.

Old Master Tian's response was incredibly simple: "Yes."

"That is really hard to believe." Zheng Nanyuan sighed. "Even though Sun Jicheng didn't live an ordinary life, he did live a very regimented life, out in the open, never hiding his actions. No one leveled any suspicions against him in all these years. I really don't understand how the Old Master would suddenly come to the conclusion that he is the Laughing General."

Old Master Tian let out a cold laugh. "You think I'm the only person who knows this secret? Why do you think Chamber Lord Xiao is here?"

With this deft statement, he shifted the responsibility of answering the question to Xiao Jun.

And of course, Zheng Nanyuan instantly said, "Chamber Lord Xiao, how did you come to this conclusion?"

"Our Sect's disciples are everywhere," he said coolly. "Every matter in Jianghu, large or small, comes to our attention sooner or later."

This answer didn't really count as an answer, but didn't count as a refusal to answer either.

Everyone in Jianghu knows that the Beggar Sect gets information quickly. As for the source of that information, who knew?

So even though his answer did not quite satisfy Zheng Nanyuan, he couldn't really ask for more information.

But he could ask another question. "How can the two of you be certain that Wu Tao is Big Boss Sun?"

"Sun Jicheng killed his body double with one fatal palm strike that inflicted severe internal injuries. He perfectly imitated 'As Stable as Mount Tai' Qiu Budao's technique, as if he had actually practiced it for thirty or forty years. The only difference is that the inner force contained in that palm strike contained some soft Yin elements." With complete confidence, Master Tian

continued, "Divine Shaolin Palm power is completely Yang based. There is no way that a disciple of Shaolin would produce such refined Yin force."

Old Master Tian possessed deep knowledge and experience as well as profound understanding of martial arts. As far as martial abilities, weapons, fist and palm techniques, hidden weapons of the various schools and sects in Jianghu, he knew something about all of them.

Zheng Nanyuan could only listen.

"Condor King Wang, one of the Huainan Three Kings, was killed by Wu Tao," continued Old Master Tian. "The attack he used to kill Wang was from none other than the Huainan Sect's Eagle Claw kung fu, and his technique was just as good as Wang's own. Except, his Eagle Claw technique also contained Yin force."

Eagle Claw uses Yang force, and Huainan Sect disciples did not train in Yin force.

That point did not need to be stated out loud, everyone knew it.

"I examined both bodies personally. I may be an old man, but my eyesight has not grown dim. When I see something, no one can say I saw wrong."

No one could say, nor would anyone dare to say.

Finally, Old Master Tian asked Zheng Nanyuan: "How many people in the world can defeat an opponent by using the opponent's own kung fu, something they practiced for decades. And who can also mix Yin power with Yang power martial arts?"

"Not many, I would say."

"Other than the Laughing General, who claims to be surnamed Li, can you name another?"

Zheng Nanyuan said nothing.

He couldn't say a single name.

“You can’t think of a single one. So therefore, I must dare to say, Wu Tao is Sun Jicheng, Sun Jicheng is General Li, and General Li is Wu Tao.”

This was his conclusion.

Zheng Nanyuan had no more questions. However, Xiao Jun did.

This kind of question would normally be unanswerable.

“As of now, Wu Tao knows that we have uncovered his secret, and are looking for him,” he said. “So, what is his next step?”

Frogboy suddenly laughed. “You shouldn’t be asking us. Why don’t you go ask him yourself?”

Part 3

April 17th. Afternoon.

It was a clear day, and the sun illuminated everything. Even though it couldn’t directly shine onto the cramped, moldy and incredibly stinky cell block, some of its rays somehow found their way inside.

Ingot had awoken already and sat staring with his two large eyes.

No one could possibly imagine what he stared at.

He stared at something that he had never before seen in his entire life. Something he never would have wanted to see, and even now, upon seeing, could scarcely believe.

Ingot was currently looking at hundreds of spiders, rats, cockroaches, lizards, snakes, centipedes, mosquitos and bedbugs.

Dead spiders, dead rats, dead cockroaches, dead lizards, dead snakes, dead centipedes, dead mosquitos, dead bedbugs.

He had never imagined that a stone jail cell could possibly contain so many things like this.

Yet, there they were. And they had originally been jumping with life.

But as soon as they touched Wu Tao, who remained fast asleep, they would instantly die.

Regardless of spider, rat, cockroach, lizard, snake, centipede, mosquito or bedbug, as soon as they touched his body, they would stiffen and fall, never to move again.

Ingot not only stared, he counted.

Every one that died, he counted. He currently was up to one hundred eighty-nine.

That number itself was nothing frightening, but having counted so high, the hairs on his whole body stood on end.

Wu Tao was still fast asleep, sleeping like a corpse.

Who knew how many more vile pests would appear in the prison? From outside could be heard the sound of iron shackles clanking on the stone floor, piteous wails and weeping, and the cursing of jailers as they whipped and beat inmates.

If you heard those sounds and saw what Ingot saw, you too would be disgusted.

He couldn't take it any more.

At what point would Wu Tao wake up?

Ingot decided to wake him up. He didn't call out to him, he just went over and pushed him. But as soon as his hand touched Wu Tao's body, he felt it pushed away. And then nearly half of his body went numb.

—This guy really was weird. He himself wasn't too scary, but his martial arts were terrifying.

Ingot didn't fear him in the least. He grabbed a dead rat and then threw it toward Wu Tao's nose.

A slapping sound rang out as the rat hit the nose.

Not Wu Tao's nose. Ingot's nose.

The dead rat had rebounded, and struck Ingot directly in the nose.

Ingot, furious, was about to start yelling. But Wu Tao had already woken and started stretching. Glaring at him, Ingot said, "What the hell?"

"What the hell what?"

"What the hell are you hitting me in the nose with a dead rat for?"

"Was it me who hit you in the nose with a dead rat? Or the other way around?"

"I can hit you, but you can't hit me," said Ingot, bold and assured.

Wu Tao sat up. "Why can you hit me but I can't hit you?"

"Because you're an adult, but I'm just a kid." The more he spoke, the more reasonable his arguments sounded. "Also, you were pretending to sleep, so of course I should try to make you get up. You weren't sleeping, so why the hell did you hit me?"

Wu Tao looked like he wanted to laugh, but he didn't.

"Why did you need to wake me up? Why not sleep a little bit more?"

"I couldn't sleep."

"Why couldn't you sleep? Is there something wrong with this place?"

"Everything."

“Do you want to leave?”

“Yes. Very much so.”

“You want to leave and never come back?”

“Call me a bastard if I ever come back,” said Ingot, sounding more and more angry. “This is not a place for people. Even bastards shouldn’t stay here.”

Wu Tao suddenly stood up. “Okay!” he cried.

“Okay?” said Ingot. “What does that mean?”

As soon as he said it, he knew what Wu Tao meant. He saw Wu Tao stretch out his arms, and then heard a sound like fireworks coming from his body.

And then a bang sounded out.

The cramped, moldy cell block, constructed of thick slabs of stone, suddenly exploded out in every direction.

Dust flew out, and Ingot felt as if he were flying in the air. Then the only thing he could hear was Wu Tao’s voice: “If this place isn’t fit for bastards, why leave it standing?”

**

[1] Guizhou Maotai is one of China's most famous baijiu. <http://tinyurl.com/nbvvhkh>

[2] These texts are the books about Confucianism. <http://tinyurl.com/pl68w5l>

CHAPTER 8 – A SWORD WHICH YOU CANNOT DROP [1]

April 17th. Before dusk.

Jinan City's supposedly impregnable "Number One" cell block suddenly turned into dust. It had been constructed from specially imported stone blocks, each one weighing hundreds of kilograms. And yet, some mysterious, inexplicable force shattered it into rubble. Some of the pieces flew as far as twenty meters away. A few even damaged the wood shed in the back of the yamen as well as an ancient, three-hundred year old scholar tree. [2]

Over two hundred death-row inmates in the prison all suddenly died. Upon investigation, the local chief coroner, Ye Laoyan, determined that two of them had actually died the day before, prior to the destruction of the cell block.

No one could determine their cause of death, nor how the cell block had been destroyed.

The local authorities wanted to cover up the matter, but in less than an hour, everyone in Jinan was talking about it.

The girl with the braids might not have been the first person to hear about the prison, but she heard about it sooner than most.

The news was passed on to Old Master Tian as he took his afternoon nap. He immediately called Beggar Clan Torture Chamber Lord Xiao Jun, and his eldest son Frogboy, into a sitting room. They knew the reason for his call.

They hadn't slept the previous night, and had been drinking during lunch. But Old Master Tian was completely sober.

“You heard the news already?”

“Yes.”

Old Master Tian beckoned to a Sect disciple, who carried over a large chunk of stone and placed it into the table.

“The cell block was constructed from this type of stone. Originally, each piece weighed four or five hundred kilograms.”

The rough stone slab’s original size would have been roughly half a meter by half a meter.

Old Master Tian picked up a fragment of stone and crushed it between his fingers.

“This is not a common type of stone,” he said. “The quality is slightly lower than granite, but it is just as hard. If a blacksmith beat it with an iron hammer, it would probably take half a day to break.”

Frogboy started up with his questions. “Was this stone broken with a hammer?”

“No.”

“Old Zhao from the prison said that today, a prison block suddenly collapsed, and the stone slabs flew apart in every direction.” He looked at Frogboy. “Is there any hammer under heaven that can do that?”

“Nope.”

“There may not be one under heaven, but maybe in heaven there is.” Old Master Tian continued, “If I were a bastard, maybe I would think that the cell block was destroyed by a spirit.” He sighed. “But I’m not a bastard. Other than spirits, there is another power which could accomplish this.”

Of course, Frogboy had to ask: “What other power is that?”

“Manpower,” he said. “Manpower can exceed your imagination.”

“What person could have such power?” Frogboy always asked questions that aligned with his father’s topic of conversation.

“Not many people do. In fact, currently, there is only one.”

“Who is it?”

Old Master Tian flipped out again. Glaring at his son, he said, “Do you really not know who I’m talking about? Are you really such an idiot?”

Frogboy was no idiot. He knew exactly who Old Master Tian was talking about.

“People want to catch him and imprison him, so he goes to a prison.” Frogboy laughed wryly. “This guy really has a knack for things.”

“He’s not just a guy, he’s a general. The Laughing General,” said Old Master Tian, his face looking very serious. “And he doesn’t have a knack for things. At the very least he has seven or eight hundred knacks.” He pointed his finger at his son’s nose and angrily said, “You had best remember this, or else you’ll find yourself dead!”

“Ok.”

“Remember it. Anyone who underestimates the Laughing General won’t live very long.”

“Ok,” said Frogboy. “I never forget anything father says to me.”

Xiao Jun finally spoke up. “Can Old Master be certain this was the Laughing General?”

“I’m certain,” he said with complete confidence. “No one else could have done it.” His certainty was supported by evidence. “Currently, only he can mix together and use powerful Yang energy and gentle Yin energy. And only a kung fu which fuses the elements of Heaven and Earth, Sun and Moon, Yin and Yang, could produce such an incredible power.”

“He was so scared that he faked his own death and fled for his life, then ended up hiding in that prison’s forsaken death row cell block. Why would he suddenly use such a unique kung fu to reveal his position?”

Frogboy’s question was certainly apropos.

Old Master Tian thought for a while before responding: “Because his position had already been revealed, and he knows that others are aware he isn’t dead. Most likely he hid in the prison because he needed to rest and restore his energy and power.”

Upon hearing this, Frogboy and Xiao Jun’s faces both changed, and a strange light shone in their eyes.

They understood what Old Master Tian meant.

—The reason Laughing General needed to build up his energy was no doubt because he intended to face off with his enemies in battle.

One could only imagine what that desperate battle would be like.

Old Master Tian sighed, pulled a bottle of alcohol out from underneath the table, and took a drink. “Fortunately,” he said calmly, “I am not his enemy.”

“If it’s not father, then it’s not me either,” said Frogboy with what seemed to be a sigh of relief.

“Of course it’s not you,” laughed Old Master Tian. “You’re not worthy.”

“Who is worthy? The person who killed Zheng Nanyuan’s twenty-six subordinates?”

“It wasn’t a person who killed them. It was a group of people, an organization. Qiu Budao’s squads were infiltrated by this organization, and that is why the same technique was used in all the killings.”

“That technique is especially fearsome, right?”

“Do you want to find them and test it out?” Old Master Tian let out another cold laugh. “I’m afraid if you do you’ll be sitting in that precious wheelchair of yours for the rest of your life.”

Xiao Jun gazed off into the distance, as if he were thinking about something that no one else could even imagine. "Perhaps I am not worthy, either."

"Worthy of what?"

"Worthy to be the enemy of the Laughing General," he said coldly. "But regardless, I must be."

—Did some unresolvable enmity exist between Xiao Jun and General Li? Some secret matter?

This time, inexplicably, Frogboy didn't ask any questions. He hated prying into people's personal affairs.

"Why don't you ask me about it?" said Xiao Jun.

"Ask about what?"

"Why I must fight Laughing General."

"I know the Laughing General is the reason you are here to begin with."

"But why haven't you asked me why?"

Frogboy laughed. He didn't really want to laugh, but he did. "You're saying I should ask you about it?"

Xiao Jun once again looked off into the distance. After some time passed, he spoke again. "I have my arm, and my life. If I can fight him, it will be worth it, regardless if I live or die. What does 'should' mean, and what does 'shouldn't' mean?" He slowly stood up. "I just hope I can find him before anyone else does."

"You can find him?"

"Perhaps," he said. "Because I now understand a bit about Qiu Budao."

"Oh?"

"His greatest weakness was his gambling. Everything started there. The people who infiltrated his squads met him at the gambling hall."

Actually, his statement did not make clear his true intentions. But Old Man Tian sighed and looked at his son. "If you were half as smart as Chamber Lord Xiao, I would be really happy."

Xiao Jun didn't hear the comment.

In that exact moment, he was already atop the wall surrounding the courtyard outside.

"You really think he can find them?" asked Frogboy. "How will he do it?"

"The thirteen men who infiltrated Qiu Budao's squads made contact with him through gambling," said Old Master Tian. "Sun Jicheng is the Laughing General, their enemy. If the Laughing General wants to track them down, how will he do it?"

"By going to the gambling hall."

"The Laughing General has decided to go to battle, so of course he's looking for them. Therefore, if Xiao Jun wants to find the Laughing General, how will he do it?"

"By going to the gambling hall."

Old Master Tian sighed. "Finally you display a bit of intelligence. You're not that stupid after all."

Frogboy sighed. "If I were half as smart as Chamber Lord Xiao, I don't think father would be very happy."

"Why?"

Frogboy took the small half-empty bottle of alcohol and drained it in one drink. "Because I remember something father once told me. Smart people don't live for very long."

“Big Zhao’s” was just a small restaurant, but it was very famous. More famous than even the big restaurants.

The boss of “Big Zhao’s” was neither big nor fat, nor was surnamed Zhao.

Actually, the big, fat, tall man surnamed Zhao was an assistant. But the name “Big Zhao’s” actually came from him, and a lot of people assumed he was the owner and the owner was the assistant.

—Not all big restaurants are better than small restaurants, and not all owners have bigger reputations than assistants. If you think about it, a lot of things in the world are like this.

April 17th, before dusk.

“Big Zhao’s” wasn’t open today, because Big Zhao had been up all night having fun and needed to rest.

If the assistant rested, the owner also rested. Because if the assistant quit, the restaurant would go out of business.

So when the assistant needed to sleep, even if the kitchen caught on fire, he would sleep. Nobody could wake him up.

But today, they woke him up, and he didn’t dare complain.

Because the people who woke him up were the two drunks from the night before, the two people being chased by the Flowered Flag Sect and the local government.

These type of people were not the type to offend. Otherwise one might end up like the Flower Flag Sect’s old Mr. Wang, dead in your own urine-soaked pants.

So, whatever they wanted, one dared not hold back.

Big Zhao might have a big gut, but he didn’t have real guts.

The two people ordered eight dishes, eight appetizers, twenty steamed buns, as well as a vat of Lianhua baijiu. And they scarfed it down in the blink of an eye.

Wu Tao ate ravenously, as did Ingot.

But Ingot was already getting full. He'd never seen someone who could eat even half as much as Wu Tao.

"If you sleep well you can have plenty of energy," said Wu Tao. "And if you eat well, you can have plenty of strength. Even if you're just a night soil collector [3], you still need to build up your energy and strength before you work. Regardless of what you do in life, it's the same."

"Are you full yet?" asked Ingot.

"It seems about seventy to eighty percent."

"When you're finished, are you going to go collect night soil?"

"No. There are only three things I never learned to do."

"What three things?"

"Play chess, do embroidery, collect night soil."

Ingot didn't laugh. He just stared at him with his big eyes, then asked, "Other than eating and drinking, what can you do?"

"What does it look like to you?"

"It looks like you can kill people!" said Ingot. "I bet you're building up your energy to do some killing."

Wu Tao suddenly laughed heartily.

He didn't laugh often, but when he did he laughed hard. He seemed extremely happy.

Tones of irony and sadness often floated within his laughter, and usually it would stop suddenly.

“Do you believe dead people can come back to life sometimes?” he asked Ingot

“Nope.”

“You’ll believe it in just a moment.”

“Why’s that?”

Wu Tao downed a bowl of Lianhua baijiu. “Because right now there’s a dead person about to be resurrected.”

Ingot stared at him for a while, then downed his own bowl of Lianhua and asked, “I suppose the dead person is you?”

“Correct,” admitted Wu Tao. “I’m the dead person.”

“But you’re not dead.”

“Wrong. What you should say is, Wu Tao is not dead.”

“You’re not Wu Tao?” blurted Ingot.

“Sometimes I am, sometimes I’m not.”

“When you’re not Wu Tao, who are you?”

“A dead man.” Wu Tao’s eyes suddenly twinkled. “A dead man who will be resurrected any moment.”

Ingot laughed. “I don’t understand,” he said. “You already died your horrible death in this life. Why come back to life?”

“Because there are people who won’t let me die.”

“What people?”

“Enemies.” Wu Tao drank another bowl of alcohol. “So many enemies that I can’t kill them all.”

“If they are your enemies, then why won’t they let you die?”

“Because I’m more useful alive than dead,” he said. “Also, they think my last death was too swift and easy. They want me to die again, slowly.” He continued on coolly: “Unfortunately, this time, I don’t care who wants me dead, they won’t find it very easy to pull off.”

Ingot slapped the table forcefully. “Great! I approve!”

“Approve what?”

“I approve of you not wanting to die so easily. If you’re gonna die, at least you can take out some of those endless enemies first.”

Wu Tao laughed heartily and slapped Ingot’s shoulder. “Great! I like it.”

“Like what?”

“You.” Wu Tao tipped a bowl of wine to Ingot, then drank it down. “In a few years, you’ll be a great man. I drink to you!”

Ingot didn’t drink. Instead, he asked, “You mean I’m not a great man right now?”

“You are.” Wu Tao downed another bowl. “You already are.”

He put the bowl down, then picked up a pair of chopsticks and started tapping out a tune onto the bowl. He sang, “A cup of alcohol you can’t finish drinking, a sad song you can’t finish singing. A treasured sword you can’t drop, a tall building you can’t climb. A hero’s blood which can never stop flowing, your enemy’s heads which can never all be lopped off.”

The bleak, solemn song suddenly stopped, and Wu Tao shouted: “Go!”

As he shouted, the chopsticks in his hands suddenly flew forward, and with a “ding” sound, shot into the door.

The restaurant hadn’t opened for the day, so the door wasn’t open. The chopsticks penetrated the door, then shot out the other side.

Two miserable cries rang out from outside, and then people started shouting: "It's him, it's him!"

"If you know it's me, then why don't you come in?"

Nobody came in. No one dared to.

Wu Tao stood, grabbing Ingot's arm. "Since they won't come in, why don't we go out."

The door was closed.

However, it seemed Wu Tao didn't seem to notice that. He strode forward, and then a "crash" sound rang out. Pieces of the door flew out in every direction.

The street outside was quiet; passersby had already fled, seeing as the little restaurant was completely surrounded.

Two moaning men, each with a chopstick embedded in his shoulder, were being dragged away by their compatriots.

In Wu Tao's hand, two ordinary chopsticks could shoot through a wooden door and stab all the way to the bone. Each chopstick had stabbed into exactly the same position on each man, and both were the same distance away from the heart.

They weren't dead, but that had nothing to do with them.

They lived because Wu Tao had no interest in taking their lives.

Ingot could see that clearly.

What he didn't understand was how a person could shoot two chopsticks from behind a three inch thick door, and hit exactly the same spot on both people.

—There was no way he could see through the door. That was completely impossible.

—Could it be that he could sense their position by listening to the sound of their breathing?

That wasn't possible, and yet, it wasn't impossible.

There are some things that are slightly possible, and if possible, perhaps only possible for one person.

As for that point, it might not be possible for most people to understand. And yet other than Ingot, there were others who could see it.

Amidst the crowd of people surrounding the restaurant, someone suddenly started clapping.

“Listening to the breathing to determine the position when you can't see. Piercing a floating leaf with the power to penetrate walls. I never imagined such kung fu actually existed in the world. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I would call myself a rotten son of a bitch before believing.”

The man spoke with a very conclusive tone.

The first half of his speech was quite elegant, extremely elegant. Only wizened sect leaders of the previous generation would speak like that.

But the last half was not elegant at all, especially the last line. That part sounded like something a ruffian would say.

This person was very unique.

He wore a voluminous cotton robe. Of the thirteen buttons on the front, only about five were clasped. Sticking out of the bottom were a pair of dilapidated flax shoes.

But clasped around his waist was a belt that only a young prince or a nouveau riche poppy would wear, a gold belt inlaid with a dozen or so pearls and gems.

He didn't look handsome at all, but the more you looked at them, the less horrible he looked.

Tall and strong, he wasn't young, but when he smiled, he looked like a child.

Ingot thought this person looked very interesting. It seemed Wu Tao did, too.

—Annoying people always make people feel annoyed, and interesting people always make people feel interested.

This truth is as simple as the the saying “chicken eggs are not duck eggs.” Some people enjoy doing things which annoy others.

As he strode out from the crowd, he laughed. With a smile, he looked at Wu Tao and said, “I’ve seen a lot of famous experts of the martial world. But to be able to see your excellency’s kung fu today, my eyes have truly been opened.” He deliberately let out a sigh. “But I feel a bit of regret.”

“Oh?”

“I regret that I still don’t know how to address your excellency,” he said. “Should I call you Mr. Wu? Or Big Boss Sun?” He laughed again. “Or perhaps the most correct is to call you General Li.”

“What should I call you?” retorted Wu Tao.

“I’m not important,” said the man with a laugh. “Even if you call me a rotten son of a bitch, it wouldn’t matter.”

Ingot laughed, showing his two dimples. “If you’re a son of a bitch, what does that make your father? A bitch?”

People in the crowd began to cry out in anger, but the man held them back. Smiling, he said, “You calling me a son of a bitch, doesn’t mean I actually am a son of a bitch. And sometimes a person you don’t call a son of bitch, is actually a super bitch. These are two completely different situations.”

“That makes sense,” said Ingot. “So are you, or are you not a son of a bitch?”

“Do I look like one?”

“Not really.” Ingot squinted. “At the most, you look like a scoundrel.”

The man laughed heartily. He seemed quite happy, not the least bit angry.

“You don’t look very much like an ingot,” he said. “Well, maybe a little. Sort of like the ones I used to make out of flour when I was a kid. Except they always ended up getting moldy.”

Ingot laughed. He didn’t seem to be the least bit angry either.

“A moldy flour ingot and a medium-sized, mid-level scoundrel. It seems we’re both the same: good-for-nothing.”

“You’re good for something, but I’m not a thing at all.” He winked. “Because I’m a person.”

Wu Tao, who had been staring at them this whole time, suddenly asked. “Are you surnamed Tian?”

“Yes,” admitted the man. He truly was surnamed Tian.

“Then that makes you Tian Yonghua’s son, Frogboy.”

“That’s me.”

“Why wouldn’t you just say so?”

“I still don’t know who you are,” said Wu Tao. “So why should I let you know who I am?”

“You know enough already. As do I.”

“What is it that I know?”

“That I am the person you’re looking for.”

“And what is it that you know?”

“That I am the person you’re looking for!” His eyes flashed. “I know that hidden in your belt is a flexible Burmese sword, capable of splitting hairs

[4]. And hidden in your garment are thirteen deadly flying flags, the same concealed weapon used by Tian Yonghua in the past.”

Frogboy sighed. With a bitter laugh, he said, “Is there anything in the world you don’t know?”

“There’s one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m the person you were looking for, and you found me. You have blade in your belt and hidden weapons in your garment. You can attack at any time. Why don’t you?”

“Because I’m not worthy.”

Some people would die before speaking such words, but Frogboy said them with a chuckle. He continued, “Even my father said I’m not worthy to be your opponent. How could I dare to make a move?”

“Then why are you here?”

“I just wanted to see what kind of person you are,” he said. “Your true opponent went somewhere else. Otherwise he would be here.”

“Who is that?”

“Xiao Jun,” said Frogboy. “He has a heart of stone, and attacks like lightning. He’s the Chamber Lord of the Beggar Sect’s newly founded Torture Chamber.”

Wu Tao laughed coldly. “You think he’s worthy to be my opponent?”

“He himself said he’s not.” Frogboy sighed. “But he still wants to give it a try.”

“And why isn’t he here now?”

“He went looking for you, and has been at it for some time.”

“Where did he go to look for me?”

“He calculated that you would eventually go to the gambling hall to track down the people who paid off Qiu Budaο. He’s most likely there right now, waiting for you.”

“And why didn’t you go there, too?”

Frogboy sighed again. “Because I’m kind of stupid. I can’t figure out things the way he does. So I just sat foolishly waiting, blissfully ignorant. In the end, he didn’t find you, but I did, by just waiting.”

Wu Tao laughed, and it sounded heartbreaking. Who could not feel dread upon hearing it?

“So are we going or not?” asked Ingot.

“Going where?”

“To the gambling hall. I’ve never seen what a real gambling hall looks like.”

Wu Tao’s eyes gleamed. “You will soon,” he said coolly.

Ingot looked really excited, as if he had no idea how many countless enemies with the intent to kill lie in wait there. It seemed he had already forgotten how frightening Xiao Jun was.

He just wanted to get there as quickly as possible, and do some f*cking gambling!

Frogboy seemed excited as well.

“Okay, I’ll take you there,” he said. “And if you don’t have anything to gamble with, I can lend you something.”

“You have money?”

“Of course,” he responded. “Tons.”

He pulled out a big bag, but unfortunately it only contained an assortment of copper coins and a few silvers.

“That’s your tons of money? It doesn’t seem like much.” Ingot seemed a bit disappointed.

“This is all the money I have in the world! And you’re saying it’s not much?”

Ingot shook his head with a bitter laugh. “It seems you, a rich person, and me, a beggar, aren’t too different in the end.”

Frogboy, his face solemn, his tone respectful, said, “A person should not have too much wealth. If you get money with your left hand, you should spend it with your right hand. Then you can be carefree, and extremely happy.”

“That makes sense,” said Ingot.

“If you have too much wealth, and don’t spend it all, then if you lose it, you will be upset. You will constantly be worried about it being robbed or stolen. You’ll fear being swindled or cheated. You’ll worry about people coming to borrow money from you all the time. Plus, you can’t take it with you when you die. That is true unhappiness.”

“Makes sense.”

“Being able to spend money happily, that is true wealth. And so, I am rich.”

“You definitely are.”

“Therefore, my riches are relatively few. I don’t worry about people robbing or cheating me, and I don’t worry about people coming to borrow from me. But, all you have to do is ask, and I’ll lend it to you.”

It is usually a joyful matter to have someone offer to lend you money. Who would have imagined that Ingot would suddenly become cautious. “Do you need collateral?” he asked.

“Nope.”

“What about interest?”

“No.”

Magnanimous offers like this are not common. Ingot asked another question: "Can I not return it?"

Frogboy laughed. His followup question was even more astounding than Ingot's original question. "Can I ask you to not return it?"

"You can!" responded Ingot, ecstatic. He grabbed Frogboy's bag.

People willing to borrow in this fashion are not common in the world, and people willing to lend money in this way are even rarer.

But both of them seemed quite happy.

"If I were Big Boss Sun, I definitely wouldn't be as happy as this," said Frogboy. "He definitely wouldn't be willing to hand over all of his wealth to you, nor would you be willing to ask him to."

Ingot let out a loud laugh. "Fortunately, you aren't Big Boss Sun. You're just a medium-sized, mid-level scoundrel."

"Absolutely correct."

But Ingot had made a mistake.

There was no need for him to borrow money for gambling, because after arriving at the gambling hall, they found that money was not being gambled.

The people there wanted to gamble with lives!

**

[1] I'm changing the name of the chapter from Undroppable Sword to this new translation.

[2] The scholar tree ... is a type of tree ... -__- <http://tinyurl.com/nzrpek>n

[3] Night soil is human excrement, which they would collect to use for fertilizer <http://tinyurl.com/opf6bb>q

[4] This is a type of sword that has no hilt, which would make it easy to conceal in a belt. <http://tinyurl.com/o8x65a>4

CHAPTER 9 – WAGERING PEOPLE NOT LIVES

Part 1

August 17th. Night.

Lanterns had been lit, just now. One hundred and ninety-six exquisite cinnabar lanterns.

Big Boss Tang of the “As You Wish Gambling Hall” paid close attention to pomp and ceremony, and believed that people liked brightly lit places. If people were going to spend money, they would likely spend a bit more in a well-lit location.

The interior designer who decorated the gambling hall had recommended ninety lanterns, but Big Boss Tang had insisted on one hundred ninety-six.

It was not a mistake.

As You Wish Gambling Hall brought in more income than any other seven or eight gambling halls combined.

Big Boss Tang rarely made mistakes, and as of now, didn't actually need to do anything.

The only thing he needed to do was sit at home and count the silver flowing in. If silver didn't flow in, gold flowed in.

The light of one hundred ninety-six lamps was sufficient. Underneath that amount of light, even the wrinkles on a carefully made up thirty-five year old woman could be seen clearly.

But it seemed as if Xiao Jun saw nothing.

People filled the gambling hall, people both good looking and bad.

All sorts of things happened in the gambling hall, things both good and bad.

But Xiao Jun saw none of them.

Of course all sorts of people came here to gamble, even if it were at the risk of losing a wife.

No one knew what Xiao Jun was doing there, and no one dared to ask.

His facial expression was just too fearsome, and underneath the bright light, it grew even more terrifying.

It looked almost transparent.

Part 2

Just as the lanterns lit up, Frogboy arrived with Wu Tao and Ingot.

Of course, many of the people in the gambling hall knew him.

He was no prince who abstained from drinking, feasting, women and gambling.

He was a close friend of Big Boss Tang.

Anyone in Jinan who ran this kind of business needed to be a friend of the Flowered Flag Sect, otherwise as soon as one hundred and ninety-six lanterns were lit in the grand hall, they would be smashed to pieces.

And so Frogboy made quite a grand entrance. Even people who didn't really know him wanted to call out a greeting.

One needed to have quite a bit of face to call out a greeting to Frogboy, and even more to be able to call him "Frogbro."

It seemed quite a few people had the face to greet him. Not a few called out, "Frogbro, what are you going to play today?"

“I’m not playing today,” he replied with a shake of his head. “I brought two friends here today, they’re going to play. They’re my guests.”

Only people with a lot of face could earn the right to be called Frogboy’s friend, and even though Wu Tao and Ingot didn’t seem that type, people had no choice but to look at them in a favorable light.

Xiao Jun didn’t notice.

He didn’t notice them and they didn’t seem to notice him.

He seemed to only be able to see the things in that other world in which he resided.

And the pai gow tiles in front of him. [1]

Pai gow is very fun, as long as you don’t lose.

Most gambling is like that, fun as long as you don’t lose.

Unfortunately, he had won eight times and lost nine times.

—Or perhaps was currently losing the ninth.

“What game would the two guests like to play?”

“Pai gow.”

Frogboy’s two guests were immediately led to the largest pai gow table in the house.

“Which position would the two guests like to assume?”

“Heaven position.”

The player currently occupying the Heaven position immediately left.

The dealer was not an employee of the gambling hall.

Those who run gambling halls cannot do any gambling themselves, lest the gambling hall itself be lost.

The dealer, a fat man with gigantic stomach, had an enormous coin purse, and a reckless air.

How could you be a dealer in a gambling hall unless you were the type of person willing to spend recklessly?

Ingot immediately produced Frogboy's bag of wealth, then looked up at the dealer.

He hoped the dealer would look back at him and display some sort of admiration for his bold extravagance.

The only thing the dealer wanted to do was knock this young beggar aside and grab back the person who had just vacated the Heaven position.

But he dared not.

Who would dare to be disrespectful to Frogboy's friends?

The dealer rolled the dice, and they came up three. Heaven Position would go first, the dealer third.

The third place dealer unexpectedly played a club of panthers. [2] If the young beggar hadn't interfered and messed things up, the dealer could have won about two thousand silver from the Heaven position with this play, since that position's pieces were crap.

Ingot had lost, and was completely cleared out.

Then, he was the only person who hadn't place a new bet on the table. Everyone waited, even the dealer, looking like they weren't sure whether they wanted to laugh or cry. What would he bet?

The only thing he had left to bet, was himself.

"Why don't you put yourself down on the table?" said Frogboy. "Don't tell me you forgot that you're an ingot?"

The dealer gaped.

Now that Frogbro had suggested it, what would they do if the young beggar actually laid down on the table?

He never imagined that the “ingot” would suddenly shake his head and say: “No, I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because this ingot is far too valuable. I don’t think they could afford to match up against me.”

The dealer let out a sigh, as did everyone else. But Frogboy didn’t give up. “What are you going to wager this round, then?”

“Some gold.”

“Gold?” A young beggar, he clearly didn’t have a single scrap of gold. Frogboy couldn’t help but ask: “What gold?”

“Nearby. There’s gold everywhere,” he said nonchalantly. “I just need to go grab it. I can any time.”

“When do you plan to do that?”

“Right now.” He strode toward the exit. “Just hold on, I’ll be back in a bit.”

Please wait?

Did anyone believe that he could really get his hands on some gold? Did anyone believe that he would bring it back?

The dealer laughed loudly. “It looks like the Heaven position is now empty. Who would like to come play a few rounds?”

Wu Tao suddenly stood up. “Me,” he said. “I’m here, you leave.”

Choking down a laugh, the dealer said, “Why do I have to leave?”

“Because,” replied Wu Tao coolly, “You can’t afford to bet what I will be betting. And you can’t afford to lose if you did.”

The dealer stared in shock. And then suddenly, he heard a voice from behind him say, "I'm here, you leave."

He turned around to find himself looking at a face as pale as a corpse's, as pale a corpse that had been sitting in an icebox for three months.

Who would dare to offend a person such as this?

The dealer left, as well as the two players in the other positions on the table. They got as far away as they could.

Everyone could tell that these two people would be doing some incredible gambling.

Of course Frogboy, didn't leave. He knew exactly how incredible this round of gambling would be. Incredible to the point of death.

The only thing he didn't know, was whose death it would be.

Part 3

In an instant, it suddenly seemed as if all one hundred ninety-six lanterns shone onto two faces.

The faces really did look like the faces of corpses.

Wu Tao sat in the Heaven position, Xiao Jun took the dealer's spot.

"You're here, as am I," said Xiao Jun. "You want to gamble, I'll join you."

"Good."

"Am I worthy?"

"You're worthy," said Wu Tao. "What I wish to gamble, only you can afford."

"What do you want to wager? Lives?"

“Wager lives? How many lives do you have?”

“Just one,” said Xiao Jun. “One is enough.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Why not? Perhaps before you had more than one life, but at the moment, you only have one left.”

“It’s precisely that way: I have only one life. It’s not enough,” said Wu Tao. “Therefore, we can’t gamble.”

“Why?”

“Because if you lose even once, you have no chance to recover your losses. That’s neither fun nor satisfying.”

“Then how do you want to gamble?”

“I always wager people, not lives.”

“Wager people?” Xiao Jun didn’t understand. “What’s the difference between wagering people and wagering lives?”

“They’re completely different. We both have only one life to wager, but as for people, well, there are many people.”

“The person you wish to wager isn’t yourself?”

“Of course not.”

“Then who is it?”

“Him.”

