

Righteous Blood Cleansing the Silver Spear (碧血洗银枪) - Gu Long UNABRIDGED

This is the translation-only thread for Bixue Xi Yinqiang by Gu Long. For discussion, go to the original thread.

Information

About the Title

I've seen the following titles being used:

-Silver Spear Cleansed in Blood

-Crimson Blood Cleansing Silver Spear

The Chinese title is 碧血洗银枪. 碧血 (bixue) literally means crimson blood. However, according to baidu, 碧血 has the following definition:

1. 指忠臣烈士所流之血 - Refers to blood shed by loyal officials or heroic warriors.
2. 指为国牺牲的精神 - Refers to the spirit of sacrificing for one's country.
3. [blood shed in a just cause]

So to me, the translation "righteous blood" used by BeeDreamer is the most accurate. There were a bunch of alternate titles from movie and TV series which I'll just ignore.

About the Book

This book was one of Gu Long's later work. It was serialized in China Daily from September 1976 to February 1977.

Synopsis

The Jasper Villa wanted to select a suitable son-in-law amongst the four renowned gentlemen of Wulin. When three of gentlemen became victim of an evil scheme, Ma Rulong was accused of being the culprit. Being cornered, Ma Rulong escaped and must find a way to clear his name and find out who was real mastermind.

Characters

- Duan Yu (段玉) -

Four Young Masters (四公子) - Four famous young martial artists in Jianghu.

-Qiu Fengcheng (邱凤城), aka the Silver Spear Gentleman (银枪公子) - He use a silver spear and seem to have come from a rich, prominent Wulin family.

-Du Qinglian (杜青莲), aka Green Lotus (青莲) - He is a pale and fair looking gentleman that loves to drink. He is also from a rich family.

-Ma Rulong (马如龙), aka the White Horse Gentleman (白马公子) - He seems arrogant, doesn't talk much and carried a sword. He is also from a prominent Wulin family.

-Shen Hongye (沈红叶), aka Red Leaf (红叶) - The poorest of the four (lol). He has a folding fan. He came from the Ye (叶) Family, the descendent of Ye Kai from the Flying Dagger Series

- Madame Jasper, Biyu-furen (碧玉夫人) - A very mysterious and powerful woman that is respected and feared in Wulin.

- Jin Zhenlin(金振林) - Carried a golden spear. A rival of silver spear, Qiu Fengcheng.

- Peng Tianba (彭天霸) - A famous sabre user of Jianghu, known for his qui

- Feng Chaofan (冯超凡) - Another famous Wulin senior, seemed to know Qiu Fengcheng's father.

- Jue dashi (绝大师) - A monk set to rid evil people and won't hesitate to kill.

- Dawan (大婉) - A haughty and mysterious girl Ma Rulong met.

- Yu Wu (俞五), aka Broken Bowl - Leader of the Beggar Clan. A very knowledgeable, skilled, and respectable Wulin master.

- Xiaowan (小婉) - A lover of Qiu Fengcheng.

- Monk Chiku (吃苦和尚) - Said to be more powerful than Jue dashi. Knowledgable in poison.

- Jade Taoist (玉道人) - Another equal with Monk Chiku but more powerful than Jue dashi, Feng Chaofan. Said to be handsome and know how to cure poison

- Yu LingLong (玉玲珑) - A well-know prominent expert of disguise.

- Xie Yulun (谢玉仑) - Seemed to know Dawan and has a rivalry with her. She has the same type of arrogance and mysterious background.

- Zhang Rongfa (张荣发) - A plain common owner of a general store.
- Wang Guizhi (王桂枝) - Zhang Rongfa's bedridden wife, said to have a hot temper.
- Zhang Laoshi (张老实) - Zhang Rongfa uncaring and honest clerk.
- Baoyi (陶保义) - A local constable that lives with his wife.
- Tie Zhentian (铁震天) - An infamous and powerful expert in Wulin, said to be more powerful than Jue dashi.
- Tie Quanyi (铁全义) - Tie Zhentian's loyal brother.
- Wang Wanwu (王万武) - A renowned Wulin master with vicious attacks.
- Sun Zao (孙早) and Sun Chi (孙迟) - A pair of young crippled twin brothers.
- No Thirteen (无十三), aka Wu Shisan - An undefeatable fighter the beaten all the top Wulin masters at the time, thirty years ago. Disappeared after suddenly appearing in Jianghu for three months.
- Yu Liu (俞六), i.e. Yu Six - The rather non-famous younger brother of Yu Wu (Yu Five).
- Peng Tiangao (彭天高) - A unknown and illegitimate younger brother of Peng Tianba

Places:

- Jianghu (江湖) - Common term for the martial art, wuxia world.
- Winter Plum Valley, Hanmei Gu (寒梅谷), a cold valley at the beginning of the story.
- Jasper Villa, Biyu Sanzhuang (碧玉山庄), - Place where Madame Jasper lived. No one seem to know where it is. It was compared to the Yihua Gong (移花宫), or Floral Palace, from Legendary Siblings, where it was also a mysterious and female-only place.
- Hall of Divine Horse, Tianma Tang (天马堂), - Seems to be the residence of the Ma family.
- Xingxiu Hai (星宿海), or Constellation Sea - A mysterious and legendary place in the far north.

Weapons:

- Jasper Sabre (碧玉刀) Biyu dao - Family weapon of the Duan family of Jintan.
- Five Tiger Breaking Down the Door Sabre , Wuhu Duanmen Dao (五虎断门刀) - A powerful and famous saber skill of the Peng family. Used by Peng Tianba.
- Dragon Phoenix Gold Ring (龙凤金环) - Formerly used by Shangguan Jinhong, I think. Very powerful and currently used by a mysterious person.
- Mandarin Duck Kuahulan (鸳鸯跨虎篮) - A strange powerful weapon also used by a mysterious user.

Other:

- Heaven Kill, Tiansha (天杀) - A mysterious assassin organization, with unknown leader or motive.
- Three Positive Lineage Ending Palm (三阳绝户手) - A powerful palm skill with terrible outcome to its victim.
- Separate Muscle Wrong Bone Hand (分筋错骨手) - Literally a crippling technique.

High Force Eagle Claw Kung Fu (大力鹰爪功) - Powerful technique originated from the Eagle Claw King 鹰爪王.

- Babu Ganchan (八步赶蝉) Eight Steps Pursuing Cicada - A broadly known qinggong that's hard to master.
- Tianma Xingkong (天马行空) Heavenly Steed Galloping Across the Sky - Another qinggong specialty, used by Ma Rulong

Prologue

It was said in these three hundred years; the luckiest man in Jianghu¹ was Duan Yu², the eldest son of the Duan family in Jintan³.

In Jintan, the Duan family was an influential family. In Jianghu, the Duan family had a celebrated reputation and was a noble Wulin⁴ family.

Although their traditional family's sabre⁵ techniques were rather gentle and soft, contains no vicious or devious stance, and didn't stray from conventional means; these techniques were full of strength, extremely profound, and contain extraordinary power. Their sabre techniques were like Duan Yu himself; though not fearful, it commanded respect.

Their family legacy weapon was the "Jasper Sabre"⁶ (BiYu⁷ Dao). It was also a legendary weapon with a grand history. However, the story we are telling is not the story of the Jasper Sabre.

In Jianghu, there was another treasure called the "Jasper Hairpin" (BiYu Chai). Jasper Sabre will bring to its owner, luck and prosperity. On the other hand, the Jasper Hairpin will lead to misfortunes and disasters.

It was said, whoever owns the Jasper Hairpin will be immediately plagued with disasters. It was said, its owner would always be struck down by sudden death. There was no exception.

In Jianghu, there were many stories about the Jasper Hairpin. Some were close to becoming mythical; filled with supernatural and evil elements. This, I must say, is also not the story about the Jasper Hairpin.

The story we are telling is about the “Jasper Pearl” (Biyu Zhu).

What is the Jasper Pearl? a person? a weapon? a treasure? or a mystical pill?

_[Footnote]_____

1. Jianghu (江湖) lit. rivers and lakes. It refers to the martial art world.
2. Duan Yu (段玉) - Surname Duan means section, given name yu means jade.
3. Jintan (金坛) - a county city in Changzhou prefecture, Jiangsu province.
4. Wulin (武林) lit. martial forest. It's also used to describe the martial art community. In my opinion, wulin is used to describe things related to martial art society; whereas jianghu is typically used as if it was an actual place.
5. A Chinese dao is a single-edge sword, similar to a sabre. Whenever a sabre is mentioned, just remember it's referring to a very specific type of weapon.
6. Biyu dao, aka Jasper Sabre or Jade Sabre is part of Gu Long's seven weapon series.
7. Biyu is literally jasper. It was commonly translated as jade (yu). Although that's technically correct, biyu is more precisely a jasper. Afterall, it's specially a biyu not just a yu (jade).

Chapter 1

Chapter 1: Four Young Gentlemen⁸ [四公子]

Severe winter. It was bitterly cold in the snow valley.

Thousands of li⁹ (miles) were covered in snow and the land was completely white. One person was digging a pit on the snow ground. This pit was three chi¹⁰ (feet) wide, five chi deep, and seven chi long.

He was young, healthy, tall, and handsome with signs of proper upbringing. He was wearing a mink coat that was worth a thousand gold and held a pair of glimmering silver spears. The spear shaft was pure silver with the following five words carved onto it:

“Phoenix City, Silver Spear, Qiu11.”

Such a person originally did not dig pit. Such a pair of spear was not supposed to be used for digging.

This place was a beautiful valley. The sky was clear blue, snow was silvery white, and the plum blossom was bright red.

He came on a horse and had ridden a long way. The horse was a pure-breed Ferghana12 colt. It was a noble and spirited horse. It had vivid saddle and bridle, and even the stirrup was made of pure silver.

Why would such a person, who was riding this type of horse and using this type of weapon, came here to dig a pit?

The pit was finally finished. He laid down in the pit. It seemed like he wanted to examine how big this pit was and whether he could comfortably lay down inside. Did he dig this pit for himself?

Only a dead person would have use for such a pit. He was young and healthy. It looked like he could still live for several decades. Why would he dig such a pit for himself? Could it be that he wanted to die? He seemed to be living well, why would he want to die? And why did he have to pick this place to die?

The snowing stopped yesterday night. The weather was clear and cold. He took off the saddle, gently patted the horse, and said, “You go now. Go find a good master.” The horse neighed softly and rushed away from this snow-covered valley. He sat on the horse saddle and looked upward to the blue sky. Lost in thoughts, his eyes carried a hint of unspeakable sorrow and grief.

At this time, a group of people appeared. Some carried boxes of food, some carried tables and chairs, and some even carried two tan13 (jugs) of wine, walked into the valley. The person in the front, who looked like a restaurant waiter, came and asked, “Excuse me, young master. Is this Winter Plum Valley?”

The pit-digging young man nonchalantly nodded. He did not even look at them.

This person again asked, "Did the eldest young master of the Du family invited you here?" The pit-digging youth did not even pay attention to him.