Wu Tao stretched out his hand and pointed a finger toward a man wearing grey clothing, with black hair and a pale face. “This time, I want to wager him. Whoever wins, gets him.”

The man in grey originally had a pale face, but now it had grown green.

Yet he stood there, unmoving.

Frogboy suddenly laughed. "This is some incredible gambling. Incredible through and through. You use people who have nothing to do with you as the stakes. That way, if the gambler loses, nothing happens to he himself."

"Not necessarily." Wu Tao coldly asked him: "If you lost, are you sure you could catch that person and hand him over to me?"

"No," admitted Frogboy, "I'm not sure."

"Then what happens if you lose?"

Frogboy didn't respond, so Wu Tao asked Xiao Jun: "How about you?"

Xiao Jun said nothing. He tossed the dice. One came up a four, the other, too low to mention.

It's not easy to roll so low, and yet Xiao Jun did.

Frogboy leaped up and shouted to the man in grey: "Flee! Flee! He lost you him, you need to flee!"

The man in grey didn't flee. In fact, not only did he not flee, he walked forward to stand in front of Wu Tao. His pale, greenish face had a smile on it, a somewhat horrifying smile.

"So I've been lost and given to you?" he asked Wu Tao earnestly.

"Yes."

"Well here I am, you can collect me up."

He had inexplicably and mysteriously been selected to be the stakes in a wager, and yet did not seem to find this strange. Furthermore, he handed himself over with not the slightest bit of discontent.

Frogboy stared in amazement.

He had never seen something so incredible in his entire life. Nobody had.

Even more incredible, from within the crowd suddenly appeared twelve additional men, each one wearing almost exactly the same grey clothes. They walked forward to stand in front of Wu Tao, and in the same strange, empty voice, said, "Why don't you collect me up?"

"I won one person. Why would I collect you all?"

"We are one person," the thirteen of them responded in unison. "But there is something different about me."

"What is that?"

"Other people have only one life. You yourself only have one."

"And all of you?" asked Wu Tao. "How many lives do you have? Thirteen?"

"We have nine hundred and ninety-nine."

"Nine and ninety-nine lives, all yours?"

"Yes."

Wu Tao sighed. Anyone with that many lives would have no fear of death."

The thirteen men nodded in unison, and then stretched out their arms.

They stretched out their left arms, except... they had no left arm.

Their left arms had all been chopped off, and in their places had been installed strangely-shaped, gleaming steel pincers. They looked peculiar, ugly, dextrous and deadly.

Up to now, no one had seen them stretch out their arms, nor had anyone seen the steel pincers. For them to suddenly do this only increased the unspeakable bizarre sense of horror.

It seemed that they all used the same stance to extend their arms, a simple stance, but a stance in which the position of each person's body was very strange. They all complemented each other: the thirteen steel pincers

almost seemed as if they were being controlled by some sort of machine. And the thirteen men seemed as if they were some sort of exquisite robot.

Within the flickering light, the thirteen steel pincers shot towards Wu Tao's ankles, knees, wrists, elbows, shoulders, head, neck and larynx.

In a split second, every joint and vital point on his body became vulnerable to them, and all routes of escape sealed off.

Were he made of wood, it would mean he was about to be snapped into pieces. Were he made of rock, it would mean he was about to be crushed to bits.

Even were he made of iron, he would still be unable to evade the grasp of the steel pincers.

Anyone would believe him unable to escape death. But who could know for sure?

At that exact moment, all one hundred ninety-six lanterns in the great hall all went out.

The brilliant lantern light in the hall suddenly became sheets of pitch black. It was so black that even the gleaming of the steel pincers could not be seen.

Some people like darkness.

Within darkness, some people are capable of doing certain things which they normally would never think of doing.

Some people can only think in darkness.

Throughout history, many deep philosophies and secret plans were given birth to within darkness.

But darkness can be frightening.

People will always have an inexplicable fear of darkness.

Within the darkness of As You Wish Gambling hall, people began screaming and rushing around in panic. But then they stopped.

Because suddenly, thirty six of the one hundred ninety-six lanterns lit up again.

As the lantern light spread, the crowd found that the thirteen men in grey were nowhere to be seen. Neither was Wu Tao.

Another thirty-six lanterns lit, and the floor manager of the gambling hall shouted, "Big Boss Tang has prepared a hundred jugs of fine alcohol and a hundred tables of food for everyone. Everyone here tonight is an honored guest of Big Boss Tang. It's all on the house."

All one hundred and ninety-six lanterns now shone. Everyone in the crowd watched as staff members entered carrying food and alcohol. And they also watched as the young beggar returned carrying a large, heavy bag.

No person can simultaneously extinguish one hundred and ninety-six large lanterns.

No one knew how it happened. Furthermore, no one knew how the thirteen men and Wu Tao had suddenly disappeared, nor where they had gone to.

But everyone could see Ingot walking toward the table, the big bag in his hands letting off "clinking" sounds.

Just from the sound of the clinking, everyone could discern that the objects in the bag were very heavy, perhaps as heavy as gold.

The young beggar really had brought back gold to gamble. Where had he acquired such an amount?

Part 4

Xiao Jun still sat there, his posture exactly the same as before the lanterns had been extinguished, his face still as expressionless, as if nothing had just happened.

Jugs of alcohol and platters of food were already being served.

Frogboy shook his head and sighed. "This person is a real treat-lunatic," he murmured, "and even seems to be a moneyphobe."

Ingot heard these strange expressions as he put down his bag, and couldn't help but ask, "What does 'treat-lunatic' mean?"

"It means this person loves to treat people so much that they've become a lunatic."

"And what does 'moneyphobe' mean?"

"It means this person is afraid of being too rich, so he spends his money crazily by treating others." He sighed again. "The lights going out had nothing to do with him, yet he treats everyone."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Other than Big Boss Tang, who could it be?"

"Ok." Ingot gave a thumbs up. "This Big Boss Tang seems like a big boss after all. I like him."

Frogboy sighed again. "You shouldn't."

"Why not?" asked Ingot.

"Because he definitely wouldn't like you."

"How do you know that?"

It seemed Frogboy was about to say something, then changed his mind and said something else: "Your friend suddenly disappeared, and you didn't even ask about it. How could anyone come to like an unfriendly person such as yourself?"

“He may have disappeared, but he’ll return. So why ask?” Ingot seemed very confident. “In fact, there will still be time to ask, even after he comes back.”

“Wrong,” said Frogboy, also sounding very confident. “Your friend will not be coming back.”

“Why not?”

“How can a dead person come back?”

Ingot laughed, so hard that he bent over at the waist. “What makes you think he’s dead? If he can die, half of everybody else would be dead.”

After he finished laughing, Frogboy asked, “You believe he won’t die? That he will definitely return?”

“Definitely.”

“What’s in your bag?”

“Gold.”

“Do you want to make a bet?” he asked Ingot. “You can bet your bag of gold.”

“You already loaned out all your wealth. If you lose, what will you give me?”

“A person.”

“Ok,” said Ingot. “I’ll make a bet with you. If he doesn’t come back within one hour, then I lose.”

Frogboy laughed heartily. “Then you’ve lost already.”

**

[1] Pai gow is a Chinese domino gambling game. <http://tinyurl.com/ouyblnw>

[2] I really don't know much about pai gow, and couldn't get much information. I'm not sure if I'm correctly translating the game terminology, but it's not really relevant to the story, so I'll just go with as direct a translation as possible.

CHAPTER 10 – THE FIRST STAR

Part 1

April 17th. Night.

The night grew deeper, the lantern light brighter. The aroma of alcohol, meat and fish filled As You Wish Gambling Hall, as well as the fragrance of makeup and perfume. When all the smells mixed together, it actually smelled somewhat foul.

Many things in the world are like this.

Ingot patted the big bag that he had carried in. “Did you hear that? Mr. Chicken here said I’ve lost already. [1] I worked so hard to get you here, I really don’t want to lose you so quickly.”

The cloth bag couldn’t hear what he said, but Frogboy could.

“I’m not Mr. Chicken, I’m Mr. Tian.”

“Mr. Chicken, Mr. Tian, whatever. They’re both about the same.”

“About the same?” asked Frogboy. “Why do you say that?”

“Well, you can eat chickens and you can eat frogs,” he chuckled. “Right now, I feel like eating chicken. Penniless chickens are not a common thing to be able to eat.”

“Hold on a moment.”

“I’m in a real hurry, why should I wait?”

“Because I have two things I still need to tell you,” responded Frogboy. “You really need to remember them.”

“Ok. Go ahead, I’m listening.”

“Frogs and chickens are different,” he said. “There are least three areas of difference.”

“Which three?”

“Frogs have four legs, chickens only have two. Frogs can jump, very high, in fact. Chickens can’t. And chickens can lay eggs, frogs can’t.”

“That’s true,” said Ingot, clapping. “I never imagined you were so knowledgable. I really admire that.”

“You should come back often to learn things from me. You, too, can become more and more knowledgable.”

“Mr. Tian, what is the second thing you wanted to tell me.”

“You must never casually believe what other people say,” Frogboy said. “If someone randomly drags a bag in from outside and says it is full of gold, you shouldn’t just believe it.”

Ingot jumped up like a frog and let out a shout like a rooster whose neck had just been stepped on.

“You don’t believe me? You don’t believe my bag is filled with gold? Do I look like a liar?”

“Yes, you do,” said Frogboy with a smile. “Very much so.”

Ingot stared at him with an angry look, and then suddenly laughed.

“Yeah, I guess I do. Sometimes when I look in the mirror I think the same thing. Anybody who thinks I won’t deceive people is a real fool.”

“I’m no fool. Therefore, I want to see the contents of your bag.”

“Okay, go ahead and look.”

Not only did Ingot unexpectedly agree, he personally handed the bag over to Frogboy.

The bag contained no gold, not even a single bit.

It was filled with a random assortment of copper and iron bits.

Frogboy laughed. "That's gold?"

Ingot didn't laugh. In a very serious tone, he said, "Of course. All of it is. One hundred percent, died-in-the-wool pure gold."

Frogboy looked at him, his expression like that of a bridegroom who, upon entering the bridal chamber, found that he had stepped on a pile of dog feces.

"Are you crazy?" he asked Ingot. "What's wrong with you?"

"I'm not crazy, and I don't have anything wrong with me. But I do have a star." He seemed very serious. "Therefore, even though the bag only contains a random bunch of iron and copper, in my hands, it can become gold. One hundred percent pure gold."

"You have a star?" Frogboy looked even more astonished. "What kind of star?"

"A star of blessing."

"A star of blessing?" As of now, Frogboy did not think he was crazy. But he asked another question: "Where did this star of blessing come from?"

"It fell down from heaven," said Ingot. "A star of blessing from heaven, with one tap, it can turn iron into gold."

Frogboy's expression suddenly changed. In dead earnest, he asked, "Can you let me see this star?"

"Sure."

Ingot felt around his garments and then pulled out a star. It appeared to be nothing more than a simple five-pointed star carved out of wood, with a character engraved on either side.

It was impossible to see clearly from a distance what character it was. Frogboy accepted it with two hands and looked at it, then handed it to Xiao Jun. Xiao Jun's facial expression changed, he handed it respectfully back to Ingot.

"So what did you see?" asked Ingot casually.

"A star," said Frogboy grimly. "A star of blessing."

Ingot tapped the star onto the bag. "So what is in this bag?" he asked Frogboy.

"Gold. One hundred percent pure gold."

Ingot laughed. "Therefore, am I able to eat chicken now?"

How could a bag of iron and copper suddenly become gold? Why would Frogboy admit to this?

What was this star of blessing? How could it have the magical power to turn iron into gold? Nobody knew.

Part 2

Most of the tables had already resumed play. The losers wanted to retake their losses, the winners wanted to win more. When gamblers gamble, it is difficult to distract them.

And little in the world could distract Ingot's appetite.

He had already begun wolfing down food and drink. It was free, and when it came to free food, he never let himself be second place in line. Even though someone had just said he would lose a bet, he still had to eat.

Frogboy had already begun to admire him: "This little punk can really hold his own and also let go. Even if he lost his own life, he wouldn't care."

Xiao Jun appeared to be off somewhere else as usual, except he suddenly said in a cold voice: "He didn't lose. You did."

And it was true.

Frogboy turned his head to see the supposedly dead Wu Tao walking in, not a scratch on him, not a hair missing.

But Frogboy had some missing hairs.

Whenever he ran into a situation he couldn't comprehend, he would pull violently at his own hair. He pulled his hair and said to Wu Tao, "How did you get back?"

"It seems I walked back," said Wu Tao. "Using my two legs."

"And the other people?"

"What other people?"

"The people who were about to smash every vital point in your body?"

"They're back too."

"Where are they?" Frogboy didn't understand. "How come I can't see them."

"Because," said Wu Tao coolly, "They didn't come back completely. Only a bit of each came back."

How could a bit of someone come back? At first Frogboy didn't understand, but then... he did.

Wu Tao had a bag in hand. When he opened it, Frogboy understood completely.

Inside the bag were thirteen steel pincers, exactly the same pincers that the thirteen men had been wearing.

The pincers were their killing weapons, but also their means of defense. They would not arbitrarily give them to someone else, any more than a person would casually chop off their arm to give to another.

What about the rest of their body parts? No one asked, nor did they need to.

Ingot laughed, then rushed over and clasped Wu Tao's shoulders with two chicken-grease covered hands. He glanced back at Frogboy, "So, is he dead?"

Frogboy laughed bitterly. "I don't think dead people can walk."

"So, he's back, right?"

"Seems so."

"And did you just make a bet with me?"

"Yep."

"Did you lose, or did I lose?"

"I lost."

"So now what?"

Frogboy laughed, and then suddenly asked a question: "Didn't I say that if I lost I would owe you a person?"

"Yes."

"Then I need to think for a moment about how to get a person to pay you with. Although, I never said exactly what type of person I would owe you." Frogboy chuckled. "After all, I could provide you with a blind, ugly, fat, stinky, bald, diseased, cleft-lipped *****. She could accompany you every day, from morning till night. You couldn't refuse, you would have to accept her."

Ingot gaped.

Even he could be fooled. Others might not think it possible, and of course he had never thought it possible.

Frogboy laughed heartily, and it seemed he was preparing to go out and find such a horrible young lady. He laughed proudly. "By chance, I happened

to know of exactly such a girl who lives in the area. And by chance, she happens to be looking for a young man just like you.”

He really did seem like he was about to leave to find the horrific-sounding girl, when Wu Tao suddenly asked him to stop. “There’s something that, by chance, I need to consult with you about.”

Frogboy instantly stopped. “One of my best attributes is that I am extremely willing to help others.” He smiled happily. “Anyone who comes to me asking for advice, I will give them some, no matter what.”

“Well that is excellent.”

“With which matter do you need my advice?”

“It seems there are a total of one hundred ninety-six lanterns here.”

“You didn’t count incorrectly. Not at all.”

“How is it possible that one hundred ninety-six lantern could all be extinguished at exactly the same time?”

Frogboy’s tilted his head. “That is a truly odd thing, but not impossible,” he said. “If ten concealed weapons experts were here, and they all shot out ten projectiles, then the lamps would go out.” What he said made sense. “This is a place of crouching tigers and hidden dragons [1]. Even if a hundred such masters were here, I wouldn’t find it strange.”

Wu Tao could not deny that what he said made sense. And yet, he suddenly flew up into the air, placed his left hand onto one of the crossbeams in the roof, and grabbed one of the lanterns with his left hand. Everyone cheered as he floated back down and placed the lantern in front of Frogboy.

“If the lanterns were extinguished by means of a concealed weapon, then there would definitely be a hole in the lantern.” He asked Frogboy: “Do you see any holes?”

“No.”

“The lantern is lit, and the paper is wrapped around all eight sides very tightly. Even the slightest hole would ruin the beautiful craftsmanship, and

anyone would be able to see it.” He continued, “If there is no hole, could the lantern have been extinguished by means of concealed weapon?”

Frogboy shook his head and laughed bitterly. “As of now, you don’t need to consult me any further. I know how the lanterns were extinguished.”

Everyone looked shocked. Even Ingot couldn’t figure it out.

“What happened?”

“These lanterns are all the handiwork of the famous Qian Erdai from the Capital City. Even though the characters in his name mean ‘number two stupid,’ he is actually not the least bit stupid, and has incredibly dextrous hands. At the top of each of his exquisite lanterns is a spring mechanism. With a mere touch, a small metal cover will clamp down over the lampshade and the wick, thus extinguishing the lantern.”

“Above the lamps are hooks,” said Wu Tao, “also attached to spring devices, all of which are connected by thin copper wires to a handle. All one hundred and ninety-six lanterns can actually be extinguished by about ten people. As long as they all pull the lever at the same time, all one hundred ninety-six lamps would be extinguished simultaneously.” He continued coolly, “All you need to pull off a trick like this, is people with hands. It’s a lot easier to find people with hands, than to find top notch experts who can shoot and never miss.”

Ingot listened, spellbound. “I think I need to go find Qian Erdai and get me some of his lamps to mess around with.”

“However,” said Wu Tao, “to cause all the lamps here to go out at exactly the same time, is actually not very easy. I think perhaps only one person could make that happen.”

“Who?”

“Big Boss Tang.”

“No, no way,” said Frogboy, shaking his head. “Why would he do something like that?”

“Because someone asked him to. And there’s only one person who that could be.”

“Who?”

“You,” said Wu Tao, looking at Frogboy coldly. “Everyone in Jinan City knows that Young Master Tian and Big Boss Tang are good friends.”

“Me!” Frogboy looked baffled. “Why would I do something like that? I’m not crazy, and extinguishing the lamps doesn’t benefit me at all.”

“It does,” said Wu Tao. “My death will benefit everyone, it doesn’t matter who you are.”

“And what does the lanterns being extinguished have to do with you living or dying?” asked Frogboy. “Why do they have to be out for you to die?”

“Because once the lanterns are extinguished, Lord Xiao Jun could make a move,” replied Wu Tao. “His fists skills, palm skills, blade skills, lightness arts, and concealed weapons are all incredibly refined. That precise moment when the light is extinguished, he could attack my vital parts with concealed weapons. Who’s to say I wouldn’t be dead? At least,” he said coolly, “that’s what you thought.”

At that moment, Xiao Jun had been sitting directly in front of him. All Wu Tao’s paths of retreat were blocked by the deadly thirteen steel pincers.

If Xiao Jun had made a move and attacked the vital points on his torso, it would have been difficult to avoid.

An expert like Xiao Jun could attack someone directly in front of him even with his eyes closed. Having already determined the position of the vital points, once the lights went out, he would have an advantage.

Frogboy sighed. “Everything you said makes sense. If he wanted to take your life, that was definitely the best opportunity.”

“And so you gave him the opportunity,” said Wu tao.

“He wasn’t confident enough to take it?”

“No, he’s not,” said Wu Tao. “Perhaps he is too young, and lacks the ruthlessness to such a thing.”

“If he had, would you be dead now?”

Wu Tao suddenly leaned his head back and laughed. “I roamed Jianghu for twenty years. The number of people who sought after my life are not few, and among them, at least nineteen are experts of the same level as Xiao Jun. And they all had opportunities like he did.”

“But they weren’t confident enough to take them?”

“They were all ruthless people. They knew that if a good opportunity is lost, it may never return. Opportunities like that cannot be missed.”

“So where are all those people now?”

“Dead. Nineteen, completely and thoroughly dead. Just before they died, they all realized something.”

“Oh? What?”

“When you have an opportunity to kill someone, it usually means that someone has an opportunity to kill you. And if that someone can kill you, why wouldn’t they?”

“It makes sense,” sighed Frogboy. “If more people in Jianghu realized this, there would be a lot less dead people.”

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[1] In Chinese, adding the character 田 tian (which literally means field, but is also a common surname, and the surname of Frogboy and his father) to the character 鸡 “chicken” makes the word 田鸡 “frog.” So, Frogboy’s name contains the character “chicken” in it.

[2] I had to keep the original idiom, which is the same as the title of the movie and book of the same name “crouching tigers, hidden dragons,” which means powerful people lay in hiding

CHAPTER 11 – INGOT'S ADVENTURE

Part 1

April 17th. The night grew deeper.

Most gamblers knew that in “As You Wish Gambling Hall,” the biggest gambling table was “Number One Heaven.” It was not the largest in size, but it was the biggest.

Only people with the biggest reputation and connections could gamble there.

Though smaller in size than a craps table, in most peoples' eyes, it was the biggest table in the room.

Many things in the world are like this.

Usually, the bets placed on the table would be gold, silver, pearls, jewelry and bank notes. But Frogboy suddenly placed his belt down onto it, along with an old leather bag.

“The belt has a Burmese sword in it, and in the bag are thirteen flying flags. Whoever wants them can take them.”

No one seemed to understand what he meant.

“These are deadly weapons,” said Frogboy. “And yet, I haven't used them to kill anyone in my entire life. I really don't wish to be encumbered by such things.”

“Some people don't need weapons to kill people,” said Wu Tao coolly. “Isn't it much easier to get others to do your dirty work for you?”

Frogboy laughed, then said, “I really hope you can come to understand something, preferably before you die.”

“What’s that?”

“There are definitely people here who seek your life. And at least seven or eight who can take it.”

“What about you?”

“I’m the only one who doesn’t want to. If there’s anyone here who doesn’t want your life, it’s definitely me.” He suddenly yelled out: “President Jin, am I right or not?”

A man who had been sitting in the corner far away from them this whole time suddenly sighed, then slowly turned around. With a bitter laugh, he said, “Young Master Tian, I knew that you would call me out sooner or later.”

This short, emaciated man wore a set of ordinary, grayish clothes. Anyone would have trouble noticing someone like him.

“Does anyone here know who this is?”

Frogboy asked the question, then answered it himself: “Most likely no one can tell from looking who he is, but I’m sure you’ve all heard of him. North China has a Divine Constable who solved eight-hundred and fifty cases in ten years, unprecedented since the founding of Department Six. His name rocked both orthodox and unorthodox alike.”

Looking at the man with the goatee, he laughed.

“Well, that’s him.” Frogboy pasted a smile onto his face. “He is none other than the Chief Constable of the Eight Circuits, Five Districts and Nine Prefectures of Shandong, ‘Watertight’ President Jin.”

He went on: “With President Jin’s status, would it be difficult to cause all the lanterns in a gambling hall to be extinguished, if he wanted it to happen?”

No one seemed willing to respond to his question, but President Jin smiled and said, “It wouldn’t. It wouldn’t be hard at all.”

In a loud voice, Frogboy called out: “Great Hero Tu, shouldn’t you, too, show your face now?”

Even though he hadn't showed his face yet, everyone knew who Frogboy was talking about.

The words "Great Hero" were not words to be spoken casually. Few Great Heroes existed in Jianghu, and among them, there was only one "Great Hero Tu."

"Hate Evil with a Vengeance" Tu Qu'e. [1]

After the lights went back up, people had gone back to gambling. But actually, more people were watching the scene than gambling. Only one table was currently packed with gamblers.

Suddenly, the people at the table all stepped aside. A tall man with a pale, golden face sat in the seat of honor. Tu Qu'e.

Frogboy looked at him and laughed. With a smile, he said, "When did Great Hero Tu arrive?"

"When the lights went out."

Great Heroes don't lie. He didn't wait for Frogboy to ask the question he knew he would ask. "Yes, I could have had the lanterns extinguished. And I can also take peoples' lives." In a stern voice, he said, "I want the lives of all the bandits and evildoers under heaven to be extinguished, eliminated completely."

"Great," said Frogboy, clapping his hands. "Great Hero Tu is truly worthy to be called Great Hero. I truly admire you."

As he finished speaking, a "square" man walked out from behind a screen. He was not short.

But his shoulders were too wide, his frame too large, so much so that he looked like a square. Although he didn't appear to be a perfect square, he was close enough.

Almost everyone in Jianghu knew of Head Bodyguard Dai Tianchou of the "Enmity of Heaven Protection Agency." [2] His "Golden Bell, Iron Tunic, Severe Thirteen Officials" Virgin kung fu had been rigorously trained to the point where his body was impervious to blades and spears. [3]

Only practitioners of this type of kung fu could truly understand the sacrifices he had made to practice it, and how bitterly he had trained.

“I cannot compare to Great Hero Tu,” said Dai Tianchou. “And I don’t have the power to kill all the bandits and thieves under heaven. I only want one person’s life.”

With a hoarse voice, he continued, “Because of the enmity between me and this person, we cannot live under the same sky. The only reason I live, is to see him dead.”

Worldly-wise people all knew what he referred to.

Twelve years ago, under the careful, daring and skilled leadership of Dai Yongan, the newly founded “Eternal Peace Protection Agency,” [4] gained more fame in a three year period than most agencies earned in thirty. No one dare even touch anyone who traveled under the flag emblazoned with the character “Peace.”

But once, someone did touch one of their charges, even before they left the main gate.

The charge was a huge collection of extremely valuable sparklers and nacre. In the jargon of protection agencies, sparklers and nacre means jewelry and pearls. The owner of said jewelry and pearls was extremely cautious, never ostentatious. One night, he had two huge metal strongboxes delivered to the protection agency.

Head Bodyguard Dai personally oversaw his subordinates receive the two chests from their owner. They placed them in a small room in the rear courtyard and sealed it tight, then assigned several squads of bodyguards to take shifts to protect it. After securing the chests, he entertained the owner, during which time he had slapped his chest and guaranteed: “This charge is in absolutely no danger whatsoever.”

Even as the words left his mouth, three frightening laughs rang out from the rear courtyard.

When Dai Yongan rushed over, he found that the locked room had been broken open, the two bodyguard captains and their six men all immobilized. The two metal chests were gone.

The final result:

The protection agency went out of business. Dai Yongan wasted away and died, his wife hanged herself. Right before she died, she changed the name of her only son to "Tianchou," and told him to never, ever give up on seeking vengeance.

And Dai Tianchou never forgot.

President Jin, Tu Qu'e, Dai Tianchou. These three men all had vastly different identities, but they were all people who no one dared to ignore.

They had all come for different reasons, but they had all come for the same person.

Frogboy looked at Wu Tao and sighed. "See, I didn't lie to you, did I? Quite a few of your enemies showed up here."

"Just now, didn't you say that there were at least seven or eight? Where are the rest?"

"I can't say the names of the others."

"Why not?"

"Because the identities of the others are different than these three," he said. "Of these three, one is a great hero, another is a Head bodyguard, the other is a Chief constable. They are all men of integrity and honor. Even though I called them out and revealed their position, they may curse me in their heart as a scoundrel and bastard, but they won't do anything to me." He sighed. "But the others are different. If I call them out when they want to stay hidden, who's to say whether or not they will take my life? I only have one head, and I don't want it chopped off and turned into a chamber pot this late at night."

Ingot's head swiveled as he looked around the room, wide-eyed. "Who are they all here for?"

"A general," said Frogboy. "Three Frightening Laughs General Li."

“Why are they looking for a general?” said Ingot, blinking. He purposefully lowered his voice: “Do they want to be soldiers?”

“Not really,” said Frogboy, laughing. He also lowered his voice: “This general isn’t actually a real general.”

“If he’s not a general, then who is he?”

“He’s a great bandit, who has been in hiding for ten years.”

“And no one found him in all those ten years?”

“Nope.”

“Nobody finds him for ten years, and then suddenly everybody shows up at once. What’s going on? Maybe you’re mistaken...”

“He’s not mistaken,” Tu Qu’e suddenly said to Ingot. “Kid, come over here. There’s something I want to show you.”

Why would someone as famous as Tu Qu’e have any dealings to do with a young beggar. Could it be because of his star?

Ingot walked over, then asked. “Are you gonna show me something pretty or something ugly?”

Tu Qu’e’s attitude seemed very warm. He laughed and said: “How could an old man like myself have anything pretty? It’s just a letter.”

And then he really did pull out a letter, sealed with wax. On the letter was written: “For the eyes of Great Hero Tu Qu’e only.”

The contents of the letter were clearly extremely important and top secret, not for anyone else to see.

Tu Qu’e was not an indiscreet person.

And yet, he handed the letter over to Ingot and said, “After you take a look, there’s no harm in reading it out loud for everyone.”

Ingot frowned. "You shouldn't have me read it. There may be characters I don't know."

Fortunately, the letter contained only fourteen characters, characters that even young children know.

Ingot laughed, then read them out loud. "If you want Three Frightening Laughs General Li, come to Jinan on April Fifteen."

After he finished reading, he frowned.

"These characters look horrible," he said. "Even I can write better."

"That's on purpose," said Tu Qu'e. "Whoever wrote it doesn't want others to recognize them through the handwriting."

"Do you know who it is?"

"I don't."

"Does anyone know?"

"Probably not," said Tu Qu'e. "But I suspect that more people than me received a letter like this."

Ingot shook his head. "You all don't even know who wrote the letter, why do you trust him?"

Dai Tianchou suddenly laughed. "I've been looking for this Li for twelve years. I wouldn't miss the chance to uncover even a little clue."

With these words, he revealed that he, too, had received a letter.

He glared hatefully at Wu Tao: "I don't even want to know who wrote the letter," he said. "Because I've found you. Do you want to fight in here, or outside?"

Wu Tao laughed. "Not many people nowadays practice Severe Thirteen Officials Virgin kung fu. It's simply not something people should study."

“But I do,” said Dai Tianchou harshly. “Perhaps I can’t defeat you, but at least I can hold up against you. I can hold up against at least ten palm strikes with no problem. What about you? Can you hold up against one of my palms?”

“Why should I have to stand up to one of your palms?” said Wu Tao with a sigh. “In any case, it’s truly frightening to see someone who has trained their kung fu to your level. I might as well let you try it out.”

Dai Tianchou said nothing. With an angry shout, he flew into the air.

But he didn’t fly forward.

As soon as he flew up, two dominos flew toward him. His palms shot out, smashing the dominos into pieces and sending the fragments flying outward.

But his body stopped flying.

The dominos had shot forth from the dealer’s seat at the “Number One Heaven” table. Xiao Jun, his face expressionless, coolly said to Dai Tianchou: “I wouldn’t attack if I were you.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to take the risk.”

“You don’t want to take the risk?” roared Dai Tianchou. “My life is on the line, not yours? What are you risking?”

“It’s because your life is on the line that I’m taking a risk.”

Dai Tianchou didn’t understand. Nobody understood.

“I can’t take the risk of letting you try to kill him,” said Xiao Jun coldly. “I can clearly see that you are not his match, but what happens if, by some lucky chance, you defeat him? What then?”

“Chamber Lord Xiao,” said Dai Tianchou, his face growing purple. “What are you talking about? I don’t understand.”

“What I mean is, you can’t touch this man. Only if I’m dead can you touch him.”

If anyone else said this, Dai Tianchou would have attacked him instantly. But the words had come out of the mouth of the Torture Chamber Lord of the Number One Sect under heaven. Not even Dai Tianchou would dare act recklessly in this situation. He could only ask, “Why?”

“Because he’s mine,” said Xiao Jun. “If I can’t kill him myself, I can’t die in peace.”

Dai Tianchou, his voice hoarse, said, “Chamber Lord Xiao, can you please give me a chance?”

At this point Ingot interrupted: “I think you guys should draw lots.” He chuckled. “President Jin, Great Hero Tu, Head Bodyguard Dai, Chamber Lord Xiao. The four of you draw lots. Others can participate as well. Whoever wins gets to make a move first. In any case, you are all his enemies, it doesn’t really matter who gets to go first.”

Frogboy immediately clapped his hands in approval. “Great idea.”

“Actually, I have an even better idea.”

“Oh?”

“Why don’t you call that moneyphobe Big Boss Tang to turn out the lights again? Just have them fight in the dark. That way no one will be able to see, and no one will get embarrassed.”

Frogboy yet again clapped and laughed loudly. “That is a really good idea.”

Suddenly, the lights went out.

Just like last time, all one hundred ninety-six lanterns were simultaneously extinguished. [5]

Within the darkness could be heard gusts of wind coming from everywhere—the sounds of rustling sleeves, flying hidden weapons, and whistling blades.

And Ingot heard Wu Tao say something to him: "Get out of here."

Ingot didn't obey, because he was already gone.

In that instant in which the lanterns went out, he could sense at least three people moving toward him in attack.

He couldn't see who they were, but he could tell that they were all top notch experts.

He dodged the attacks of two of them, and actually counterattacked against one of them. But the third was able to latch onto his wrist.

This person's hand felt as cold as ice.

And they were extremely powerful.

Ingot felt half of his body go numb. The other half had no energy whatsoever.

And then, he felt himself being tossed like a ball. He flew across the room, whereupon someone caught him.

It turned out the person who caught him was the same person as the one who threw him. He could tell, because the person had a unique scent.

It smelled like a corpse who had been soaked with herbs and sealed in a coffin.

This was not an odor one could often smell.

Ingot had struck it lucky: in a short moment, he had the chance to smell it twice.

And then he passed out.

Part 2

When Ingot awoke, he smelled something completely different, a fragrance which, if dead people were able to smell, would cause them to leap up kicking.

He had never before smelled such an entrancing fragrance.

And then he realized that he was no longer in the gambling hall, filled as it was with auras of death.

Just now, he had been sleeping on a bed, and that was the origin of the fragrant aroma.

His beggars' clothes were stinky, stinky beyond belief. But no stink existed here.

He suddenly noticed that he lay naked on the bed, and that his entire body was completely clean, as clean as a newborn baby.

Ingot felt a wave of shock.

—How did he get here? What was this place?

—Who was that person whose smelled like a corpse and had hands as cold as ice?

Ingot didn't know.

Even though he had received a shock, he didn't jump up. His body still felt weak, without even an ounce of energy.

Just then, when he wasn't sure he could cry even if he wanted to, he suddenly heard someone—he heard someone laughing.

It was a girl who seemed to be about the same age as him, or perhaps a bit younger. She had suddenly appeared at the head of the bed, chuckling. When she laughed, two dimples appeared, as cute as his own.

Other than Ingot himself, anyone in the world would most likely say that she was much more cute than him.

Ingot hurriedly wrapped himself up in the blanket. The girl giggled even more happily.

“I’m not going to do anything to you,” she said. “What are you scared of? For example, if you’re scared of me looking at you, well, I saw everything just now.”

“You saw?” asked Ingot, horrified. “What did you see?”

“Everything,” said the girl. “I just bathed you.”

Ingot gaped.

Even in his dreams, he’d never imagined he would meet a girl such as this, much less that she would bathe him.

How could this have happened?

**

[1] His name is interesting. The character Tu 屠 is a surname, but can also mean “to slaughter.” Qu 去 can have the meaning of “to get rid of” and E 恶 means evil. So his given name could mean “get rid of evil.”

[2] Tianchou literally means “enmity of heaven.”

[3] Virgin kung fu is a real type of martial art practiced by Shaolin <http://tinyurl.com/qdc3c84>

[4] Dai Yong'an's name “Yongan” literally means eternal peace.

[5] What about the lantern Wu Tao took down... Did he put it back secretly?
Haha



CHAPTER 12 – INGOT'S SEVEN STARS

Part 1

April 18th, dusk.

Ingot had no idea what time it was, nor where he was, nor had he any clue what had occurred after the lights went out at As You Wish Gambling Hall.

He wanted to ask about all these things, but he didn't. The girl who had bathed him started asking questions first.

"I know people call you Ingot, but what is your surname? What's your given name? Where is your family? What family members do you have... are you married?"

Her succession of five questions made it seem like she was sizing him up as a prospective mate.

"I'm called Ingot, and I'm just a beggar," he said. "How could a stinky beggar have a family, much less a wife?"

"You're lying," said the girl. "You are definitely not a beggar. I could tell that when I bathed you just now."

"How could you tell?"

"Your skin is delicate and you have fair complexion. Your feet are as delicate as a woman's. How could you be a beggar?" She chuckled. "If you think a woman wouldn't want to marry you, you're wrong. I'll marry you any time. Just now when you lay sleeping in the bathtub, I realized that I really like you."

How could such words come out of the mouth of such a young girl? Ingot laughed bitterly.

“Did I hear incorrectly? What you said just now, I think you didn’t actually say. My ears must have a defect.”

“Your ears don’t have any defect. In fact, I can guarantee that your entire body is without defect. You’re as robust as a bull.” The girl was still laughing. “I could also tell that you are definitely a boy, and definitely able to marry a wife. Even if you married three wives, or five, you would be fine.”

She did not blush, nor did she seem embarrassed in the slightest.

She sat there next to the bed, looking like she was ready to jump in at any moment.