This person let out a sigh, abashedly said to himself, "I just do not understand why Young Master Du want us to bring the food and wine to this place?"

Another person laughed, "Young noble masters from rich family have strange temperament. Of course, poor wretches like us wouldn't understand. "

These people set up the table and chairs under the plum tree, arranged several dishes of food and cups of wine, and then left. After half a day, a person outside the valley suddenly made out a drawn out noise.

There really were bells ringing. One person rode on a young donkey and another rode on a white horse, and entered the valley. The one riding the donkey had a pale white complexion. He looked sick but still had a warm smile, graceful manners, and dressed luxuriously.

The other person was carrying a long sword on his waist, wore a silver fox fur cap and silver fox coat, and dressed entirely in silvery white. He was riding on a tall and magnificent white horse. He was looking around and had an air of arrogance. He did have reasons to be arrogant. There were not much beautiful man like him in the world.

The pit-digging young man was still sitting here. Lost in his world, it seemed like he did not even notice them.

They also did not recognize him either.

These three young people were not the same. The latter two came to this snowy place looking for the plum blossom, and to admire the flower and drink wine. The pit-digging youth came here waiting for death.

The wine was under the flower. The sickly-looking youth poured a cup of wine, drank it, and said, "Good wine."

The flowers in front of the wine had already blossomed. He drank another cup and said, "Good flower!" The flowers were radiant next to the snow; the red looks redder and the white looks whiter. He raised the cup again and said, "Good snow." After three cups, his pale white face was showing sign of redness. He seemed very leisurely, high spirited, and vigorous.

Though his body was indeed weak and sickly, he can still enjoy and appreciate all the beautiful things in life. He seemed to be interested in everything, therefore also lived an interesting life.

The beautiful young man that rode the white horse, wore the fox coat, carried the long sword had a calm and somber face. He did not seem to be interested in anything.

The sickly-looking noble gentleman smiled and said, "Such beautiful snow, such beautiful flower, such good wine. How come you don't drink a cup?"

Beautiful young man said, "I never drink wine."

Noble gentleman said, "You came here and you don't even drink. Wouldn't you be wasting such a beautiful snow valley, and these thousands of plum blossom?"

Beautiful young man coldly said, "No matter where I am, I don't drink wine."

Noble gentleman sighed and mumbled, "This person is truly a layman, killing the mood. How did I even have a friend like him?"

Pit-digging young man was still lost in thoughts. The noble gentleman suddenly stood up, walked around his pit and said, "Good pit." The young man the dug the pit ignored him. Noble gentleman said, "The pit is well dug." The pit-digging young man ignored him.

Noble gentleman simply walked in front of him. He asked, "Did you dig this pit?"

Pit-digging young man could not ignore him and answered, “Yes.”

Noble gentleman said, “I have been saying you’ve dug this pit well. Do you know what I mean?”

Pit-digging young man said, “You want me to drink with you.”

Noble gentleman laughed and said, “Not only can you dig a pit well but you understand people well too.”

Pit-digging young man said, “Unfortunately, I will not drink.”

Noble gentleman stopped laughing and asked, “You also never drank alcohol before?”

Pit-digging young man replied, “When I am in the mood to drink, I will drink. When I am not, I will not drink.”

Noble gentleman asked, “How come you will not drink right now?”

Pit-digging young man replied, “Because I am not in the mood to drink right now.”

Noble gentleman not only did not get angry but instead laughed, “I know who you are now. I’ve always heard, the Silver Spear gentleman, Qiu Fengcheng¹⁴, temper is like his spear, straight and stiff. You must be Qiu Fengcheng.”

Pit-digging young man ignored him again.

Noble gentleman said, “My surname is Du, name is Du Qinglian¹⁵.” Qiu Fengcheng was still ignoring him, as if he had never heard of this name before.

Actually he had heard of this name before. For those roaming in Jianghu, very few people had never heard of this name.

In Wulin, there were four young gentlemen: Silver Spear, White Horse, Red Leaf, and Green Lotus. Among this generation of youngsters in Jianghu, there was no one with talents that could surpass them. Although they were not acquainted with each other, Qiu Fengcheng should recognize the name Du Qinglian. He also know that beautiful young man that rode the white horse, wear fox coat, carried long sword was White Horse young gentleman, Ma Rulong¹⁶. However, he still pretended he did not know.

Du Qinglian sighed and said, "Look like you are determined not to drink today."

Suddenly, a voice outside the valley yelled, "They don't want to drink. I'll drink."

The wine drinker came. The time after the snow stopped was colder then when it was snowing. Even though they wore fur coats, they still felt cold. This person was only wearing thin silk garments. Although the material was not bad, it was definitely not the type of clothing to wear in this type of weather. So he was trembling. Although it was really cold, he was actually holding a folding fan.

There were wine bottle and wine cup on the table. He rushed over here, and lifted up a wine jug and drank directly from it. After a large gulp, he let out a breath and said, "Great wine." Du Qinglian laughed.

After taking another large gulp, he said, "Not just great wine; great flowers and even the snow is great." After three large gulps, he was no longer shivering and even his face liven up.

Although this person was poor, he was not obnoxious. He could even be considered a very likable person. He had a beautiful and delicate face. When he smiled, there were two dimples. Du Qinglian was starting to think, the person was quite cute and interesting.

This person said, "Such mood and atmosphere at such time, those who do not drink really should..."

Du Qinglian asked, "Should what?"

This person said, "Should be spanked."

Du Qinglian laughed heartily. The pit-digging young man still showed no interest beside that person and that matter on his mind. Even though other people are in front of him, it was as if they were not there. Other matters, he couldn't care less.

Ma Rulong furrowed and seemed to be agitated, but he had not done anything yet. It was not because he was afraid. It was merely because of his disdain of stooping to the level of these people.

However this person went directly to him, lift the wine jug and said, "Come, you have a drink too."

Ma Rulong coldly said, "You are not worthy."

This person said, "What kind of people would be worthy to drink with you?"

Ma Rulong, "What kind of person are you?"

This person did not answer, and simply opened his fan. There were seven words written on it. The characters were well written and elegant, just like him.

"Autumn leaves are redder than February flowers."

Although the person was lowly and poor, his fan was rather refined. The seven words on the fan was, without a doubt, the work of an expert calligrapher.

Du Qinglian raised the cup and heartily said: "Great characters."

This person lifted the wine jug, drank a large gulp, and said, "Your taste is also pretty good."

Du Qinglian asked, "Who wrote these characters?"

This person said, "Other than me, who else could've written these flawless characters?"

Du Qinglian laughed and said, “Now I also know who your are.”

This person said, “Oh?”

Du Qinglian said, “Other than Shen Hongye¹⁷, who else can be as conceited as you?”

Amongst Wulin’s four young gentlemen: the proudest one was “White Horse” Ma Rulong; the headstrong one was “Silver Spear” Qiu Fengcheng; the most spirited one was, of course, Du Qinglian; and the most conceited one was Shen Hongye.

Ma, Qiu, and Du were rich, powerful and distinguished families. White Horse, Silver Spear, and Green Lotus were famous and recognized noble gentlemen. Red Leaf’s origin was a mystery.

It was said, he was the descendent of previously world’s number one hero, Shen Lang¹⁸.

It was said that “Little Li Tanhua”¹⁹ best friend, the world’s fastest sword “A-Fei”, was his ancestor.

A-Fei’s past was already a mystery, so Shen Hongye’s past was also a mystery. He never told anyone about his origin. Everyone considered him to be part of the four young gentleman mainly because he grew up in the Ye family.

The Ye family was Ye Kai’s family. Ye Kai was Little Li Flying Dagger’s only disciple. — Who is Little Li Flying Dagger? Who doesn’t know?

Wulin’s four young gentlemen had now gathered together, but they did not plan to meet up here.

This place was several thousand li away each of their home. Even if Du Qinglian was in a good mood, he would not have traveled several thousand li to this place just for flowers and wine.

Qiu Fengcheng would not travel several thousands li just to die. If a person wants to die, any place would have sufficed. Why would he come here? What was he doing here?

Ma Rulong coldly and silently sat here. His attitude did not change after hearing the name Shen Hongye but his hand was drawing closer to his sword's handle. He gazed at Shen Hongye and suddenly said, "Very good."

Shen Hongye asked, "What is very good?"

Ma Rulong said, "It's very good that you are Shen Hongye."

Shen Hongye asked, "Why?"

Ma Rulong said, "Originally I thought you are not worthy. Not worth me drawing my sword. My sword never touches the insignificant."

Shen Hongye asked: "How about now?"

Ma Rulong said: "Shen Hongye is not insignificant. So if you said anything skittish and rude, between me and you, one would be a corpse with blood spilling everywhere."

Shen Hongye sighed, bitterly smiled, and said, "I just want you to drink with me. Why are you so upset?"

Du Qinglian said, "If he doesn't drink, I'll drink." He took Shen Hongye's jug of wine, tip it to his mouth, and drank several mouthful before breathing and said, "Good wine."

Shen Hongye took back the jug of wine. He also drank a mouthful then sighed and said, "With wine like this, even if it's poisonous, I would give up my life to drink it."

Du Qinglian smiled and said, "Not bad. If we could die here, it would've been our fortune."

Shen Hongye exclaimed, "Why?!"

Du Qinglian said, "Because there is a person here that could dig a really good pit."

Shen Hongye asked, "Is the pit he digs that good?"

Du Qinglian said, "It's superb."

Shen Hongye suddenly stood up, carried the jug of wine, went to and walked around the pit and muttered, "This is indeed a good pit. After a person dies, he would be lucky to be buried in this pit."

Du Qinglian said, "Unfortunately, this pit was not dug for us."

Shen Hongye said, "Only a dead person would have any use for such a pit. Could it be that he wanted to die?"

Du Qinglian said, "It looks like it."

Shen Hongye seemed shocked and asked, "Why does a person like him wants to die?"

Du Qinglian said, "Because, like us, he also received a letter telling him to come here."

Shen Hongye exclaimed, "Is that letter also sent by Biyu-furen²⁰ (Madame Jasper)?!"

Du Qinglian said, "Definitely."

Shen Hongye said, "Madame Jasper told us to come here because she wants to select a son-in-law among the four of us."

Du Qinglian said, "Right."

Shen Hongye said, "Madame Jasper is widely-acknowledged as a world's number top expert. In Biyu Sanzhuang²¹ (Jasper Villa), everyone is a woman of great beauty.²² After receiving this letter, I was so happy I couldn't even sleep."

Du Qinglian said, "I could imagine that."

Shen Hongye said, "If she choose me to be her son-in-law, I would be so happy that I will go mad."

Du Qinglian said, "You better not go mad. Madame Jasper would not want a madman to be her son-in-law."

Shen Hongye asked, "Would she want a dead person to be her son-in-law?"

Du Qinglian said, "Of course not."

Shen Hongye asked, "In that case why would our young master Qiu wants to die?"

Du Qinglian said, "Because he is a love-obsessed fool and he already have a beautiful lady whom he had already pledged his undying love to." He sighed and said, "If Madame Jasper selected him to be his son-in-law, he would not be able to be together with his love."

Shen Hongye said, "So once Madame Jasper selects him, he would choose to die here instead."

Du Qinglian said, "That is all correct."

Shen Hongye thought for a bit and said, "There is another way of saying all of this."

Du Qinglian said, "What way?"

Shen Hongye asked, "Is Madame Jasper absolutely able to see this pit?"

Du Qinglian smiled and said, "It would be difficult to not notice such a big pit."

Shen Hongye said, "If she see this pit, she'll know young master Qiu is committed to death. There's a possibility that she'll spare him and select me as the new guy²³ (master's husband) of the Jasper Villa."

Du Qinglian said, "You really are a smart man. This is the thinking of a smart man; definitely not like regular people, and especially not like a love-obsessed fool."

Shen Hongye laughed and said, "Being a love-obsessed fool doesn't mean he is not smart."

Qiu Fengcheng's expression changed. He suddenly got up, stared at Du Qinglian, and said: "How do you know about this?!" This was a secret. A secret that only two people knew about. However, this question confirmed the validity of Du Qinglian's statements.

Du Qinglian sighed and asked, "You couldn't imagine how I would know about such a thing?"

"Even I couldn't imagine. Unfortunately, that beautiful lady..."

He did not finish the sentence and a strange expression suddenly appeared on his face. A pale-white face suddenly became deathly black. He looked at Shen Hongye with his mouth opened. He wanted to say something but his voice was already gone.

Shen Hongye said, "Are you..." His voice also cracked after two words and a strange expression appeared on his face. The two people faced and looking at each other, their eyes had expressions of extreme fear.

A sound of "bo", Shen Hongye's jug of wine fell out of his hand into the pit, and broke into many pieces. His face suddenly had a sad and mysterious smile. Using his coarse voice, he said, "It looks like my luck is better than yours. I am standing by this pit..." These were his last words and without finishing it, he fell

into the pit. Even though this pit was not prepared for him, he was already in the pit. Why would the living fight with the dead for this pit?

_[Footnote]_____

8. gongzi is more of a noble gentleman. Will use gentleman or young master at times.
9. Li (里) is a Chinese mile. It's about half a kilometer, 500m, or a third of a mile, 1650ft.
10. Chi (尺) is a Chinese foot. It is about a third of a meter, 33.33 cm, or 13.13 inches.
11. Qiu (邱), a surname, means mound.
12. Dayuan (大宛) is an historical Chinese name for a country that existed in the Ferghana Valley in Central Asia. In this context, it's referring to the area and not the long-gone Dayuan civilization so I used the English name instead of sticking to pinyin. The area is famous for their powerful horses.
13. tan, a large clay jug to smaller opening and wider body. It's use for storage, in this case wine.
14. Qiu Fengcheng (邱凤城), surname Qiu, given name means "phoenix city", hence the inscription on his spear.
15. Du Qinglian (杜青莲), surname Du, given name means "green lotus".
16. Ma Rulong (马如龙), surname Ma means horse, given name means "like dragon".
17. Shen Hongye (沈红叶), surname Shen, given name means "red leaf".
18. Shen Long is the main protagonist of Gu Long's Wulin Waishi.
19. Tanhua was a title given to those that finished third in the imperial examination. Little Li is a protagonist of the Flying Dagger series -- check out Sentimental Swordsman, Ruthless Sword. A Fei is also another protagonist in that story.
20. Furen is an honorific referring to an esteemed married woman, hence Madame Jasper.
21. Sanzhuang is a resident on the mountain. It's a mountain side manor house, or villa.
22. Tianxiangguose, lit. means heavenly fragrance and national beauty.
23. Guye (姑爷) is a term to address the son-in-law by the family of the wife.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2: The Killer [杀手]

Du Qinglian also collapsed. At the moment collapsed, bloods were seeping out the edge of his mouth. However, he still struggled to get up. There was still wine in the wine bottle on the table. He struggled and grabbed onto the table and drank all of the remaining wine in the bottle. He laughed and said, "Great wine. Great wine." His laughter sounds extremely miserable and sad.

"Such a great wine. Even if I know there is poison, I still want to drink. Everyone look, did I not drink it all?" He laughed while rushing over and somersaulted into the pit. He would not let Shen Hongye enjoy this all to himself. The sky was already dark and the wind was piercingly cold. However, they would never feel cold anymore.

Qiu Fengcheng and Ma Rulong were startled while looking them tumbled down. It was as if they would tumble too. This change was too sudden, too shocking, and too horrible.

Unknown amount of time had passed; Qiu Fengcheng finally lifted his head and stared at Ma Rulong. His glance was colder than wind. His eyes were like knives, a knife that wanted to cut opened Ma Rulong's chest and dig out his heart. Why did he stare at Ma Rulong in such a manner? Ma Rulong had already calmed down and composed himself. Du Qinglian was his friend. Although his friend died in front of him, he did not seem to be sad. Du Qinglian's mysterious and sudden death did not seem to shock him.

Whether people were dead or alive? How did they die? He didn't seem to care. It was because he hadn't died and he was still Ma Rulong. The "White Horse gongzi", Ma Rulong, who thought he was above all else.

Qiu Fengcheng stared at him and suddenly asked, "You seriously never drink wine?"

Ma Rulong refused to answer. He seldomly answer other people's question. He was usually the one that ask the question, give the order.

Qiu Fengcheng said, "I know you drink wine. I seen you drank wine before, drank quite a bit too."

Ma Rulong neither confirm nor deny this.

Qiu Fengcheng said, "Not only do you drink wine, you drink quite often, and gotten drunk often. Once at Zhenzhu Fang (Pearl Place) in Hangzhou²⁴, you drank for three straight days and chased away all the customers in Pearl Place because these people were too vulgar and not worthy to drink with you." He

continued, "It was said that you drank all of Pearl Place's nu'er hong²⁵, twenty catties worth of this aged wine. You drank four jugs worth, a record that hasn't been broken since."

Ma Rulong coldly said, "The last jug was not nu'er hong. Pearl Place only had three real jugs of nu'er hong."

Qiu Fengcheng said, "After drinking sixty catties worth of alcohol. You could still determine the authenticity of the last jug. You really have good alcohol tolerance."

Ma Rulong said, "Indeed good tolerance."

Qiu Fengcheng said, "However, today you haven't touch a drop of wine." He coldly stared, "How come you did not drink today? Is it because you know it's poisonous?" Ma Rulong did not reply. Qiu Fengcheng continued: "Since you and Du Qinglian came here as friends, you definitely should have known where he would order food and wine. It should be easy to bribe someone to put poison in the wine."

Although he did not confirm this, he did not deny this.

Qiu Fengcheng said:, "I already decided to die instead of marrying into Jasper Villa. Now even Du Qinglian and Shen Hongye are dead. Madame Jasper no longer need to chose, you are now her proud son-in-law." He coldly smiled, "I should truly congratulate you."

Ma Rulong remained silent. After a while, coldly said, "I now understand what you mean."

Qiu Fengcheng said, "You should understand." He was already gripping onto his silver spear.

Ma Rulong did not speak anymore and slowly walked over facing him. At this time, suddenly someone came out and said, "Qiu Fengcheng is mine. This is not your turn."

No one know when this person came, possibly when Du Qinglian and Shen Hongye's suddenly died. At that time, no one would have notice anything else. This person was slim, tall, had high cheekbone, and extra large hands. His hands were holding onto a golden spear, which was four chi (feet) nine cun²⁶ (inch) long. The gold was radiant. Even if it was not really made of pure gold, it looked as if it was.

The clothing this person was wearing was also gold. They were high quality and tailored fit. These were his signature appearance. Thus, people of Jianghu would recognize him in an instance, “Golden Spear” Jin Zhenlin²⁷.

In Jianghu, the most famous spear was supposed to be a gold spear, Jin Zhenlin’s gold spear. However, things were different now all because Silver Spear Gentleman had defeated this gold spear three years ago. Since then there had been unresolvable rivalry between the gold and silver spear.

Jin Zhenlin said, “We still have some old grudges. Old grudges come first.”

He point his golden spear toward Qiu Fengcheng, “We will take care of our scores today.”

Qiu Fengcheng coldly smiled and said, “What a coincidence for you to pick such a time.” Jin Zhenlin also coldly smiled. He suddenly pivoted his body, planted his feet, and viciously thrust with his golden spear. With the golden spear in motion, the silver spear also responded. Ma Rulong could only step back.

Old scores come first; this was a rule of Wulin.

The golden spear was vicious, fast, powerful, and longer than the silver spear; one inch longer, one inch stronger. However, the silver spear was more agile, quicker, and had more changes in stances compared to the golden spear. It looked like the golden spear would be defeated again. Qiu Fengcheng clearly wanted to end this battle; he was using all his might. As he was using all his strength against Jin Zhenlin, a person suddenly leap out from behind the snow-covered plum blossom tree.

A person adorned in black attire, face covered with black scarf, and entirely covered in black. This person was even slimmer and taller than Jin Zhenlin; like a stick of black arrow. His body movement was really quick, also like an arrow.

He had a sabre on his hand, a thin and sharp Yanling sabre²⁸. Sabre flashed and hacked on Qiu Fengcheng left neck, which could definitely takes a person’s life.

Although Qiu Fengcheng critically escaped this attack, he was already bearing his chest. Jin Zhenlin already struck, like a bolt of lightning, toward and into his heart.

This spear attack was also very lethal! While attacking, Jin Zhenlin did not stop. He flipped over in mid-air, plundered outward four zhang²⁹.

Blood was gushing out. By the time Qiu Fengcheng collapsed, Jin Zhenlin is already ten zhang away. The black-clothed man retreated even faster.

Ma Rulong did not chase, he went back to Qiu Fengcheng's side. He never cared about anyone's death. However he didn't chase after the murderer, only came to check whether Qiu Fengcheng was already dead. Therefore he missed a opportunity to see something no one could imagine! Jin Zhenlin almost caught up with the black-clothed person. These two were fleeing side-by-side together. The black-clothed person was slowly falling behind. Suddenly with a flash of sabre, the black-clothed person was struck out like lightning with his Yanling sabre. The sabre struck on the back of Jin Zhenlin left neck. The strike was even more vicious and faster than his previous move.

Jin Zhenlin cried out in pain, bloods were shooting out like arrow. He wanted to turn around to pounce onto this black-clothed person. As soon as he turn around, he collapsed.

The black-clothed person succeeded in one blow and did not stopped. He continued on fleeing away from the valley. His killing move was clean, precise, and extremely effective. Obviously he was very experience. After he killed, he left, and did not even look back. Unfortunately he was still one step behind.

He suddenly realized someone in front of him blocking his way. He silenced someone; other also wanted to silence him. He immediately realized this.