Ingot wasn’t the type of boy to get embarrassed easily. He was gutsy, and thick-skinned. But currently, the only thing he could do was shrink deeper into the bed and change the conversation topic on this girl who seemed to have much thicker skin than him. “Is it starting to get light outside?” A tiny bit of light seemed to seep in from the window. It looked somewhat like dawn light.

“Yes, it will be light soon,” said the girl. “At the most, twelve or fourteen hours from now.”

“Twelve or fourteen hours?” cried Ingot in shock. “Don’t tell me it just got dark? I slept a whole day?”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t know?” said the girl, laughing again. “I had to bathe you for two hours before I could get you clean.”

She brought up the bathing matter again, but Ingot changed topics again just as quickly.

“How did I get here?” he asked her. “Who brought me here?”

“A very scary person. Even I am scared of him.” She really did appear to be frightened.

Upon mention of him, her laughter ceased completely.

“What’s his name?”

“I can’t say, even if you beat me.”

“Why?”

“Because he told me not to. He said that if I spoke his name, he would slice off my nose, mix it with rice, and feed it to the cats.”

Ingot could sense that she spoke the truth, given that her face had grown pale white.

He had personally experienced that person’s fearsomeness already.

Just thinking about those ice-cold hands, and that stench of death, he felt goosebumps all over his body.

“He grabbed me in one move, threw me across the room, then caught me himself. Who wouldn’t be frightened of someone like that.” Ingot sighed. “I just can’t figure out why he would bring me here. Why not just dump me in the gutter?”

“Because he likes you, too,” laughed the girl. “And at the least, this place smells better than the gutter.”

“What is this place? How far is it away from As You Wish Gambling Hall.”

“Not far.”

“How far is ‘not far?’”

“Why do you want to such a detailed answer?”

“Right now, I can barely even take a single step,” said Ingot. “I want you go go there for me and ask around.”

“Ask around about what?”

“I want to know what happened after the lanterns were extinguished last night.”

“I just know that some people got killed,” said the girl. “I don’t want to know anything more.”

She suddenly laughed happily again. "Anyway, this place can't be considered very far from As You Wish Gambling hall, because this place is As You Wish."

Ingot gaped.

"This room is in the courtyard behind the main room you were in. It's Big Boss Tang's house, and I'm Big Boss Tang's adopted daughter. I'm surnamed Cai; people call me Little Cai." [1]

Ingot laughed.

"Little Cai? An appetizer? What kind of appetizer? Meat or vegetarian? Stir-fried lamb kidney or cold, shredded radish?"

He laughed heartily. "Just hearing your name makes me hungry. I could eat any kind of appetizer whatsoever. I'm so hungry I could eat a horse."

Little Cai didn't laugh. She stared at him for a while, then suddenly placed her soft, white face in front of his and said, "Okay. Eat. I'll feed you."

Again, Ingot was incapable of laughing.

But this time, the reason he didn't laugh was not because of this audacious girl.

This time, he didn't laugh because he had just thought of something extremely serious.

"You just bathed me, right?" he asked her. "And you were the one who took my clothes off?"

"Of course," said Little Cai, with a purposefully coquettish expression.

"How could I let anyone else take your clothes off?"

"Where are they?"

"Burned," she said, "along with all the toys and junk that were inside."

"What?" cried Ingot. "How could you burn my things?"

“Why not? They were making the whole room stink. Don’t tell me you wanted me to save them like they were treasure or something?”

Ingot was struck speechless, his expression like that of a person who had just swallowed eight or nine stinking duck eggs. “You’ve killed me,” he said. “You’ve really killed me.”

“Sadly, I haven’t killed you,” she said with a sigh. With a flourish, she pulled out an embroidered bag from within her garment. “See? What’s this?”

Ingot sprang to life, snatching the bag from her. She sneered and laughed coldly.

“You look like a very easy going person. Why would you treat a pouch like a great treasure?”

“You don’t know what’s inside.”

“How could I know, I never looked inside,” she said. “I’m not in the habit of secretly looking at other peoples’ things.”

“You’re a good girl,” said Ingot happily. “Of course you wouldn’t have a habit like that.”

“Although, if you decided to let me see, I wouldn’t refuse to look.”

“I might not necessarily let you look,” said Ingot quickly. “I’m not sure you even want to look. After all, how could a beggar have anything worth looking at.”

“What if I said you had to show me?”

“You wouldn’t,” said Ingot. “You’re not that type of person.”

“How do I know what kind of person I am?” she replied. “I’m just an idiot.” She sighed deliberately. “Even though I just couldn’t bring myself to burn your pouch, I could have hidden it away. Why did I have to return it to you? If I’m not an idiot, what am I?”

Ingot thought for a while, and then for a while longer. Then he suddenly said, “You’re right. Okay, I’ll show you.”

The pouch didn't contain any treasures, just seven stars.

Nobody would regard these seven stars to be treasures, not even a three-year-old child.

They didn't appear to be very interesting at all. Whichever way you looked at them, there wasn't anything at all that made them look valuable. If someone offered them to you, you wouldn't take them. If you randomly picked them up, you would throw them away immediately.

The seven stars were not made from any special material. Even though one appeared to be crafted from jade, the others weren't. They were made from scraps of copper and iron and wood. One even appeared to be cut out of cardboard.

But each star had a character inscribed on it. Before Little Cai could look closely at the characters, Ingot asked, "So you had your look, right?"

"Yes."

"Do you think they're cool?"

"Not really."

Given that they weren't cool, Ingot gathered them back up. His dimples appeared. "I told you, beggars don't carry anything interesting."

Little Cai's dimples also appeared.

"Then why don't you give me one," she said with a sweet laugh. "How about the one made from old wood?"

A star of blessing from heaven, with one tap, it can turn iron into gold. She knew about this star, so did she know about what happened that night after the lights went out?

Ingot wanted to ask, but didn't.

His lips appeared to have been sealed as tight as if they had been sewn shut with thread. He didn't say a single word. Because he suddenly realized that someone was standing at the end of the bed looking at him.

When had this person arrived? Where had they come from? He had no idea.

He only knew that moments ago, there was no one else in the room. Then suddenly there was someone standing at the edge of the bed.

Part 2

It was a woman, but as for what type of woman, who could tell?

There are not many women in the world like her.

She had a wide forehead, high cheekbones, and a large mouth. She possessed a very dignified air, the type that made her seem unapproachable.

And yet, her lips, soft and graceful, and slightly curved, gave her a permanent gentle and charming smile, the kind that made her seem very approachable.

Her eyes were not large, but exceedingly bright, filled with maturity and wisdom, the kind that would make people feel comfortable talking with her about anything because they knew she would understand.

Her age could not be very young, and she wasn't extremely beautiful.

But as soon as Ingot laid eyes on her, he was struck into a daze. He didn't even notice Little Cai jumping off the bed.

His heart started beating, much faster than usual.

Neither in the past, nor in the future, would there ever be another woman who could make Ingot's heart beat so fast.

Ingot didn't really care about much. Whatever things happened in life, it wasn't very important to him.

What other people thought or did or said wasn't important to him either.

But it appeared that seeing this woman for the first time was something very important.

He absolutely could not allow her to view him as some simple-minded, love-struck fool. So he sighed.

"Another woman? Are all the men in this place hiding somewhere? They don't dare to see me?"

"Who do you want to come see you?" said the woman, her voice deep and beautiful, like a musician expressing memories of a past lover by means of the strings on his instrument.

"Big Boss Tang." Ingot coughed twice. "I really want to see Big Boss Tang."

The woman laughed. When she laughed, her beautiful lips rose, and within the tenderness and joy seemed to reside shades of cool sorrow, although not the type of sorrow that aroused pity.

"You've already seen Big Boss Tang," the woman said. "Me." With a smile, she asked Ingot, "Do you think that all the Big Bosses in the world are men?"

Ingot shook his head. "No, but I think you should really let me put on some clothes, then treat me to some food and alcohol."

Looking nonplussed, Little Cai said, "Why should we treat you to food and alcohol? On what basis do you demand us to?"

"No basis!" said Ingot. "But if you don't treat me, then you have to pay me what you owe."

"Since when do I owe you something?"

"You owe me a bath."

"I owe you a bath?" Little Cai didn't understand. "What does that mean?"

"What it means is, you bathed me one time. If you don't treat me, then you must let me bathe you one time." With a straight face and in dead earnest,

he said, "If you want to bathe me, then I have to let you. But I'm a person. You can't just bathe me any time you want. And if you bathe me, then of course I'm allowed to bathe you."

Little Cai, stupefied, stared at him in shock.

"Can you talk like a human? Or are you speaking nonsense on purpose?" She turned to Big Boss Tang. "Ma, is this little bastard brazen, or what? How can he say such ridiculous things?"

Big Boss Tang smiled. "He does sound a bit unreasonable, but, then again, so do you."

Little Cai pouted and rolled her eyes, appearing to be on the verge of tears.

But she didn't cry. It seemed she had just thought of something. "I'm a woman. Women innately have the right to be unreasonable. But what basis does he have to be unreasonable?"

Ingot sighed. With a bitter laugh, he shook his head and said, "I bow to you. How could I not bow to someone who speaks such truths."

Big Boss Sun laughed. "She won't treat you, I will."

Ingot appeared to be extremely happy. "You're quite perceptive. It's not often that you have a chance to treat someone like me."

Part 3

Exquisite, delicious food and alcohol filled the table, and all of it was the type that Ingot liked.

He was so hungry he could surely eat every item on the table, but he hadn't even touched his chopsticks.

He didn't touch the food with his hands, either. He just sat there eagerly, his mouth watering.

The young serving girl who stood behind him finally said, "The food is getting cold. Why don't you eat?"

"I'm a guest today!" shouted Ingot. "How can I eat if the host doesn't accompany me." He seemed very resolute. "I won't eat even if I starve to death."

Even though his body had no energy, he spoke in a very loud voice, loud enough that anyone nearby could hear.

And so, Big Boss Tang entered a few moments later, her face flushed, looking like she had just washed her face with hot water. Her long, black hair was coiled into a loose bun. Barefoot, she wore a soft silk gown that sometimes concealed those feet and sometimes revealed them.

Her feet were delicate and beautiful, and looked like they had been carved out of a chunk of flawless, white jade.

Ingot again felt his heart beating quickly.

"I'm here to accompany you," she said. "But, I'm not going to eat anything. I'll just drink a bit with you."

"How much is a bit?"

Big Boss Tang looked at this young man, then suddenly laughed. When she laughed, she suddenly seemed to become younger.

"Can you really drink?" she asked.

"Why don't you check and see?"

"Very well." She sat down. "However much you drink, I'll drink too."

"Really?"

"Why would I lie to you?"

"You won't lie to me in anything?"

With a beautiful laugh, Big Boss Tang said, “Adults shouldn’t lie to kids. Adults who do, are not good people. Do I look like a scoundrel to you?”

Ingot shook his head. In all seriousness, he said, “You’re not a scoundrel. And I’m not a kid.”

He suddenly changed the topic.

“Who was that bastard?”

“Which bastard?”

“The bastard who brought me here and drained me of all my energy?”

Big Boss Tang waved away the serving girl, then poured a cup of alcohol for herself and Ingot.

She drained the cup in one drink.

Her drinking method was refined and straightforward, just like her personality.

“Twenty years ago in Jianghu, there was an organization called ‘End the Heavens, Destroy the Earth.’ It was called that because of the names of the two people who founded it. One was named Gao Tianjue, the other was named Guo Mie. [2] They founded the organization for one purpose only.”

“What purpose?”

“To pursue great criminals at large in the world. They would not give up until capturing all of them.”

“Seems like a good organization,” said Ingot. “How come I’ve never heard of it?”

“Nine years ago, Guo Mie suddenly disappeared. Allegedly, he was killed by Laughing General Li. Around the same time, Gao Tianjue lost an arm. After that, the organization dispersed like the clouds. Who would have thought that they would suddenly appear in Jinan, now. And it seems they are more powerful than ever.”

Ingot couldn't help but ask: "Are they here for General Li?"

"Of course," said Big Boss Tang. "Those thirteen men with the arms severed and replaced with pincers were their people."

"And Gao Tianjue is here too."

Big Boss Tang nodded. "It was he who brought you here. He didn't want you drawn into the revenge killing. Here, not only are you safe, but people won't come looking for you."

"This Gao Tianjue is one of a kind!" said Ingot loudly. "Why does he care about my safety? If I died, he shouldn't care less."

Big Boss Tang seemed to agree. "He is one of a kind. His personality, his ruthlessness, and especially his martial arts. Even if Guo Mie came back to life, he might not be his match."

"So when he brought me here, you had no choice but to receive me." Ingot gave a deliberately cold laugh. "And I bet you have no intention of letting me leave."

"I dare not," said Big Boss Tang forthrightly. "I have no death wish."

Ingot sighed. "Actually, I don't have a death wish either. Beggars don't have a desire to die any more than big bosses."

He drank another cup of alcohol, then asked the question he most wanted to know the answer to.

"Last night when the lanterns were extinguished in the gambling hall, who killed who?"

**

[1] It's common to put the character for "little" or "small" before someone's surname to create a nickname. Cai is a common surname. But when you combine those two characters, it creates a homophone for the word for small dishes or appetizers. Sounds exactly the same, although different characters. It looks like this: Her nickname is 小蔡, and small dishes is 小菜.

[2] The "Tianjue" part of Gao Tianjue's name literally means to end the heavens. And the "Mie" of Guo Mie means "destroy." Their names are 高天绝 gāo tiān jué and 郭灭 guō miè

CHAPTER 13 – A SILENT SONG FOR THE DEAD

Part 1

April 18. Night.

As Ingot sat in Big Boss Tang's luxurious abode dining on delicious food and alcohol, Xiao Jun also was eating. He sat at a roadside stall, illuminated by a single lamp, eating a dish egg and onion stir-fried in lard.

Everyone must eat, regardless of whether they want to or not. If you don't eat, you die.

There are many things in the world like this, things you have to do whether you want to or not.

Xiao Jun was not a picky eater. As long as something was edible, he would eat it. Most of the time, he didn't notice the flavor of the food, and often, he didn't even know what it was he ate.

This was because he was unlike most people in the world. Usually, when people's mouths are in motion, their brains are not.

But Xiao Jun was different.

When he ate, he would think of many things, many questions. Right now, he was thinking about a very strange question.

He couldn't stop from thinking: "Why am I not dead?"

From the previous night up until this moment, he had thought about this question over and over again, because in truth, he should have been dead.

The second time the lanterns had simultaneously been extinguished at As You Wish Gambling Hall, he had been holding a master-crafted, refined steel short sword modeled after "Fish Intestines," one foot three inches long. [1]

In that fleeting moment, his body had already flown forward approximately three and a half meters. Wu Tao's throat should have been right there, in the same position as his sword. He had already calculated its precise distance and position.

His calculations were always extremely precise.

The speed of his movement and sword could not be matched by anyone.

Of course, the sword attack contained secondary elements. As it stabbed forth, the power of the sword suppressed the movements of everyone within a radius six meters.

He put all the power, knowledge, experience and skill of a lifetime into this attack.

But the sword was empty.

Everything within the range of the attack was empty, completely empty. There was nothing. No light, no ability, no reaction, no result, absolutely nothing.

In that moment, Xiao Jun felt as if he were falling off of a building hundreds of meters tall, straight into a state of complete despair, a state of absolute powerlessness.

The most frightening thing was...

His own power seemed to have been emptied. It was as if some incomprehensible, impossible to resist force had sucked him dry.

At that moment, even a child could have knocked him over.

He had never experienced such a feeling before.

He now knew that he had encountered an unprecedentedly fearsome opponent, someone more frightening than anything which could appear in a person's worst nightmares.

Even more horrifying, he could sense that this person had already sent a fatal attack flying towards him.

He could not not resist or evade.

He had developed his power and skill for many years, had gained wisdom and experience through countless life-and-death battles. Yet suddenly, he had become empty, completely ineffective.

In that moment, there was only one thing he could do. Wait for death.

But he didn't die.

As the fatal strike approached, its aura of death completely suppressed his movement and breathing, and he knew beyond a doubt that he would die. And then, suddenly, someone saved him. A hand saved him.

The hand was like wind, a wind from nowhere, a hand from nowhere.

The hand stretched out from an incomprehensible, mysterious direction to grasp his shoulder, filling him with impossible power.

His body flew into the air, avoiding the deadly attack.

When he descended, he had no idea of his position. The only thing he could hear was rushing wind coming from all directions.

—The sound of sleeves rustling, concealed weapons flying, blade edges slashing, and shouts and cries both miserable, shrill and horrific. [2]

No one could possibly describe the sounds he heard.

Unless you heard them with your own ears, you would have no way to imagine what they sounded like.

And if you did hear them, you would never be able to forget them for the rest of your life.

Xiao Jun felt himself about ready to vomit.

But he did not vomit. Because the sounds all suddenly ceased, and then three laughs rang out.

Everything became deathly still. The resplendent, brilliant, bustling hall had suddenly turned into a tomb.

Luckily, Xiao Jun's heart still beat.

He could hear it: "thump, thump, thump." It thumped for a long time, and then suddenly a flame bloomed to life in the darkness, a flame booklet.

The flame booklet was in Frogboy's hand.

He sat in the same position as before. It seemed as if he hadn't moved at all, or maybe couldn't.

There was someone new next to him.

At some point, Old Master Tian had come to sit in the chair next to him. He sat there strumming a sanxian, a sanxian that produced no noise.

A noiseless sanxian, whose strings had been broken.

—A noiseless sanxian, and a fading old man; the sound of a noiseless sanxian is more desolate than any other sound in the world.

His fingers played the sound of a funeral song.

But the melody of the funeral sound could not be heard, because he never had any intention of letting anyone hear.

Frogboy lit a lantern, the one that Wu Tao had just moments ago grabbed down.

As the lantern light spread, he caught sight of Xiao Jun.

But Xiao Jun wasn't looking at him. Xiao Jun was looking at the people on the ground.

Dai Tianchou, Tu Qu'e, and President Jin all lay on the ground, not breathing, their bodies growing cold.

Dai Tianchou's Thirteen Officials Virgin kung fu, trained over the course of years and years, had been broken. Although, his Golden Iron Bell mail tunic, impervious to blades and spears, had not been broken.

But he bled. Blood streamed from a spot behind his left ear.

That area was his Achilles' heel, the only weak spot on his entire body, and also his greatest secret.

A person who practiced that type of kung fu would never reveal their Achilles' heel to anyone.

How could the secret have been known to the person who killed him?

The hall had previously been lit by one hundred and ninety-six lanterns, but now, it was lit by only one.

The gloomy light shone onto Xiao Jun's face, as well as onto the faces of the eight bodies on the ground.

Other than the three just mentioned, five more corpses could be seen, four of whom Xiao Jun recognized. All of them were top experts of the martial world, including great heroes and great villains.

Every one of them had surely come to take someone's life, but now their lives had been taken by that someone.

Every one had been killed by a single deadly blow, and all of their faces were twisted with horror.

None of them had ever imagined that they would die in such a tragic fashion.

Frogboy sighed.

“I was counting the whole time,” he said. “From the moment the lights went out until just now when I lit my flame booklet, I only was able to count from ‘one’ to ‘eighty-eight.’”

A kung fu which could take the lives of eight martial world experts in such a short time, was truly terrifying.

The killer had already departed.

Wu Tao had already departed.

A fatal blow, eight heroes dead, three laughs, then, away with the breeze. What kind of skill was this? What spirit?

Frogboy looked at Xiao Jun, then sighed.

“I’m only alive because of my father,” he said. “What about you? I had assumed you would be the first to die, how come you aren’t?”

That was the question Xiao Jun just couldn’t figure out the answer to.

—Why wasn’t he dead? Who had saved him? Why had that person saved him?

Part 2

Not a small amount of alcohol had been consumed. Big Boss Tang’s cheeks were flushed the color of a pale rouge, and her eyes shown even more brightly than before.

She sighed softly, then told Ingot:

“Therefore, we’ve prepared to stop business for half a month, starting today. We will completely redecorate the main hall. Gamblers are generally very superstitious. Who would dare to gamble in a place where eight people died in a split second?”

“So, eight people died. Other than Dai Tianchou, Tu Qu’e and President Jin, who else died? Who were the other five people?”

“I’m not too sure,” said Big Boss Tang. “I heard that one was a Mr. Su Zhong from Wudang Sword school, one was a martial uncle of Qiu Budaο and another was one of the highest ranking members of Shaolin’s secular disciples.” She sighed. “Whoever killed eight experts of that level in an instant, must have extremely powerful martial arts and ruthless skill. It’s really frightening.”

Ingot slapped the table with his palm.

“I don’t believe it,” he cried. “Beat me to death, and I still won’t believe it.”

“What don’t you believe?”

“I don’t believe that they were all killed by Wu Tao,” he said. “He’s just not that wicked and merciless.”

“Other than him, who could it be?” said Big Boss Tang. “Who else has such fearsome kung fu?”

“If I could examine the eight corpses, perhaps I would be able to see.”

“See what?”

“See what method the killer used. Was it really Wu Tao’s technique? In any case, no one could see anything. Whoever did kill them could easily shift the blame to Wu Tao, turn him into a scapegoat.”

“That does make sense,” said Big Boss Tang. “Sadly, you can’t examine the corpses.”

“Why not?”

“Because Old Master Tian already took them away. They’ve already been placed in coffins and sealed up. Nobody can examine them.”

Ingot’s big eyes suddenly narrowed, as if he were plotting something.

“Why would Old Master Tian be in such a hurry to take the bodies away? Could it be he feared someone would find out that not all of the fatal injuries were caused by Wu Tao? Perhaps he intentionally notified the friends and family of the various victims, with the purpose of sending them after Wu Tao for revenge?”

Big Boss Tang laughed, looking at Ingot with eyes as clear as spring water. She raised a glass to him and drank.

“You might not be very old, but you’re exceedingly clever. How could you possibly think up an idea like that? Furthermore, with his reputation, how could Old Master Tian do such a thing?”

“Why couldn’t he?” said Ingot. “Who knows whether or not some of his own enemies were among the eight killed. Maybe he took advantage of the situation to kill them.” He thought for a moment. “I was brought here by Gao Tianjue, so he was there at the time, too. Who knows whether or not he was the killer? With his martial arts, it wouldn’t be difficult to kill eight people. Maybe Old Master Tian and he are friends, and yet Old Master Tian fears him. And that’s why he did it.”

Big Boss Tang stared at Ingot for a long moment, then suddenly asked him: “Are you really only seventeen or eighteen?”

“Pretty much.”

“Looking at you, you do seem to be seventeen or eighteen, but sometimes I feel like you’re actually a seventy- or eighty-year-old man.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because only old men have such suspicious frames of mind.”

Ingot stared back at her for a long moment, lowered his voice, then quietly said, “Can I tell you a secret?”

“What secret?”

“Actually, I’m already seventy-seven.” His expression was quite serious. “I’ve just taken really good care of myself, so I look much younger.”

Big Boss Tang laughed, and with a curved smile said, “In that case, this old granny will have to toast you a few more times.”

Part 3

The bodies had been placed in coffins and sealed. Now the woodshed in the back of “Forest Memory” lumber yard had eight more coffins.

Old Master Tian had been keeping guard there from morning until the sky grew dark. He did not eat a grain of rice nor drink a drop of water or alcohol. Nor did he speak.

Frogboy had never seen his father in such a serious mood.

Finally, when the night was exceedingly dark, people came to light the lanterns. Old Master Tian asked Frogboy, “Could you see how they died?”

“Somewhat,” said Frogboy. “Each one was killed by a single fatal blow. The technique used was bizarre. It instantly hardened and then burst their arteries and Qi channels, the same way a person might smash a piece of charcoal between their fingers.”

“Could you tell which technique this person used?”

“I couldn’t. I’ve seen many people dead from crushed arteries and Qi channels, but I’ve never seen a technique like this before.”

“Of course you haven’t.” Old Master Tian sighed. “Because only one person under heaven uses a deadly technique like this.”

“Is it General Li?”

“No.”

“If not him, then who?”

“A person more fearsome than him,” said Old Master Tian. “More fierce, more ruthless, more extreme in action.”

“Who is more extreme than General Li?”

“Gao Tianjue.”

Part 4

A remote lane, a ramshackle meal stall, a flickering oil lamp. An old man, his face long since darkened by the smoke of the oil lamp, looked at Xiao Jun, who had just finished his bowl of fried eggs. With a tone of partial sympathy, he asked, “Would you like a bowl of broth? On the house.”

Xiao Jun shook his head and slowly stood up. His colorless, expressionless face suddenly shone with a look of fear and astonishment.

If you didn’t see it yourself, you would probably never think that a person’s face could change in such a way.

But the old man saw.

He couldn’t imagine what would cause this one-armed man’s face to change, this man who spoke so strangely and ate so slowly.

But it did not take long for him to understand why. He turned his head and saw the same thing that Xiao Jun saw, something that would frighten the wits out of anyone.

Moments ago, the area around the lonely food stand didn’t even contain the shadow of a ghost. But now, there was a person there.

The person wore black. A black cloak, a black scarf, black boots, and black eyes.

This black was not a normal black.

Shining like lacquer, denser than ink, this black was like the joyless black of the sky in the moments before the breaking of dawn.

His long black cloak hung to the ground, just like the dark cloak of the oft-referred to blood-sucking demons.

But his face was white.

Not a normal white, and not the pale, deathly white of Xiao Jun's face.

His face was more horrifying than the face of a corpse.

It was a pale, silvery color, as if he wore a silver mask forged in the fires of hell. It shone.

But not a normal shine.

This was a dim, flickering shine, like the shine in the eyes of a person as they approached death. Though bright, it carried with it a feeling of pain, torment, fear and hopelessness.

It was impossible to tell when this person arrived, or when they had come from.

Perhaps only Xiao Jun knew.

It seemed as if he recognized this person. He looked like a child who had suddenly run into a demon who constantly plagued his nightmares. It appeared as if his throat were being clutched by the hands of a demon. It took him a long time to speak.

"It's you?"

“It’s me.” It seemed as if the person were laughing. “I’m surprised that you remember me.”

Xiao Jun definitely recognized this person. Even though he had only seen him once, he would never be able to forget him.

Anyone would remember this person after seeing him only once, but as for Xiao Jun, his memories was deeper and more painful than anyone else’s.

It was something that had happened a dozen or more years ago.

Xiao Jun remembered it more clearly than anyone. It was the night of the full moon, thirteen years and three days ago.

That night, the moonlight shone mirror-like, and the cold night air cut like a knife.

He saw a blade that he had never seen before, or rather, the flash of a blade.

The instant that blade flashed, his left arm was lopped off.

Xiao Jun never found out who that person was, or why they had severed his arm.

He had never seen that person before that night, and never saw them again. And he’d never imagined that he would see him standing in front of him now.

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[1] Fish Intestines was the name of a sword used by the famous historical assassin Zhuan Zhu. It was called Fish Intestines because he hid it inside a fish during a banquet when he killed King Liao of the Wu State. Zhuan Zhu: <http://tinyurl.com/odrgsbn>. Click the link and scroll down to see an artists rendering of it: <http://tinyurl.com/nmnfc8d>

[2] Gu Long does something here in Chinese which generally you don't do in English writing, and that is he uses a TON of adjectives. Here's the literal translation: "and the sound of hoarse, sad, shrill, miserable, fierce, brutal, and ruthless shouts and shrieks and bawls."

CHAPTER 14 – A SILVER MASK

Part 1

The moon this night was also full, and the silver mask glittered brilliantly in its light. The moon looked exactly as it had thirteen years before.

Masks cannot age, nor change.

But the people had changed.

Xiao Jun had grown from a young disciple of the Beggar Sect to become the Lord of the its Torture Chamber, with complete power over life and death. He'd changed from a youth full of vim and vigor, into a taciturn, cold man.

Had his arm not been severed, he would not have become this way.

He had never seen this person's face, but this person had changed his entire life.

Was the change his good luck, or his misfortune?

Even he didn't know.

What type of person hid beneath this silver mask and black cloak? Why had he chopped off his arm?

Xiao Jun had no idea.

In his nightmares, he would frequently see this person, on that same night underneath the full moon, thirteen years ago. Upon awakening in a cold sweat, he would ask himself: "Why? Why? Why...?"

The only person who could provide answers, now stood in front of him like a figure from a nightmare.

In moments, his clothes were soaked with sweat, sticking to his flesh. His tongue stuck inside his mouth; he couldn't speak a single word.

The person in the silver mask had already sat down in front of him at the food stall. "Of course you haven't forgotten me," he said. "Thirteen years ago, I chopped off your arm under the light of the full moon."

His voice was not as fearsome as his appearance. If you didn't see him, but heard his voice, you would think he was a very gentle person.

This was the first time Xiao Jun heard his voice.

It was soft and deep, and when he spoke to Xiao Jun it sounded like a gentle mother, sitting next to her child in bed, singing a bedtime lullaby.

And yet, at any moment, he could chop off Xiao Jun's other arm.

"Thirteen years ago, you had never seen me before, nor had I seen you," said the person in the silver mask. "And yet, I took your arm and left you to live a life of suffering. All this time, I never came looking for you, and you had no way to look for me. And yet now, thirteen long years later, here I am. Do you know why?"

Xiao Jun shook his head.

"Do you want to know why?" asked the person in the silver mask.

Xiao Jun nodded.

He slowly turned around. "If you want to know, come with me. If you don't want to come, I won't force you."

No one knew where he came from, and no one knew where he planned to go.

And yet Xiao Jun went with him, seemingly bewitched.

Even if this person led him down into hell, he would probably follow.

It seemed his voice had some entrancing power over Xiao Jun.

This was the first time he had heard the person's voice, but yet, it also seemed as if he had heard it countless times before.

Why was that? Xiao Jun had no explanation.

Part 2

Fog filled the night, a dreary and hazy fog. The black cloak fluttered in the night wind, making the person look like a specter floating in the dark.

He walked ahead, at a measured pace. Xiao Jun followed, not far behind.

He carried a sword specially designed for killing, a sword that assassins during the Warring States period had favored.

If Xiao Jun drew his sword, perhaps he could plant it straight into the back of the person in front of him, piercing his heart.

But he didn't draw the sword.

Even though he had never stabbed anyone in the back before, for this person he could probably make an exception.

He knew that if he missed this opportunity, he might never get another. Opportunities like this don't come twice.

For years, he had been waiting for a chance like this. Now the chance had arrived. Why didn't he make a move?

From within the dreary fog suddenly appeared several dim lights. Lamplight flickered on undulating water, water undulated underneath flickering lamplight.

Mirror-like water rippled.

“Lotus flowers and willow trees abound, half of the scenery in the city is this lake.” [1] Tranquil Daming Lake suddenly appeared in front of Xiao Jun. [2]

The lights came from a boat, which floated on the water some 25 to 30 meters from the shore.

The waves were beautiful, the boat was beautiful.

The person in the silver mask stood there on the shore, beneath a weeping willow. Willow branches rustled gently in the wind. He turned and looked at Xiao Jun.

“Are you getting on board?”

Xiao Jun suddenly drew his sword and chopped three chunks of wood out of the trunk of the willow tree. The sword flashed, and the pieces of wood flew out onto the water. The first piece landed nine meters out, the second, fifteen, the third, twenty-one.

By the time the flashing of the blade dissipated, Xiao Jun had already landed on the first piece of wood.

The chunk of willow began to sink, and he flew up. His left foot tapped the second piece of wood, his right foot tapped the third.

By the time the wood sank and reemerged, he was on the boat.

This was the result of years of bitter training. Xiao Jun believed his lightness arts to be among the top ten in all of Jianghu.

And yet, as soon as his foot touched the planks of the deck, he saw the person in the silver mask walking slowly into the cabin. A curtain of pearls hung in the doorway.

The curtain swayed in the wind, and the strings of pearls clinked against each other, producing a sound reminiscent of wind-bells on the eaves of a temple.

The pieces of willow still floated on the surface of the water, but Xiao Jun’s heart had already sunk.

In his life, he truly hated only two people, and lived solely for the purpose of seeking vengeance against them.

Now, he had found both of them.

And yet he had also found out that he had no chance or hope whatsoever in going up against either of them.

Two men in gray robes stood outside the door, looking at him. Their faces, seemingly carved from limestone, contained no trace of color or expression.

Each used a right arm to part the pearl curtain, keeping their left arm concealed in their sleeve. It seemed as if they did not wish anyone to see that arm.

That hand was their secret weapon, and a deadly one at that. It was for killing, not to be shown off to others.

Xiao Jun had seen people like this before.

They all had deadly steel pincers, along with nine hundred and ninety-nine lives.

And their lives all belonged to the fearsome person with the silver mask.

The ship's cabin was not large, but was decorated resplendently. The person in the silver mask had already sat down in a large, soft chair, and sat waiting languidly.

Another gray-robed man brewed tea on a crude clay furnace. The water in the copper pot was already boiling.

“This water is from Baotu Spring [3], one of the most famous springs under heaven,” said the man in the silver mask. “It has flowed unceasingly for millenniums. The color, fragrance, aroma and flavor of tea brewed with this water is no different from tea brewed with the best spring water from Jingshan [4].

His voice had grown even more gentle as he spoke about such refined matters.

Were it not for the frightening silver mask, anyone would assume that Xiao Jun had come here upon invitation to partake of fine tea.

“I don’t drink alcohol,” said the man in the silver mask, “only tea. I happen to have a fondness for it. People who drink tea are always much more clear-headed than people who drink alcohol.”

Xiao Jun stood by the window, staring at the distant shadow of Thousand Buddha Mountain. [5] He suddenly asked, “What happened to their arms?”

“Whose arms?”

“The people here,” he said. “These men with nine hundred and ninety-nine lives.” He continued with another question: “Are they truly men with nine hundred and ninety-nine lives? Or are they nine-hundred and ninety-nine men with one life each?”

“Do you really care about their lives?” asked the man in the silver mask with a cool expression. “It seemed as if he were laughing. “It really doesn’t matter how many there are, or how many lives they have. It’s the same either way.”

“The same? How so?”

“Because they are mine, as are their lives. I can make them do anything I wish, even die.” His voice was still gentle and mild. “Their arms are like yours, severed by me. Every one of them the same.”

It was truly inconceivable for someone to use such a gentle tone to talk about such horrific matters.

“But they are not like you,” continued the man in the silver mask. “Even though I cut off their arms, they don’t hate me.”

“Oh?”

“Because I also gave them arms, arms that are much better than the original.”

“Why don’t you show your arm to Chamber Lord Xiao?” he said said to the man making the tea.

The gray-robed man stood up, then rolled up his sleeve, only a bit, to reveal a steel pincer.

The construction of the pincer was precise and complex, although Xiao Jun could only see a bit of it.

“This is not an arm,” said Xiao Jun, “it’s a pincer.”

“It is an arm,” said the man in the silver mask. “Anything that can be done with an arm, this arm can also do. The water is boiling, the tea cups are on the table. Why don’t you serve Chamber Lord Xiao a cup?”

The gray-robed man gently lifted the teapot with his pincer, then poured a cup for Xiao Jun.

A tea leaf stalk floated up from within the tea. The man softly plucked it out.

The movements of the pincer were dextrous and nimble beyond imagination.

“Things that other people can’t do with their arms, this arm can do. If Chamber Lord Xiao doesn’t believe, why don’t you let him have a look?”

There was a clunk as the steel pincer sliced the handle of the copper tea pot in half, as easily as a pair of scissors cutting through a sheet of paper.

The fire burned in the oven. The gray-robed man reached inside with the pincer and pulled out a blazing chunk of charcoal.

“Can others use their arm to do that?” asked the man in the silver mask.

Xiao Jun said nothing.

His voice filled with pride, the man in the silver mask said: “This arm can do more than that. It can shatter a person’s joint in an instant. It can grip the edge of a blade, tear open a door, snap and iron shackle. If you are hanging from a roof beam, you can hang for a very long time without falling, because this wrist will not get tired or break.”

Xiao Jun could not deny that this arm could do things that normal arms cannot.

“If someone tries to use Qinna techniques to seize the vital point on this arm’s wrist, well, that person will have made a fatal mistake, because this arm has no vital point. In fact, it has no acupuncture points at all. [6] If you had an arm like this, and were wielding a sword, no one could possibly take that sword away from you.” He asked Xiao Jun, “Would you like an arm such as this?”

Xiao Jun kept his mouth shut, but he could not deny the feelings that arose in his heart.

The man in the silver mask could see this.

“Even though you don’t know who I am, I know everything about you.”

“Oh?”

“You are an orphan. Your mother passed away when you were not yet six years old. You’ve never met your father, not even once.”

Xiao Jun felt a stab of pain in his heart, the same as if a person had stabbed him with a needle.

This was a secret he kept buried deep inside, and he’d never imagined this stranger would suddenly speak it out in the open.

The man in the silver mask continued: “From a young age, you were raised by the former Chief of the Beggar Sect, Mr. Dabei, who is now deceased. But even he never told you about your past, and furthermore, did not treat you well in general.”

Xiao Jun’s face suddenly changed, from pale white, to scarlet red.

“How do you know these things?”

“I just do.” His voice suddenly had a very strange tone to it. “I also know that the person you hate the most is not me, but Li Xiao.”

“Li Xiao?”

“Three Frightening Laughs, General Li, Li Xiao.” [7]

No one knew the Laughing General’s real name. This was the first time Xiao Jun had heard it.

“I know that the person you hate most is him,” said the man in the silver mask. “Even though Mr. Dabei never told you about your past, whenever he heard mention of the Laughing General, he would fly into a rage. He clearly utterly detested Laughing General, as do you. And that is because Mr. Dabei surely told you that your mother died a horrific death at his hands.”

“How do you know this?”

“I just know,” he said strangely. “I know many things that others do not know. But, even I make mistakes.”

He let out a long sigh, a sigh filled with regret.

“I never should have cut off your arm,” he said. “The reason I did was because I was taking you for another person.” He didn’t give Xiao Jun a chance to speak. He continued, “Now, I know it was a mistake. Therefore, I wish to offer you compensation. I want to give you an arm, as well as an opportunity.”

“What opportunity?”

“An opportunity for revenge,” said the man in the silver mask. “I can let you personally kill General Li.”

He spoke with complete confidence and certainty, “Furthermore, I can guarantee that you will succeed.”

Xiao Jun said nothing, but he was incapable of maintaining his usually icy calm.

He stood up. Then sat again. Then stood again. Then he began pacing back and forth over the persian rugs which covered the floor of the cabin.

He did not want to accept any favors from this person in the silver mask, and yet, he didn't want to lose this opportunity.

He would never forget the indignation, hatred and enmity with which his adoptive father spoke of General Li.

To people of Jianghu, this type of enmity, in which you cannot live under the same sky as another person, can only be erased with blood.

—Not with the blood of the enemy, but with one's own blood.

Xiao Jun finally stopped pacing and faced the man in the silver mask.

“Why do you want to give me this opportunity?”

“Because Li Xiao is my enemy. I also have a family member who was killed by him.”

His voice had suddenly changed. Now it sounded exactly like Mr. Dabei's, filled with grief, hatred and enmity.

“Since you hate him so much,” said Xiao Jun, “Why don't you kill him yourself?”

“I want him dead, regardless of who kills him. I don't care if he gets mauled to death by wild dogs.”

The silver mask glittered in the lantern light. Xiao Jun couldn't see his face, but he could tell that the enmity which existed between him and Li Xiao was deeper than any other in the world.

“I'm giving you the opportunity, because your chances are greater than mine.”

“Why?”

“Because he doesn't care about you, and will not take precautions against you. Therefore, you have a chance. I'm afraid that even if Chief Chu came

back from the dead, he wouldn't be able to touch a hair on General Li's head." [8]

"What about you?"

"I'm not good enough." The man in the silver mask sighed. "Within fifty stances, he would have my head. He wouldn't even need to use a sword. He could snap my neck with his bare hands."

He was anything but a modest person. If he said such a thing, it was surely the truth.

"Therefore, you have to kill him in one move. Otherwise, you will undoubtedly be dead." He spoke in complete earnestness: "You must remember this. When you have a chance, attack. Your attack must hit a vital spot, and that vital spot must be a deadly vital spot."

—How many chances will I have?

Xiao Jun wanted to ask this, but he didn't. Even if he only had one chance, he should try.

"You will have a good chance," said the man in the silver mask. "His carelessness and disregard for you will ensure that. Furthermore, he will never imagine that you have another arm."

"I have another arm?"

"I promised you that I will replace your arm. And you must promise me that you will use that arm to kill him."

What he gave Xiao Jun was not a real arm, but a steel pincer. The steel pincer was attached to a two-jointed metal arm, which would rotate and move naturally. Its construction was delicate and complex.

"Using it is simple," said the man, placing the arm on Xiao Jun's severed stump. "Your muscles are not dead. Simply send your Qi and inner force in here. It will move the mechanisms in the metal arm, and you can use your killing short sword. Considering your intelligence and inner force, as well as

your skill," he guaranteed, "you should be able to master it within two hours."

The two joints of the metal arm were made of six steel bones. The bones were not thick, so when the arm was concealed in a sleeve, the sleeve would float gently as if it contained nothing.

"If you're careful, Li Xiao won't notice," said the man excitedly. "When your arm comes stabbing out of your sleeve, that will be the hour of his death."

Xiao Jun did not want to use such a method to kill someone, but the person he wanted to kill was unkillable. He would only have one opportunity like this one.

He had no other options available. But there was one more thing he wanted to know.

"Who are you?" Xiao Jun asked the man in the silver mask. "Didn't you promise to tell me? Who are you?"

"Actually, you most likely heard of me long ago. I'm Gao Tianjue."

Part 3

Ingot's head was already muddled, his tongue swollen. His eyes, not small to begin with, were larger than normal. When he moved them about, they moved erratically.

Thankfully, he didn't want to move them, because he was looking at someone.

In his eyes, no one in the world was better looking.

Big Boss Tang had been stared at by others from the age of thirteen or fourteen. Even at the age of thirty-four, people still stared at her, all types of people. She had grown used to it. But being stared at by this young rascal, she felt a bit embarrassed.

“What are you looking at?”

“You.”

“I’m an old lady, what are you looking at me for?”

Ingot let out a deliberate sigh. “I’m already an old man. Who else should I look at other than an old lady?”

Big Boss Tang didn’t want to laugh, but she did. She suddenly realized that the little rascal was actually quite charming.

This was a dangerous matter.

A thirty-four year old woman, lonely, suddenly finds a man charming. It doesn’t matter what type of man he is, or how old he is, it is a dangerous matter. Not only dangerous, but frightening.

Were she like Gao Tianjue, she would definitely hide behind a silver mask.

She realized that this charming rascal was dangerous, and she didn’t want him to know that she knew.

Unfortunately, she had no silver mask. She had no mask of any kind.

So Ingot asked her a question. A dangerous, frightening question. A question that would shock anyone.

And of course, Big Boss Tang was shocked.

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[1] This is poem from Qing Dyanasty poet Liu Fenghao. I couldn't find much info on it in English.

[2] Daming lake is a famous attraction in Jinan. <http://tinyurl.com/oyhwhl6>

[3] Baotu Spring is a famous spring in Jinan. <http://tinyurl.com/o8wlzta>

[4] Based on my research, I think Jingshan refers to a place in Taiwan which is famous for hot springs.

[5] Thousand Buddha Mountain is a famous mountain in Jinan.

<http://tinyurl.com/l976t6w>

[6] Qinna is a Chinese martial art grappling technique.

<http://tinyurl.com/n5666ww>

[7] Li Xiao's Chinese name is 李笑 lǐ xiào. Xiao is the character for "laugh."

[8] He's referring to Chu Liuxiang, titular character of the Gu Long series.

<http://tinyurl.com/q4lvmqk>

CHAPTER 15 – A DARK NIGHT ON LAKE HU

Part 1

April 19. Before dawn.

Soft wind blew across still water, the moon and stars sank. Lamplight grew brighter. In the blackness preceding dawn, lamps are the brightest thing in the world.

This is because a lamp sacrifices itself. It burns itself to shine on others.

People are the same.

If a person sacrifices themselves up, no matter how black the surroundings, light will shine forth.

Gao Tianjue. So, this person was Gao Tianjue.

“End the heavens, destroy the earth; wipe the whole lot out.”

This mysterious person who only appeared in legends, now sat in front of him.

Xiao Jun was an orphan. By the time he was born, Gao Tianjue was already one of the most feared figures in Jianghu.

The two of them shouldn't have any relationship whatsoever. But now, for some mystical reason, their fates seemed to be tied together.

Gao Tianjue suddenly asked, “Do you wish to remove my mask to see what type of person I am?”

“At first, I did.”

“And now?”

“As of now, I don’t,” said Xiao Jun, “because I realized something.”

“What’s that?”

“I can’t see your face, but neither can you see mine. On the way here just now, you walked very slowly. The reason is because you can’t see.”

When people use masks, they will leave two holes which will reveal their eyes.

But the silver mask had no eye holes, only a single hole for the mouth.

He could drink tea, but could not see.

Only a blind person would use such a mask. How could the universally famous Gao Tianjue be blind?

Xiao Jun didn’t ask.

He knew the question must touch on something deeply painful to Gao Tianjue.

“You can’t see me, therefore I do not wish to see you.”

“Do you think that’s fair?” asked Gao Tianjue.

“Yes.”

“Then I suppose there’s no harm in telling you something else that’s very fair.”

Xiao Jun didn’t ask about what he referred to.

He’d noticed that this entire time, Gao Tianjue’s kept his left arm concealed in the black cloak.

But then, he suddenly stretched it out.

What he stretched out was not an arm, but a glittering, silver pincer.

“I cut off your arm, and someone else cut off mine.” Gao Tianjue’s voice contained a sneering pain that anyone could hear. “Is that not fair?”

Xiao Jun didn’t answer the question. Instead, he retorted, “Does the person who chopped off your arm resemble me? Is that why you cut off mine?”

Gao Tianjue laughed loudly.

“Laughing” is an innately joyful thing, not only for oneself, but for others.

But the face of Gao Tianjue’s gray-robed subordinate was suddenly covered in fear.

—Could this be because he knew the source of the laughter was not joy, but calamity and misfortune?

Xiao Jun’s palms grew wet with cold sweat.

He felt an indescribable fear in his heart. It was not because he had never heard such fearsome laughter before, but rather, because he had.

In that moment, he suddenly remembered many things. Some seemed real, but others seemed the stuff of nightmares.

Nightmare, not nightmares, he couldn’t tell.

Gao Tianjue’s laughter suddenly ceased. The gray-robed subordinate’s face grew rigid, and Xiao Jun awoke from his reverie.

Nothing had changed in the cabin. Around the boat, Daming Lake was as tranquil as ever.

But to them, it seemed as if everything under heaven had changed. They felt some type of enormous pressure in their hearts.

There was no wind in the cabin, nor had Gao Tianjue moved. And yet suddenly, it seemed as if his cloak were billowing.

The cover of the tea bowl flipped up three inches into the air, then shattered into pieces.

Then a clattering sound rang out as the window slammed shut, shredding the window paper and sending pieces fluttering about like hellish butterflies scattered about by a demon in hell.

A thrumming sound arose from a seven-stringed zither which lay on a wooden rack in the corner, and the pearl curtain in the doorway began to rattle.

Then a cracking sound rang out as the zither strings snapped. The curtain's pearls fell to the ground like tears. All the sounds stopped. The two gray-robed men who had been standing guard outside were nowhere to be seen.

There was nobody at all on the deck. Nobody knew what was happening.

Except Gao Tianjue.

"He's come," he said with a deep sigh. One word at a time, he said: "He's already come."

Part 2

Big Boss Tang stared at Ingot, her eyes and mouth wide.

Her eyes were not small to begin with. As of now, though, they were twice as large as normal. Her mouth was not small either, but currently it seemed large enough to be able to swallow two whole eggs.

She was thirty-four years old, and had seen many things in her life, yet at the moment, she looked like a little girl who had been frightened half to death. Right now, it seemed as if she were not more than seven or eight years old.

What Ingot just said really had startled her.

“What did you just say?” She shook her head. “You didn’t say it. I must have misheard. You didn’t say anything.”

“Actually, I did say it,” replied Ingot, his face completely straight. “I said it very clearly, every single word.”

“But I didn’t hear.”

“You did hear.”

“I didn’t.”

“You absolutely did.”

“I absolutely didn’t,” said Big Boss Tang.

Ingot stared at her, then, shouting in a voice like that of a drowning person crying for help, repeated himself.

“I want you to marry me.”

Big Boss Tang was yet again shocked. This little devil shocked her so badly she felt as if her soul had departed.

“My god,” she said hoarsely. “My god.”

“Did you hear me this time?” asked Ingot. “Or should I say it again?”

“I beg you, please, listen to me.” Big Boss Tang didn’t seem anything like a Big Boss now. “If you say it again, I’ll go jump into a river and drown myself.”

“Why would you drown yourself?”

“Even a deaf person five streets away could hear what you said just now.”

“What’s wrong with that?” said Ingot, staring at her. “I’m never afraid of people hearing anything I say.”

“You might not be afraid, but I am.”

“What are you afraid of?” he said, slapping his chest. “With me here, what do you have to fear?”

Big Boss Tang moaned, and it looked as if she might pass out onto the table at any moment.

“Do you know how old I am?” she said. “I’m just about old enough to be your grandmother.”

Ingot nodded.

“Right, right, right. You’re almost old enough to be my grandmother. My grandmother is only one hundred and one years old.” Then he deliberately asked, “How old are you, by the way?”

“Well I’m not that old, but I am over thirty. At the very least I’m old enough to be your mother.”

“My mother? Hahaha!”

“What does hahaha mean?”

“Hahaha means that you’re just about to really piss me off. My fourth sister is just over thirty, and you say you’re old enough to be my mother? Are you trying to get me angry?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Then let me tell you something. My oldest sister is old enough to be your mother,” he said in all earnestness. “If you want to come home with me, the only way you can do it is by being my wife. And you have no other choice but to be my wife.”

Big Boss Tang covered her ears with her hands.

“I didn’t hear anything,” she said. “You didn’t say anything and I didn’t hear anything.”

“Okay, then I’ll say it again.”

And he did, in a voice even louder than the last time. "I want you..."

This time, he only got half of the sentence out, because Big Boss Tang lurched forward and used her hands to cover his mouth.

Her hands were warm and soft.

Her body was also soft.

Ingot knew, because as she lurched forward, he seized the opportunity to embrace her. She wanted to push him away, but couldn't.

"You little devil, you're really a good-for-nothing."

"I'm not good-for-nothing, I'm a person. A man."

"You're a bullshitter," she said. "At the very least, I'm ten years older than you."

"My third and fifth brothers-in-law are both over ten years older than my sisters," argued Ingot courageously. "If a thirty-year-old man can marry a girl in her teens, why can't a thirty-year-old woman marry a boy in his teens?"

"You're drunk."

"I'm not."

"You're obviously drunk."

"I'm not, I'm not..."

Part 3

Who was "he?" Who had come?

The glass-like waters of Daming Lake were suddenly split by a white wave.

A small boat sliced through the waters like a sharp knife cutting through silk. It sped forward like an arrow.

A tall man in a black robe stood at the front of the boat, his arms clasped behind his back. His long robe rippled in the breeze.

The stars had disappeared, as had the moon. This was the darkest period of night, and though his features could not be distinguished, anyone could sense his mighty dignity.

There was no one else on the small boat, no sail, no punt-pole, no one pulling the oars, no one at the helm.

But the boat had already arrived, faster than anyone could have imagined.

Lowering his voice, Gao Tianjue asked, "Do you know who it is?"

"Li Xiao?"

"Yes. It's him."

Li Xiao, Three Fearsome Laughs, General Li Xiao.

Xiao Jun knew that Li Xiao was Wu Tao. But this person didn't look at all like Wu Tao.

He had become someone else, because as of now, he had no reason to conceal his identity.

Gone was his belly. All the fat on his body had miraculously disappeared.

His narrow, pointed forehead was now wide and sanguine, his previously ashen face now glowed like white jade.

—Was he really that ordinary, low-class businessman whose coin purse had been stolen away?

Xiao Jun couldn't believe it.

He had never believed that anyone in the world could possess such miraculous appearance-changing techniques, nor had he believed that anyone could change so much.

But right now, he couldn't disbelieve.

This was the person he wanted to kill, and yet, he suddenly felt indescribable fear and admiration for him, the kind of feeling a hot-blooded youth has in his heart upon seeing his idol.

Xiao Jun did not understand this feeling, but it caused him to realize something.

—There seemed to be two people battling inside him, battling with two swords. When one sword stabbed back, the other stabbed forth, and both chopped at his heart.

This cause his heart to be constantly filled with contradiction and pain.

“You will only have one chance, and you must take it. Your attack must hit him in a vital spot.”

Xiao Jun hadn't forgotten what Gao Tianjue had repeated to him three times.

But when the chance came, would he attack? He wasn't sure.

The little boat floated on the lake. The man had already reached Gao Tianjue's boat.

A moment ago, the small boat had been quite some distance away.

But now, the man stood in the cabin, and Xiao Jun could see his features clearly.

He had a distinct profile, seemingly carved from fine jade. A wide face and straight nose, and a smile that seemed to contain an air of cynicism.

His eyes radiated brilliance and power, as well as melancholy and heartbreak.

He stood straight and tall, like a javelin.

It would be hard to find someone else in the world who could match his dashing air, his imposing manner, his elegant demeanor.

Why would a person like this have an air of melancholy? Could it be that his heart felt the same type of confusion and pain as Xiao Jun?

Gao Tianjue didn't see him. He couldn't see anything. The strange thing was, it seemed he could actually see more than anyone else.

Even stranger, even though no one could see Gao Tianjue's face, it seemed this person could.

They faced off, staring at each other, as if both parties could see the other's face.

Gao Tianjue's silver mask glittered in the flickering lamp light.

Masks do not display emotion or expression. But the mask did seem to carry expression, an expression that no one except the two of them could understand. Then it seemed as if the silver flicker turned into a roaring flame.

The expression on General Li's face was impossible to describe. And then it was expressionless, as if he had suddenly donned a mask of ice.

"So it's you," General Li said. "I knew you would find me sooner or later."

"You came looking for me," said Gao Tianjue coolly. "I didn't come for you."

"Now that we're here, it doesn't really matter who went looking for whom."

"It does."

"Oh?"

“I didn’t look for you, nor can I see you. I said before that I would never look at you again for the rest of my life.”

“So that’s why you’re wearing such a mask as this?”

“Yes.”

“And what if I decide I have to look at your face?”

“You can’t.”

General Li laughed coldly. His body had already flown into the air.

General Li hadn’t paid any attention whatsoever to Xiao Jun, hadn’t even glanced at him. It was almost as if he didn’t even know someone else was in the cabin.

But Xiao Jun was paying attention to them, to the expressions, to their conversation.

He awaited his chance.

He did not know when the chance would come for him to strike, so he waited.

And had no chance.

Li Xiao stood there, unmoving, off guard, like a wooden statue.

But this wooden statue had been carved perfectly. Every stroke had been carved in precisely the correct position, every line cut flawlessly. His body contained no flaws whatsoever.

So, though off guard, he was invulnerable.

To move without moving; to not move, and therefore move. Defeat tranquility with motion, defeat change with unchangeableness.

It was a state of Zen.

Even if Xiao Jun wanted to make a move, he had no chance to. But, he noticed something strange.

It seemed the two of them knew each other, and perhaps had once been friends. And yet, some irresolvable hatred existed between them.

Were they enemies or friends? Who could tell?

The motionless General Li suddenly moved.

No one could possibly describe this movement.

It seemed slow, and yet so fast that it couldn't be seen clearly. It appeared clumsy and awkward, and at the same time as graceful and elegant as a soaring phoenix.

Gao Tianjue wanted him dead and in the ground. But he didn't want Gao Tianjue dead.

He simply wanted to take off that mask, ugly and beautiful, mysterious and fearsome.

Gao Tianjue wouldn't let him.

Gao Tianjue also moved.

The two of them, motionless, suddenly sprang into motion. They moved like the wind, like the ripples, the catkins, the clouds amidst the wind. Like the wind amidst the ripples and catkins and clouds.

Xiao Jun's heart sank deeper.

He'd always thought of himself as one of the peak masters in Jianghu. Most others also thought this way.

But now he knew how laughable it was.

His martial arts couldn't compare to that of these two. Completely incomparable.

He had never imagined that anyone in the world could possibly have martial arts like them.

But now he was watching it with his own eyes.

How could he make a move? How could he have a chance to make a move?

Their shadows flickered, and the lamp light went out.

But the darkest part of night had passed. The first rays of the morning sun shone down on Daming Lake.

The contending shadows suddenly parted, and General Li appeared directly in front of Xiao Jun. His hand shot out like lightning, and he grabbed Xiao Jun's right arm. His only arm.

Xiao Jun had no time to react. He could only hear General Li say in a low voice: "You can't stay here, come with me, now."

By the time he finished speaking, Xiao Jun had left the ground, and was flying along with General Li.

He couldn't resist.

And then, as they flew out of the cabin, he suddenly saw his chance.

In that moment, pale rays of morning sun shone onto General Li's back.

His back was empty. This was the first time in his entire life that he had exposed his back to someone, and it would undoubtedly be the last.

He never imagined that Xiao Jun would attack, never imagined that he now had another arm.

When he saw the sun shining on General Li's back, the short sword held in the steel pincer shot out, stabbing into the ribs below his left shoulder, directly into his heart.

The move seemed like the reflexive reaction of someone who grabbed a hot coal; it didn't even pass through Xiao Jun's conscious mind.

—This person was his enemy, and this was his only chance. He had to seize the opportunity to attack.

The thought had taken root in his heart, and so he didn't even need to think in order to act.

He had finally seized his chance. Because of all his experience in life, his reaction was fast.

This reaction speed was born from his countless bitter battles and painful training.

He should have been quite pleased with the attack.

But for the rest of his life, whenever he thought about it, he felt a stab of pain.

Even though his sword had stabbed General Li, he felt as if he had stabbed his own heart.

The glitter of the sword was no longer visible.

General Li's body shrank inward and he slid off the blade, writhing in mid-air.

His head turned to face Xiao Jun, and the sun shone down onto his face.

His face did not contain the dread of someone facing death, nor indignation at being plotted against. It was only filled with regret, remorse and sorrow.

Xiao Jun looked upon his face.

He would never be able to forget the expression he saw.

By the time the drops of blood fell onto the deck, General Li had already descended into the waters of the lake.

Water sprayed everywhere, and he sank down.

Ripples spread out, and each ripple contained the blood of General Li.

Before the ripples had subsided, Xiao Jun heard Gao Tianjue's laughter.

He should be laughing.

General Li was finally dead, exactly according to his plan. He should be quite pleased with himself.

And yet his laughter contained not even a drop of joy, but instead was filled with pain and sorrow.

Why was this?

Xiao Jun would never be able to forget that sad, shrill laughter.

CHAPTER 16 – BIG BOSS TANG'S ADVENTURE

Part 1

April 19. Daybreak.

Pale rays of morning light seeped in through the window, allowing Big Boss Tang to gaze upon Ingot's face.

He was drunk. Back when he said "I'm not drunk," he had instantly fallen asleep, and now that he slept, he looked like a child.

He was a child, an intelligent, mischievous, charming, annoying boy, just like a boy she had known when she was young.

She had called that boy "bro," and he had called her "kid brother." He really had regarded her as a kid brother. Every day they would go hiking or tree-climbing together. They would curse and fight, ride cows and chase dogs, steal chickens and go fishing.

All the things that adults forbade children to do, he would take her to do. All the tricks that boys played, she had played.

Eventually, she almost forgot that she was a girl.

Then one summer day, he took her to the forest behind the mountain to go splash around in the brook.

It was a hot day, and she wore a thin outfit of woven grass cloth. The water in the brook was cool and refreshing. The two of them had shouted up a storm as they played, until her clothes were soaked through.

The clothes were tight on her body, and the afternoon summer sun shone down on her in its warmth.

She suddenly realized that he wasn't shouting any more. He was staring at her stupidly with his large eyes.

It was at that moment that he discovered she was definitely not a boy, and furthermore, she had grown up.

She had started to get nervous.

And then she saw something on his body changing, changing in a very scary way. She wanted to run, but her legs had already grown weak.

By the time they returned home that day, the sky was dark, and dinner had long since been eaten.

From that day forward, even though he still called her "little brother," he never again took her to play like the boys play.

From then on, she was his, all the way to the day that he decided to leave and roam Jianghu. He told her not to play with other boys, to wait for him until he returned.

But he had never returned.

She was seventeen that year, and now she was thirty-four.

In these seventeen years, she had never had a second man. And never had there been a second man who could move her heart.

She had never imagined that after those seemingly endless seventeen years, she would suddenly meet a young man like this, so intelligent, mischievous, charming and annoying.

She felt her heart beating.

Just now when Ingot had embraced her, a familiar heat had flushed her body, the same feeling she had felt on that summer evening.

If Ingot hadn't fallen asleep drunk, what would have happened?

She didn't dare think about it.

—How could this little scoundrel act like this? How could he be so pernicious?

Even though it was only April, it seemed to be getting hot. Uncomfortably hot.

She was sweating, sweating uncontrollably.

She couldn't wait for the little scoundrel to wake up. She couldn't give him another chance to mess with her, to confuse her, to hurt her.

A woman of her age should not have done something as stupid as this.

She quietly picked up her woven, golden shoes from under the bed, then pushed open the door to leave. But then she walked back quietly and covered Ingot with a thin blanket. Finally, she left.

The dimly lit courtyard outside was cool and humid. Milky, morning fog drifted about. Someone sat on the stone steps of the corridor opposite her, cheek resting on her hand, staring at her.

"Little Cai," said Big Boss Tang, surprised. "What are you sitting there for? Why aren't you asleep?"

Little Cai ignored her, instead staring dully at the golden shoes in her hands.

—This young girl was already growing up, and was already at the age where she would have flights of fancy. The more she shouldn't think about something, the more she liked to think about it. And she would always think about the worst things.

Big Boss Tang knew what she was thinking, but couldn't devise a way to explain herself.

—When a woman stays all night in a man's room, then leaves in the morning, disheveled, carrying her shoes, half drunk...

What would people think? What could she say?

“Go back to your room and go to sleep!” she said, avoiding Little Cai's eyes. Then in a very level voice she said, “You should have gone to sleep a long time ago.”

“Yes, I should have. And what about you?” She stared at her. “The entire night, you didn't go back. Why?”

Big Boss Tang couldn't think of anything to say.

With a cold laugh, Little Cai said: “I advise you to put on your shoes as quickly as possible. Walking barefoot can lead to a cold.”

With that, she stood, turned, and walked off without a backward glance. It seemed as if she had no intention of ever looking at Big Boss Tang again.

There was a chill in the early spring air.

Big Boss Tang stood there stupidly on the stone walkway, feeling cold spread from her feet all the way into her heart.

She hadn't done anything wrong whatsoever, but she knew that what she had done was broken a young girl's heart.

Dawn light spread, but the fog did not dissipate.

She let out a deep sigh from her heart, and was about to head back to her bedroom when she suddenly noticed that she was once again not alone in the courtyard. Someone sat on the stone steps in the spot that Little Cai had just vacated, cheek resting on hand.

The big difference was, it was not a young girl, but an old man.

A weird, little old man.

Part 2

Big Boss Tang didn't recognize the little old man, and had never seen someone as weird-looking as him before. She had never imagined she would ever see someone like this.

The little old man was not just extremely old, he was also extremely small. Some parts of him seemed older than anyone else in the world, and some parts smaller.

His head was almost completely bald. Only a few white hairs stuck out of the top of his head, and they looked almost like they had been glued on. Even the strongest wind wouldn't blow them away.

Almost all of his teeth were gone. From the top of his mouth to the bottom, from left to right, he only had one tooth. But his tooth was not like the usual teeth of old men, dirty and yellow.

His only remaining tooth was bright white, so bright it seemed to glow and shine.

He was truly old, and yet the skin on his face was like that of an infant's, white and soft. It was a rosy white, and a soft like tofu.

He wore a set of red clothes with gold lining, embroidered with gold flowers. Only nouveau riche playboys on their way to a brothel would wear something like this.

Wouldn't you agree that an old man such as this is truly incredible?

Big Boss Tang just about laughed.

But she didn't. Because this courtyard should in no way have a person such as this in it.

And yet, there he was sitting in front of her, looking at her. He gazed at her with a twinkle in his eye, the look you might expect to see on the face of a man who was twenty, or thirty, or forty or maybe fifty years old.

Luckily, Big Boss Tang knew how to keep her cool. She could do it despite being shoeless. So she nodded at him and smiled.

“Hello, how are you?”

“I’m very good,” said the little old man. “Extremely good, good beyond belief.”

“May I ask your honored family name? And what distinguished business brings you here?”

“‘Honored’ is not my family name,” he said. “And I didn’t come here on any distinguished business. What I came here to do is absolutely not distinguished at all.”

“And what is it?”

“Guess.” The little old man gave her a child-like wink. “If you guess right I’ll kowtow to you three thousand six hundred times.”

Big Boss Tang shook her head. “That many kowtows would be too tiring. I don’t need your kowtows, and I have no way to guess what you’re here to do.”

“Of course you can’t guess,” said the little old man with a hearty laugh. “If you spent your whole life you wouldn’t be able to guess correctly.”

“Then why don’t you tell me yourself?”

“If I told you, you wouldn’t believe me.”

“Give it a try.”

“Okay, I will. I’m here because my wife wants to strip off all your clothes and take a close look at you.”

Big Boss Tang laughed.

She should have been angry, but instead she laughed, because she had never in her entire life heard something so absurd and ridiculous.

She had never imagined she would ever hear something like what he'd just said.

The little old man sighed. "I knew you wouldn't believe me. I knew all along you would refuse to believe."

After he sighed, he flew into the air, like a child who had been wrenched into the air by an adult. He flipped ceaselessly.

Big Boss Tang was not the type of person who was easy to bully.

A woman who everyone truly believed to be a Big Boss was obviously not the type to be easily bullied.

She practiced martial arts. The martial arts she practiced were sort of a random assortment. Some she had learned after formally being accepted by a master. Some had been taught to her by men who hoped to get close to her, to flatter her. To earn her admiration, they would reveal many of their most treasured secrets.

Flying Blossom Fist, Double Duckweed Palms, Mantis Kung Fu, Flying Phoenix Finger, Greater and Lesser Qinna, Five Animals and Seven Transformations, 36 Path Long Fist, Yellow 72 Path Legs, Chain Locking Legs...

She could do at the very least thirty or forty types of martial arts. But when facing up against this little old man, she couldn't use any of them.

There was a person in mid-air flipping constantly. But it wasn't the little old man, it was Big Boss Tang.

She had no idea how she had ended up in the air flipping in circles.

She really didn't know.

She only knew that as soon as the little old man had landed on the ground, she suddenly felt herself being tossed up.

And then she started spinning, ceaselessly, in mid-air, until everything began to go black.

And then she didn't know anything at all.

Part 3

By this time, Ingot had awakened.

He had slept like a rock, so deeply that even if someone had beat him and kicked him and dumped him in the gutter, he still wouldn't have woken up.

But now he was awake, and as he awoke, he saw the morning sun shining on the window.

He groaned, quickly covering his head with the blanket. Any slower and his eyes would have been stabbed to death by the sunlight, his head split into two pieces.

When someone gets truly drunk for the first time, then awakens to a room full of sunshine, they will usually have a reaction like this.

But, not too long after, Ingot slowly stuck his head out from underneath the blanket.

This was because, before his eyes had been covered by the blanket, he had seen someone else in the room.

A person who was definitely not Big Boss Tang.

He hadn't been mistaken.

It was a person wearing a black cloak and a glittering silver mask. Despite being in a room filled with sunlight, he seemed to be a shadowy demon.

Ingot laughed.

He wasn't the kind of person to fear scary people. The more scary the person, the less afraid he would be.

"That's a great demon mask you have there," he said. "Could you lend it to me for a day or two? I'd love to go around scaring people."

"I'm not here to scare you," said the person in a warm voice. "I know that you've been gutsy since you were small."

"You know who I am?"

"I do."

Ingot laughed again. "Fortunately, I also know who you are, otherwise I would really be in a predicament."

"Who am I?"

"You're Gao Tianjue," said Ingot. "You're the person who sapped the power from my limbs, made my whole body weak, then brought me here."

"Correct," said Gao Tianjue. "That was me."

"If you know who I am, how do you dare treat me this way?" Ingot's voice suddenly became fierce and malicious. "Aren't you worried my family will come seeking revenge?"

"They won't come looking for you."

"Why not?"

"Because they know what I did was for your own good. I think you understand that, too."

"Sadly, I don't understand."

"We can never see the light of day, and should have died long ago," said Gao Tianjue. "We carry with us cruelty and hatred which can never be dispelled."

Though his voice was mild, it was filled with a hatred which could make one's hair stand on end: "No matter who runs into us, it's not a good thing for them, because what we carry with us is murder, disaster and blood."

"You, plural?" asked Ingot. "Who are you people?"

"Perhaps we are not even people, but rather evil spirits. Therefore, I don't wish for you to get wrapped up in our grievances and struggles."

"In other words, you don't want me to stick my nose where it doesn't belong."

"Yes," said Gao Tianjue. "Because you come from a different background. That is why I brought you here."

"Otherwise, you're worried that eventually you would have to chop my head off?"

"I won't chop your head off," said Gao Tianjue coolly. "If you want to kill someone, you don't necessarily need to cut off their head. There are many ways to kill someone, and that is one of the silliest."

"How do you usually kill people?"

"I use a kind of pain."

"A kind of pain," said Ingot. "You cause them pain, or cause pain to yourself?"

Gao Tianjue suddenly grew silent.

"That's not a good method," said Ingot. "The person you want to kill is already dead, and not painfully. Therefore, the pain must be yours. Only the living can feel pain."

Gao Tianjue said nothing, nor did he move. And yet, his cloak billowed violently like turbulent waves of a furious ocean.

Ingot kept talking: "There was a day once when I was really happy. It was like a giant meat bun had fallen from the sky straight into my mouth. I was

super happy. And therefore, everyone around me was happy too. Everyone was extremely happy.”

He sighed. “Pain is the same. When you make others feel pain, then you yourself will definitely feel hurt.”

Before he even finished speaking, he felt an ice-cold hand gripping his throat.

Part 4

By that time, Big Boss Tang had also awakened.

When she opened her eyes, she saw no sunlight, nor did her head hurt. But similar to Ingot, she wished she had never woken up. In fact, she wished she could drop dead and forget everything.

CHAPTER 17 – CONGRATULATIONS!

Part 1

April 19.

Big Boss Tang had awoken, and her eyes were open, but in front of her was a sheet of darkness. She couldn't see a thing. It was as if her eyes were closed.

How long had she been unconscious? What time was it? What was this place? Why had the weird old man brought her here?

She had no idea.

She only knew that all important acupuncture points on her body had been sealed in a unique and ingenious way. Her tendons, arteries, Qi and blood were all undamaged, but she couldn't move even so much as her pinky finger.

If that old man had been a bit younger, perhaps she could have guessed what he had in mind for her. She would have thought of it immediately.

But the old fellow really was just too old, old enough that she could comfort herself because of it.

—He wouldn't do something like that. He couldn't be interested in a woman like herself. He couldn't handle it. When old men want to chase women, they always chase the young, naive girls.

This was how she comforted herself, and yet thinking about it made her sick.

Fortunately, she could still hear.

Not long after she woke up, she heard the sound of two people conversing. The first was a woman, her voice thin, shrill and loud, as if she took everyone around her to be deaf.

The second person spoke at a leisurely pace and in a very eccentric tone. It was none other absurd old man.

“Did you bring that woman back?”

“Of course I did,” said the little old man. “Having been dispatched on such a duty, I achieved immediate success, as simple as stretching out my hand.”

“I know you like this kind of thing,” said the woman, her voice growing louder. “You old wretch, pervert!”

“Who likes this kind of thing? You sent me to do it. Had you asked someone else to do it, I wouldn’t go even if you knelt down and begged me.”

“Shut the hell up. You take advantage, then try to show off your cleverness?”

“Took advantage of what?”

“You... I know without doubt that you molested her.”

Suddenly, a “whap” sound rang out. The little old man had just been slapped across the side of the face. He cried out.

“Unjust treatment, unjust treatment!”

“You dare to claim unjust treatment? You dare to say you didn’t molest her?”

“If I did, then call me a son of a bitch.”

“You’re definitely a son of a bitch. And elderly son of a bitch.”

“If I’m a son of a bitch, then what are you?”