Without waiting for the opponent to attack, he struck first. His sabre was more vicious than poisonous snake. He rarely failed to kill someone. Unfortunately, this time, he picked on the wrong opponent.

Standing side by side outside the valley, there were three people blocking his way. One was big, tall and strong. One was fat and stubby. One was a monk. The big and tall one was a silver hair, red face old man. He was good looking and had a majestic air to him.

If a monk roaming in Jianghu, then he should have quite a background. Everything knew that in Jianghu -- begger, woman, and monk -- were the three most difficult types of people.

An experienced killer, of course, would've chosen the weakest one first. He selected the clumsy and slow-looking fat man.

He never would have thought this fat man was currently the most famous sabre user, the current master of "Wuhu Duanmen Dao" (Five Tigers Breaking Down the Door Sabre), Peng Tianba³⁰. Currently Jianghu's fastest, fiercest, and most famous sabre was Peng Tianba's family sabre, Five Tigers Breaking Down the Door Sabre.

Peng Tianba was, of course, carrying the sabre. The sabre was at his waist, in the sheath. All of a sudden, it was at the black-clothed man's throat. The black-clothed man struck out his saber and just saw the flashing movement of a sabre's light. By the time he saw the light from the sabre, the sabre blade had already slashed his throat.

The big, tall and strong old man called out, "Let him live...." However after he said this, the black-clothed man's head had almost completely left his neck.

Peng Tianba let out a sigh and said, "You said it too late!"

The old man also let out a sigh and said: "Actually I should have known. No one have ever live through your sabre."

That monk calmly said, "Peng daxia³¹ has killed many. The one he killed deserved to be killed. This person had already killed five. His death was definitely just."

The old man said, "I just want to ask him, those five waiters and workers from "Jufenglou"³² were not people of Jianghu. They should not have any grudges with him. Why must he kill them all?"

Peng Tianba said, "Although he is dead, we will eventually find answer to that question."

Old man said, "Who should ask? Other than him, who else would know?"

Suddenly there was a loud noise, "I know!"

Qiu Fengcheng, surprisingly, did not die. He struggled, pushed Ma Rulong aside, and breathlessly said, "Fortunately, I still know what's going on."

After the two sister masters of Yihuagong³³ passed, Wulin most mysterious and mystical woman was Madame Jasper. The world most mysterious place was also the Jasper Villa. No one knew the state of affair in Jasper Villa. No one even knew where it was. This was because Jasper Villa was like Yihua Gong, a female's world. Male were forbidden.

It was said not only were the women there beautiful, but they also possessed extremely mysterious wugong (martial art). No matter how capable these women were, there were still times where there was still a need for men. Especially when they wanted to continue their legacy.

Now that Madame Jasper's daughter was all grown up, Madame Jasper did not wish her sole daughter to live her life alone. Like any mother, she wanted a perfect son-in-law. Currently, the most suitable bachelors happened to be the four young gentlemen.

Unfortunately, she only had one daughter so she had to select one among the four. As such, she invited the four young gentlemen to the Winter Plum Valley. Madame Jasper's request, no one could ever refuse and no one dare to refuse.

So the four young gentlemen, Qiu Fengcheng, Ma Rulong, Du Qinglian, and Shen Hongye; all came. Madame Jasper never told them to keep this a secret but they also never told anyone about this. This was because only one will be chosen among the four. If he were not the chosen one, he would definitely lose face. The four young masters reputation were renowned, no one wanted to be embarrassed.

It was hard to believe there were poison in the wine. Du Qinglian and Shen Hongye were poisoned to death. Also it was even harder to believe that Qiu Fengcheng's archrival, Golden Spear Jin Zhenlin, came here. Also an experienced assassin came. Other than them, no one should know Qiu Fengcheng would be here today. How did Jin Zhenlin found out?

— Of course, someone brought him here. In addition, the person brought a professional assassin along with him. Because this people knew very well that Jin Zhenlin might not be able to defeat Qiu

Fengcheng. This person also would've been the one that put poison into the wine. This person wanted Jin Zhenlin and the assassin to be ambushed en route, and killed all five workers from Jufeng Lou that brought the food and wine here.

This person also wanted the assassin to silence Jin Zhenlin afterward. He was not afraid the assassin would reveal his secrets. Because a person that kills for a living not only has to be cruel, vicious, fast; but also able to keep a secret. So even if the assassin lived, he would not reveal his customer's secret.

Qiu Fengcheng's final conclusion was, "I should've die upon Jin Zhenlin's spear. You three are not supposed be here. This person's plan originally would've succeeded and no one would've ever known about this conspiracy and secret. Madame Jasper would not need to waste time on the selection. This person would've become Jasper Villa's son-in-law."

Though Qiu Fengcheng did not say this person's name, that was not necessary. Who this person was, everyone would've guessed. Everyone stared coldly at Ma Rulong.

Ma Rulong had no reactions. How other looked at him? What other people thought about him? He did not care.

Peng Tianba constantly walked around. Although he was fat, he was extremely active. At this time he stopped, stopped beside Jin Zhenlin's corpse. He picked up his spear, weighed it slightly and mumbled, "This spear is not heavy."

Qiu Fengcheng said, "He practiced his family's Lihua³⁴ Spear, it is originally an light and quick skill. "

Peng Tianba said, "It was said that someone tried and tossed seven copper coins toward his face. He thrust out his spear and pierced through all seven coins."

Qiu Fengcheng said, "His hands are definitely accurate."

Peng Tianba let out a sigh and said, "He definitely would never imagine, he would fail today."

Qiu Fengcheng said, "No, he did not fail."

Peng Tianba said, "If he did not fail, why are you still alive?"

Qiu Fengcheng did not answer him directly. He struggled and opened his lapel. Beside a mink coat on the outside, inside there were three more pieces of tight-fitting garments. The one closest to his body has a hidden pocket right at his heart. Inside this pocket, there was a small pouch.

A flower was stitched on the pouch. It was very detailed. It must have been stitched by the extremely careful woman's hands. Now the pouch had been pierced through between two stems of flowers. A piece of jade inside the pouch was completely crushed.

Jin Zhenlin's spear did not miss, his spear definitely could've pierced through Qiu Fengcheng's mink coat and straight to his heart. But Jin Zhenlin never would've imagined there would be a piece of jade close to his heart blocking the way.

Qiu Fengcheng said, "Xiaowan gave this to me. She wanted me to keep it close to my heart. She doesn't want me to forget her."

His eyes became gentle, "I did not forget about her so I am still alive." No doubt, Xiaowan was his lover, the lover that he would rather die than abandon.

Peng Tianba let out a sigh; eye with a hint of smile and said, "So there is an advantage of being lovestruck."

The tall, big, and strong old man suddenly said, "Young master Qiu; although I do not recognize you, I recognize this silver spear."

Qiu Fengcheng said, "This is Wanbei's³⁵ (junior) family treasure. Wanbei do not dare to show off with this."

Old man said, "I know." His phrases were also gentle, "Many years ago when your father used this to battle 'Changbai Qunxiong'³⁶, I was there."

Changbai Qunxiong brothers were all fearless and brutal great bandits. Situated in Liaodong for many years, people of Jianghu never dared to intrude their territory.

Qiu Fengcheng's father together with "Fengtian³⁷ daxia", Feng Chaofan³⁸, charged into Mt. Changbai. With a pair of silver spear and Feng Chaofan's pair of pure steel Hunyuanpai³⁹; they wiped out Changbai Qunxiong stronghold. This event not only caused a huge sensation back then, people still spoke about it today.

Qiu Fengcheng said: "Could it be that qianbei⁴⁰ (senior) is Feng daxia?"

Old man said, "That's correct. I am Feng Chaofan."

He smiled and said, "You saw his sabre at first. You should also know who he is."

Beside the Five Tiger Breaking Down the Door Sabre, there wasn't a more "absolute" sabre technique. Absolute sabre, absolute love, absolute man, absolute life! One sabre cut-off lives, never leaves a survivor.⁴¹

Qiu Fengcheng let out a sigh and said: "This person must have committed atrocious crime to meet the fate of the Five Tiger Breaking Down the Door Sabre."

Peng Tianba laughed and said, "If he was up against the monk at first, he would've die even faster." Is this monk's skill more extreme than Five Tiger Breaking Down the Door Sabre?

Qiu Fengcheng changed and said: "This senior must be Shaolin's Jue dashi⁴²."

Peng Tianba said: "That's right, he is Monk Jue."

Shaolin's extreme monk are even more extreme, emotions are even more cut-off, innately hates the wicked. If anyone with any wrongdoing falls into their hand, they can give up the idea of living in peace.

Qiu Fengcheng let out a long sigh and said, "I couldn't believe heaven would sent three seniors to this place."

Peng Tianba said, "Indeed we were not supposed to come, and wouldn't have come here."

Feng Chaofan said, "We originally want to go to Jufeng Luo to drink to wine." He was a frequent customer at Jufeng Luo.

In a restaurant, a frequent customer will have a designated waiter to serve him. It is because this waiter will know this customer's behavior; his favorite food and drink without the customer ordering. However on this day, the young waiter, Xiaogu, that normally served them was sent out to deliver a table of food and wine to Winter Plum Valley.

— In such bitter cold, there was still a person at Winter Plum Valley appreciating flower and wine. This must be a person with refined taste.

Peng Tianba said, "After drinking three cups, us three old fools became spirited and decided to come over to Winter Plum Valley to meet this gentleman."

Feng Chaofan sighed and said, "Couldn't imagine that halfway here, we saw Xiaogu's group corpses."

Peng Tianba said, "Everyone was killed in one sabre blow. They're killed cleanly, orderly."

Feng Chaofan said, "He also uses sabre so of course he couldn't help coming here to see who would have such a fast sabre."

Peng Tianba said, "So the three of us, who were not supposed to be here, came."

This must be fate. Qiu Fengcheng looked above to the sky and said:, "Lord is all knowing. Nothing escapes god's eye. Those who kill will be punished."

He suddenly stood up and faced Ma Rulong articulated, “These three phrases, you should put in your heart and never forget them.” At this moment the sky was slowly getting dark, the winter night always comes earlier.

_[Footnote]_____

24. Hangzhou, capital of Zhejiang, close to Shanghai.

25. nu'erhong, lit. daughter red. It's a huangjiu (yellow wine) that originate from Shaoxing, Zhejiang. It is said that it came from a tradition of burying wine when a daughter is born and only dug up for the daughter's wedding, hence the name.

26. Chi, Chinese feet is around 13.12 in. (33.3 cm). Cun, Chinese inch is 1.312 in (3.33 cm). Note: Chinese measurements are in units of 10.

27. Jin Zhenlin (金振林), surname Jin means gold, given name means “shaking forest”.

28. Yanlingdao is a type of Chinese sabre. Literally means goose-feather sabre.

29. Zhang, about ten chi, so about 3.33 meters or 3.645 yards.

30. Peng Tianba (彭天霸), Surname Peng, given name means “sky overlord”.

31. I could probably write a paper on the term “xia” but in short it's a person that follows a code of chivalry. Daxia, thus means a great chivalrous hero.