“Beat it! Beat it and get as far away as you can! The farther the better. And don’t come back until I call for you.”

“As you wish.”

The old man sighed, muttering to himself: “You live to seventy or eighty and still get as jealous as a little girl. You’ll drive me to my death.”

The old man’s voice faded into the distance. He seemed to be afraid of receiving another slap across the face.

Big Boss Tang finally breathed a sigh of relief. She could tell that the old man and the woman with the thin, shrill voice were husband and wife.

The man had gone, leaving behind the woman, and she was seventy or eighty. How would an old lady treat her? However she ended up being treated, it would definitely be better than what she had been imagining moments before.

Just when she began to think that she could set her mind at ease, she saw lantern light shining.

The light was exceedingly bright. Anyone’s eyes would have a hard time adjusting to such a bright light amidst the darkness.

Big Boss Tang closed her eyes. Then she opened them, and then closed them again. When she opened them again, she didn’t see a person, but only several lanterns, each and every one much brighter than the lanterns in her gambling hall.

All of the lanterns hung directly above her. By use of covers, all the light of the lanterns was directed directly onto her body. Everything else in the room was pitch black.

She squinted her eyes, trying to block the light with her eyelashes. By tilting her head, she could just barely make out the shadow of a person.

It was a woman, skinny and tall.

Big Boss Tang actually couldn’t see the person. She could only see the skirt she wore.

It was a gaudy, pleated skirt, not the type that a seventy- or eighty-year-old elderly woman should be wearing.

Seeing the skirt, Big Boss Tang could tell that this woman was taller than anyone she had ever seen before. That was because the skirt was longer than any skirt she had ever seen. And it was very tight.

The skirts Big Boss Tang wore when she was thirteen years old were more loose than this dress.

What kind of figure did you need to be able to wear such a skirt? Big Boss Tang simply couldn't imagine.

The woman was definitely looking at her, from head to toe. After a long time passed, she asked a question with her thin, shrill voice: "What's your surname? And what's your given name? How old are you? Are you the one who started the As You Wish Gambling Hall?"

Big Boss Tang refused to answer. This woman didn't have the right to interrogate her, so she felt no need to respond.

Instead, she retorted, "What is your surname? And what's your given name? How old are you? Why don't you tell me first?"

"I can tell you," said the woman. "I'm surnamed Lei, and people call me Grand Miss Lei." [1]

"Well then, I can tell you that I am surnamed Tang. People call me Big Boss Tang."

"How old are you?"

"Did you tell me how old you are?"

"No, I didn't."

"Then why should I tell you how old I am?"

"You can tell me. You definitely can." In a cool voice, Grand Miss Lei said, "I like your disposition. You have the kind of spirit which would rather die than be at a disadvantage. I have the same type of disposition."

“Well that’s excellent, then.”

“Unfortunately, there is a bit of a difference between us.”

“What’s that?”

Grand Miss Lei didn’t respond. Instead, she slowly extended her hand, and then slapped Big Boss Tang across the face.

Her had moved out slowly, and yet Big Boss Tang couldn’t clearly see what the hand looked like before the palm slapped her face, then disappeared.

The slap happened very quickly.

“I can hit you, and you have no way to hit me. That is the area of difference. Do you understand now?”

Big Boss Tang said nothing.

“I can do more than slap you,” Grand Miss Lei continued. “Anything that you could possibly imagine, I could do. Even things you can’t imagine, I can do.”

Big Boss Tang’s heart began to sink. She knew that what Grand Miss Lei said was not intended to frighten her. The things women can do to women are far worse than the things men can do, and she had already imagined a few horrifying things that could be done.

Grand Miss Lei sighed. “I’m confident that you understand my meaning. So, can you tell me now? What is your name?”

“Tang Lanfang.” [2]

“How old are you?”

“Thirty-four.”

“You’re only thirty-four? That’s good. You’re still a young girl, you’ll make a good match.”

In her eyes, a thirty-four year old woman was still a young girl. Exactly how old was this Grand Miss Lei?”

Big Boss Tang really wanted to see her face, see what she looked like.

“You’re not too old, and you don’t look too bad. Even though your temper isn’t too good, it can’t be considered bad.” Grand Miss Lei’s voice grew soft. “To be frank, I’m already quite satisfied. However, I still need to take a close look at you.”

“Take a close look?” cried Big Boss Tang. “Why do you need to do that?”

She had cried out because she had suddenly remembered something quite horrifying.

She had remembered what the little old man had said.

—If I tell you, you won’t believe me. I came here because my wife wants to strip off all your clothes and take a close look at you.

At that time, she’d thought it quite ridiculous, and had actually laughed. She had never heard something more absurd before.

But she wasn’t laughing now.

Back then, she hadn’t believed the old man to be speaking the truth. Now she believed.

Grand Miss Lei’s hands stretched out again. This time, it wasn’t to strike her, but rather to unbutton her clothes.

All of Big Boss Tang’s clothes were tailored by master tailors; the clothing was of the highest quality, the cut perfect, completely unique—

And the buttons were specially crafted. Even were she motionless, it would be difficult for another person to undo them.

That’s not to say that it was a frequent occurrence for a man to attempt to undo her buttons. Even if someone wanted to do that, no one would dare to try.

Rather, it was her preference.

She had always believed that the buttons on a woman's clothing were like the outposts on a battlefield, and should have the ability to protect things carefully.

And yet now, the battlefield outposts collapsed in a moment, disintegrated by Grand Miss Lei's fingers.

Big Boss Tang had never seen anyone with fingers as dextrous as hers.

Part 2

Gao Tianjue's hand was ice cold, as cold as the edge of a blade, seemingly as cold as the steel of his pincer.

Anyone who felt such a hand wrap around their throat would be frightened, if not to death, then at least half to death.

But no look of fear appeared on Ingot's face. Instead, it a look of sympathy filled it as he looked at Gao Tianjue. He sighed, and continued with what he had been saying: "You really are quite pitiable. I really sympathize with you."

It seemed he actually felt sympathy for him, as if he didn't know that this person could crush his throat like a walnut in a door jam.

"You sympathize with me?" blurted out Gao Tianjue. "Why would you sympathize with me?"

"Because you fear that you don't have very long to live."

His own life was being held in another's hand, and yet he talked about that person not having long to live, and quite earnestly at that.

Gao Tianjue had roamed unhindered across Jianghu for twenty or thirty years, but had never met a person like this.

"Who doesn't have long to live; me, or you?" he asked Ingot.

“Of course it’s you.”

“And how will you be able to continue living for a long time?”

“Because you’re sick, and quite seriously.”

“Oh?”

“If I were you, I would have gone home a long time ago, had a bowl of steaming soup, and climbed under two or three blankets to sleep for three days.” He spoke in complete earnestness. “If you listened to my advice and do as I say, perhaps you could be saved.”

Gao Tianjue seemed to be shocked to the core. Ingot rolled his eyes, and then suddenly grabbed hold of the man’s hand.

“Feel for yourself,” he said. “Your hand is too cold. It’s as cold as the hand of a dead person.” He sighed. “So, I advise you to be good and listen to me. Get home as quickly as possible.”

Gao Tianjue’s hand was cold and smooth, while Ingot’s was warm and soft.

He gripped Gao Tianjue’s hands with his two, and softly said, “A person like you should really take good care of yourself. If you don’t care for yourself, then who will? And if you die, I’m afraid there won’t be anyone to shed even a single tear for you.”

He didn’t laugh. It seemed as if his words sprang forth from his heart, and that he actually hoped Gao Tianjue would be moved by them. He wanted to move others’ hearts, because he himself was often moved by others.

In fact, it would be hard to find another person who was so easily moved by others.

Gao Tianjue showed no reaction whatsoever, and yet he also did not remove his hand from Ingot’s throat.

This was a truly strange reaction. If anyone else had said such things in front of him, that person’s tongue would already have been sliced off. And if any other person had dared to touch his hand, then that person would no longer have an intact skeleton.

Ingot waited for a long time, and, seeing that he did not appear to be moved at all, asked another probing question, "Did you hear what I just said?"

"I heard," responded Gao Tianjue. "I heard every word very clearly."

"So are you prepared to go home?"

"No."

"What are you prepared to do, then?"

"I'm prepared to kill you," he responded coldly. "I'll start by slicing out your tongue, then I'll cut off your hands, and finally I'll kill you and feed you to the dogs."

"Why?" asked Ingot, looking surprised. "I've treated you so well, why would you want to kill me?"

"Because I know that of everything you said, not one bit is the truth," said Gao Tianjue with a cold laugh. "You're just trying to use words to move me, so that I will let you go."

Ingot seemed completely unwilling to deny this. He just sighed and laughed a bitter laugh. "It seems it really isn't very easy to fool you."

"So you admit it?"

"Well, since I can't fool you, there's no use in denying it. Go ahead and just kill me."

"I was always going to kill you."

"How exactly are you planning to kill me? Can you kill me using only this one arm?"

His own hands still held Gao Tianjue's. He suddenly kissed the hand with his soft, warm lips. Then he closed his eyes, appearing to wait for death.

"I've heard that death row inmates get a last request before they die," he said. "So this is my last request, you definitely have to grant it."

With that, he closed his mouth, and prepared to die.

Part 3

Big Boss Tang didn't cry, nor kick up a row. She did not shriek or struggle. She knew those things were useless.

She wished she could die. If death were not an option, she wished she could pass out. But unfortunately, she wasn't dead, and in fact completely sober. So she could only lay there underneath the lights while Grand Miss Lei, who did not seem like a Grand Miss at all, looked at her from head to toe in extreme detail.

She had a slender waist, a large bust, and long, slender legs. She had no blemishes whatsoever on her body, nor any fat whatsoever. Her body was no different than when she was seventeen years old.

For a thirty-four year old woman to maintain her body in this way was no easy task. It was the result of years of hard work, and something she was immensely proud of.

On spring nights, after bathing, standing alone in front of the mirror, Tang Lanfang would sometimes visualize an impossible fantasy in which someone gazed upon her flawless figure, just like that other spring night seventeen years ago when she had offered herself up for the first time.

She really had thought about such things, and she believed that many other women had had similar thoughts.

Not willing to eat this, not willing to eat that, looking horrified at the sight of fat, expending all effort to remain slim: wasn't it all for others' enjoyment?

And yet, at the moment, what she really wanted to do to the person who was "enjoying her," was to dig her eyes out.

Even more annoying, as Grand Miss Lei examined her, she kept muttering things to herself.

“Not bad, she’s taken good care of herself, no flabby skin at all, no defects whatsoever. She can definitely give birth to children, lots of sons and daughters, for sure.”

In the end, Big Boss Tang couldn’t handle it any more, and cried out: “There is no enmity between us, why do you treat me like this?” she screamed. “Who are you? Why are you doing this? Tell me!”

Who could explain such a preposterous thing? Who could understand it?

Grand Miss Lei didn’t explain at all. Instead, she just said something incredibly unbelievable.

In a very happy voice, she said to Big Boss Tang: “Congratulations!”

**

[1] Her surname 'Lei' is also the word for thunder. Also, her title is hard to translate in English. It's a title used with young women from powerful, rich families.

[2] Lan means orchid and fang means fragrant, or virtuous.

CHAPTER 18 – A RED FLOWER IN A WHITE HEAD OF HAIR

Part 1

August 19. Late Morning.

Ingot awaited death, but even after waiting for quite a long time, he didn't die.

Gao Tianjue's hand still gripped him tightly, the icy palm slowly seeming to grow warm, just like an iceberg floating on the north pole since ancient times that had begun to melt.

Icebergs will eventually melt, as will flesh and blood people.

Ingot laughed.

"I knew you couldn't bear to kill me," he said. "How could you have the heart to kill someone as charming as me?"

Gao Tianjue showed no reaction.

It seemed as if he weren't there, as if he had slipped deeply into a sweet and dark snare. It was like someone had taken distant dreams of the past and weaved them into a trap.

Ingot stroked his hand, then sighed.

"Such a good-looking hand. You should have been able to use it to do a lot of happy things for yourself and others. Why turn it into a murder weapon?" He couldn't help but ask: "Why can't you be like other women, and do the things women are supposed to do?"

Gao Tianjue's hand and body suddenly became icy cold and rigid.

“How did you know I am a woman?”

“I just do,” said Ingot. “I knew a long time ago.”

Gao Tianjue suddenly flipped her hand around and grabbed his wrist. Angrily, she said, “You knew I was a woman, and you dared to treat me this way?”

She suddenly changed. Now she seemed as if she could kill at any moment. Her hand was now a murder weapon.

But Ingot didn’t look scared at all.

“It’s because I knew you were a woman that I treated you so,” he said. “Because I really have felt bad for you this entire time.”

“You feel bad for me?” Fury filled her hoarse voice. “You dare to feel bad for me?”

“Why can’t I?” he replied. “You have no family, no friends. Your life throughout these years is more painful and lonely than anyone else’s.” He sighed. “To be frank, not only do I feel bad for you, I like you.”

Gao Tianjue looked as if she had just been chopped with a sword. Her sharp fingertips had already stabbed into Ingot’s skin.

“What did you say?” she said angrily. “What did you just say?”

“I said I really like you,” said Ingot, sounding a little angry. “Don’t tell me I can’t like you? Don’t tell me you believe yourself unworthy to be liked?” The more he spoke the more angry he got. “Don’t tell me you think I’m trying to trick you by enticing you? By seducing you? If you really think that, then just kill me now, and if you don’t, then you’re a real bastard.”

Who would dare to speak in such a way to Gao Tianjue? Even Ingot knew that no one dared to.

Therefore, he closed his eyes again and awaited death.

Part 2

“Congratulations? You’re congratulating me?”

Big Boss Tang couldn’t hold back from letting out a scream. Her throat seemed like it would split apart at any moment.

But Grand Miss Lei just continued on happily: “I am congratulating you.” She repeated herself again: “Congratulations, congratulations! I wish you good fortune and great rejoicing.”

“I was sitting at home minding my business, when suddenly a weird old bastard dragged me here. Then you, you ***** old granny, stripped me, rendered me half dead. And then you congratulated me?” Her voice hoarse, she asked, “What’s wrong with you?”

Her voice not the least bit angry, Grand Miss Lei said, “There’s nothing wrong with us, neither is there with you. I can guarantee your body doesn’t have anything wrong with it whatsoever.”

“I’ve always been that way.”

“So because you have nothing wrong with you, I’m congratulating you. I needed to check to see, and that’s why I had you brought here.”

“There are a lot of people in the world. Why couldn’t you go see if some of them have something wrong?”

“Because they aren’t you,” said Grand Miss Lei cleverly. “It’s because you aren’t someone else that we selected you.”

“Does me having something wrong or not have anything to do with you?”

“Of course it does.”

“How?”

“Because our Young Master 9th took a liking to you, and wants to marry you,” said Grand Mistress Lei. “So of course I had to take a good close look at you. People with problems cannot marry into the Dragon Family.” [1]

Big Boss Tang finally understood. And yet she couldn't help but ask a question to clarify: "Your Young Master 9th is that clown?"

"He's not a clown, he's an ingot," she laughed. [2] "The great Ingot who everyone loves."

Big Boss Tang's face grew red, burning red.

"How do you know he wants to marry me?" She mustered her gumption, then asked again: "Just how do you know?"

"How could we not know?" laughed Grand Miss Lei, sounding even more happy. "We know everything you said and did last night in the bedroom."

Big Boss Tang's face grew even more red and hot.

How could these people know about everything she had said and done last night?

"We aren't the type of people to stick our noses into the affairs of other. We haven't done so for many years. But when it comes to Young Master 9th's affairs, we had to get involved; we had no choice."

"Why?"

"Because of what we owe his father."

Big Boss Tang started to get angry again. "He's out causing mischief and stirring up trouble, why don't you get involved with that?"

"Those things we don't get involved with," said Grand Miss Lei. "Actually, his father can't control him, so even if we wanted to, we couldn't." She spoke in a very straightforward manner. "As long as you don't bully him, then he can do whatever he wants, and we won't get involved."

"And what if he bullies others?"

"He's a good boy. Good and kind-hearted. Why would he bully people?" Her voice was filled with love. "Even if sometimes it seems like he's bullying

others, it's not a big problem." Then her voice grew hard. "But if he wants to do some bullying, so be it. We'll just pretend we don't know. And if he tries to, but fails, we will step in to help out."

Big Boss Tang listened, shocked.

She didn't understand how someone could say such preposterous things.

"As of now," said Grand Miss Lei, "I know you have no defects, so you are qualified to marry him. Of course I should congratulate you." Then she asked, "Now do you understand?"

"I don't."

"You still don't understand?" said Grand Miss Lei, shocked. "Are you an idiot?"

"I'm not an idiot," said Tang Lanfang. "But I'm old."

"You're not the least bit old."

"I'm at least ten years older than him."

"So?" she said, sounding both very open-minded and also very earnest. "Married couples and friends are the same. As long as they both are happy, what does a bit of difference in age have to do with anything?"

Tang Lanfang gaped.

She had never heard anyone say such things before, nor had she ever dared to think about them.

Yet now, she was forced to. Her heart started to beat, quickly.

Then she heard the voice of the old man coming from outside: "Can I come in now?"

"You dare!" cried Grand Miss Lei angrily. "If you dare to come in, I'll dig out your eyeballs."

He seemed to heave a sigh.

Grand Miss Lei muttered curses: "Old pervert." As she cursed, she put Tang Lanfang's clothes back on. Afterwards, she shouted, "Get the hell in here!"

Finally, Tan Lanfang could see the two of them clearly.

The husband, furtive and ancient, incredibly skinny and short.

The wife, even more furtive, more ancient and more skinny, and at least twice as tall as her husband.

Her age was far beyond that of "Grand Miss." She was at least old enough to be any grand miss's grandmother.

And yet she wore the clothes that a grand miss would wear. And what she wore was even more gaudy than any grand miss would put on.

She wore makeup on her gaunt face, and a large red flower was stuck into the white hair on her temples.

Tan Lanfang had never seen people as laughable as this. And yet she didn't laugh.

She couldn't.

However, the old man laughed. Looked at her and laughed.

"Do you know why my wife just said what she did?" he asked her. "Why she said that an age difference shouldn't matter between married couples?"

He quickly answered his own question, apparently afraid his wife would forbid him from saying it: "Because she's a dozen or so years older than me."

Tan Lanfang felt it was all very strange.

What was strange was not what he had said, but the fact that after he said it, he didn't receive a slap in the face.

Not only did Grand Miss Lei not seem inclined to do anything, she actually looked at her husband with a warm, meaningful glance.

“He was born in the year of the sheep,” she said, “and he always assumed I was too. That would make me twelve years older than him. Except, I was actually born in the year of the tiger, which makes me nineteen years older than him.”

“You thought I didn’t know?” said the old man with a loud laugh. “You thought you could trick me?”

“You knew?”

“Of course I knew,” said the old man, looking immensely pleased. “I knew even before we got married.”

“Then why did you ask me to marry you?”

“Because I love you,” the old man told his wife, his eyes filled with sweet, tender affection. “Even though you’re seventeen years older than me, I still wanted to marry you.”

“Really?”

“When did I ever lie to you?” he said with a wink. “If I ever did, it was only because I didn’t want you to get angry.”

Grand Miss Lei chuckled, a laugh that truly sounded like a grand miss.

“Now, you’re not allowed to lie to me,” she said, her face suddenly very serious. “After you married me, did you regret it?”

“Why would I regret it?”

“Not only am I older than you, I’m fierce and rude and get jealous easily.”

“You’re fierce because you want the best for me. You get jealous because you love me, and you’re worried I’ll go after a younger woman. If you didn’t love me, I could go chase eight hundred women, get on my knees and beg you to get jealous, but you wouldn’t.”

He suddenly clasped his wife's hand, just like a young man clasping the hand of his first love. "Let me ask you, after all these years, would you say our lives have been happy?"

Grand Miss Lei nodded her head quietly. "Every day since the day we got married has been very happy. If God could let me live them all again, I would still marry you."

She then turned her head and looked at Tang Lanfang: "I bet you think we are sickeningly amusing."

Tang Lanfang didn't respond. She didn't need to. She was sure that they could see how she felt. Right now, if anyone said they were sickeningly amusing, she would slap them across the face.

Originally, she had thought this couple to be laughable, but now she just wanted to cry.

Like a person who had been stuck in a dark room for a very long time, and then suddenly saw the bright sunny sky, green mountains and trees, red flowers and spacious land, tears streamed from her eyes.

"You're crying?"

"I'm not crying."

"You're obviously shedding tears."

"Shedding tears isn't necessarily crying," said Tang Lanfang. "And crying isn't necessarily shedding tears."

"You should think an old granny like me, made up like a little girl, is quite laughable. Why are you crying instead?"

"I don't know," said Tang Lanfang. "I really don't know."

Actually, she did know, she just didn't want to say. So the old man said it for her.

"If you believe yourself to be young, who would dare call you old?" he said to his wife. "If you believe yourself to be old, you can dress yourself up however you wish, and no one will think it laughable." He continued: "The determining factor in being old is not one's age, but rather one's heart. Therefore, some people who are eighteen years old are already old, but some people who have lived to eighty are still quite young."

Grand Miss Lei laughed, then lightly pinched Tan Lanfang's cheek. "If I'm not old, then how can you dare to call yourself old? Come! We must go back."

"Go back?" asked Tan Lanfang. "Go back where?"

"Back to your little clown!"

She grabbed her to leave, but Tan Lanfang, her face growing red, said, "Wait a moment."

"Wait for what?"

"There's something else I want to ask you."

"What's that?"

"Maybe he wants to marry me, but do I want to marry him?" she asked, her face scarlet. "Regardless of anything, you should at least ask me first."

She had to muster a lot of bravery to say this. And yet, to Grand Miss Lei this question didn't seem to even count as a question.

"Of course you want to," she said. "Who knows how many women want to marry a talented young man like him. If they lined up, the line would stretch all the way to Kaifeng." [3]

"There are really that many women who want to marry him?"

"Of course there are."

“Then why don’t you let one of them marry him?”

“Why would I let someone else marry him?”

“Because I’m not someone else,” said Tang Lanfang, her face straight. “Other people want to, but I don’t.”

Grand Miss Lei laughed again. “I know, I know. Women are like this. With their lips they say they don’t want to, but in their hearts they 1000% want to.”

It seemed she was already completely decided on the matter, unwilling to change her mind at all. Even if Tang Lanfang said more on the subject, she wouldn’t listen.

Tan Lanfang could only go along with her.

Dealing with a person like this, what else could she do?

It was an enchanting, sunlit spring day. Flowers bloomed. Some bloomed a bit early, and some a bit late, but eventually, they all bloomed.

Flowers that bloom late are always more colorful and beautiful.

Some people’s lives are like late-blooming flowers. Just when they think that no more flowers will bear fruit in their lives, heaven will send them an unexpected surprise. Flowers will again bloom, bringing happiness.

As long as one is alive, there is hope.

Part 3

Tan Lanfang’s heart beat rapidly. The closer they got to her house, the faster it beat.

What would happen after she saw Ingot? How would he treat her? How would she treat him? She still didn't dare to think about it.

The little scoundrel had only said those things after he was drunk. Who knows how many times in the past he had said similar things to girls. Maybe he had already forgotten what he said.

But this old couple took what he said seriously, as if he had formally proposed to her according to the three letters and six etiquettes. [4] It seemed they were ready to send them to the nuptial chamber. When she thought of that, her heart beat even faster.

She liked Ingot, really liked him. But not enough to marry him instantly.

She had never even thought of marrying someone.

But if Ingot, in all seriousness, admitted to what he had said, she might not be that angry.

—How could a thirty-four year old woman suddenly start acting like a little girl?

She really wanted to give herself two strong slaps across the face.

What about Ingot? Had he woken up to find her gone? Was he worried about her?

The old man had been looking at her this whole time, laughing to himself, as if he could see into her heart. He suddenly said, "Don't worry, he won't run off. Even if someone tried to beat him away with a broom, he wouldn't leave. I know that he loves you, and he'll wait for you to come back."

Tang Lanfang ignored him.

The old man continued to mess with her. Deliberately, he asked, "You know who the 'he' I'm talking about is, don't you?"

Deliberately, she responded, “No, I don’t.”

“You really don’t know?”

“Nope.”

“Well then I’ll just have to tell you,” he said with a wink. “I’m talking about that clown, your future husband.”

Tan Lanfang’s face grew red, and the old man clapped his hands, laughing. He laughed so hard it seemed as if his one remaining tooth might fall out.

Grand Miss Lei also looked quite happy. Even the big red flower in her white hair seemed to be laughing happily. Tang Lanfang wanted to be angry, but just couldn’t make herself.

When life is so wonderful, what reason would they have to be upset? What justification to be angry?

And so they were happy. Because they had no idea what had happened to Ingot.

Even if someone told them, they probably wouldn’t believe it.

What had happened to Ingot, even he himself could scarcely believe.

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[1] And finally here is the connection to 7 Killers!!! Remember Dragon 5th of the Dragon Family? As of now, we know that Ingot is Dragon 9th, assumably Dragon 5th's brother.

[2] A bit of wordplay here. If you take the first character of the word ingot and change it to another character, it makes the word for a clown or a funny person.

[3] Kaifeng is a city in Henan province. <http://tinyurl.com/l87yg3m>

[4] Ancient China had some pretty complicated wedding customs.

<http://tinyurl.com/oa2vxwb>

CHAPTER 19 – A HAND AND A FOOT

Part 1

April 19. Afternoon.

The setting sun of this spring afternoon shone in through the window onto a camellia, which rested in the corner of the room. The leftover alcohol from last night still remained. Some of Tan Lanfang's hair and fragrance also remained on the pillow.

The room was as quiet and peaceful as when she had left. The only difference was that now the room was empty.

“Ingot?”

He must have regretted what he'd said last night, and snuck away.

Tan Lanfang forced herself under control, not allowing any pain or disappointment to show on her face. “He's gone,” she said coolly. “That's fine. People who should leave cannot be made to stay.”

She didn't look at Grand Miss Lei's face. She slowly walked over to the bed and pulled a hair off the pillow.

—Was this one of her hairs? Or his?

She stood there stupidly, looking at the hair, for who knows how long. Then suddenly she felt a chill in her feet that pierced to her bones.

She'd seen a shoe. Ingot's shoe.

There is nothing frightening about shoes. But when she saw the shoe, her face suddenly filled with an unspeakable panic and fear. And when she turned, she found that Grand Miss Lei's face had the same expression on it.

“He didn’t leave,” said Tang Lanfang. “Not by himself.”

“Oh?”

“Who would leave wearing one shoe?” She grabbed the gauze bed canopy to prevent herself from falling down. “Also, he was completely powerless. He wouldn’t even be able to get past the courtyard.”

“Oh?”

“Without my command, no one would enter the courtyard, nor would any of the guards let him leave.”

“And yet moments ago you were convinced he had left,” said Grand Miss Lei. “Why didn’t you think of these things then?”

“I don’t know.” She sat down. “I really don’t know.”

Actually, she did know. She just didn’t want to say. So again, the old man said it for her.

“Because you love him already, but you don’t know if he really loves you. Your heart is twisted up in a knot, and when you didn’t see him here, you felt flustered. How could you possibly think of anything else?”

“What about you?” asked Grand Miss Lei. “Are you flustered?”

“Honestly speaking, my heart is flustered to death,” he said with a bitter laugh. “If something’s happened to him, I’ll go drown myself in the ocean.”

Grand Miss Lei walked over and stroked Tan Lanfang’s hair. “Don’t worry, I guarantee you that nobody in the world would dare harm a single hair on his head. Not even Gao Tianjue would have the guts to do that.”

The old man sighed and shook his head. “That’s what I used to think.”

“What do you think now?”

“I just remembered that Gao Tianjue is a woman.”

“So what if she’s a woman?”

“No so what,” he said with a sigh. “It’s just that if a woman runs into a charming young man like Ingot, sometimes they can do just about anything. No matter how old she is, or who she is.”

With a shriek, Grand Miss Lei said, “Don’t tell me you think Ingot would be interested in an old granny like Gao Tianjue?”

“Old men are always interested in young women, why can’t old women be interested in young men? In any case, Gao Tianjue isn’t that old, and furthermore...”

He didn’t finish his sentence, because he had just caught sight of something very strange.

This was something even more strange than Ingot’s shoe.

Right now, anyone who saw something like this, in a place like this, would be completely shocked.

And then, Grand Miss Lei and Tang Lanfang both saw it, too.

Part 2

A black cloak, a black headband, and a silver mask which glittered brightly in the afternoon sunlight.

The waters of Daming Lake rippled under the same sun.

Gao Tianjue stood quietly on the shore, looking somewhat changed. She looked tired, as if she had something weighing on her mind.

—Was this change because of the damned scoundrel Ingot?

Ingot wasn't there. She was alone.

—And what of Ingot? Where was he? Dead by her hand?”

It would be such a pity for a charming youth like him to die. How could she bear to do it?

A small boat floated nearby, anchored under the shade of a willow tree. A gray robed man stood there, head lowered in respect, not daring to look at Gao Tianjue's face.

After a long time passed, Gao Tianjue slowly climbed into the boat, her footsteps seeming a bit heavier than usual.

Her mood was undoubtedly somber.

Killing is not something that makes you happy, especially when the person you kill is someone you didn't want to die. Anyone's mood would be somber in a situation like this.

Part 3

Everyone has feet, so a foot is nothing strange or frightening.

And this foot had not been chopped off, nor was it dripping with blood in a burlap sack.

It stuck out from underneath the bed, and normally feet do not stick out from underneath beds.

But when Tang Lanfang and Grand Miss Lei saw the foot, they were both shocked.

Because this foot did not belong to Ingot.

It was a woman's foot, and a good looking one at that, slender, sparkling and perfect. It looked as if it had been painstakingly carved by a master craftsman, from a slab of perfect jade.

How could there be a woman's foot sticking out from this bed, in this bedroom?

The old man's eyes stared fixedly.

The more a man appreciates women, the more he will appreciate their feet. Generally speaking, a man of this age knows how to appreciate women.

Unfortunately, he couldn't appreciate anything, because standing next to him was a very jealous wife.

Grand Miss Lei gave him a slap.

"Lift your eyes up! Or do you want me to dig them out?"

"No, I don't."

The old man quickly slid away to stand by the door. He couldn't stop from sighing.

"If a man can't even look at a woman's foot, what is the point of conducting oneself properly?"

This time, Grand Miss Lei pretended she didn't hear, and instead asked Tang Lanfang: "Didn't you just say that without your order, no one would dare enter this place?"

Tan Lanfang nodded, but then shook her head: "Besides me, there's one other person who could come in."

"Who?"

"Little Cai."

"Who is Little Cai?"

“A girl.” Tan Lanfang thought for a moment before saying, “She’s my adopted daughter.”

“Is this her foot?”

“No, that’s not possible.”

“Why not?”

“Because her foot is like mine, the second toe is a bit longer than the big toe.”

Grand Miss Lei looked at her with a strange expression, then looked at the foot. “Then whose foot is this?”

The old man couldn’t hold back any longer. “If you want to know who she is, why not just pull her out from under the bed and have a look? If you’re not willing to touch her, I can do it.”

“If you dare to touch her, the second you do, I’ll chop off the foot, braise it in soy sauce and cook it until it’s falling apart, then make you eat it.”

The old man lifted his head up. “Why would you ask me to eat someone else’s foot? You know that I won’t eat anyone’s foot except yours.”

Grand Miss Lei couldn’t help but laugh. But as soon as she touched the foot, she stopped laughing.

The foot was icy cold, without the slightest bit of warmth, just like that of a corpse.

As soon as she stretched out her hand, she pulled it back, then called to her husband. “Okay, you do it.”

“How come you’ve suddenly stopped being jealous?” he said, looking surprised.

“Who said I’m not jealous? I’m always jealous of living people, with no exception.” She sighed. “But to be jealous of dead people is going a bit too far.”

Just who was it under the bed? Was it a dead body?

When the old man pulled the person out from under the bed, Tang Lanfang's heart almost stopped beating.

Part 4

The sunlight gradually grew dim, as did the reflection of the mountains on the surface of the lake.

Gao Tianjue slowly walked onto the boat. A middle-aged man in a gray robe stood by the pearl curtain, hands at his side respectfully. He reported, "We've already sent six shifts of men into the water, but we still haven't found the corpse."

"Humph."

"He's definitely in the water," said the man, sounding utterly certain. "We've had men guarding the banks of the lake since last night. Even if he's not dead, he wouldn't be able to escape the shores."

Gao Tianjue laughed coldly.

The man continued, "Chamber Lord Xiao has been in the cabin the whole time. He won't eat or speak, as if he's possessed. He just sits there, not moving."

Xiao Jun really was sitting there, not moving.

His breathing hadn't stopped, and his heart still beat, but he looked like a corpse, as if he had died along with General Li.

It seemed as if the sword that had stabbed through General Li's heart had simultaneously stabbed through his own heart.

Gao Tianjue walked in slowly to stand in front of him, but he showed no reaction whatsoever.

It was as if his eyes, too, had been stabbed out by the sword.

Killing someone usually doesn't make you happy, but it shouldn't produce suffering like this.

He had wanted to kill him all along, had lived to slay him with his sword.

His wish had been fulfilled. Why did he appear to be in so much pain and suffering?

Gao Tianjue gave off another cold laugh.

"You're dead," she said. "Even if you manage to live to eighty, you're a living dead person."

Xiao Jun showed no reaction.

"That's because you want to be dead," said Gao Tianjue. "You should want to continue living, but instead you wish to die."

Xiao Jun showed no reaction.

"If people found out that you had killed yourself, then there would definitely be a lot of happy people. I should call them over, and let them see what has become of the world-famous Beggar Sect Torture Chamber Lord."

Xiao Jun still showed no reaction.

"Do you know what I want to do as of this moment?" It looked as if Gao Tianjue were getting angry. "I really want to slap you across the face."

Xiao Jun suddenly had a reaction, because he had just caught sight of something very strange.

His pupils constricted, as if he had just seen a ghost or a poisonous dragon.

But he hadn't seen a ghost, nor a poisonous dragon.

He had seen a hand.

Everyone has hands, so a hand is nothing strange or frightening.

And this hand had not been chopped off, nor was it dripping with blood in a burlap sack.

But as soon as he saw this hand, he was more shocked than if he had seen a poisonous dragon or a ghost.

Why?

Part 5

The person had already been pulled out from underneath the bed.

It was woman, a woman not easy to see. If you walked around the entire world, you would have a hard time finding a woman like this to see, because there was truly no one else in the world like her.

She was too beautiful, beautiful beyond belief, in a way that is impossible to describe.

Her hands, feet, skin, figure, even her undergarments, were matchlessly beautiful. She was so beautiful that you would not dare to even touch her.

This level of beauty was actually frightening.

But the most frightening was not her beauty, but from her ugliness.

She was exceedingly beautiful, but also exceedingly ugly. Her beauty was unimaginable, but so was her ugliness. Her beauty was impossible to describe, so was her ugliness.

Her hand was as beautiful as a statue's, her arm glittered like jade. Even the most picky person would not be able to point out any flaws.

Except, she only had one hand, and one arm.

Her hair was black, soft, and shining. Her face was shaped beautifully, every line and every contour.

However, right in the middle of her face was a blood-red X.

It had been carved with a sharp knife, a knife filled with hatred and enmity. When the knife had slashed her, it flayed both flesh and bone.

The wound had long since healed, but the scar was still blood-red.

Grand Miss Lei felt her stomach and even her pores contract.

If she saw a scar like this on another person, she would feel bad, but to see it on this flawlessly beautiful face gave a different feeling.

She felt a trembling dread that was impossible to describe, and she wished she had never seen this person.

But she had already laid eyes on her, and knew who she was.

"Gao Tianjue."

"No wonder she always wears a silver mask. If I were her, I would definitely never let anyone see my face."

"And she doesn't want to look at other people," said Tang Lanfang sadly. "Or at least, there are some people she doesn't want to look at."

"Oh?"

"I've seen her mask," said Tang Lanfang. "It has no eye holes."

Grand Miss Lei sighed. "I understand how she feels. If I were her, I would probably be like this too."

Now, there was no mask on Gao Tianjue's face, and yet her eyes were blank. It seemed as if she couldn't see anything.

When others spoke, she couldn't hear.

"There's something I don't understand," said Grand Miss Lei. "All those years ago, Gao Tianjue and Guo Mie were amongst the top experts under heaven. It was said that when they worked together, they were invincible."

"Even I said as much," said the old man. "As a husband and wife team, they were invincible."

"How about us two?"

"Nope."

The old man spoke with unbreakable certainty, but his wife didn't seem convinced. "How can you be so sure? Was the reputation of Madam Silver Lightning and Silent Thunderbolt any less than theirs?"

So, this couple was none other than the Thunder and Lightning couple, who had rocked Jianghu in years past. Even Tang Lanfang was shocked.

But Silent Thunderbolt, who in the past was irascible beyond measure and would never admit defeat, said, "Our reputation was no less than theirs, but that's because we never fought them."

This time, Grand Miss Lei actually didn't argue with her husband. Instead, she sighed. "Maybe you're right. And that is why I still don't understand."

"What do you not understand?"

"They had such incredible skills, how could she be like this now?"

—As of now, Guo Mie was dead and Gao Tianjue was a cripple. If they were truly invincible, who could possibly have defeated them?

"I can't figure it out either," said the old man with a sigh. "This is one of the two great mysteries in Jianghu."

The other was the location of all the infinitely process treasures stolen by the Laughing General. In all the years, no one in Jianghu had been able to track them down.

The old man's eyes glittered, and he suddenly said, "If you really want to take a guess at who defeated them, well, I can think of only two possible candidates."

"Which two?"

"Themselves."

"Themselves?" cried Grand Miss Lei. "You mean Guo Mie killed himself? And Gao Tianjue disfigured her own face?"

"Yes."

"Are you crazy?"

"No."

"You're definitely crazy. Only a crazy person would think this way."

"He's not crazy." Who said this? The previously unhearing, unmoving Gao Tianjue.

Upon hearing her speak, everyone was shocked. Who would have ever imagined that she would say something?

"He's not crazy?" cried Grand Miss Lei. "And neither are you?"

"He's definitely not crazy." Gao Tianjue's voice was very calm. "Because he's completely correct."

"Don't tell me you you're like this because you hurt your own self?"

"Yes. End the heavens, destroy the earth, completely invincible," said Gao Tianjue coldly. "Other than ourselves, who could possibly harm even a hair on our heads?"

Grand Miss Lei stood there in shock, as did Tang Lanfang.

Who could imagine why a person would intentionally injure themselves. This was surely an incredible secret.

No one could or should possibly even ask about the secret.

Grand Miss Lei thought of another question. "What about right now?" she asked Gao Tianjue. "Don't tell me you sealed your own acupuncture points and stuffed yourself under the bed?"

Gao Tianjue didn't respond to the question, so Grand Miss Lei continued, "Or was it Ingot? Where did he go?"

Gao Tianjue's calm voice suddenly became incredibly grim, "It doesn't matter where he went, you will never find him. Forever!"

Part 6

Seeing a hand is nothing strange. Who knows how many hands a person sees in a lifetime?

The strange thing was, this hand had stretched out from a place it should not have. Even a hand sticking out from the floor planks would not have been as strange.

Because this hand was a left hand, sticking out from Gao Tianjue's pitch black cloak. Gao Tianjue had no left hand.

If this Gao Tianjue had a left hand, then it was no Gao Tianjue.

As fast as lightning, Xiao Jun grabbed the person's wrist. In a deep voice, he asked, "Who are you?"

CHAPTER 20 – THE SECOND STAR

Part 1

April 19th. Before sunset.

The light of the setting sun, which shone on the camellia, suddenly became dim and murky. The camellia, which moments ago had seemed so bright and colorful, suddenly looked pale and sallow.

This is because it does not emit its own light. Moments ago, it had appeared so glorious only because of the light of the sun shining down onto its petals.

People are the same.

Some people shine brilliantly for a time, but then at a certain point become old and frail, and despite being alive, are simply waiting to die.

Fortunately, some people in the world are not like that.

This is because they are innately luminous, powerful, without any need to rely on others. When alive, none dare look down on them. Even after they die it is the same.

Gao Tianjue was that sort of person. Regardless of the circumstances, no one would be willing to doubt her power.

If she said that the “Thunder and Lightning” couple and Tang Lanfang would never again see Ingot, then sadly, they could only wait until after death to do so.

“You’re a woman, as am I,” said Grand Miss Lei, staring at Gao Tianjue. “What women say is generally not very reliable. But, I believe you.”

“Oh?”

“If you dare to say such a thing, then I believe that not only have you already killed Ingot, you are also prepared to attack us. Now that we have seen your face, you will not let us keep on living.” She sighed. “If I were you, I would probably do the same.”

“You don’t want to ask if I’m certain I can take on all three of you at once?”

“I don’t need to ask.”

“Why not?”

“Because if you killed Ingot, then we couldn’t allow you to continued to live.” Grand Miss Lei’s voice suddenly grew very calm. “We would do it even though we might die. So no need to waste breath on any questions.”

“Correct,” said Gao Tianjue. “There is no need for further questions.”

“I could see just now that your acupuncture points had been sealed. And now, I can see that your blood and Qi are flowing properly again.”

“Correct.”

“Even my husband and I could not do that,” said Grand Miss Lei. “Your kung fu really is a lot higher than ours.” She sighed again. “In recent years, we haven’t payed any attention to all the trivial matters in Jianghu. And yet we have more and more of our own trivial matters to attend to. All year, every day, all day, the things we do are of no account. We don’t do anything important at all.”

“Oh?”

“What we do all day is plant flowers and pull weeds, play chess and chat, get jealous and argue, visit scenic spots, catch rabbits and go fishing. Where is there room for important kung-fu related matters?” She sighed. “Although these things are more interesting than important matters, it means that our kung fu hasn’t advanced at all in the past few years. So, of course we can’t match up to you.”

Despite all her sighing, her expression was filled with joy, and contained no trace of regret.

Even though Gao Tianjue didn't sigh, her eyes seemed to be filled with remorse and pain.

"Right now, even if we attack you three against one, young Miss Tang wouldn't really count as a person. She would be useless in an attack, so you really would only need to deal with the two of us."

The old man broke in: "Actually, we don't really count as two people."

"Why not?"

"Because we two are one person," he said. "When attacking her, you would defend me with your life, and I would defend you with my life. If I got hurt, you would get flustered, and if you got hurt, I would be flustered. And that is when she would have her chance." He sighed. "So as I said, the two of us will never measure up to them." Even though he sighed, his expression was one of happiness, without any sign of regret.

"So," asked Grand Miss Lei, "you mean that we've already lost this battle?"

"Pretty much."

"And we are basically dead already."

"No one can evade death, so there's nothing really amazing about it. In any case, we have lived our lives quite happily. Although, there's something I need to say to you before I die."

"What's that?"

"Do you remember that year we went to the Zhongnan Mountains to make immortality pills? [1] Your younger martial sister came to visit and stayed for about a month?"

"I remember."

"There was one occasion when you went to the other side of the mountain to pick medicinal herbs, and you were gone for a few days. Well, when you

were gone, your younger martial sister and I did something wrong. We regretted it, but by that time, we had already done it, and it was too late.”

Grand Miss Lei stared at him, and then her wizened, rigid face broke out in a smile, a smile as lovely as a lily.

“You think I didn’t know about that?” she said. “You think you could fool me?”

“You knew?” said the old man, shocked. “When did you find out?”

“I knew all along.”

“Then why didn’t you say anything? Why didn’t you lose your temper? Why didn’t you flip out on me?”

“Because we are married,” she said softly. “Being married is different than being siblings, friends or lovers. If I flipped out on you for a mistake you made, then the person in the wrong would not be you, but me.”

Gao Tianjue had been listening quietly, but now she interjected: “I also had a husband. He was surnamed Guo. Guo Mie. He was an extremely intelligent and talented man. I’ve never met another man in my entire life who could compare even to one of his fingers. When we were young, we were also happily married.”

“We know all that already.”

“He’s dead now,” said Gao Tianjue. “Do you know how he died?”

“No,” said Grand Miss Lei. “But we’ve always wanted to.”

“Then I’ll tell you. I killed him. I used the most cruel method possible to kill him.” Her voice was again extremely calm, frighteningly calm. So calm it was almost impossible to take. “Do you know why I killed him? Of course you don’t know.”

“Why?”

“Because of a child.”

“A child?” blurted Grand Miss Lei. “You killed your own husband because of a child?”

“Yes.”

“Whose child was it?”

“My husband and my older sister’s child. My blood sister.”

The room was suddenly silent. Even the sound of breathing seemed to have ceased.

Everyone knew that she must have a feeling of deep hatred in her heart to have become like this. But who could have imagined that the people she hated were her blood sister and her husband.

Gao Tianjue suddenly asked Grand Miss Lei: “If you were me, would you have become like this?”

Grand Miss Lei was at a loss for words. After a very long time, she quietly said, “I don’t know. I really don’t know.”

Gao Tianjue sighed. “In any case, we two are different. You have grown old together happily as a couple, because you have patience. I am a vicious and jealous woman, and that is why I have become like this.” She laughed. “So everything you just said is quiet useless.”

“What did we say? What do you mean useless?”

“You said all those things on purpose. You wanted to provoke me, make me feel pain, to create an opening to kill me.”

This was a tactic; don’t attack the person, attack the heart. When experts fight, if the heart is disturbed, it can lead to defeat.

“Unfortunately, this type of tactic is useless on me,” said Gao Tianjue coolly. “Because my heart is already dead. I have always been prepared to die, and that day is today.”

Grand Miss Lei looked surprised. “You prepared to die today?”

“Not only am I prepared to die, I am determined to die. So anything you say is useless. However, you do not wish to die, therefore, you will.” She sighed and continued, “There are many things in the world like this. People who don’t want to die often die more quickly than the ones who do.”

Tang Lanfang suddenly let out a sigh. “The person who least wishes to die is me. And yet I know I will be the first one to go.”

“Yes,” said Gao Tianjue coolly. “You shall be the first to die!”

Part 2

Ingot took the black headband off and removed the silver mask, chuckling as he looked at Xiao Jun.

“Chamber Lord Xiao, long time no see! Hello!”

“You!” Xiao Jun said, looking shocked. “How could it be you?”

“How could it not be me?” chuckled Ingot. “From the day I was born until now, I’ve always been me, not some random Joe. And I’m not Pockmarks Wang’er.” [2] He laughed happily. “But if someone wants to mistake me for Gao Tianjue, well I can’t do anything about it.”

Xiao Jun looked at him in amazement. Staring at his outfit, he said, “Who do these things belong to?”

“To Gao Tianjue, of course,” he said, placing the mask on top of his head. “Other than her, who else would have treasures like this?”

“Why would she give them to you?”

“Who said she gave them to me?” said Ingot. “These are her treasures. She wouldn’t give them away even if you killed her.”

“And yet there they are in your hands.”

“I’m just borrowing them.”

“She agreed to let you to borrow them?”

“She didn’t agree.”

“If she didn’t agree, then how could you have borrowed them?”

Ingot sighed. “To be honest, I didn’t borrow them.”

Xiao Jun usually was not the type of person who wanted to examine a matter down to the last detail. But he could not hold back from asking more questions.

“You didn’t borrow them?”

“No.”

“Then where did they come from?”

“I took them,” said Ingot. “Because she didn’t agree to lend them to me, I had to take them.”

“How did you do it?”

“I only have two hands, so of course I used two hands. First I took the headband and the mask, and then the clothes and boots.”

“Where did you take them from?”

Ingot looked at him as if he were a simpleton. “Do you really have to ask me such an obvious question?”

“I already did.”

Ingot shook his head and sighed. "Well, I guess I just have to tell you, then." He spoke it like a list: "The headband, I untied off her head. The mask, I took off her face. The cloak, I stripped off her body." He paused for a moment before continuing on slowly: "The boots were a bit more difficult, because they were on tight. It took a lot of effort, but I finally took them, off of her feet."

Xiao Jun stared in shock. After a long time passed, he said, "You took these things off of her body?"

"Every one of them."

"And what of her?" asked Xiao Jun. "Where was she?"

Ingot looked like he wanted to jump up. "Did you really just say that? Did you really ask such a nonsensical question? She's there. Her head was inside the headband, her face was behind the mask, her body was inside the cloak, and her feet were inside the boots. Such a simple matter, don't tell me you couldn't figure that out?"

"Is she dead?"

"No," said Ingot. "How could a person like her be dead?"

"If she's alive, but you have her things, does that mean she made you take them?"

"Even if she refused, I would still take them."

"Why?"

"Because I'm Ingot," he said, pointing at his nose. "I'm a big, round, shiny, lively, charming and handsome giant ingot."

Xiao Jun didn't say anything. There was nothing he could say.

He didn't believe it, not any of it. If this little scoundrel wasn't insane, then he was ten times as thick-skinned as before to dare to boast and tell such lies.

The best method to deal with people like this is to ignore them.

Yet in the world there are some people who are impossible to get rid of, and ignoring them doesn't work.

"You've asked me all these questions for such a long time," said Ingot, "I think it's now my turn to ask you some questions. "Do you have such an expression on your face because you just killed someone?"

Xiao Jun ignored him.

"Killing isn't good. If I killed someone, I would feel regret, and then sorrow. But you're different. The person you killed was the person everyone said you wanted to kill. Why are you sad?"

Xiao Jun couldn't continue to ignore him.

"How do you know I killed someone," he asked. "Do you know who I killed?"

"Of course I know."

A murderous look appeared on Xiao Jun's pale white face, an expression that made it seem like he could kill someone at any moment.

Ingot didn't seem to notice, and in fact seemed happy. He said, "You killed Three Frightening Laughs General Li. He's someone that everyone wanted to kill. It doesn't matter who killed him, it would cause a huge sensation. Lately there have been more people around here trying to kill him than you could find rats in a rice granary. Only you succeeded. You should be happy to death, and yet you look like you're so sad you want to die."

Ingot shook his head: "I really don't understand what's going on with you."

Xiao Jun stared at him. After a long time passed, he said, one word at a time: "You really don't understand?"

"At first I didn't. Even if you smashed my head open I wouldn't be able to figure it out."

"And now?"

“Now?” Ingot rolled his eyes. “Right now, the sky is turning dark and it’s about time for dinner. If you cooked up a pot of mushrooms, ham and pigs’ feet, maybe with some chicken, then added some fragrant sticky rice and boiled it for a while, I think I could finish the whole thing without your help.”

Xiao Jun stared at him lividly.

“And now?” he asked again, his face looking as taught as a bowstring. “Do you understand now?”

“Yes,” admitted Ingot with a sigh. “Even if I wanted to not know, I would still know.”

Xiao Jun suddenly stood, gathering his Qi and assuming a stance. The five fingers on his right hand became hooks. It looked as if he were about to snatch a viper.

This was a unique technique of Beggar Sect disciples. Neither vipers nor people could easily escape its grip.

It could stab the vital point on a vipers and kill people alike.

But there were no vipers in the cabin, only a person.

In Xiao Jun’s eyes, Ingot, so vivacious and charming, had become as abominable and terrifying as a viper.

Ingot didn’t even blink.

“Why don’t you ask me what I know? And how I know it?”

It seemed his words were effective. Xiao Jun, who was originally about to attack, suddenly didn’t.

That was because he really did want the answers to those questions.

Ingot smiled. “That’s better. If you want to kill me to shut me up, you should at least first let me make things clear before you attack.”

It turned out Xiao Jun was willing to ask: "What exactly do you know?"

"Honestly speaking, I happen to know quite a bit." Sounding completely at ease, he said, "Everything that you don't want people to know about, I know."

"Like what?"

"Gao Tianjue worked out a plan for you to kill someone. After you did, she told you that you shouldn't have killed him. Even if everyone under heaven wanted to kill him, you couldn't. Because you are his son."

Xiao Jun's fists clenched. They clenched, not upon a person's throat, nor upon the vital spot of a viper.

They clenched on themselves, on his own life and blood and soul.

"Other than Gao Tianjue, who would ever have guessed that you were the son of Three Fearsome Laughs General Li? Even you could never have guessed. That's because you always believed that he killed your mother." Ingot sighed. "Gao Tianjue told you that even if he did kill your mother, you can't deny that you are his son. Gao Tianjue hated his guts, so he devised this plot, had you kill him. That way, he would die in unrest, and you would regret it for the rest of your life."

Xiao Jun showed no reaction. He was already numb to the point of collapse.

"Even in your wildest dreams you never imagined that there could be someone in the world who would use such vicious methods to kill people. If Gao Tianjue hadn't told you herself, you wouldn't have believed it."

"Did she tell you this herself?" Xiao Jun seemed like a person who had been awaked from a dream by being stabbed with a needle. "Why would she tell you these things?"

"Perhaps because she felt proud of herself, and couldn't help but tell someone. Perhaps because she wished me to spread the story, that she had gotten her revenge in this way. Then no one in Jianghu would ever forget her."

Both conjectures seemed highly possible.

Ingot sighed again. "Although, perhaps only heaven knows why she told me."

Xiao Jun looked at him, his expression empty, numb, exhausted. But murderous intent still shone in his eyes.

"You shouldn't know these things." He sighed. "And I wish you didn't."

"I know what you mean."

"You do?"

"I'm so charming, you really can't help but like me. But now that I know all these things, you have no choice but to kill me to shut me up." He continued, "Even though you don't want to continue living, you have to kill me first so that I don't reveal your secrets. They are things you cannot allow others to know."

Xiao Jun didn't deny it.

He was in control of himself, his spirit and energy. All of his energy and concentration, all of his gathered Qi, was focused on something.

And that something was how to deliver a killing blow.

Ingot didn't seem to notice.

There are some things that others don't notice whatsoever that he would notice from the very beginning. And yet some things that others noticed immediately, he wouldn't notice whatsoever.

Anyone at all could see Xiao Jun's intent to kill, that he planned to crush Ingot like a viper. And yet Ingot looked happy. With a chuckle, he said, "Actually, I should know these things. Even if I didn't want to know them, I should. And fortunately, there are some other things I know."

"What things?"

"Some things that I should know. Some things that should make you very happy, you and other people as well. Anyone who knows such things should be able to live a long, happy and peaceful life." He smiled, exceedingly

cheerful. “And only someone as smart and talented as me could know such things.”

Some people seem to be unable to refrain from praising themselves, to boast, to talk themselves up. People who look down on them end up being overlooked.

Xiao Jun knew that Ingot was not such a person.

He just liked to talk this way because he wanted others to be happy, and hoped that others could be like him, and go with the flow.

Depression, nervousness, sorrow, and wrath are not only useless, they can also cause people to make unforgivable mistakes.

A person should maintain a bright and open frame of mind in order to make the most correct decisions and made the best judgements.

So as of now, Xiao Ju could no longer take Ingot to be a boastful, naughty child. He asked him, “What type of things are you talking about?”

“Well for example, some people are convinced that they killed someone, and are certain that they should not have killed that person. Therefore, they are sad to death. That is because they don’t know that the person isn’t dead at all. But,” Ingot said, “I do know.”

“You do know?” said Xiao Jun in shock. “Who are you saying isn’t dead?”

“General Li, of course.”

“You really know this?”

Ingot sighed and shook his head. “What kid of person do you think you are? Chu Liuxiang? Little Li Tanhua?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Of course you’re not. You’re not even qualified to compare yourself to them.”

Xiao Jun had to admit this was correct.

Even though he was a very proud person, he admired those two great heroes of the older generation as much as anyone.

“Since you already admit that you can’t compare to them, then why don’t you think about it a moment. How could Three Fearsome Laughs General Li, who roamed unhindered throughout the earth, possibly die by your hand?”

Xiao Jun was speechless.

He knew that he was fundamentally not a match for General Li, and wished that what had occurred had not.

But underneath that pale moon, he had clearly seen his sword stab General Li in the heart.

He would never forget the look on General Li’s face as his sword stabbed into the flesh and blood.

“Why don’t you say something?” asked Ingot. “Don’t tell me you still think you killed him?”

Xiao Jun was silent for a long time. Slowly, he said, “The reason I’m still here is because I hoped he wasn’t dead. I hoped that I would see him again.” His expression miserable and dark, he said: “And if he is dead, I hoped that I could see his corpse.”

“But they haven’t pulled up his corpse, even after switching shifts several times during the dredging process. They haven’t even caught sight of his shadow.”

“True.”

“Do you know why they haven’t found General Li’s corpse?” said Ingot. “You probably know.”

“But I don’t.”

“You really don’t?” said Ingot, looking surprised. “Such a simple thing, and you still don’t get it?”

He again shook his head and sighed. "They can't find the corpse, because he isn't dead!" Ingot acted as if he were chiding a child. "If a person isn't dead, there can't be a corpse. If you can't understand something as simple as that, then you really are an idiot."

"Even if he wasn't dead at first, he would be drowned by now."

"Why?"

"Because the shores are patrolled constantly, and all of the guards are experienced martial artists. Gao Tianjue spent ten long years training up this group of people."

"I believe it."

"Perhaps their kung fu doesn't count as being truly top rate, without compare. But their eyesight, hearing, endurance, as well as their powers of observation and judgement, are all first rate."

"I believe it."

"It's clearly impossible for General Li to have slipped past the shores of the lake. Even if they couldn't stop him, they would have at least seen him."

"Who ever said General Li made it to the shores? If he went onto the shores, of course he would find it impossible to evade the eyes and ears of those men."

"Well, then he must have drowned in the lake," said Xiao Jun sadly. "It's already been a day and a night since he entered the waters. There is no way he could stay under this long. Furthermore, even if he wasn't dead at the time, he was seriously injured."

Ingot stared at him for a while, before coldly asking him: "Do you really think he is dead?"

Xiao Jun didn't answer, because even he was not sure what he believed in his heart.

He was never the type of person to say much. Even at times when he should speak, he wouldn't speak very much.

Right now, he should have remained silent because of grief, and yet had actually spoken quite a bit.

That was because in his heart, he still had some hope.

Ingot could actually refute everything he had said.

—If you saw a man do something incredibly abnormal, and then become filled with deep pain and suffering, and yet could understand enough to forgive him, then you would be a truly magnanimous person. A true man.

Ingot stared at Xiao Jun for a long time before suddenly saying, “I know that you don’t dare to make a bet with me. Definitely not.”

“What do you want to bet about?”

“I want to bet that he’s not dead. Do you dare make the bet?” He looked askance at Xiao Jun and did something that experienced swindlers will do to attract gamblers: “I advise you not to make the bet, because this time I definitely will not lose.”

Xiao Jun’s pale white face suddenly grew red, the color of watered-down blood.

He knew that Ingot didn’t really want to make a bet with him, nor did he himself want to win such a bet.

He wanted to lose.

Perhaps Ingot was using this as a method to comfort him, to raise his spirits, stop him from being depressed, remove his thoughts of longing for death.

For whatever reasons Ingot did it, he felt grateful in his heart.

“I’ll bet with you,” he said. “Whatever the bet is, I’ll take it.”

Ingot laughed, just like a swindler who had seen the sheep get hooked into the trap.

“You won’t regret?”

“I won’t.”

“If I can find General Li, let you see him with your own eyes, alive, then what?”

“I’ll do anything you want.”

This was not something Xiao Jun would normally say. Considering his identity and position, he wouldn’t say something such as this in any situation.

But if he lost to Ingot, he really would do as he said. He would willingly do anything Ingot said.

And he truly hoped that the loser would be himself.

But he really did not see how Ingot could win. How could Ingot possibly find General Li?

General Li had to be dead. Even if in the one out of ten thousand chance were true and he hadn’t died, how could Ingot possibly know where he was?

Ingot had absolutely no way to know.

The red on Xiao Jun’s face disappeared, because in his heart, though he wished to lose the bet, he still believed Ingot would lose.

It seemed Ingot could tell what he was thinking. “Why don’t you ask me what will happen if I lose?”

“Why don’t you tell me?”

Ingot frowned deliberately and thought for a moment. Then he asked, “Do you know why Gao Tianjue suddenly became so agreeable? Why she would obediently hand her treasures over to me?”

That matter didn't have anything to do with the bet, but Xiao Jun hadn't been able to figure it out. He'd wanted to know all along, so he said, "Why?"

"Because she was already under my control," said Ingot. "I sealed seven or eight of her acupuncture points in a matter of seconds.

"Oh?"

"You don't believe it. I knew you wouldn't." Ingot laughed happily, proud of himself. "How could someone like me seal the acupuncture points of someone as skilled as Gao Tianjue?" He chuckled. "You're thinking to yourself, this kid is crazy; he has skin thicker than anybody to be able to boast like this, to tell such lies."

Xiao Jun didn't deny it, because that is exactly what he was thinking at the moment.

"But think for a second. Had I not sealed her acupuncture points, how could her things end up in my hands?"

No one could deny the truthfulness of what he said. So Xiao Jun asked, "How did you seal her acupuncture points?"

"Oh, that was nothing," he said, acting deliberately casual. "I just showed her something."

"You just showed her something? When you moved to seal her acupuncture points, couldn't she dodge or fight back?" Xiao Jun was both shocked and a bit suspicious. "What did you show her?"

"Of course it was something special. Something very special."

Twenty years ago, Gao Tianjue was already unstoppable under heaven, powerful and invincible.

In those twenty years, she had no idea how many amazing and terrible things she had done. But she did know that she had shed many tears alone in the night.

After twenty years of setbacks and painful lessons, she had become even more eccentric, cold, proud and ruthless. And her martial arts were even more powerful.

If there was truly something in the world that could make her lose her head to fear and let a teenage youth seal her acupuncture points, then that thing was definitely very special.

Anyone could reach this conclusion.

Many people in Jianghu would trade their lives for such an item.

Ingot coolly said, "If I lose, I'll give it to you."

At some point, he had pulled the object out and held it in his hand. Even though he wasn't a very big person, his hands were not small, and when he closed it into a fist, no one could see what was inside.

Xiao Jun didn't want to win, and receive this item. But everyone gets curious.

He couldn't help but ask, "What is this thing?"

"Nothing, really," said Ingot in a deliberate understatement. "It's just a star, that's all."

"A star?" asked Xiao Jun. "What kind of star?"

"A small star," he said, sounding apologetic and regretful. He sighed. "A very, very, very small star." And then, Ingot revealed his second star.

**

[1] Zhongnan Mountains are located in Xi'an, and are known for their connection to Buddhism and Daosim. <http://tinyurl.com/m62km24>

[2] I'm pretty sure he's referring to Xiao Jun's subordinate with the pockmarked face.



CHAPTER 21 – A SMALL STAR, GLITTERING

Part 1

“A small star, glittering,
Stars fill the heaven, but the moon does not shine,
People fill the earth, their hearts grieve.”

An autumn night, full of stars. A young boy, and two young girls ; three children, one heart and a star. A very, very, very small star. Later, the children grew up. One heart became three. But there was still only one star.

And there was still just one very, very, very small star.

After growing up, they grew old. Some of them died. Some did not die, and yet their hearts died.

The star was as small as ever, and didn't change. This is because stars do not have emotions, or life. They don't understand how to pursue love, nor do they comprehend hatred. And so they do not change, nor do they grow old.

This star had been made from a seashell, scooped up out of the ocean.

When one of those people, who had already grown old and changed so much, who was not dead, but whose heart was dead, saw this star, a star that would never change, what feeling would arise in that person's heart?

Other than the three people, who could know?

Part 2

April 19, before dusk.

The stars had not yet begun to shine.

The star was made from a beautiful and precious seashell. On the back were carved delicate designs, and two characters. It had obviously been carefully carved by a pair of extremely nimble hands.

Some seashells in the ocean are as precious as pearls, with radiance and luster which will never fade.

But this seashell appeared to be nothing more than a shell picked up off the beach by a pair of beautiful hands. It didn't look like anything special.

Xiao Jun couldn't help but ask: "You showed her that star?"

"Yes."

"Don't tell me that after she saw the star she suddenly couldn't fight back against you?"

"No, it's not like that," said Ingot. "After she saw the star, her hand started trembling, as did the rest of her body. Unfortunately, I couldn't see her face, so I'm not sure her expression at the time."

"She was wearing her mask?"

"Yes."

"Then how could she see you?"

Ingot laughed. "You're a person who pays close attention to details, or at least that's what you think. You believe nothing can slip past you." He sighed. "Sadly, you are not like that at all."

"Oh?"

"Do you really think Gao Tianjue can't see anything when she puts on her mask? If so, then how could I wear the mask to come here? And how could I

know what expression is on your face? If you were as attentive as you think you are, you would have noticed that even though the mask does not have eyes, it does have two tiny holes, each a bit larger than the size of a needle, inlaid with pieces of crystal. When the mask is shining and glittering, I'm afraid only an incredibly bright, kid genius like myself would notice!"

Xiao Jun could only keep his mouth shut.

"Preventing others from seeing you is a mark of genius, but to prevent yourself from seeing others would be plain stupid." He sighed. "Think about it, how could Gao Tianjue possibly be that stupid?"

The Beggar Sect is the largest sect in the world. It has the most beggars, and the most complicated affairs.

The Chamber Lord of its newly founded Torture Chamber, intent on reorganizing the sect, not only must be occupied with numerous complicated affairs, but must also have the wisdom to be able to perceive the minutest details of a matter. He must have an unfailing sense of judgment. But in front of this boastful, laughingly foolish youth with his feigned charm, this conceited Chamber Lord could not say a single word.

It seemed Ingot had more questions. "Can you tell what is special about the star? Why it would have such an effect on Gao Tianjue?"

"I can't tell."

"I can't either," said Ingot. "That's because you are not Gao Tianjue, and neither am I." In a serious tone, he continued, "From my perspective, it just looks like a star a kid might make out of a seashell. But to some people, it seems to have a type of magical power."

"Some people?" said Xiao Jun. "What people?"

"At the moment, I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

“Because right now, I don’t know. At the moment, I just know that it is absolutely useful in dealing with Gao Tianjue. More useful than the most fearsome weapon in the world.” [1]

That was enough. Just based on that alone, the value of this star was incredible.

For some people, this star could be considered far more valuable than the “turn iron into gold” star.

“So, let me ask you. Will you accept the bet?”

“I accept.”

Ingot tucked the star away, put on his mask, and tied the black headband on. “Then come with me.”

“Where are we going?”

“To find General Li.”

“You can find him?”

“Of course. I have no choice. Otherwise I have to give you my star.”

“Where is he?”

“On this ship, of course.”

Xiao Jun didn’t say anything.

He now believed Ingot, believed that General Li wasn’t dead, believed that Gao Tianjue, after seeing Ingot’s star, had allowed her acupuncture points to be sealed. But despite believing all that, he couldn’t believe that General Li was on the ship.

Part 3

The ship was lit with lanterns, even below decks. Not the shadow of a single person could be seen.

That was because this Gao Tianjue who wasn't really Gao Tianjue had ordered, "Everyone go up top. No one is permitted to come down."

Even though it was Ingot who gave this order, it was as effective as if it had been spoken by Gao Tianjue. This was because he wore the headband, mask, cloak and boots. All of these things were symbols of mysterious power, an irresistible authority.

No one had ever doubted this power and authority, and no one could have ever imagined that these symbols of Gao Tianjue could be "taken" away.

The area below decks was much larger than anyone who hadn't been there could imagine. And there was even more space in the hull.

There was nothing in the hull. But without the hull, the boat would sink. And were it filled with objects, the boat would also sink. It was its emptiness that made it important, far more important than any other part of the ship.

There are many things in the world like this.

Part 4

There were about ten cabins below decks. People lived in some of them, others were filled with grain or other cargo.

Ingot took Xiao Jun along cabin by cabin. Though they didn't even see the shadow of a person, Ingot was still filled with confidence.

"I know that you don't believe General Li is on the ship," said Ingot.

Xiao Jun had to admit it.

Then, Ingot asked him a very incredible question: "Why don't you believe?"

Xiao Jun thought about the question for a while: "Because it's just not possible. Who could possibly believe it?"

"So you are saying that it is impossible for him to be hiding on this ship."

"Yes."

"I understand what you mean," said Ingot with a smile. "Your way of thinking now is the same as it was two days ago, when you never imagined that we could be hiding in Jinan's biggest prison."

Xiao Jun understood what he meant.

If a person like General Li wanted to hide somewhere, he would pick a place no one would ever think to look.

"I get what you mean," said Xiao Jun. "But did you ever think of how he could possibly get onto the ship?"

Ingot deliberately made a straight face, and in a very serious tone said, "It's definitely not possible. There are people everywhere, all of them with very sharp eyes, none of them even half blind. General Li has no invisibility technique, nor the seventy-two transformation abilities of the Monkey King that would allow him to turn into a housefly and fly on board." He let out a deliberate sigh. "When you think about it your way, he definitely could not come onboard."

"Therefore, it is not possible for him to be on this ship."

Ingot sighed, then, with a chuckle, said: "Fortunately, you are not, fortunately, you are not."

"Fortunately I'm not what?"

"Fortunately you are not General Li, and he is not you. Otherwise you would be dead, and I would have lost."

“Don’t tell me you still think he’s on the ship?”

Ingot didn’t respond. Instead, he gripped an iron hoop nailed into the deck planks and pulled up a secret hatch. “I think you should go see for yourself.”

Underneath was the hull. No people, no cargo, no lamps. Nothing.

Xiao Jun hesitated, but then finally grabbed a small lantern and leaped down. And then, he gaped in shock.

In the corner of the hull was a person!

It really was him. The multi-millionaire who had faked his own death, Sun Jicheng. The man who had fled and then returned to Jinan, the businessman Wu Tao. And the incarnation of them all, Three Frightening Laughs General Li!

Xiao Jun stood in front of him as if in a dream. This was truly something that would not occur even in a dream.

General Li lay there, half sitting, half reclining. His back lay against the bulkhead, and he seemed as if he didn’t even have the energy to sit straight.

Even though the sword had not actually stabbed through his heart, his injury was clearly severe.

But his eyes shone brightly, and when he saw Xiao Jun, he suddenly smiled. It was a smile filled with both comfort and pain. And then he said, “Where’s Ingot?”

Ingot jumped down, shutting the secret hatch behind him. In his best imitation of Gao Tianjue’s bearing, he walked up to stand in front of General Li.

He really did have a bit of genius. He had studied well the ways to imitate a person, and pulled it off quite well.

“That little bastard Ingot is already dead and fed to the turtles,” he said. “You’ll never see him again.”

General Li laughed. “How can a person call himself a bastard? We’re friends. If you’re a little bastard, what does that make me?”

Ingot laughed too.

“How did you know it was me?” he said. “And how did you know I would come?”

“When I hid here, I thought to myself, if anyone could find me here, it would definitely be Ingot.”

Ingot immediately nodded his head in agreement! “Other than me, no one would guess. When it comes to a genius like myself, there is no second in the world.” He sighed. “Sometimes I just can’t help but admire myself.” He suddenly clapped Xiao Jun on the shoulder. “Right now you can’t help but admire me too, right?”

Xiao Jun seemed to be in a dream, staring blankly at General Li.

—Was this person who he had never seen before really his father? Why would he abandon he and his mother? Why would he let his mother die in her hatred, and let him live a life of suffering?

Regardless, the man was alive. Perhaps he had made mistakes, but the mistakes were not so great that amends could not be made.

Xiao Jun looked on this relative who was a stranger, not sure whether his heart filled with hatred or love, sorrow or happiness.

Ingot was incredibly happy. “Who would have thought you would hide on this ship?” he said. “Other than me, no one would have imagined you would use this method.”

“How did you come to realize it?”

“It was when I saw the water armor the people wore when they went to look for you.”

The divers wore tight water armor made from fish skin that covered their entire bodies, even their hair.

That was what General Li was currently wearing.

“The divers’ kung fu was good, and you were injured, but you could still take care of one of them easily.

General Li smiled. “It was incredibly simple.”

“Take off his armor and wear it, then bury him in the sludge at the bottom of the lake, mingle back in with the people returning to the ship and take advantage of the chaos of the shift change to sneak down here. At that time, it wasn’t light yet, everything was dark below and above the water. Nobody could see anything clearly. To do all that wouldn’t be difficult at all.”

General Li smiled and gave a sigh. “As of now, even I have to admire you a little bit.”

“A little bit?” said Ingot, shocked. “I assumed at the least it would be a medium bit or a lot bit. I was definitely sure.”

What he said really was a bit excessive, but he had to have a reason to say something this.

So General Li asked, “Definitely? Why do you say definitely?”

Ingot’s response was incredible: “Because you aren’t blind yet.”

“I’ve never been blind,” responded General Li, baffled. “What does me being blind or not have to do with me admiring you or not?”