32. Jufenglou (聚丰楼), lit. means gathering and plentiful restaurant.

33. Yihuagong (移花宫), Yihua Palace, lit. Flower-Shifting Palace, from the Legendary Siblings/Twins.

34. Lihua, pear blossom.

35. wanbei (晚辈), refers to a person of a younger generation.

36. Changbai Qunxiong, lit. bear group of Changbai mountain.

37. Fengtian (奉天), old name for Shenyang.

38. Feng Chaofan (冯超凡), surname Feng, give name means “beyond ordinary”.

39. Hunyuanpai (混元牌), hunyuan lit. means the essence of the universe, pai is a plate, tile, or tablet.

40. qianbei (前辈), refers to a person of an older generation.

41. Jue (绝), has several meanings: 1. sever/cut-off, 2. extreme, 3. absolute, 4. more etc. There are no single English word the means all these thing. Just be aware all the extreme/absolute/sever/more are the same word in Chinese.

42. dashi, lit. great master. Dashi is also a title of a Buddhist monk.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3: Heaven Kill (Tiansha) [天杀]

Ma Rulong still had no reaction. If it was anyone else at this point, even if they did not flee they would've strongly defended themselves. However he did not. He just quietly stood there and did not even seem to care what other people were saying.

— He did not defend himself, is it because this is nothing for him to defend?

— He did not flee, is it because he knows he could not escape these three people in front of him?

Jue dashi also quietly stood there with an apathetic face with no emotion. Now he finally said, "I think I heard from someone, the essence of sabre techniques in the world all exist within the Five Tigers Breaking Down the Door Sabre. As such every sabre techniques in the world, there isn't any one he doesn't know."

Peng Tianba said, "Not think, you DID hear that from someone."

Jue dashi said, "Who did I hear this from?"

Peng Tianba said, "You, of course, heard it from me."

Jue dashi said, "I'd always believe in the things you say."

Peng Tianba said, "Although I sometimes boast, I only boast in front of woman not in front of a monk." He smilingly said, "Boasting in front of a monk is like playing a lute in front of an ox. There is no purpose to it."

Jue dashi did not get angry or argue back. His face still has the cold and indifferent expression. He said, "The black-clothed person at first wanted to kill you in one blow. The sabre stance he was using must also be an essence of his sabre skill."

Peng Tianba said, "In such a situation, of course he would have used his most capable skill in his repertoire."

Jue dashi said, "You seemed to have said that the essence of saber skills of every school and every sect in the world; there are none you do not know."

Peng Tianba said, "I said it before."

Jue dashi said, "His sabre skill are from which school and which sect?"

Peng Tianba said, "Don't know." He gave a really straightforward reply. Everyone in Jianghu knew the master of "Five Tigers Breaking Down the Door Sabre" is a straightforward person.

Jue dashi still asked, "You truly do not know?"

Peng Tianba said, "If I don't know, then I don't know. What's so true or fake about it?"

Jue dashi said, "You may not know, but I know."

Peng Tianba was a bit taken back. He blurted out and asked, "You truly know?"

Jue dashi said, "If I know, then I know. What's so true or fake about it?"

Peng Tianba laughed, "The sabre skill he used; which school and which sect is it from?"

Jue dashi said, "That is Tiansha (Heaven Kill)!"

Heaven Kill!

Peng Tianba said, "I don't understand. What is Heaven Kill?"

Jue dashi said, "Go undo his clothing and take a look."

Black-clothed man's chest has nineteen bright red characters. It was hard to tell whether it was tattooed with cinnabar or blood. "Heaven gave men countless things. Men did not give anything to heaven. Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill!"

Peng Tianba asked, "This is Heaven Kill?"

Jue dashi said, "Yes."

Peng Tian said, "It's a pity. I still don't understand."

Jue dashi said: "This is an assassin organization. People of this organization kill for a living, kill for pleasure. As long as you can afford it, whoever you wants to kill, they will kill that person."

Peng Tianba said, "How do you know about this?"

Jue dashi said, "I have been pursuing them for five years."

Peng Tianba said, "Pursue what?"

Jue dashi said: "Pursue their headquarter. Pursue their leader. Pursue their lives!" He blandly said, "Killers deserve to die. They have kill countless people. If they don't die, where is the heaven justice in that."

Peng Tianba said, “Have you found them yet?”

Jue dashi said, “No.”

Peng Tianba said, “One day you will definitely catch them. If not, you will not let it go even after you die.”

Jue dashi said, “Yes.”

Sky was dark, cold winds were like knives. Peng Tianba looked down at the body; he put his clothes back on as if he was afraid the body would get cold. The body will never felt cold.

If the black-clothed person was still alive and freezing to death, Peng Tianba wouldn’t had even care. People, no matter whom, are especially kind to the dead. This is because everyone would eventually die. When he dies, he wants other to show him same kindness. When Peng Tianba pulled clothes back on the dead body, something fell out of the body.

What fell out was a piece of jade. Jade is a precious gemstone. Jade is an ancient gem. Not only does it ward evil, it also brings fortune, peace, and wishes.

In old legends, it was said jade could also “swap death”. It would die for the owner and saved the owner’s life. The jade that Xiaowan gave to Qiu Fengcheng saved his life.

This jade, however, wanted Ma Rulong’s life. This was because the jade had a string attached to it. Attached to the string was a gold medal piece. On the front of the gold medal was a horse, on the back were four characters:

“Tian Ma Xing Kong”⁴³

This was a Tianma Tang⁴⁴ (Hall of Divine Horse) badge. Ma Rulong was the eldest son of the master of Hall of Divine Horse.

Why would was a Hall of Divine Horse badge with the assassin? There could be one explanation: Ma Rulong used this piece of had and this badge to hire the assassin to help him kill. Kill Du Qinglian, Qiu Fengcheng, Jin Zhenlin, and the workers and waiters from Jufeng Lou.

However he could not believe Qiu Fengcheng was not dead yet. Furthermore, could not have imagined Peng Tianba, Feng Chaofan and Jue dashi would come. This must all be heaven's will. Heaven kill is not heaven's will. Heaven's will guard against killing!

Until now, no one had mentioned the name of "this person". Because this matter involved a lot of people: Du Qinglian, Shen Hongye, Jin Zhenlin. Any one of these people's death would had shocked Wulin. Also, this could lead to a lot of vendetta within Wuli's prominent families.

Once these revenge starts, it would not end in a short period. It was also hard to imagine how many would die. No one should jump to conclusion. However there were undeniable motives and evidences here.

Feng Chaofan had serious look on his face and said, "Now we should all hear what Ma Rulong has to say."

Ma Rulong did not say a thing; he slowing took off his silver fox fur coat and calmly said, "This came from my third uncle's night hunt in the great snowy mountain when he was young. I can not let the property of the deceased be ruined under me."

He handed the fox fur coat to Peng Tianba, "In former years, I know gexia⁴⁵ was a good friend of my third uncle. I hope you can bring his item back to Hall of Divine Horse and give it to my third aunt."

Peng Tianba let out a sigh and said, "The hero, Third Brother Ma, died young, I... I definitely will bring this back."

Ma Rulong slowly took off his dazzling long sword and gave it to Jue dashi.

He said: "The Wudang⁴⁶ master of the Xuanzhen⁴⁷ Taoist monastery gave this sword to my father. Shaolin and Wudang are closely related, I wish you can give this back to Xuanzhen Taoist monastery. This way it could not end up in the hands of the wretched."

Jue dashi said, "Absolutely."

Ma Rulong took out a pile of silver-based banknotes and gold leaves and hand it to Feng Chaofan.

Feng Chaofan said, "Who do you want me to give this to?"

Ma Rulong said, "Money originally do not have an owner. Who you want to give this to doesn't matter. "

Feng Chaofan was pondering, took it, and said, "I will use this the save a few people and do some good deed."

Now everyone could see that Ma Rulong was settling things. Very few people can refused a person's last wishes before death. They couldn't help feeling heavy and serious holding the items Ma Rulong gave them.

Ma Rulong took a long sigh and said, "Now there is only this horse."

His white horse was still under the plum tree. These strictly trained well-bred colt was like a Jianghu expert. Not confused in perils and always clam. Ma Rulong went over there, untied the ropes, lightly patted the horse, and said, "Go!" The white horse neighed and walked out.

Ma Rulong turn around, faced Feng Chaofan, and said, "Now, I only have one thing to say."

Feng Chaofan said, "Go ahead."

Ma Rulong said, "You are all pigs."48

With this said, his body shoot out like arrow and fled. His white horse started out slowly but rapidly increase his speed. The horse was already ten zhang (about 33.3 meter or 36.5 yards) away. With all his might, Ma Rulong used his "Tianmaxingkong" superb qinggong (lightness martial art). This type of lightness skill was energy consuming. However by the time he was running out of energy, he already

caught up to the horse. This one-of-a-kind fast horse's body had already warmed up and reached its full stride.

Once Ma Rulong got on the horse, the horse neighed. Traveling like dragon, the rider was pure white, horse was pure white, and the earth was silvery white.

Feng Chaofan and Peng Tianba started to move and chase while still holding the money and fox fur coat Ma Rulong handed him. By the time they realized how stupid and foolish they were, the man and horse disappeared into the silvery white land. Feng Chaofan stomped on his feet and threw the money on the ground, "I really am a pig."

Sky was even darker and the wind was even colder. The cold wind was piercing toward here, but Ma Rulong chest had a fire. Burning with anger! This was because he knew he was not the murderer. He had never put poison in the wine. Unfortunately, other than him no one would believe he was innocent. He understood this very well.

He could only run away! Death, he did not care. A death battle with those who were certain he was the culprit would have been very satisfying. However, if he died in their hands he would have died with the accusations, unable to clear his name. If he wanted to die, he rather dies with innocence, with honor. He vowed he would wait until he found the real culprit and clear his name. Then have a duel to the death with them.

Who was the real culprit? Who poisoned the wine? Who hired the assassin? He did not have a clue.

No matter who he was, he was definitely a cunning and vicious person. This plan was careful and thorough without any flaws. Can he really solved this conspiracy and find the culprit? He had no assurance. He did not even know where to start. Until the real culprit was found, in everyone's view he was the murderer.

If Feng Chaofan, Peng Tianba, and Shaolin's Jue dashi said someone was a murderer, no one in Jianghu would have doubted them. No matter where he went, he would've been hunted down and killed. He could not bring the trouble back. If everyone considered you to be a criminal, there was no place to hide and nowhere to run.

If it were anyone else in his situation, they would've died of anger and worry. However, he did not care. He believed in this vast world, there would a place he could go. He also believed that heaven is just, no

evil can escape. There would be a day where he could find the culprit. He had confidence. He was full of confidence. His hand was stronger than other, mind more nimble than other, and ear and eye were more sensitive than other.

At this time, he already heard something other couldn't hear. It was a cry. It sounded like a weak groan. Then he saw some hair. The sky was completely dark. However it was hard not to notice the jet black among the silvery white snow.

If someone else were here, they, too, would've noticed these hair and would've definitely notice this person here. This person's body was completely buried in the snow, revealing only half a pale white face. This half of a face flashed before his eye, the fast horse already galloped past it. He did not stop. He was running for his life.

The merciless Jue dashi would not let him go. It was possible he would soon catch up to him. If they caught up to him this time, they would definitely not let him have a chance to escape again. He definitely could not stopped for stranger that was close to freezing to death.

— However this person was definitely not dead, this person was still groaning. The horse was like flying and had already galloped far away. He suddenly turned the horse around and rode back.

If a person simply let another die, how could he be proud of himself? Ma Rulong was a proud person, full of pride.

This pitch-black hair already had ice all over it. The pale white face had no hint of blood. It was a miracle this person was still alive. — How long does it take for a person that is buried under snow to die?

It was said women could withstand bitter cold, hunger, and pain better than men. This person was a woman and quite young but not beautiful. In fact, this woman was quite ugly, could even be considered hideous. She had a broken and crooked nose, fat pig lip, rat-like eyes all on this round face with no traces of blood. She looks like a botched work of a porcelain worker that was broken even before going into the furnace.

Although she was not dead, staying alive was still difficult. If there were a cup of warm wine, hot soup, fur coat, or a good doctor; her chance of surviving would be higher. Unfortunately, there was nothing here.

Ma Rulong's clothing was not sufficient to ward against the cold. Whether he could live was also questionable. He tried his best. Right now, he should have abandoned this ugly female stranger and run away from here. However, he took off his only warm cloth and wrapped it around her. He wrapped himself around her and using his body temperature to keep her warm.

— Man greatest grief is “stupidity” and woman greatest grief is “ugliness”. An ugly woman is usually a pitiful woman. Not only did he not abandon her because she was ugly, he felt sympathetic. As long as she was still alive, he would definitely not abandon her like a wild dog in the cold. However, he did not know where to take her. He, himself, have lost everything and had nowhere to go.

The sky was already very dark. Cold winter night not only come early but also last longer.

_[Footnote]_____

43. Tianmaxingkong, lit. means divine horse walking in air. It is also used to describe something out of this world. For here, it's just wordplay on his family name, “Ma”.

44. Tianma Tang, lit. divine horse hall.

45. gexia (阁下), a very honorary way to refer to someone, means “you”.

46. Wudang (武当), a very famous Taoist martial art school. School also had Shaolin lineage.

47. Xuanzhen (玄真), part of Taoist philosophy.

48. Chinese consider pigs to be very stupid animals.

Chapter 4

Ch.4: Long Night [长夜]

Night. The long winter night had just begun. Ma Rulong was gathering pieces of dry wood and started a fire in this abandoned temple to ward off the cold.

Firelight might lure the enemies here. Anyone knew, when running for your life, you could not start fire; even if it meant dying from the cold. However, this woman desperately needed the fire. Although he did

not mind dying of cold, he would not let the female stranger die of cold just so he could hide from his enemies. He rather died than to do something so shameful.

The fire was burning brightly. He moved the woman to the warmest and driest spot. He also needed rest. Right when he finally closed his eyes, he heard a shrieked, "Who are you?"

This woman actually woke up. Not only was she hideous, her voice was dreadfully piercing. Ma Rulong did not answered her. Right now, he did not know who exactly he was either, a refugee without a future or a past. He slowly stood up and wanted to go over and check out how she was doing, whether she can move, and whether she can live. Who would've thought she would suddenly picked up a stick next to the fire and shouted, "If you dare come near me, I'll kill you." He risked his life to save her. Now this grotesque woman acted as if he was going to rape her. Ma Rulong did not say a single word and sat down.

The woman was still gripping onto her stick, used her rat-like eyes and ruthlessly stared at him.

Ma Rulong shut his eyes again. He doesn't want to waste time looking at her. The woman, using her high-pitched voice, asked, "How come I am here?" Ma Rulong was too lazy to answer.

This woman finally thought about her situation and again asked, "I believe I was buried in snow at first. Did you save me?"

Ma Rulong said, "Yes."

Surprisingly this woman called out, "Since you saved me, why didn't you bring me back to the city to go see a doctor? Why did you bring me to an abandoned temple?"

Her voice was extra sharp, "I had seen your kind of people all the time. I know you are up to no good."

Ma Rulong almost wanted to say, "Don't worry. I am not going to rape you. With a face like yours, I have no interest." However, he did not say those words out. This woman looked even uglier under the firelight, he did not want to hurt her feeling. So he slowly sighed and said, "I did not bring you to the doctor because I am penniless."

The woman coldly laughed and said, "How did a man like you ended up in such a state? Don't even have a penny, it's probably because you are lazy and jobless." Ma Rulong again couldn't be bother by her. This woman did not let him go and continued scolding him about how he was good for nothing and lacked maturity.

Ma Rulong suddenly stood up and coldly said, "The firewoods here are enough for you to last the entire night. By tomorrow, someone should pass by here."

He couldn't stand it so it was better to leave.

The woman again retorted, "What are you doing? You want to leave? You want to abandon a poor, helpless, and weak woman here? And you consider yourself a man?" From the way things look she sure did not look like "weak woman"; however, she was still a woman.

The woman coldly smiled and said, "Are you afraid my enemies will come here? So you are trying to leave as soon as possible and avoid any conflict."

Ma Rulong couldn't bear it and asked, "You have enemies?"

This woman said, "I don't have enemies? So you think I buried myself in the snow? You think I'm crazy?"

Ma Rulong slowly sat down again. He did not ask her who her enemies were or why they were after her. He only knew that he could not leave. Someone was trying to kill and bury a weak woman. A real man facing this would not stand by and ignore this.

This woman again asked, "You are not leaving now?"

Ma Rulong said, "I am not leaving."

The woman unexpectedly said, "Why aren't you leaving? Do you have some kind of sinister plan?" Ma Rulong actually laughed. He couldn't hold it and had to laugh. A woman like her was rare; he couldn't

believe he actually met one today. Other than laughing, what else can he do? Should he cry? Should he kill himself?

The woman sharply yelled, "What are you secretly laughing about? What exactly are you plotting? Talk!"

Ma Rulong did not say anything because outside the abandoned temple someone said: "He will not talk. Whatever's on Ma-gongzi's mind, he'll never say it out." In the wavering firelight, a man slowly walked in. Surprisingly, it was Peng Tianba.

Peng Tianba was still holding the fox fur coat in his left hand. His right hand was holding a sabre; a sabre that was already out of its scabbard, the Five Tiger Door Breaking Sabre. Unfortunately, this woman did not recognize this person or this sabre. She looked up with her rat-like eyes and shouted, "Who are you?"

Peng Tianba said, "I am a pig."

The woman said, "Although you seem a bit fat, you are still skinnier than a pig."

Peng Tianba let out a sigh and said, "It's too bad I am dumber than a pig. That's why I have his silver fur fox coat."

The woman seemed very surprised and asked, "This is his?"

Peng Tianba said, "Yes."

The woman asked, "Why would he give you such a valuable item?"

Peng Tianba said, "Because he need to use this fur coat to hold onto my hand."

This woman asked, "Did you use your hand to hold onto fur coat, or did the fur coat hold onto your hand?"

Peng Tianba said, "It's all the same."

This woman said, "Why is it the same?"

Peng Tianba said: "Whether the fur coat was holding up my hand, or my hand was holding onto the fur coat, in the end the coat was on my hand. Therefore I could not draw my sabre or use my throwing weapon." His Feihu Zhuihun Biao (Flying Tiger Soul Chasing Dart) was just as menacing as his Five Tiger Breaking Down the Door Sabre.

This woman didn't understand and asked, "Why didn't he let you draw your sabre or use your dart?"

Peng Tianba said, "Because he wanted to run away."

The woman asked, "Why did he want to run away? Is it because you are bullying him? Why are you bullying people?"

Peng Tianba could only bitterly smile. He finally realized talking to this woman was not exactly a wise decision. He returned to his serious face and coldly said, "Ma-gongzi, this time you don't need to flee. The three of us split up and went to different paths. Only I am here, why do you try to silence me too?"

Ma Rulong did not open his mouth, the woman butt in and said, "He will not kill you. He is a good person."

Peng Tianba asked, "He is a good person?"

The woman said, "Of course he is. I have never seen such a good person. If you touch him, I will kill you."

Peng Tianba laughed, coldly laughed, but unexpectedly the woman jumped forward and grab onto his neck and yelled, "I am holding onto him, quickly run away."

Ma Rulong did not run. She could not hold onto him. Peng Tianba, with one shook, threw her on the ground.

Peng Tianba said, "You'd said a lot. You must be tired, why don't you rest a bit." He lightly kicked out his foot and knocked on her yunxue⁴⁹ (faint acupoint). He covered her with the fox fur coat on his hand.

Ma Rulong eye as gazing at the sabre on his hand, waiting for him to make his move. Surprisingly, he put his sabre back to its sheath on his waist and warmed his hand near the fire. He knew Ma Rulong could not escape so before doing anything, it was better to warm up his hand first. This type of poise and composure of a seasoned Jianghu man was hard not to respect.

Ma Rulong was also pretty calm. He was not anxious and did not attack first.

Fire was weakening. Peng Tianba added more firewood into the fire and slowly said, "Did you know I was friend with your third uncle?"

Ma Rulong said, "En."⁵⁰

Peng Tianba said, "When he was alive, had he ever spoke of me in front of you?"

Ma Rulong said, "En."

Peng Tianba said, "Did he ever told you how we became friends?"

Ma Rulong said, "No."

Peng Tianba said, "We met each other through fighting." Peng Tianba laughed, and then said, "Your third uncle was an extremely prideful person. Of course he would mention this to you."

Ma Rulong said, "Why?"

Peng Tianba said, "Because although my wisdom and intelligence can not be compare to his, it was a pity he had too many interests - music, chess, literature, art - he wanted to learn everything. Obviously he would have less time practicing sword skills."

Ma Rulong had heard of this. Not only was his uncle a famed swordsman, he was also a well-rounded intellect.

Peng Tianba, "So even though he was better than me at everything, his martial art was not. I had fought him three times and every time I defeated him within a hundred stances." He did not let Ma Rulong speak and suddenly said, "How is your sword skill compare to your third uncle?"

Ma Rulong was pondering to himself. After a while he said, "I am not better than him."

Peng Tianba said, "I also believe your sword skill is not better than him. So even if you have a sword, I can kill you within one hundred stances." He dully continued, " Right now your hand is empty. You can, at most, withstand sixty stances."

Ma Rulong did not open his mouth. Peng Tianba continued, "My sabre skill, every strike is a killing stance and I never hold back. Sometime even if I did not intend to kill, once I strike I couldn't control myself. "

He sighed again and said, "Therefore, very few can lives past my sabre." Ma Rulong was silent. Peng Tianba continued, "You are like your third uncle; very intelligent, very proud. However, I do not wish that you will die young like him."