“Of course they’re connected. Because you’re not blind, you should be able to see whose clothes I’m wearing.” An immensely proud expression covered his face. “I took these things from Gao Tianjue, and it definitely wasn’t easy.”

“You took all of that from her?”

“Every piece.”

“How did you do it?”

“I just showed her something, that’s all. As soon as she looked at it, I sealed her acupuncture points. Then I took all this stuff.”

General Li looked at him for a long moment, the look on his face the same as Xiao Jun's when Ingot had told him the same thing.

Of course what Ingot said was completely unbelievable, so General Li couldn't help but ask, "What did you show her?"

"A star," said Ingot. "A very small star."

Part 5

Ingot always carried a random assortment of things on his person. People might think them a valueless lot of broken copper and iron, but they were his treasures, treasures that he would not allow others to see. But this time, not only did he let General Li see his star, he didn't even wait for him to ask. He just pulled it out and put it out in front of General Li's face, as if afraid he couldn't see it clearly.

"This star," he said. "This star fell from heaven, and then was scooped up out of the sea."

General Li's expression was changing. Even before Ingot had finished speaking, his expression had begun to change. Just like Gao Tianjue, as soon as he laid eyes on the star, his expression changed, as if someone had stabbed a long, sharp, pointed needle directly into his heart.

This star was something a child might play with. If it fell onto the ground, not many people would even pick it up. If you gave it to someone, they would probably drop it into the gutter.

But in the eyes of the incredibly proud Laughing General, who had roamed Jianghu unhindered, this star seemed to carry all the blessings and curses of the heavens and the earth, of gods and demons. It seemed to him to be more valuable than all the treasures in the world.

He reached out his hand as if to take the star, his hand trembling, just like Gao Tianjue's. It trembled uncontrollably.

This time, Ingot did not take advantage of the situation to seal his acupuncture points. Instead, he just stepped back.

“This is mine,” he chuckled. “Grownups can’t steal things from children.”

“That’s not yours,” said General Li, his voice hoarse with grief. “I know it’s not.”

“Maybe it didn’t used to be, but now it is. And no one can take it from me.”

“Where did you get it?”

“That’s my affair,” said Ingot with a wink. “Can’t I keep a few secrets for myself?”

General Li stared at him for a long time, then let out a long sigh. “So, you’re a member of the Dragon family,” he said. “What is your seniority among your brothers and sisters? Are you Dragon Eighth? Or the Ninth?”

Ingot responded with his own question, “How do you know I’m a member of the Dragon family?”

“Because I know that this star would not fall into anyone else’s hands.” He spoke with utmost confidence.

Ingot didn’t deny it, but instead asked, “If I wasn’t a member of the Dragon family, would you have already taken the star away from me?”

General Li looked at him for a while. “If you weren’t a member of the Dragon family, you would be dead already.”

“Why?”

“Because I wouldn’t want that star to be in anyone else’s hands,” he said. Then he asked, “Would you be willing to trade it to me?”

“Trade it for what?”

“Anything you want,” said General Li. “Gold, white jade, pearls, emeralds. Anything you want is fine.”

Ingot laughed. "You undoubtedly know that I won't trade it. Those things you just mentioned can't be worn as clothes, nor can they be eaten. I don't need them."

The things mentioned by General Li are things anyone in the world would love to have. Who knows how many people scheme and bleed and risk their lives for them? But to Ingot, not even a single coin was of any worth.

General Li sighed. "Good. I knew you wouldn't trade it. How could the children of the House of the Dragon care about paltry treasures and money?"

"And so, seeing you alive and not dead, I'm extremely happy." Ingot laughed. "Because were you dead, this star would already be in someone else's hands."

"Why is that?"

"Because I just made a bet with Chamber Lord Xiao, and this star was the stakes of the bet."

"What did you bet?"

"He was sad just now because he thought that you had died under his sword."

"And what did you tell him?"

"I told him there was no way you were dead." He laughed even more happily. "I said, how could Three Fearsome Laughs General Li, who roamed unhindered across Jianghu, possibly die so easily at your hand?"

General Li's expression changed again, his face filling with indescribable agony and grief.

And yet, his eyes still glittered, like the cold stars on an autumn night.

Ingot once again clapped Xiao Jun's shoulder. "You've lost, so the star still belongs to me." He chuckled. "Do you still remember what you owe now that you've lost?"

Xiao Jun didn't say anything. But General Li did. He said something very strange.

"He didn't forget," he said. And then, one word at a time: "But he didn't lose."

"He didn't lose?" Ingot seemed to be both shocked and amused. "Don't tell me I lost?"

"Correct," said General Li. "You lost."

Ingot laughed, so hard that he bent over.

"I'm gonna laugh myself to death," he said. "I haven't heard something so funny in my entire life."

"Oh?"

"If I told people that Three Frightening Laughs General Li was helping his son to act shamelessly, who knows how many people in Jianghu would die laughing. Then if I took all the bodies of the people who had died laughing and shipped them here, well even if you used 500 large eight-wheeled carts, I'd say it would take at least three days and three nights."

He laughed until it seemed he was having trouble breathing, as if he really would die.

General Li didn't have even the slightest hint of laughter on his face. In fact, he looked even more solemn than if he were facing an enemy.

He waited until Ingot finally started to think things weren't so funny after all, then slowly said, "If people in Jianghu found out about this matter, there would be a lot of deaths. If one person found out, there would be one death. If ten thousand people found out, there would be ten thousand deaths. Except, I can guarantee they wouldn't be laughing." His voice grew very cold. "Because it's not a laughing matter."

Ingot couldn't laugh at this point.

"What's going on here?" he asked General Li. "Why do you say that I lost?"

“Because you are the loser.”

Ingot looked at Xiao Jun, then back at General Li. “Don’t tell me he isn’t your son?”

“He is,” said General Li dejectedly. “He is bone of my bone, blood of my blood.”

“Don’t tell me you’re dead?!” Ingot asked, a deliberate question.

“I’m not dead yet.”

“Then it’s strange. You’re obviously not dead, how could I have lost?”

“Because even though I’m not dead, General Li is. Dead for many years.”

Ingot was shocked.

“General Li is already dead? Don’t tell me you’re not General Li?”

“I’m not.”

Ingot stared blankly. He stared at this man who was being pursued by all the heroes under heaven, who everyone thought was General Li. Then he looked at Xiao Jun.

“Gao Tianjue told me with her own mouth that he is General Li’s son. I cannot believe that she would tell a lie.”

“She wouldn’t.”

“Then, he really is General Li’s son?”

“Yes.”

“And didn’t you just tell me that he is your son, bone of your bones, blood of your blood?”

“Yes.”

“You do not seem like the type of person to tell lies, either,” said Ingot with a bitter laugh. “Can you just tell me what is really going on here?”

“It’s not really that complicated. You yourself are the one who has made it complicated, that’s all.”

“Oh.”

“Everyone has parents. And parents means more than one person.”

Ingot finally understood, but still found it hard to believe. “Don’t tell me General Li is his mother?”

“Yes.”

“Are you telling me General Li is a woman?”

“Yes.”

Ingot again stared blankly.

Three Fearsome Laughs General Li, whose name could shake the heavens, was a woman. This was a truly shocking matter.

Despite the fact that down to this day, no one had ever seen what General Li looks like, and no one truly knew whether he was a man or a woman, how could anyone put forth the idea that she was a woman?

In the popular mentality of the men of Jianghu, women are inherently weaker, and can never match up to men.

“General Li is his mother, and you are his father.” Ingot sighed. “Now I understand this part.”

“What else is there that you don’t understand?”

“The more I think about it the less sense it makes. Who exactly are you?”

There aren’t very many men who could claim to match up to General Li.

“Your martial arts, your heroic spirit, your complexion, your resourcefulness, I’ve never seen a second person who can compare to you.” Ingot’s words were spoken in complete sincerity. “If you were General Li, well that wouldn’t be anything strange. In my imagination, General Li should be just like you.” He sighed. “Sadly, you’re not him. So I just can’t figure it out.”

“What can’t you figure out?”

“If you’re not General Li, who are you? I’ve thought a lot about who in Jianghu would match your description. It just doesn’t seem that person exists.”

“You’re right, I really shouldn’t exist.” He gave a sad laugh. “Because I should already be dead.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m Guo Mie,” he said. “I’m the Guo Mie who should have died seventeen years ago.”

Part 6

Guo Mie and Gao Tianjue, No couple in Jianghu had a higher level of martial arts.

They were the mortal enemies of General Li.

“End the heavens, destroy the earth” took it as their duty to pursue fugitive bandits and robbers. Who knew how many great criminals with excellent martial arts fell to them?

At the time when Three Fearsome Laughs General Li roamed Jianghu unhindered, their reputation was at its peak.

Everyone in Jianghu knew that “End the heavens, destroy the earth” would never let General Li go. If they did not execute such a great thief, they would regret it for the rest of their lives.

And so, everyone waited to see what would happen when the tiger and the dragon had their showdown.

No one was certain who would prevail.

But then “End the heavens, destroy the earth” suddenly disintegrated. Guo Mie disappeared from Jianghu, assumed dead, presumably at the hands of General Li.

Therefore, when Gao Tianjue reappeared, everyone assumed it was because of General Li. She must want revenge for the death of her husband. No one would think twice about it, no matter how vicious the methods she used.

Who could have imagined that she was not going up against General Li, but rather her own husband, Guo Mie?

Of course she knew he was Guo Mie and not General Li. Even though no one else in the world knew, Gao Tianjue definitely knew.

Why did she view her husband as an enemy who must die?

How could Guo Mie be alive?

How could he have a son with the arch-enemy of “End the heavens, destroy the earth,” General Li?

Why would the former Sect Leader of the Beggar Sect tell Xiao Jun that his mother had been killed by General Li?

When surrounded by the pursuing heroes, why would Guo Mie admit to being General Li?

Who had revealed his whereabouts?

In seventeen years, no one had been able to find him, why would everyone suddenly descend onto Jinan in only one night to come after him?

Who could explain these things?

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[1] Everyone knows the most fearsome weapon in the world is a solitary box...



CHAPTER 22 – A STORY

Part 1

April 19, night.

The air in the hull space slowly began to grow thick. The top of the hull cabin was below the surface of the water, so of course it contained no areas of ventilation. Even the slightest gap would allow water to rush in and the ship would sink.

But Ingot didn't care about the air. He was focused on Guo Mie.

All the events surrounding him should not have happened, so of course no one could explain them.

Ingot still wasn't convinced.

No matter how much he thought about it, he just couldn't explain everything that had happened. He was starting to get a headache, and still couldn't even begin to piece everything together.

"Did you notice my head?" he suddenly asked Guo Mie. "Does it look any different?"

"It doesn't seem so."

"But it's changed, I know. It's at least three times larger than normal." Ingot gave a bitter laugh. "My head is small to begin with. Now that it's three times larger than normal, it hurts so bad it's shaking." He asked Guo Mie, "Do you know why a person's head will change suddenly?"

"Why?"

"Because I can't figure it out," he finally admitted. "I just can't figure out what happened between you and your wife and son." He grabbed his head

in his hands. "I used to think I was incredibly smart, that I could figure out anything in the world. But as for your story, my brain just swells up, so big that my neck might snap from the weight of it."

"You shouldn't have tried to figure it out," said Guo Mie. "It's a secret that should have remained buried. Nobody besides the three of us should know about it."

"Why's that?"

"Because this secret is a deadly weapon, a weapon that can hurt people. Anyone who reveals the secret will harm not only us, but themselves."

"Which three people are you referring to?" asked Ingot. "Do you mean General Li, Gao Tianjue and yourself?"

"Yes."

"But as of now, you need to let at least two more people know. Because there are two people who need to know!" It seemed he feared Guo Mie might misunderstand. "The two people I'm referring to, of course, are me and your son. Everyone has the right to know a secret which affects their life."

"What of you?" Guo Mie asked Ingot. "What gives you the right to know other peoples' secrets?"

"Because I can't not know. If you don't tell me, I'll be very hurt at heart."

Actually, he didn't give any reason at all, and yet spoke as confidently as if he had given one hundred reasons.

"Also," he continued, "even if I have a deadly weapon in my hand, I won't use it to hurt people." In a cheerful tone, he continued, "Even if it was an actual deadly weapon, in my hand it would become a good luck charm."

Guo Mie looked at him, then looked at Xiao Jun. He sighed.

"Very well, I will tell you," he said to Ingot. "There are no secrets in the world which can remain hidden forever. I suppose the time has come to speak it out."

Ingot looked at him, his expression suddenly very serious and sincere. "By all means, speak it out. I can guarantee you will not regret it."

They stared at each other, an understanding growing between them that only they two could understand.

Both could feel the mutual agreement.

And so, Guo Mie told his story:

Part 2

Many years ago, a naughty and energetic child got lost in the mountain roads. People who got lost in these mountains either ended up food for leopards, or they starved to death. No one had ever passed through alive.

But the child got incredibly lucky, because he accidentally stumbled into a mysterious valley, and ran into two sisters, about the same age as him. They were as beautiful as immortal spirits from heaven.

Not only did they save him, they took him home with them.

The child was very intelligent and charming, the type to always attract the attention of others.

It was something learned by living a difficult life.

He was an orphan with horrible luck, but as of that day, his luck changed.

This was because the father of the two sisters was an extraordinary man who had long lived in seclusion, and had mystical martial arts honed to perfection. After the tragic death of his wife, he had fled from civilization and gone into hiding, eventually settling down on that wild mountain.

He accepted the child in.

He could see that his daughters had taken a fancy to him, and could also sense that he was extremely bright.

The two sisters were equally beautiful, but their temperaments couldn't be more different. The older sister was gentle and quiet, the younger sister, ambitious and aggressive. She often lost her temper.

Though young, the child knew how to please the two sisters.

When a person struggles through a difficult life, it is impossible not to learn about that type of thing. At that time he was not yet ten years old.

All children grow up, and usually it happens without their realizing it. And usually, they will come to understand some of what goes on between men and women, even if no one teaches it to them.

There are many things in the world that do not need to be taught.

As the father grew older, it became apparent that he wanted to take this now grown child as his son-in-law.

The child understood that.

Although he got along well with the arrogant and spirited younger sister, had had fallen in love with the gentle and quiet older sister.

By that time, the older sister was completely grown up, and she of course she could tell how he felt.

And so, even though the two of them were not officially married, they were committed to each other in their hearts, and united for the first time on a soft spring night.

This is a truly beautiful story, just like a fairy tale.

But then things changed, in such a way that would cause them pain and regret for the rest of their lives.

Part 3

Hearing up to this part, Ingot couldn't help but ask, "Are you the child?"

"Yes."

"And the older sister? Is she General Li?"

"Yes."

General Li was the older sister, and Gao Tianjue was the younger sister. How could flesh and blood sisters end up mortal enemies?

How could the gentle and quiet older sister become the great thief General Li, who rocked Jianghu?

Ingot couldn't hold back from asking another question: "What happened next? How did things turn out?"

Part 4

The father gradually grew older and older. He looked much older than his actual age.

This was because he was too lonely, and could not stop dwelling on his memories of the past.

Those types of things make people grow old much easier.

Then one miserable night, on the anniversary of his wife's death, he drank some strong liquor brewed from mountain fruit, and got more drunk than usual.

He fell down that night.

Everyone will eventually grow old and feeble, and die, even people who don't wish their lives to end. But on his deathbed, he said something to the child. He spoke out his final wish, his final request.

He wanted the child to marry his second daughter, to care for her for his whole life.

This was his wish because he knew that although the younger daughter appeared on the outside to be stronger than the older one, on the inside, she was actually much more fragile. She did not have the ability to deal with mental suffering, could not take being attacked. Without an intelligent, powerful man to protect her, she could easily collapse into evil.

The child was the best choice for the younger daughter, and he had always treated her tenderly and with consideration. No doubt they would grow to love each other in their hearts.

The old man believed himself to have made the most wise and correct decision. What he didn't know was that this decision would lead both daughters to live lives of suffering.

—How could a lonely old man understand the hearts of young people?

This child had been raised into an adult by the old man, how could he refuse his dying wish?

Neither could the older sister say anything.

Her father had not misjudged her. She was a soft on the outside, but hard on the inside. No matter how wronged she felt, she could handle it, and would not say a word about it.

So the day after the old man died she slipped away quietly, leaving behind her only relative, and her only lover.

What she never told anyone was that at the time she left, she was already pregnant.

Before her child was even born, he was fated live without a father.

Part 5

Ingot did not look at the expression on Xiao Jun's face.

He couldn't bear to look, and didn't even want to. Although, even had he wanted to, he wouldn't have been able to see clearly.

His eyes blurred, and it seemed as if tears would stream down his face at any moment.

He felt very bad for Guo Mie.

Anyone in those circumstances would be unable to make a different choice. Only someone without the slightest bit of compassion would do differently, and such a person would not even count as being a person.

He also felt bad for the gentle and quiet older sister.

She could not defy the last wish of her father, nor ruin her sister's chance at happiness.

She did not wish to cause pain to her lover.

Other than leaving, what could she do?

Ingot could only imagine how heartbroken she was when she left.

And of course, he felt bad for her child.

He knew that the younger sister was innocent in the whole matter. She didn't know anything of what had happened.

She would not defy her father, because she had long since accepted being given to Guo Mie.

How could any girl, with no rhyme or reason, refuse to be given in marriage to someone she deeply loved?

And the old man hadn't done any wrong either.

A loving father, on the verge of death, wanted to select a good person to accompany his daughter through her life.

Who could say that he had done anything wrong?

None of them had done anything wrong. So who was to blame?

Ingot couldn't say. No one could possibly pass judgment on this situation.

Therefore, Ingot could only ask, "What happened next? How did things turn out?"

Part 6

Next, "End the heavens, destroy the earth" appeared in Jianghu, like a sudden miracle.

At that time, no one knew that they were husband and wife, nor did anyone know that Gao Tianjue was a woman. She didn't want anyone to know.

In Jianghu, women are looked down upon. When fighting women, many heroes would hold back. Others would simply refuse to fight.

She didn't want people to hold back against her, she wanted people to fear her.

The fame of "End the heavens, destroy the earth" grew day by day. It's hard to say how many heroes of the martial world, how many mighty men of the dark path, fell to their hand. If they chose to pursue someone, no one could help that person evade.

There was only one exception.

This person appeared just when they had achieved the pinnacle of their fame: Three Fearsome Laughs General Li.

In order to capture General Li, "End the heavens, destroy the earth" created a meticulous plan, and mobilized a force comprised of the most powerful people. And they spent six months executing the plan.

Unfortunately, they failed.

It was as if every step, every detail, of the plan had been anticipated by General Li.

They never even saw the General, and yet the General seemed to understand everything about them. It was as if he even knew how they thought.

There was only one person in the world who could understand them that well.

Only one person.

Part 7

The air in the hull cabin grew even more thick. Guo Mie seemed to be having trouble breathing.

The wound on his chest was quite serious, but with effort, he continued to speak.

“And that was when they realized, the Laughing General was most likely Gao Tianyi.” [1]

Gao Tianyi. This was the first time Ingot hear General Li’s true name. And it was the first time Xiao Jun heard the name of his mother.

With a downcast expression, Guo Mie continued, “We had lived together for so many years, no one could possibly understand us as good as her. Although, at that time, Gao Tianjue could not understand why her sister would oppose us.”

“Why didn’t you tell her?”

“It’s bad enough that one of them was hurt, why hurt both?” He sighed. “And in any case, this matter was not something for others to know. Even to speak of it would have been difficult.”

“I don’t blame you. You’re the protagonist of this story.” Ingot also sighed. “This is an appropriate time for the expression, ‘those involved in a situation often cannot see clearly.’ How true that is.” He continued, “But I still don’t understand. If she was willing to leave quietly to help you two fulfill their father’s final wish, why would she act like that later on?”

“At the time, I didn’t understand either, because I had no idea she’d given birth to a child. Some knots get tighter the more you pull at them, until they can never be undone. Many matters in life are the same. The more you think about them, the less you can understand them. When a women gives birth to a child, her thinking changes.”

The thinking of women is something men are innately incapable of understanding.

“And so, I wanted to go looking for her,” said Guo Mie. “Alone, to discuss things.”

“Did you find her?”

“I did.”

“You used so many people and yet couldn’t track her down. How come you were able to find her by yourself?”

“Because this time I knew who she was. I was as familiar with her habits and way of thinking as she was with ours.”

Ingot sighed. “Well that’s horrible.”

“What do you mean?”

“The three of you grew up together. If you could find her, then so could Gao Tianjue. When you found her, Gao Tianjue was probably right behind you.” He laughed bitterly. “Unfortunately, at that time, not only were you the protagonist, thinking unclearly, but you also were not as intelligent as me. So you didn’t think of it, and therefore, Gao Tianjue caught you red-handed.”

Guo Mie didn’t respond, because he was having trouble breathing, and couldn’t speak.

But Ingot had a lot of questions he wanted to ask.

—When Gao Tianjue found out about her husband’s relationship with her older sister, how did she respond to the situation, and what did she do?

—How did her arm get cut off? Who cut it off?

—Why did General Li suddenly go into retirement? Why did she take her son to live in the middle of nowhere, and then die from hatred? And why did she send her child to live in the Beggar Sect?

—Why did Guo Mie sever his relationship with his wife? And why, when surrounded by the heroes of Jianghu, would he admit to being General Li?

Xiao Jun now understood many things.

—He understood why Gao Tianjue cut off his arm.

—He understood why Gao Tianjue’s voice had sounded so familiar.

—He understood why former Sect Lord Ren had told him his mother had been killed by General Li.

Were it not for the entanglements of love, would his mother have ever become General Li?

Had General Li not appeared, his mother would never have wasted away in death.

—He also understood why Gao Tianjue wanted to kill Guo Mie, yet was not happy about it afterwards, and had instead laughed a laugh filled with sorrow and horror.

Xiao Jun completely understood these complex matters. But he was just as confused as Ingot was about one thing.

He wanted one thing to be made clear.

But neither of them could ask.

It was a very important question, extremely important: How would they get out of this place?

If they didn't, all of them would likely suffocate.

During that time period, they did not know that without oxygen in the air, it doesn't matter how powerful a person's martial arts are, they will begin to feel exhaustion and fatigue, then eventually fall asleep.

That having been said, everyone knows that if you can't breathe, you will suffocate to death.

Ingot suddenly said, "There's only one way. I've thought about it, and there's only one method."

"What method?"

"Bust a hole in the floor and let the water in, then we can go out." He sighed. "Sadly, that method is not an easy one."

Of course that method would not be easy.

The ship was a sturdy ship. Every plank was hewn from specially selected hardwood, and was obviously quite thick.

Were Guo Mie not injured, it would be as easy as lifting a fighter.

Unfortunately, he was injured, severely.

Ingot still clung to hope. He asked Guo Mie, "Did you put medicine on your wound? Is it any better?"

People of Jianghu, who constantly live life on the edge of the blade, know that it is difficult to avoid injury. Most will carry a small amount of special medicine with them.

But Guo Mie was not the average person, so Ingot quickly gave up on that idea.

"Of course you don't have any medicine." He sighed. "If my martial arts were as good as yours, and I didn't think anyone in the world could hurt me, I wouldn't carry around medicine, either."

Guo Mie didn't respond.

He felt incredibly sleepy. Extremely sleepy, in a way that he had never before felt in his life.

Even though he could hear Ingot speaking, he didn't have the strength to respond.

Like Ingot and Xiao Jun, he could think, but his thoughts seemed to be moving slower than usual.

They all slipped into a state of semi-coma.

It was not until they heard a rapping "tip tip tap tap" sound that they became somewhat sober.

The sound came from the exact part of the boat that they had wished to smash and escape from.

They wished to smash that hole, but had no energy to do so.

Now, it seemed someone was knocking on the hull outside, preparing to smash a hole in.

Who was it outside?

This part of the boat was under the surface of the lake.

A “bang” sound rang out, and a huge hole was suddenly smashed into the hull. And yet, no lake water rushed in.

Not a drop of water came in, only wind.

Ingot awoke, and then stared in shock.

He was a very intelligent person, but he couldn't figure out how there was wind outside, but no water.

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[1] Her name in Chinese is 高天仪 Gāo tiān yí. Tian could be translated heaven and Yi could mean gift. So her name could carry the meaning “gift from heaven.”

CHAPTER 23 – APPLAUSE

Part 1

April 19. Night.

This night, anyone who happened to be on the shores of Daming Lake would think it was very strange. Very, very strange.

Because they saw a ship.

It's not strange to see a ship. Even seeing a hundred wouldn't be anything strange.

The strange thing was that this ship started out in the water, then "walked" up onto the shore.

How can a ship walk?

Many people assumed that they suddenly had a problem with their brain, then rushed home and went to sleep. Some people went back to tell their wives, then got slapped across the face and accused of going out drinking and whoring and making up excuses upon returning.

But it really happened.

Some people had real guts, and incredible curiosity, and decided to stay to see what was happening.

What they saw was a boat with many, many legs.

A boat cannot grow its own legs; these legs, of course, belonged to people.

And the boat of course did not “walk” on its own; it was actually carried, by the power of many people.

Were these people crazy? Why would they expend the painstaking effort required to carry a ship up onto the shore?

Part 2

There is no wind under water. Where could the wind be coming from?

The small lantern in Xiao Jun’s hand had long since gone out. Everything outside was a sheet of pitch black. Nothing could be seen, especially not people.

All of a sudden, Ingot asked a incredibly remarkable question: “Can you guess who it is?” he said to Xiao Jun. “Is it Gao Tianjue? Or is it Frogboy?”

Xiao Jun had no way to answer the question, and in fact didn’t even know what Ingot was talking about.

Ingot explained: “If we were still in the water, then this part of the ship would still be under the surface. Instead, we feel wind.”

“Don’t tell me the ship isn’t in the water any more?”

“It doesn’t seem so. But, a ship can’t walk onto the land.”

“You think someone moved the ship onto the shore?”

Ingot nodded. “So that’s why I ask. Did Gao Tianjue have people move it up, or was it Frogboy?”

“Why are you so sure it’s one of those two?”

“To move a ship this big onto the shore would require at least seven or eight people with extremely powerful martial arts. Other than those two, who has the power to order that many people around?”

It was truly an incredible thing. In the eyes of most people, only someone crazy, or at least a little bit weird, would do something like this.

“Why would they do something like this?”

“Because they figured out that we were hiding in the hull cabin.” Ingot sighed. “You’ve probably been able to tell that Gao Tianjue and Frogboy are a little bit stupid compared to me, but they are still smarter than most people.”

No one could refute the fact that Gao Tianjue and Frogboy were rare talents in Jianghu.

“They want to capture the three of us to get information,” said Ingot. “And they realized that since we were in the hull cabin, we would try to punch a hole in the side and escape into the water.”

“Under water, people are more useless than fish. What happens there is difficult to control. Under water, their kung fu would not be as good.”

Xiao Jun also knew this.

The previous Chief of the Beggar Sect had lived on Lake Tai, on a ship, and Xiao Jun had spent a lot of time with him. [1]

His kung fu under water was much worse than his kung fu out of the water.

Everyone in Jianghu knew this truth, so few people would be willing to fight in water.

“But it’s different on land,” said Ingot. “They know that Guo Mie is wounded. To them, we two are nothing. Getting the ship from the water onto the land would not be difficult, and they wouldn’t even have to expend their own energy to do it.”

He sighed again. “So, regardless of whether it’s Gao Tianjue or Frogboy, both would do the same thing to ensure things go their way. I would do the same thing.”

Finally, there was sound. The sound of applause.

Ingot smiled and bowed, in much the same way a famous actor would bow after performing a masterpiece in front of a devoted audience.

And then, in a very cheerful voice, he said, "It's not an easy thing to achieve praise from Mr. Tian. If there were alcohol here, I would immediately drink to him three times."

The applause stopped, and the person outside said, "How did you know it was me?"

Ingot's response was very simple: "Because Gao Tianjue can't clap."

—How can a person with only one hand clap?

The person outside laughed. Heartily.

It was Frogboy's laughter. And yet, he did not enter. Everything outside was black, and no one appeared. [2]

Ingot couldn't help but ask, "Mr. Tian, are you going to come in? Or shall we go out?"

"Can you guess whether or not I'll let you come out?"

"You won't," said Ingot with a sigh. "I'm just hoping that when you come in, you can bring something with you."

"What would you like me to bring?"

"Can you guess?"

"How about some alcohol?" said Frogboy. "And some appetizers."

"I don't think so."

"You don't think so?" Frogboy sounded shocked. "Why not?"

“Because you’re too stingy. If you bring alcohol, you’ll only bring a little bit, and one of the things I can’t stand in life is only having a little bit of alcohol, a little bit of food, and a little bit of people.”

“What does ‘a little bit of people’ mean?”

“If you came in, but didn’t come in all the way, that’s ‘a little bit.’ For example, if your hand came in, along with your foot, but the rest of you stayed outside, do you think I could stand that?”

Frogboy laughed. “I can guarantee that I will come in all the way, and I also can guarantee that I spent all my wealth on alcohol I can bring.”

“As of now, how much is all your wealth worth? Usually, it’s not worth that much.”

“Now is different,” said Frogboy. “I guarantee that as soon as you see it, you’ll jump with fright.”

Lantern light. Brilliant lantern light.

One, two, three, four, five lanterns....

A whole string of lanterns, shining brightly.

That was the first thing Ingot saw.

And then he saw the women carrying the lanterns.

Beautiful women, wearing embroidered silk gowns, their hair piled high on top of their heads.

Ingot’s eyes grew wide.

Each and every one of the women carrying the lanterns was bright and beautiful.

Their bodies curving sensuously, the eight beautiful women walked into the ship one by one.

They formed two lines, four women in each line. They stood still.

A loud, clear voice called out from outside: "Twenty-year old Nu'er Hong!"

Four more beautiful women, dressed like the others, came in carrying a leopard skin stretched between two bamboo poles. On the leopard skin was a jug of alcohol.

They walked in, smiling at Ingot, and then put down the jug.

The loud clear voice again called out: "Twenty-year old Guizhou Maotai!"

The four women brought in the Maotai and placed it down in front of Ingot.

Then came Lianhua Baijiu, Chu Ye Qing, Persian Red wine...

Then what entered was not a beautiful woman, but a huge, burly bare-chested man. He quickly measured the hole in the side of the boat, and then chopped out his hands and made the hole into a square, cutting the wood as easily as if it were soft tofu.

The man quickly measured the hole again, and then stood in the middle of the hull cabin with arms outstretched.

This made Ingot very curious, and he was about to ask what he was doing, when suddenly a whistling sound could be heard, and something flew in from outside.

The burly man's horse stance was very stable, and the whistling object landed directly into his hands.

It was a pitch-black, glittering wood table.

He put the table down and then left.

The loud, clear voice again called out: "Pearl rice balls!"

Ingot furrowed his brow and said, "Do pearl rice balls count as a famous dish?"

He was laughing, but then suddenly stopped, his face covered with shock as he looked at the table.

There in the middle of the table was a basket of freshly made pearl rice balls, steaming.

Xiao Jun looked at them, appearing to be even more shocked than Ingot. Everyone looked shocked.

This was because on top of every single “pearl” rice ball was inlaid a real pearl at least an inch in diameter.

Round, glittering pearls!

Ingot nearly jumped up.

“By now, you should believe me,” said Frogboy, still outside.

He laughed, pleased with himself.

Ingot sighed. “I never imagined that Frogboy would finally grow up!”

“Frogboy has always been grown up,” said Frogboy cheerfully. “Have you ever seen a rooster’s crest? It’s quite beautiful.” [3]

“You’re a rooster who can lay eggs,” exclaimed Ingot. “You handle matters beautifully, and know how to magically create money.”

“Correct! Absolutely correct!”

Part 3

Frogboy actually didn’t seem to have changed too much. He looked as lazy as ever, wanting only to sit and not walk.

But now, he wasn’t sitting in the wheelchair with wooden wheels, nor did he push himself along.

He sat on a gold brocaded couch, carried by four strong, beautiful girls. Each and every girl had long, beautiful legs.

Ingot instantly recognized one of pairs of long, beautiful legs.

Of course he hadn't forgotten this girl. Not that he was sentimental, but neither was he ungrateful.

This was the girl who had recklessly saved him, and she, of course, had not forgotten him.

But when she looked at him, it was as if she didn't recognize him.

So Ingot pretended that he had never seen her before. Regardless of her reasons for wandering Jianghu as a performer, and regardless of her reasons for pretending she didn't know him, he had no desire to expose her.

The hull cabin was no longer empty, and Frogboy was not the same Frogboy as before.

Ingot looked at him for a very long moment, then asked, "Didn't you just tell me that what I said was absolutely correct?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Actually, it's not correct. Completely incorrect. In fact, what I said just now is a bunch of farts."

"Farts?" Frogboy laughed. "You can fart out of your mouth?"

"Not only can I fart, I can fart very stinky farts."

"Oh."

"Roosters can't lay eggs. Neither roosters nor chicks, neither can lay eggs. And you can't magically produce money."

"Oh!"

“Old Master Tian is famous for keeping you in line tightly. As for money, he won’t just give it out to you. Even if he gave you a little bit, he definitely would not allow you to spend it so extravagantly.”

Frogboy sighed. “Actually, my monthly allowance isn’t much more than the old lady who sells flowers outside the front door of Great Three Yuan.”

“Then how could you possibly have become so luxurious all of a sudden?”

“Why don’t you guess?”

“If I can’t guess, you’ll definitely view me as an idiot,” said Ingot. “But if I do guess, I bet you won’t admit it.”

“That’s not certain,” said Frogboy. “If you really can guess, I won’t necessarily refuse to admit it.”

“You really want me to say it out loud?”

Frogboy sighed. “I’m afraid it won’t do for you to not say.”

Ingot laughed. “You’re a very intelligent person. Soon you might even be as smart as me. I should drink to you.” Then, like an attentive host, he asked Frogboy, “What would you like to drink? The twenty-year old Nu’er Hong? Please, drink anything you like, there’s no need for courtesy.”

Frogboy laughed. “Are you the host, or am I?”

Ingot’s response was as cynical as his usual responses, provoking shock amongst others.

“Neither of us,” he said. “You are not the host, and neither am I.”

“Then who do you believe to be the host?”

“It’s General Li,” he said in complete seriousness. “Three Fearsome Laughs General Li.”

Frogboy stared at him for a while, then said, “Why is General Li the host?”

Ingot didn't respond, but instead slowly said, "General Li comes without a shadow, and leaves without a footprint. No one in Jianghu has ever seen his face, and no one knows his whereabouts. But this month, suddenly, everyone knew where he was." He asked Frogboy: "Can you figure out the truth?"

Frogboy didn't respond. Instead, he retorted, "Don't tell me you've already figured it out?"

"Actually, anyone could figure out the truth," he said. "Even people ten times stupider than me could figure it out." Sounding very earnest, he said, "The only way for so many people in Jianghu to know about General Li's whereabouts would be if someone intentionally leaked the information."

This truth, anyone should be able to figure out, but in actuality, not many people could figure it out completely.

That was because there was something else important that no one knew.

—Who had leaked the information? And how could that person know of General Li's whereabouts? Why would that person tell others such important information?

Ingot explained the answer to the last question: "He intentionally leaked the information to attract General Li's enemies to Jinan. Chaotic battling would break out, and heaven and earth would be darkened with death. Even if they all killed each other, it wouldn't be a big problem."

"It makes sense," said Frogboy with a smile. "What you say makes some sense. But," he asked Ingot, "how could this person know that General Li was in Jinan? How come no one else knew, but he did?"

"Actually, he didn't need to know."

"What does that mean?"

"It means, he wasn't completely certain that Big Boss Sun was General Li. So even though 10 years had passed, he didn't dare to make a move."

"Oh."

“But then, he noticed things changing all of a sudden. Suspicious strangers showed up in the the city, and then new faces appeared in Qiu Budao’s squads. They all seemed to appear out of nowhere.” Ingot sighed. “Of course these things could not remain hidden from him.”

Frogboy understood what he meant. “I would think that, generally speaking, they couldn’t.”

“So he realized that very shortly, someone would be making a move against Big Boss Sun.”

“Very likely.”

“Seeing the strangers, who had never appeared in Jianghu before, he very likely realized that they were a force of killers secretly trained by Gao Tianjue over the years.”

“It makes sense,” said Frogboy. “Even Big Boss Sun would probably realize that.”

“Everyone knows that Gao Tianjue is not easy to deal with, and of course he knew that.”