Ma Rulong said, "What are you trying to say?"

Peng Tianba pondered for a while and finally said, "All of a sudden I thought there are something peculiar about this."

Ma Rulong said, "Oh?"

Peng Tianba said, "Did you know how did I find this place?"

Ma Rulong shook his head.

Peng Tianba said, "You brought me here. Track from your horse on the snow led me here."

Ma Rulong actually never thought of this because he never tried to flee before.

Peng Tianba said, "If you are capable of coming up with such a secretive and vicious plot, then you should not be this careless. Also in a time where you are desperately trying to flee, you shouldn't go save such a ugly and unfamiliar woman." He sighed and said, "However you did do all of these thing. And it does not look like you are acting. Even though I am a pig, I can't help being suspicious. So..."

Ma Rulong said, "So what?"

Peng Tianba said, "So I wish you would come with me. Don't make me use force."

Ma Rulong uttered, "Where do you want me to follow you to?"

Peng Tianba said, "In the meantime, I want to sent you to Shaolin. Within three months, I will try to investigate the truth behind this. By then, I will give you your justice." Ma Rulong neither agree nor refuse the offer.

Peng Tianba said, "Right now you are a wanted man. No matter where you go, you will be pursued. This is the only path you can take." This was the truth. This was also reality.

Peng Tianba slowly walked over and said, "So you have to completely trust me. Only I can help you now." He stuck out his hand. It looked like this was the only hands in the world that wanted to and could help Ma Rulong.

Ma Rulong finally held onto his hand and said, "I believe you but..." He did not finish because at this point Peng Tianba suddenly lifted his foot and kick his huantiao51 acupoint. Once his feet wobbled, Peng Tianba flew over and sealed his maimen (pulse). He loudly laughed, "Now you know who is the pig."

Hand released and the man collapsed. "Ke" sound rattled, the Five Tigers Breaking Down the Door Sabre was leaving its sheath. No wonder Peng Tianba was Jianghu top sabre expert. The motions when he was drawing his sabre were clean and graceful.

His killing posture should also be elegant. Drawing sabre was usually for killing. However he should have a lot questions to ask Ma Rulong. Even if he already determined Ma Rulong was the real murderer, he should still ask him to clarify. Why was he already pulling out his sabre?

Ma Rulong finally understood. Seeing Peng Tianba's sabre out, he realized that the real murderer was Peng Tianba! He was responsible for this whole conspiracy, so he definitely could not let the "Tiansha" black-clothed man live.

So right now there was no need for him to ask anything. Similarly, he could not let Ma Rulong live.

Unfortunately, even though Ma Rulong finally understands, it was already too late. Sabre light was like snow and was already coming down toward him.

Surprisingly this sabre did not strike Ma Rulong's neck. Peng Tianba suddenly jumped and somersaulted back far away. His faced already changed, and shouted, "Who is it?" Other than the two people who he had sealed their acupoints, there was no one here. Did he saw a ghost?

Firelight was wildly flickering. Peng Tianba face also seemed to be changing -- one instant red, one instant white, one instant green. However, not only could you not see anyone here, you couldn't even see a shadow. He suddenly thrust forward aiming his sabre at Ma Rulong's neck.

He saw the ghost again! This time what he saw must had been even more frightening. Ma Rulong could not see anything. He jumped again, this time even higher. Once his jumped back down, he sprinted out and did not even look back.

Outside the abandoned temple was completely dark. Once he fled, there wasn't even a shadow. Fire was flickering and wind was blowing. In the winter wind, there was suddenly was a shout; it was short but sharp, dreadful, and surprised.

Ma Rulong could hear that the noise came from Peng Tianba, but could not understand what was happening. He wanted to go out and see but both his wrists and two knees' acupoints were sealed.

Though Peng Tianba was renown for his sabre skill, his dianxue⁵² (or Dim Mak) martial art was not bad. At this moment if someone came in and there was a sabre on this person's hand. Doesn't matter who this person was or what sabre this person was holding; at this point this person can definitely use this sabre and sever Ma Rulong's neck. Luckily no one came in. There was no one, no shadow, no voice, no movement, nothing. As if in this world there were only the two of them and an almost burnt up fire.

However, Ma Rulong knew at any moment someone could come in. Even if Peng Tianba would never come back; Feng Chaofan, Jue dashi, Qiu Fengcheng could come at any moment. No matter who came, this person would not let him go.

Right now this long winter night still had not pass. It was not sure what will happen from now on. Winter nights were especially long, very long.

_[Footnote]_____

49. yunxue, faint acupuncture point, shorten these as acupoint (made up).

50. En is a sound indicating approval or agreement. It's not a word.

51. Huantiao acupoint is at the side of your hip/butt.

52. Dianxue (or dim mak), is a martial art concept (i.e. fictional) based on traditional Chinese acupuncture. Its attacks are based on striking pressure points and meridians (acupuncture-based) that cause various effects on the body.

Chapter 5

Ch 5: Dawan [大婉]

The firewoods were burning really fast. The fire was getting smaller. Ma Rulong was trying really hard to stay calm. His mind had not settle down. His body was getting colder. He was almost frozen stiff. The fire was almost completely out. With his acupoints sealed⁵³, he did not know when they would be released.

Right now was not the coldest time of the night yet. If this continues, freezing to death was a possibility. He had never thought a person like him could possibly freeze to death. Actually, life is like this; no one could prepare for whatever happens in the future. No one can predict his own future.

Ma Rulong sighed in his heart and suddenly realized he did not have much to be proud of. At this moment, that woman suddenly stuck her head out of the fur coat.

Ma Rulong's qi⁵⁴ and blood flow still hadn't been cleared yet. Surprisingly her acupoint was released first. Using her mouse-like small eye, and like a mouse she was looking around for half a day. Finally she let out deep breath and said, "Couldn't believe that fat man left. Couldn't believe you are still alive."

This was indeed an unexpected outcome. No one would have thought Peng Tianba would let Ma Rulong live. It was like a rabbit being abandoned and allowed to run away after it was shot by an arrow.

She stood up, while wearing Ma Rulong's fur coat, and smiled, "The fur on this coat is not that bad; it's light, soft, and warm. It fits me pretty well too."

Fortunately Ma Rulong could still speak and couldn't help quipping, "It's a pity that fur coat seems to be mine."

This woman shook her head and said, "This is not yours. Right now, it's no longer yours."

Ma Rulong asked, "Why?"

This woman replied, "Because you gave it to the fat man. That fat man gave it to me." She was laughing heartily, "So right now this coat is mine."

Ma Rulong did not argue. He was not the type to dwell in small matters. He didn't care about these things. However he was really cold and again couldn't help asked, "Can you increase the fire?"

This woman said, "Increase the fire for what? I am not cold."

Ma Rulong bitterly smiled, "You are not cold, but I am."

This woman said, "I am not cold. Why are you cold?"

Ma Rulong was taken back. This woman was something. She push people to the point where they know whether to cry or laugh. It was fortunate his stomach had not exploded due to anger.⁵⁵

The woman unexpectedly said, "Young people should be able to withstand hardship. What is the matter with being a bit cold? You are so young and couldn't even take this. What accomplishment can you achieve in the future?"

Ma Rulong could only keep his mouth shut. He finally realized reasoning with this type of woman was not only stupid but a waste of time. If a man encounters this type of woman, it is the best to simply keep both his eyes and mouth shut.

This woman actually spared him and muttered, "Wonder if daylight is going to come soon. I will go out and check."

After muttering to herself, she went out. Just as she left, she suddenly screamed and hurried back in like her buttock was shot by an arrow.

Ma Rulong originally did not want to pay attention to her. Though she was annoying, she wasn't bad to him. Not only did she called him a "good person", she risked her life holding onto Peng Tianba and urging him to run away. As long as a person is living, this person should live a life with no regret and understand the distinction between gratitude and grudge. So Ma Rulong asked, "What happened?"

The woman was startled and said, "Outside...There is a person outside."

In such a cold place in the middle of the night, why would any one come to an abandoned temple in the middle of nowhere? Ma Rulong have to ask, "Who?"

This woman said, "It was the fat man at first."

Ma Rulong expression changed and asked, "He still haven't left?"

This woman said, "Still haven't."

If he had not leave, why didn't he come in?

Ma Rulong asked, "What is he doing outside?"

This woman said, "Who know what he is doing? He laid there as if he was sleeping." She unexpectedly reasoned, "Fat people always like to sleep."

However no matter how fat or how much a person likes to sleep, no one would sleep out on the snow. Ma Rulong said, "You must be seeing it wrong."

This woman said, "I am not seeing it wrong. Not only are my eyes pretty, I have very good eyesight." Well her eyes were really not that bad looking, at least much better than a rat.

Ma Rulong requested, "Can you go out and take a look again?"

This woman replied, "Why don't you go out and take a look yourself?" Ma Rulong, again, kept his mouth shut.

This woman looked at him, suddenly smiled and said: "I understand. You are like me. You were kicked by that fatty and now couldn't even move." Ma Rulong kept his mouth closed. She actually said, "Fine, I will help you take a look. You weren't bad to me." Right after she went out, she shrieked and ran back. She seemed even more shocked than before.

Ma Rulong, "He's not there?"

This woman gasped, "He....He is still there. He could never walk again."

Ma Rulong asked, "Why?"

This woman said, "Because he is already dead!"

Why would Peng Tianba be dead? He was still alive at first. He was healthy, no sickness or pain. It would look like he could've live longer than anyone else.

Ma Rulong asked, "Is he really dead?"

This woman replied, "He, absolutely, is dead. From head to toe, he is clearly dead."

Ma Rulong asked, "Can you tell how did he suddenly die?"

The woman said, "Of course I can tell." She seemed to be shivering, "No matter who. If someone hacked on their neck with a sabre, they would definitely die."

Ma Rulong was extremely surprised. Peng Tianba was definitely a top saber expert in Wulin. How could someone else chop his neck with a sabre? Who was holding the sabre? In this world, whose sabre skill could be faster and more brilliant than him? Why did this person chop him?

There was only one explanation! The real culprit was not really Peng Tianba. The master behind the scene was another person. Even Peng Tianba was this person's pawn. Now this person wanted to get rid of Peng Tianba. Who was this person? This person can kill Peng Tianba, why not come in and kill Ma Rulong too?

Only “this person” can answer these questions. Ma Rulong finally realized, this conspiracy was even more complicated and terrifying than he had imagined.

This woman suddenly said, “Can’t be.”

Ma Rulong said, “Can’t be what?”

This woman said, “We absolutely can not stay here.”

Ma Rulong agreed. They definitely should not stay; but unfortunately he could not walk.

The woman suddenly said, “I am a woman.”

Ma Rulong said, “I know.”

This woman said, “Great heroes are men. Gentlemen obviously have to men. So...”

Ma Rulong said, “So what?”

This woman said: “So I am neither a gentleman nor hero.” She sighed and said, “So even if you can’t go. I could go.”