Frogboy sighed. “End the heavens, destroy the earth, wipe them all out. People who fall into their hands have reached the end of their road. All their money will be taken.”

Ingot also sighed. “Anyone who creates an organization like that would have to spend a lot of money.”

“I understand.”

“But the person you’re talking about spent so many years of work on Big Boss Sun, he would definitely not be willing to sit idly by while and watch Gao Tianjue snatch him away.”

“If it were me, I wouldn’t be willing.”

“But he wasn’t certain he would be able to deal with Gao Tianjue.”

Frogboy sighed. “If it were me, I wouldn’t be certain.”

“So, he got everyone to come to Jinan and participate in a struggle which turned heaven and earth upside down. After everyone was weak and tired from the fighting, dead, wounded, then he would appear to collect his reward.”

Frogboy smiled. “This person you refer to, he sounds intelligent. Extremely intelligent.”

“He is. People as intelligent as him are not easy to come by.”

“How do you think he measures up to you?”

“He’s not quite as good as me.” Then Ingot asked Frogboy: “How do you think he measures up to you?”

“He can’t measure up to me.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I am he. And he is me.”

By this point, everyone had already guessed who Ingot was referring to.

But to hear the words come out of Frogboy’s mouth was truly shocking.

Ingot sighed. “Why did you have to say it? Hearing you say it is no fun.”

“How did you want it to happen?” said Frogboy with a smile. “Did you want to place your blade up to my neck and force me to say it? Would that be fun?”

“No, that wouldn’t be any fun. Actually, this whole thing isn’t any fun.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because too many people died. And least fun of all, some people died who shouldn’t have died.”

“Oh?”

“In recent years, Three Panthers Niu had been lurking around the shores of the East China Sea. When he saw me, he wanted to capture me, and use me as a hostage to force my family to come help deal with General Li.”

“So they all died,” said Frogboy. “Actually, I don’t think their deaths were unjust. Neither was Qiu Budao’s. And even less unjust were the deaths of Gao Tianjue’s men.”

Ingot suddenly interrupted, and in a very serious tone asked, “What about Liu Jin’niang? Was her death just or unjust?”

Frogboy didn’t say anything.

“Of course you had agents placed in Big Boss Sun’s organization, and one of them was Liu Jin’niang. She came from the imperial palace, and was experienced and knowledgeable. She was quite familiar with Big Boss Sun’s body and physique. She knew all along that he was no ordinary businessman, but rather a consummate expert of inner arts. In that regard, she could not be fooled.”

Frogboy said nothing.

Ingot continued, “She was also a person, a lonely woman. When she met a man such as yourself, she could not help but capitulate.”

Big Boss Sun had too much money, too many matters to attend to. How could he pay attention to the personal affairs of everyone around him?

If a man thinks that he merely needs to beckon with his hand to cause a woman to follow him for life, and that she will wait forever for a second beckon, then that man will find it hard to avoid certain unpleasant events.

“I think that you had been working secretly with Liu Jin’niang for a long time,” Ingot said to Frogboy. “Old Master Tian pretended that he didn’t notice, but actually, nothing escapes his eye.”

Ingot sighed. “He didn’t oppose your relationship because usually, fathers will not oppose their sons’ romances. In fact, even mothers will usually not oppose. Parents generally only oppose their daughters in such situations. It was because your father knew of your relationship with Liu Jin’niang that

he did not believe the deaths to be a crime of passion. And that is why he took the initiative to investigate the matter.”

“It makes sense,” said Frogboy with a bitter laugh. “Every word you spoke makes complete ****ing sense.”

“As of now, most of the people who know about this matter are dead,” said Ingot. “Obviously, many of your friends work for Sun Enterprises. If you could capture and kill General Li, then all those businesses could become yours.”

“It makes sense.”

“Even if it didn’t make sense at first, eventually it would. General Li’s riches are all stolen property. But if you killed him, who would dare to chase after the treasures? Even if someone wanted to, who would dare to oppose the Flowered Flag sect? If you pulled it off, all the heroes under heaven would likely give you a thumbs up and say, Young Master Tian is really amazing.”

Frogboy laughed heartily. “Actually, it’s enough for me to hear just you say that.”

“And Xiao Jun?”

“Chamber Lord Xiao is one of the great men that should receive credit for tracking down and killing General Li,” he said with a smile. “But now that he is in charge of the Beggar Sect’s Torture Chamber, he most certainly would not care a whit for money and wealth.”

“What of Gao Tianjue?” asked Ingot. “Aren’t you scared of Gao Tianjue?”

“I was at first. Extremely so. But someone already took care of her for me.”

“Who?”

“Madam Silver Lightning, Silent Thunderbolt and your Big Boss Tang.” He heaved a deliberate sigh. “It was not a case of ‘both sides suffering loss,’ but rather ‘four sides suffering loss.’ Their injuries were not serious, but not light, either.”

Ingot’s facial expression changed.

Frogboy smiled happily. "But, you don't need to worry. We're friends, and for your sake, I wouldn't treat you poorly in any way."

"What are you planning to do with us?!"

"I'm going to spend nine-thousand silver to buy two of the very best horses and one of the very best carts. I'm going to put you on it and send you back to the shores of the East China Sea." He had a very sincere expression on his face. "You've been away from home for a long time, your father is surely worried."

His appearance was both sincere and solemn: "I know you won't hold anything against me. I haven't done anything bad, just capture a great bandit. Everyone knows that the net of heaven is wide, and none can escape its mesh. I have no need to blush with shame."

Ingot laughed bitterly. "Later on, if people call you a great hero, I bet you still won't blush."

Suddenly, Frogboy's face was a bit flushed. "One day, you too will be a great hero. By that time, Chamber Lord Xiao will no doubt be the Chief of the Beggar Sect, and then the three of us can watch out for each other. Everything in Jianghu will be under our control." The more he talked the more happy he got, laughing so hard that it seemed his mouth would be unable to close.

Ingot laughed with him, happily.

"And so," said Frogboy, "the two of you should help me. Allow me to take away General Li. For the rest of my life, I won't forget how you helped me."

"Are you really determined to take away General Li?"

"Correct."

"Then you can leave," Ingot said, suddenly no longer laughing. With a sigh, he said, "But that path is a very long one. And once you go down it, you can never come back."

"What path are you speaking of?"

“A path of no return, the road to the Yellow Springs.” [4]

“The road to the Yellow Springs?” asked Frogboy. “Why would I walk the road to the Yellow Springs.”

“Because General Li passed away a long time ago. If you want to find him, how else could you go looking other than walking the road to the Yellow Springs?”

Frogboy’s smile suddenly changed a bit. He stared at Ingot for a long time, then smiled again. “General Li may be seriously injured, but he won’t die any time soon.”

“Where is he, then?”

“Right there.”

“Where?” asked Ingot. “How come I don’t see him?” His eyes shifted around, eventually coming to rest on Guo Mie. “Don’t tell me you’re talking about him?”

“Who else would I be talking about?”

“Don’t tell me you think he’s General Li?”

“Are you telling me he’s not?”

Ingot laughed out loud, laughing until he bent over at the waist, until he could scarcely breath, as if he had never heard anything funnier in his entire life.

“If he’s General Li, well, then I must be Chu Liuxiang.” He pointed at his nose. “Do I look like Chief Chu to you?”

Frogboy was still able to keep his calm. He waited until Ingot stopped laughing, then asked him, “He’s not General Li?”

“Of course he’s not.”

“Then who is he?”

Guo Mie had been sitting there the whole time, an amused smile on his face, watching them as if he were watching a play. But at this point, he opened his mouth. "I'm surnamed Guo. My name is Guo Mie."

Part 4

Frogboy stared in shock. The expression on his face was much like the expression on Ingot's face the first time he heard Guo Mie speak his name.

Anyone who heard something like that would have a similar expression.

But Frogboy is not like other people, so a smile quickly reappeared on his face.

"I never imagined. I really never could have imagined," he said, smiling. "Great Hero Guo, who hasn't been seen in Jianghu for ten years. I never imagined that you would appear here. What a happy occasion!"

"You don't believe it?" Ingot asked.

"When 'End the heavens, destroy the earth' swept over Jianghu, I was still wearing toddler's pants [1]. When I needed to take a leak, I would piss all over my feet. How could I possibly know what the great heroes of the world looked like? Since I never saw what Great Hero Guo looked like, how could I dare to say our friend here isn't him?"

He sighed again: "However, there's something that just doesn't seem right."

"What's that?"

"Madam Gao and Great Hero Guo have reunited after such a long time apart, it should be an extremely happy occasion," said Frogboy. "But, Madam Gao is extremely unhappy, so much so that she demands Great Hero Guo's life. You're much smarter than me, can you explain what's going on?"

Ingot couldn't tell him. This was a family secret, and not something he could tell others.

In a sad tone, Guo Mie said, "It's because I not only hurt her, turning her into a cripple, but also caused the organization she had created, 'End the heavens, destroy the earth' to collapse. I don't blame her for using any method she deems fit to kill me."

Frogboy looked at him, shocked. After a while, he said, "Why would you do such a thing?"

Guo Mie was quiet for quite some time. And then, one word at a time, he said, "For General Li."

Frogboy was even more shocked.

"You and your wife had a falling out because of General Li? That's why you cut off her arm, and that's why she wants to kill you?"

"Pretty much so."

Frogboy laughed. "I don't believe it, and I don't understand. This story of yours isn't a very good story."

Of course Frogboy didn't understand, because he didn't know the whole story about what had happened between the three people.

But Ingot understood.

—When Guo Mie and General Li met, Gao Tianjue arrived soon afterwards. Consumed by jealousy, she became her sister's enemy. Under circumstances like that, it would be difficult for a fight not to break out.

—General Li's martial arts were most likely a bit below Gao Tianjue's, perhaps because of pain and shame. Therefore, she almost died at her sister's hand.

But Guo Mie couldn't let that happen. He leaped in to help her, taking a stance for her. When experts battle, mistakes cannot happen, and therefore, Gao Tianjue's arm was lopped off.

Ingot believed that things happened that way.

It was only a rough approximation, though, and the specific details were unknown to him.

He didn't want to know about them.

The details were secrets that belonged to others, and if they didn't tell him, he wouldn't ask.

However, he was a bit curious about some other things.

—Why would General Li run away and live by herself to raise her son alone? The result was her death from regret.

—Why did Guo Mie come to Jinan and assume the identity of the multi-millionaire Sun Jicheng?

There must be some facts that remained to be revealed. And of course Frogboy wanted to know them.

“Regardless of whether your story is good or not, it's not easy to make up something like that. I have to admire you.” Frogboy's smile had returned. “There's only one person who can confirm whether or not your story is true.” He looked at Ingot. “And of course that person isn't you. Regardless of what you say, I have to suspect its trustworthiness.”

It seemed Xiao Jun had returned to his old self, staring off into the distance, into a small, shabby room far, far away. There, on a dilapidated table, he sat with a coughing woman, watching her die, impoverished and feeble, bitter and in grief. She slowly wasted away in her remorse until she died.

Why had she never told him who his father was? She had never complained about him.

What she regretted was her own actions, and the person she hated was herself.

Xiao Jun slowly turned around and faced Frogboy, his pale face seeming to be a bit flushed.

Frogboy had never been afraid of people looking at him. It confirmed his status as a famous person, and since he was, in general, a good-looking person, regardless of why someone looked at him, it would make him happy.

But he wasn't happy at the moment, because he could see that within Xiao Jun's eyes resided an unspeakable venom.

His voice cold, he asked Frogboy: "Can I confirm it?"

"You?" As of now, Frogboy's laugh seemed a bit forced. "What proof can you provide? Don't tell me you can confirm what he said is true?"

"I can't."

Frogboy laughed, but not for a very long time, because Xiao Jun continued: "I can't prove anything, because I don't need to. I'm not going to let you leave here alive."

"You're telling me you want to kill me?" said Frogboy, surprised. "There's never been any enmity between us. Furthermore, we're good friends. When something bad happens to you, I'm always there at your side. When you come looking for me, I always offer help. Why would you want to kill me?" He really couldn't think of any reason, and could only sigh. "Can you please tell me how I offended you?"

"You didn't."

"Then why do you want to kill me?"

"No reason."

"You want to kill me for no reason?" Frogboy was even more shocked. "Were you suddenly poisoned? Have you gone crazy?"

Xiao Jun didn't respond to his questions. Someone from outside answered them for him.

"He's not crazy." It was a calm and steady voice. "It's just, there are some things you don't know, and he's not willing to tell you."

**

[1] Lake Tai is a famous lake near Shanghai. <http://tinyurl.com/pxdctm9>

[2] There is a bit of word play that I'm leaving out based on Frogboy's Chinese name. Remember that his surname also means "field" and that he has the character "chicken" in his name? In pinyin, his name is Tian Ji Zai. The original Chinese says, "there was Tian [fields] outside, but no Tian [fields] could be seen. There was Ji [chicken] outside, but no Ji [chicken] could be seen, there was a person outside, but no person could be seen.

[3] This is a bit of wordplay based on Frogboy's name having the word "chicken" in it.

[4] As is obvious from the context, the Yellow Springs is a world for the afterlife or netherworld.

[5] He's specifically referring to the crotchless pants that kids in China wear. If you're not familiar with what I'm talking about, please check out the article: <http://tinyurl.com/mlmwtr>

CHAPTER 24 – CAUSE AND EFFECT

Part 1

April 19, before dawn.

If there are no lanterns or fires, the time before dawn is always the darkest. If there are lanterns or fires, then this period of time is no different than any other during the day.

Some people are like those lights during the time before dawn. When something exists that others cannot even begin to grasp, that person will appear, and all questions will suddenly be resolved. The current matter was similar.

And that person had now appeared.

Part 2

Zheng Nanyuan slowly walked in.

It was hard to say whether he really did have rheumatism in his legs, or if they had in fact been injured in the past. The reason he always sat in his wheelchair was because he didn't want others to see how he walked. He'd always believed his gait to be somewhat amusing and laughable.

Right now, no one thought it laughable. Even if he crawled in, no one would have thought it laughable.

—He was no ordinary person, no restaurant manager. He had only used that front to cover up his true identity.

—There must be some hidden connection between him and Sun Jicheng. As for his true identity and martial arts ability, they were beyond the imagination of others.

Those things were his secrets. And yet as of now, it seemed they were secrets no longer.

Upon his entrance, the happiest person was Ingot.

“I knew you would show up sooner or later,” he said. “And here you are.”

Frogboy looked thoroughly surprised, and yet he couldn’t help but ask, “It’s such a cold, damp night! It’s not convenient for you to walk around, sir. Why would you take such pains to come here?”

Zheng Nanuan rubbed his legs and sighed. “I didn’t really want to come, but I had no choice.”

“What do you mean?”

Zheng Nanyuan responded, “If Ingot testified that this man is Guo Mie, would you believe him?”

“I wouldn’t.”

“What about Chamber Lord Xiao?”

“I wouldn’t believe him either,” said Frogboy. “When Great Hero Guo went missing, one of those two hadn’t even come out of his mother’s womb yet, and the other was still walking around with his nose running. What could they testify to?”

“Luckily, by that time, I had stopped walking around with my nose running! I had already learned to bleed!”

“You have to learn how to bleed?”

“Of course,” said Zheng Nanyuan. “When should you bleed, and why? What can you do to make the least amount of blood flow? Mastering these things is not easy. It usually takes twenty or thirty years.”

“So at that time, you were already at the point where you could be considered not young.”

“At that time, I had been a public figure for over thirty years. And so tonight, I had no choice but to come here.”

“Come to testify that he really is Guo Mie?”

“Yes,” said Zheng Nanyuan. “Of everyone here, I’m afraid I am the most qualified to testify to this.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I was there that day.”

This was an incomplete sentence, so of course Frogboy didn’t understand. “What day? And where?”

Zheng Nanyuan didn’t answer. He turned his head to look at Guo Mie, and the two of them stared at each other, their expressions both filled with indescribable emotion.

After a long time passed, Guo Mie slowly nodded his head, and then Zheng Nanyuan responded. “That day was April Fifteen. April Fifteen, seventeen years ago.”

April 15 was the day Sun Jicheng had disappeared from the earth, and it was also the same day that Guo Mie and General Li had disappeared.

Zheng Nanyuan continued: “That day, General Li and Guo Mie met. Madam Gao also went. The three of them fought, and Madam Gao’s arm was severed. She was furious. But Guo Mie and General Li were also injured. General Li was hit by a palm strike from Madam Gao, and the injury was quite serious.”

He did not add many details because he did not want to reveal the personal matters of others.

But he did reveal something very important that neither Ingot nor Xiao Jun had known.

“This matter happened so many years ago, I originally would never have brought up what I’m about to say,” said Zheng Nanyuan. “But it is crucial to the whole affair, so I really have no choice but to speak it out.” He knew that everyone would wait for his explanation, so he opened a jug of alcohol, took a drink, and then continued, “The day they met, they did not take any subordinates along with them. They felt that the matter was a secret between the three of them, and they had absolutely no intention of letting others know about it. But they didn’t realize that we had planned for this event for many years. By the time they began to fight, we had already completely surrounded Moon Water Temple.”

Of course, Moon Water Temple would have been the location of their meeting. But Ingot couldn’t stop from asking, “We? What do you mean ‘we?’”

“There were eight of us,” said Zheng Nanyuan. “We knew that ‘End the heavens, destroy the earth’ and General Li were peak experts in Jianghu. But we were afraid we might alarm them, so we didn’t bring along any subordinates.”

“Which eight people?”

“The Chief Bodyguard of the Imperial Palace, ‘One Sword Defending Eight Wastelands,’ Tie Changchun. The former Chief of the Beggar Sect, Mr. Ren. Mount Cang Temple’s Wu Xueyan. Southern Shaolin Temple’s Grandmaster Fahua. The Helmsman of the Yangtze River 36 Strongholds, Boss Shu. Elite expert from the palace of the Prince of Northeast China, Steward Feng. Chief of the North China Bodyguard Alliance, ‘Stable and Steady’ Wang Zhongping.” In one breath, Zheng Nanyuan spoke seven names.

Seventeen years ago, anyone who spent even just a single day in Jianghu would go pale in the face upon hearing those names.

Seventeen years later, it was still the same. Even Ingot had heard of all of them.

“You said there were eight people,” said Ingot with a bitter laugh. “But I think what you had was sufficient. Each one of those men by himself is worth more than 800 men.”

Zheng Nanyuan didn’t argue this point.

“General Li had committed too many crimes, and was too gutsy. No one dared to make a move,” he said. “Furthermore, the methods of ‘End the heavens, destroy the earth’ were too ruthless and savage. That is why eight people showed up.”

“But you only said seven names,” said Ingot. “Who is the last person?”

“The last one was merely a constable.”

“A mere constable is nothing amazing. Who knows how many tens of thousands of constables there are in the world. But as far as amazing constables, there is only one!”

“Oh?”

“Of course, I’ve only heard of him, but if I’m not mistaken, that constable is also surnamed Zheng.”

“I believe so.”

“You’ve heard of him too?” asked Ingot. “His name is Zheng Po, and I believe he also had the nickname Zheng Nothing, right?” [1]

“I believe so.”

“The meaning of ‘Zheng Nothing,’ wasn’t because he was nothing. What it meant was that regardless of the case, once he got his hands on it, nothing could prevent him from breaking it.” He stared at Zheng Nanyuan. “You must be Zheng Nothing.”

This seemed to be a certainty. But Zheng Nanyuan simply shook his head.

“I’m not,” he smiled. “The boy genius finally makes a wrong guess.”

“You’re not Zheng Nothing?” said Ingot, not expecting this outcome. “Who are you, then?”

“Zheng Nanyuan and Sun Jicheng are both fake names. I never carried the surname Zheng before.”

“Then what was your surname?”

“Tie.”

Ingot was shocked. “Then you are one of the four great swordsmen of Jianghu, the greatest expert in the Imperial Palace, ‘One Sword Defending Eight Wastelands,’ Tie Changchun?”

“Yes,” said Zheng Nanyuan. “I am Tie Changchun.”

Ingot stared in shock. After a long time, he was able to open his mouth again. “Tie Changchun, ‘One Sword Defending Eight Wastelands’ Tie Changchun. Even my third brother-in-law completely admires your sword technique.” Ingot gave a bitter laugh. “If I told him that all these years you were working as a restaurant manager, he wouldn’t believe it even if I beat him to death.”

“What of you?” Tie Changchun asked Ingot. “Do you believe?”

“I believe,” said Ingot. “But I don’t understand.”

“What don’t you understand?”

“You knew all along that Sun Jicheng was Guo Mie. You also knew about his relationship with General Li. Why were you here with him these ten and more years? And why drink with him every day? Why would Wu Xueyan, Grandmaster Fahua, Wu Zhongping and the others just leave you here on your own?”

“Because we had an agreement.”

“An agreement? What kind of agreement?”

Tie Changchun sighed. “I need to explain everything from the beginning.”

“Please do, I’m listening.”

“That day, General Li sustained serious injuries, but Guo Mie sealed the wound and stopped the bleeding. And then they were surrounded by the eight of us. Anyone under heaven who found themselves surrounded by us wouldn’t even think of trying to escape. Even they understood that.”

“I understand, too,” said Ingot.

“And yet they did not exhibit even the slightest bit of fear. The two of them seemed determined that if they had to die, they would die together. They would fight us to the death.”

Ingot gave a thumbs up and shouted, “Great! General Li, Guo Mie, you are amazing!”

“Unfortunately, that battle never happened.”

“Why not? Don’t tell me you eight experts were afraid of the two of them?”

Tie Changchun laughed bitterly. “We weren’t scared. It’s just that we couldn’t let them die there that day.”

“Why not?”

“Because they still had the riches stolen from the Imperial Palace. As for that point, Wu Xueyan, Beggar Chief Ren, Grandmaster Fahua couldn’t care a bit. But Steward Feng, Chief Bodyguard Wang, Constable Zheng and myself did care, a lot. Boss Shu and Wang Zhongping were brother and sister in-law, and couldn’t let each other die. We all knew that if we tried to force General Li and Guo Mie, it would be useless. So we could only make a deal with them.”

“What sort of deal?”

“Each side would pick a champion to fight. If Guo Mie and General Li lost, they would have to hand over the treasures.”

“And if you lost?”

“Then they would still hand over the treasure, but they could add stipulations to our agreement that we would have to accept. And therefore, we reached our deal, because the two stipulations they added were fair and reasonable, and would allow us to maintain justice in Jianghu. Even Grandmaster Fahua, a completely righteous man, did not oppose.”

“What were their stipulations?”

“The first was that we must guarantee the safety of General Li. We could not harm even a single hair on her head, nor arrest her and bring her to justice. At first, Grandmaster Fahua and Wu Xueyan could not accept that.”

“Then what happened?”

“After Guo Mie told us something, Grandmaster Fahua had a change of heart.”

“What did he tell you?”

“He said, General Li had indeed committed many crimes, and had stolen treasures worth hundreds of millions. And yet, she herself had not spent even a single coin. When she wasn’t out committing crimes, she stayed in a ramshackle hut with her baby boy, living a life of poverty, supporting herself by mending clothes.” Tie Changchun sighed. “General Li’s uprightness is truly worthy of intense admiration.”

Perhaps no one in Jianghu could ever find General Li because they couldn’t possibly imagine that the person who had roamed unhindered under heaven would live in such a way. And she did it, not to evade capture, but to retain her purity as a mother, and make sure that her child grew into a good person.

At first, Xiao Jun appeared to be completely numb, but tears glistened in his eyes.

—A ramshackle hut, an old, dilapidated table, and a coughing woman.

Such sorrowful times, and such a painful life. It could only make one feel even more respect for her.

It seemed Ingot’s eyes were red, too. In a loud voice, he said, “General Li, I truly admire you. If you were alive, I would kneel down and kowtow to you three thousand six hundred times.”

Tie Changchun sighed. “Therefore, I decided to myself that even if we did win the duel, I wouldn’t allow General Li to come to any harm. At that time,

even though we hadn't seen the truth with our own eyes, the words had come out of the mouth of Guo Mie. Who could deny them?!"

Ingot stuck out his chest and called out, "He is a true man, and my friend. Because he was willing to make friends with a scoundrel like me, I will feel honored for the rest of my life."

"It is because of that battle that, down to this day, when I walk, I look like a clown. But I feel no dishonor. To have been able to fight a duel with such a hero is one of the highlights of my life."

"What was their second stipulation?"

"The treasures of the Imperial Palace had to be returned, but the vast majority of the wealth General Li had stolen was initially earned illegally. General Li wanted us to do something good with that wealth. She didn't want us to return it to the heartless evildoers she'd stolen it from."

"A good idea."

"If the stolen goods weren't returned, Zheng Po couldn't complete his mission. But he didn't oppose. The next day he retired from Department Six and went to live life on a farm."

Ingot shouted out again, "Great! Zhao Nothing is also a true man. If I can find you, I will kowtow to you!"

"However, the amount of wealth was just too great. It couldn't be randomly given away."

"Therefore, each party agreed to again select a person to represent you all to manage the wealth," said Ingot. "But you couldn't let anyone know where it came from, so you used the guise of business to avoid prying eyes and ears. You hid in the darkness, using the money to do good deeds."

"Actually, it was all General Li's idea."

"But she could not, and in fact did not want, to appear in public. So the heavy responsibility was placed upon Big Brother Guo's shoulders. Your legs were in bad shape, so you couldn't go back to the Imperial Palace to resume your position. Therefore, you joined him in this weighty task."

Tie Changchun sighed again. "You really are a genius. Even I have to admire you."

"Jinan is a huge commerce hub, with countless businesses, and that's why you picked here. In a place like here, as long as you have money to do business, no one will care too much about your background. Furthermore, the Beggar Sect Chief, disciples of Mount Cang and Shaolin, the Yangze River Helmsman, the Bodyguard Alliance Chief, and the Northeast China Prince's Steward all were protecting you. Therefore, throughout these years, no one discovered your true identities."

"And throughout these years, we have accomplished a lot," said Tie Changchun. "Even while in hiding, we have distributed 38,925,643 pieces of silver. There is a lot of wealth, but also a lot of people. I can dare to guarantee, every piece of silver was distributed correctly and at the proper time. I feel no qualms whatsoever about all of it."

"I believe you," said Ingot. "Only a bastard wouldn't."

Tei Changchun let out a very long sigh. "The only thing I regret is that General Li cannot see it." He sounded somewhat sad. "She died much too early."

The ship's hold suddenly grew quiet, and everyone lowered their head, even the girls who had brought in the alcohol and the ones holding the lanterns. Even Frogboy lowered his head. Everyone knew in their hearts that after she had handed over responsibility of the matter, she could not continue on living.

She had made her mistakes, and left behind in her heart were scars that could not be healed, along with inexhaustible regret. She did what she could, and had set her dream in motion. Even though her wound was not extremely severe, she would not be able to live.

In his own heart, Ingot asked himself: "She was the greatest hero of her generation, and yet, she was still just a poor woman?"

But Guo Mie had to keep on living, in order to make General Li's dreams a reality. In order to help people. For the big picture. He had to live the life of a multi-millionaire. How long would he have to keep doing it?

Until Gao Tianjue found him.

He knew that Gao Tianjue would come for him sooner or later. The bitterness and hatred in her heart was too profound. So when she found him, he could only flee.

Ingot asked himself another question: "Did she do the right thing? Or the wrong thing? If she didn't do the right thing, then what should she have done?"

Who could answer those questions? Who could dare to say that they knew the answer?

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[1] The 'Zheng' from Zheng Nothing is indeed the same character as Zheng Nanyuan's surname.



CHAPTER 25 – THE THIRD, FOURTH, FIFTH, SIXTH AND SEVENTH STARS

Part 1

April 20, dawn.

It had begun to grow light outside, but unfortunately, it hadn't reached the hold of the ship. If it were any lighter outside, the hold of the ship would actually be darker. This is because lantern light can only illuminate things that are in the dark. They are not useful during the day.

Many things in the world are like this.

Frogboy stood up, patting the clothes he wore, which were clearly new and extremely expensive. "Now I understand everything," he said. "And thankfully, it's not too late."

"Oh?"

"Thankfully, I haven't gotten these clothes dirty, so I can still return them. And thankfully, nothing happened to the pearls, and we only opened one jug of alcohol. Not too big of a problem. Otherwise, I would really be in a pickle."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, General Li is not General Li, and Frogboy is just as poor as he was before. I didn't pay for any of these things. Were the clothes dirty, the alcohol gone, the pearls damaged, how could I repay the debt?" He was still smiling as he told his people, "I beg all of you for a favor. Please take everything away as quickly as possible. I can only pay you one day's salary. I'll figure out a way to do that later. I will not renege on a debt."

Regardless of anything, Frogboy was a popular person, and so the people didn't say anything. They just left.

Ingot wanted to ask the long-legged girl with braids if she really had been hired by Frogboy, or whether or not she had come for some other plot or scheme.

But it seemed she was afraid of him asking such questions, and vanished like the smoke. But even as she left, she turned her head and looked at him, her eyes twinkling. Ingot didn't say anything.

In any case, the girl seemed to have good intentions. Even if she was just using her performing as an act to cover her true identity, and had come for another reason, well, Ingot didn't want to blow her cover. He had the feeling he would see her again. They were both young, and had long lives to live. He could ask her another time.

Ingot was young, but he understood that one should always leave room for adjustments when doing things in life. Helping others to do the same is never wrong.

The lanterns were gone, but luckily, the sky had grown brighter, so lanterns were no longer needed.

Frogboy stretched lazily and sighed, a charming smile appearing on his face. And then he said something that no one could have expected him to say. "Goodbye! Goodbye everyone!"

"Goodbye?" said Ingot, his eyes wide. "What do you mean by goodbye? You're going to leave, just like that?"

"The play is over, or at least, my part is. What else is there left for me to do?" Frogboy laughed cheerfully. "Don't tell me you want me to stay behind to drink?"

Ingot stared at him for a long while, then laughed bitterly and shook his head. "You really do have some thick skin. You do something like this, then pretend you don't care about it all?"

“What did I do?” chuckled Frogboy. “I didn’t steal or rob anything, I didn’t hurt anyone. Just like Great Hero Guo used to do in the past, I was trying to capture a great criminal. Since I can’t catch him, well, might as well forget about it.” With a broad smile, he looked around. “Everyone, is there anything else you all would ask of a person as elegant as me?”

Ingot gaped at him. Everyone else seemed to be struck speechless.

And then, a voice came in from outside. “They can’t do anything to you, but fortunately, I can. I’m not only gonna beat your *** to a pulp, I’m also gonna break both of your dog legs.”

As soon as he heard this person’s voice, his facial expression changed. He wanted to slink away, but unfortunately, there was nowhere to slink to.

Old Master Tian was already there in front of him. Frogboy could do nothing but bow respectfully and say, “Hello, Father, are you well?”

“No!” said Old Master Tian, his face blank. “I’m just about to the point of being pissed off to death by you. How could I be well?”

“Okay then, I’ll head back, pull my pants down and lay on the ground. I’ll wait for father to return to spank me with a wooden plank so that he can cool down.”

Ingot didn’t want to laugh, but he couldn’t hold back.

As soon as he laughed, the mood lightened. Old Master Tian slapped Frogboy across the face.

“Beat it. Get the hell back and lie on the ground. If you even think of trying to sneak off, I’ll beat you to death.”

“I’m beating it,” said Frogboy, holding his head in his hands. “I’m beating it immediately.”

Before he even finished speaking, he was gone, although he voice could still be heard ringing out.

Everyone heard him laughing in the distance and saying: “Fortunately I’m a person, not a dog, and I have no dog legs. Father wants to break dog legs, not people legs.”

Ingot suddenly shouted out: “Make sure to be careful in the future, I might be back to eat some chicken legs.”

Part 2

Old Master Tian had not come alone. Moments after he entered, two people walked in from behind him.

They were two women, both extremely good looking. One, her head lowered, her face blushing, was none other than Tang Lanfang, Big Boss Tang.

The other appeared to be a bit younger than Tang Lanfang. She was bright and gorgeous, her bearing and appearance beautiful, in a way that is impossible to describe. Anyone who saw a woman such as her would be forced to take a second look.

And yet when Ingot, who is scared of nothing in the world, caught sight of her, he had the same look that Frogboy did when Old Master Tian arrived. He wanted to hide, to run away.

But, just like Frogboy, he had no place to hide, and no place to run to. He could only brace himself, and with an obsequious smile say, “Third Sister, hello.”

“Ninth,” said the woman lightly, “stand there and don’t move.”

Ingot didn’t move a muscle.

At first, everyone found it strange that Ingot, a scoundrel who wouldn’t even blink upon the falling of the heavens, would suddenly look so scared. But then they understood.

Naughty little brothers are always afraid of their older sisters. Beatings from them are even more painful than beatings from fathers.

Tie Changchun sighed, as if an incredibly enormous weight had been lifted from his shoulders. "Thank the heavens and the earth, everything can now be resolved. With Miss Dragon Third here, what issue is there that couldn't be resolved?"

Perhaps there are some people in Jianghu who would not defer to Miss Dragon Third.

But everyone knows that there is something all children of the Dragon Family carry.

It is not a treasured sword which can split hairs. It is not a concealed weapon coated in deadly barkcloth tree poison. It is a small flag, embroidered with a dragon, and seven stars.

A flag with seven stars.

Even though Old Master Tian of the Flowered Flag sect had been famous for quite some time, and held power over a great area, he respected Miss Dragon Third as much as anyone.

The Dragon flag hadn't even appeared, and yet already exerted its power.

"Great Hero Guo, your injuries are not light," said Miss Dragon Third. "I've already prepared a cart to take you to somewhere you can receive treatment. Chamber Lord Xiao can accompany you." She laughed, then continued, "The bruises on your wife's face will heal, but the scars in her heart, well, only you can treat those. You may see her there, and I hope that you can cure her heartbreak."

Her smile was warm, but when she spoke, people could not refuse to comply.

A person like her did not need to raise her voice.

“Great Hero Tie, you should stay here. You can work with Old Master Tian to continue to fulfill General Li’s dream.” She continued softly. “This is a way to build good karma. I’m sure you will receive increased blessings and longevity.”

Everyone took their leave. Afterwards, Ingot couldn’t hold back any more, and blurted, “What about me?”

Miss Dragon Third turned her head to look at him, and after a long time, let out a soft sigh. “You. I really don’t know what to do with you.” She grasped Tang Lanfang’s hand. “I think the only thing I can do is hand him over to you to handle.”

Tang Lanfang’s face flushed. “I... How can I handle him?”

“There are ways to handle anyone,” Miss Dragon Third said sweetly. “In fact, maybe you are the only one who can handle him.” She laughed cordially. “You handle him for a year, and if it goes well, then I will start to call you sister-in-law.” She deliberately let her face grow stiff, and coolly said, “But if you don’t want him, then I’ll just take him home with me right now.”

Though Tang Lanfang’s head was lowered, she couldn’t help but secretly glance at Ingot.

Ingot was secretly looking at her, a meaningful look in his eye. He furtively kowtowed to her.

Of course, it wasn’t a true kowtow. Instead, he used his thumb.

But that was enough.

Part 3

Stars filled the sky, thousands upon thousands of glittering stars. Two people sat beneath them, talking, and it seemed they would never stop. Some of the things they said to each other should not be repeated. As for others, there is no harm.

“I know that your family’s Seven Star Dragon Flag can control anything in the world. And I know your father cares about you most, and that’s why he gave you the seven stars.”

“Yep.”

“A star of blessing from heaven, with one tap, it can turn iron into gold. I saw that star.”

“Oh?”

“A small star, glittering. That was the star that as a child, General Li gave to Great Hero Guo. When he got married, he returned it to her, yet again hurting her. Later, your older sister saved her, and so she gave the star to her as a token, telling her that anyone who carried that star could be considered to be her benefactor. No matter the situation, she would help that person if need be.”

“Oh?”

“Your older sister definitely knows that you like to stir up trouble, and was worried that people would bully you. So she gave the star to you.”

“Oh!”

“What about the other stars? Can you let me see them?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“The heavens are filled with stars. Why don’t you look at some of them? Why do you have to look at my stars?”

“Just because.”

“I’m not gonna show you. I’m not even going to let you look at the stars overhead.”

“..... Are you going to show me or not?”

“One day I’ll show them to you. When that time comes, even if you don’t want to look at them, you will have to.”

—THE END OF DRAGON KING WITH SEVEN STARS—



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