It was because of her that Ma Rulong came here, started a fire, and encountered this situation. Now she wanted to leave by herself.

Ma Rulong unexpectedly said, “Okay, you should go.”

The woman actually said, “However I can not walk, I need to ride on your horse.”

Ma Rulong surprisingly agreed, "Fine, take the horse."

This woman finally thought this person was strange. She was still human. She couldn't stand it but sighed and said, "You truly are a good person. It's a pity..."

Ma Rulong said, "It's a pity...what?"

This woman said, "It's a pity and good people don't live long."

She actually did leave. She was wearing Ma Rulong's fur coat and riding his horse. Fire was almost dead and she didn't even add more firewood to it. This woman was truly ruthless, even more ruthless than Jue dashi.

In this lonely winter night, the galloping noise had not left far. In the winter wind, there were suddenly really fast and light footsteps.

It was the footstep noise of two people. They stopped in front of the abandoned temple.

"There is a dead person here.", said one person. "The one that died is Peng Tianba."

"Can he still be saved?"

"A fatal blow, not even god can save him now."

Ma Rulong's heart sank. He heard two voices. They belonged to Jue dashi and Feng Chaofan. Seeing Peng Tianba's corpse and finding him again, they would definitely not give him a chance to explain. Surprisingly, they did not come in. It was because they saw that white horse galloped away.

"That must be Tianma Tang's (Hall of Divine Horse) white dragon colt⁵⁶." They also saw the rider wearing the fox fur coat.

“One fatal blow, fled after killing, a lethal hand, what a vicious person.”

“He wouldn’t be able escape.”

“However Peng Tianba.....”

“Peng Tianba could wait here but Ma Rulong wouldn’t wait. Let chase after him!”

After these words, their footsteps disappeared into the distance. They all thought that person wearing the fox fur coat and riding the white horse was Ma Rulong. They wouldn’t have imagined there was still someone in the temple.

If that woman had not leave, if there was still a fire, and if the white horse was still here; what would the current situation be like? Ma Rulong could definitely picture that scenario.

He suddenly thought the things that woman did was not only extreme, but also seemed coincidental and clever. He suddenly thought she might not be the heartless and unreasonable woman that one would’ve thought. Perhaps, she was more intelligent than anyone.

No matter how long the cold winter night was, there will always be a morning. No matter who sealed your acupoint, it will always be released eventually. Right now the sky was bright and the qi and blood were flowing back at his sealed acupoint.

The technique Peng Tianba used wasn’t too severe because he was not planning to seal his acupoint for too long. Because he thought Ma Rulong wouldn’t be living for long. However, Ma Rulong was still living. His own body, on the other hand, was completely frozen. That sabre blow hit his right neck, came from the front but still cut a major blood artery on the back.

Succeeded with one fatal blow. This renowned Wulin sabre master could not even avoid this blow. There was absolutely no one in the world that could prevent him from dodging or resisting, and yet he was killed by one blow here.

Unless he could never had imagine that person would kill him or would even dream that person would make this blow. Perhaps it was because this person was a friend, a very close and trusted friend. They came up with the plot together and now it succeeded; that person, unexpectedly, decided to silence him. Who was this person? Ma Rulong was not able to take a guess and did not even have a lead or clue. No one could answer this question.

Some easier questions might be -- after this plot succeeded, what would happen? What was the outcome? Who would benefit?

The person devised all this would, of course, benefit himself. After this plot succeeded, Ma Rulong would be branded the culprit. Du Qinglian, Shen Hongye, and Qiu Fengcheng's friends and relatives would look for Ma Rulong to settle scores.

If they could not find Ma Rulong, they would go to Hall of Divine Horse. If they killed Ma Rulong, Hall of Divine Horse would want to avenge him. As a result, this matter would lead to Hall of Divine Horse and Du, Shen, Qiu, the three families, fighting each other.

If the four families fought, they mutually weaken each other. When snipes and mussels fight, the one benefitting would be the fisherman.⁵⁷

Who was the fisherman?

Sky was clear again. The horse prints on the snow were extremely clear as if it deliberately made and wanted people to follow it. Wonder if they had already caught up to her?

Ma Rulong could also imagine, after they found out what kind of woman she was, that hard to tell whether they were laughing or crying expression on their face. He suddenly thought this woman was very extreme, very ugly, very strange, and very interesting. This was the first time he thought she was interesting.

No matter what, he did not owe her anything. In the future, they might not even see each other. She headed east. He decided to head west.

Right now, not only was he terribly cold, he was also terribly hungry.

He knew the west side had a very large city with a very good tavern. The building was clean and tidy, always fresh linen on the beds, and there was a great fireplace inside. The kitchen was always ready to prepare a hot pot of mutton; and well-roasted, good smelling, and crispy sesame-flavored baked cake. These were exactly what he needed the most.

In a prosperous and busy city with clean and tidy streets. That tavern's waiter was outside the entrance pulling business. Ma Rulong did not dare to go in. When he was almost near the entrance, he realized he did not have any money on him. He couldn't even afford a sesame cake. The waiter outside did not even try to approach him. In this cold winter weather, a person that didn't even have a coat on would not be a good customer.

Being given the cold shoulder did not feel good. This was the first time Ma Rulong experience this; he finally realized the value of money. Status of money in his mind was now much higher than before. Though he was extremely hungry, cold, and penniless, he still lifted his chest and stride forward.

Even though he, himself, did not know where he wanted to go, his feet did not stop. At this moment, he saw a white horse. He recognized this white horse. This white horse also seemed to recognize. The horse raised his hoof and hissed. This horse was actually his white dragon colt.

The horse was next to a restaurant. At the restaurant window upstairs a person's head poked out and greeted him. This was the same person that someone thought was extreme, brilliant, and interesting ugly person. She clearly went east, why was she suddenly in a city at the west?

She yelled, "Come, quickly come up." Ma Rulong was still hesitant, she yelled again, "Are you going to come up by yourself or do you want me to come down to get you?" Ma Rulong bitterly smiled, "I'll go up. I'll go up by myself."

The restaurant upstairs was warm and roomy. It was full of muttons, crispy fishes, maotai (liquor), daqu (liquor), and sesame sauce cake aroma.⁵⁸

She took up an eight-seated table with eight people worth of food and wine. She was still wearing Ma Rulong's fox fur coat, looked at him and said, "Sit, quickly sit down."

Ma Rulong decided to sit down. She loudly said, "Eat, quickly eat."

Ma Rulong decided to eat. He did not want her to come pull him or try to put lamb to his mouth. Her actions did not seem to leave other people any choice.

Once she saw Ma Rulong swallowed an overcooked piece of lamb, she looked like she wanted to laugh. However she made a stoic face and said, "Young people not only must be able to withstand hunger, they should also be able to eat. If you can not finished this bowl of mutton stew, doesn't matter what you say, I will ignore you."

Ma Rulong really ate that big bowl of mutton stew and also two baked sesame cakes.

This woman poured him a big bowl of wine, "After eating, you should drink some wine. Quickly drink."

This time Ma Rulong shook his head, "Not drinking."

This woman said, "Do you want me to pinch your nose and pour it down your throat?"

Ma Rulong ignored her. He did not believe a woman would publicly pinch his nose. However, he was wrong. She actually really did pinch his nose.

Although her face was weird and ugly, her hand was really pretty. It was fair, smooth, soft, and not bony. This was the first time Ma Rulong discovered that there was a part of her body that this pleasant looking. He finally drank this bowl of wine.

Since being drunk for three days straight at the Pearl Place, he had not touch any alcohol. He was committed to quitting alcohol.

No matter how committed someone was, after encountering these unfortunate series of events and being pinched in the nose publicly by a woman, his commitment would sway.

The woman finally laughed and said, "This is more like it. How can someone who doesn't even dare drink wine, considered himself a man?"

She helped him pour another bowl, "You don't have to worry. These wines don't have poison. I don't want to poison you."

Since Ma Rulong broke his commitment, he might as well drink heartily. He, originally, did not want to get drunk. No matter whoever was in his situation, he would've wanted to get drunk too. After three big bowls, the alcohol was kicking in. He finally said, "Now, can I finally talk?"

This woman coldly said, "Spit it out."

Ma Rulong asked, "How did you come here?"

This woman said, "I like to come here so I came."

Ma Rulong said, "You are supposedly heading east?"

This woman said, "But I suddenly wanted to go west."

Ma Rulong asked, "Are you staring at me?"

This woman responded, "Are you thinking because you are good looking, every woman will stare at you?" She suddenly retorted, "Since I am not Du Qinglian's mom, not Shen Hongye's mother, and especially not that stinking monk's granny. Why should I stare at you?"

Ma Rulong freely asked, "You know about this?"

This woman said, "Hmph."

Ma Rulong asked, "How did you know?"

This woman said, "Hmph."

Ma Rulong asked, "Did you meet Feng Chaofan and Monk Jue? Did they tell you this?"

This woman did not even say "hmph" this time. She only filled his bowl to the brim with wine, a big bowl.

Ma Rulong sighed and said, "When you drink wine, do you have to use a big bowl?"

This woman finally answered, "Yes."

Ma Rulong asked: "Why do you have to use a big bowl?"

This woman said, "Only Xiaowan drinks wine with a small bowl. I am not Xiaowan."59

Xiaowan? Ma Rulong seemed to have heard of this name; heard it from Qiu Fengcheng. The name of Qiu Fengcheng's lover was Xiaowan. The piece of jade, in his small pouch, was given to him by Xiaowan.

Ma Rulong couldn't help asked, "You even knew about Xiaowan?"

This woman coldly said, "You asked too much."

Ma Rulong, "However, you haven't answer anything."

This woman said, "Because those are not the questions you should be asking. You haven't ask the questions you should be asking yet."

Ma Rulong questioned, "What should I ask?"

This woman said, “You ate my food and drank my wine. You should at least ask for my name first!”

Ma Rulong asked, “What is your name?”

This woman replied, “Xiaowan use small bowl to drink wine. We use big bowl to drink wine, what is this call?”

Ma Rulong answered, “You are Dawan?”

This woman actually laughed and said, “At least you are getting smarter.”

_[Footnote]

53. Again all this mean is someone hit his acupuncture point. The context here is based on dianxue martial art, not the real-life medical-based acupuncture.

54. Qi (or Chi), is a concept of vitality air that flows through your body. Ancient Chinese concept that believes blood and air/breath flows through the body giving human its life.

55. The Chinese word, qi (气) could mean either air/gas or anger/enrage. This expression means he is so full of qi (anger) that it’s surprising these qi (air) did not cause his body to explode.

56. longju, lit. dragon steed/colt; term to describe an exceptional or majestic horse.

57. This came from traditional Chinese saying: YuPengXiangZheng, YuWengDeLi -- lit. translate to: snipes mussel mutually fight, fisherman benefit. It simply means when two factions fight, only the outside party would benefit.

58. Maotai (茅台) and daqu (大曲) are two Chinese liquor. Maotai is a type of baijiu (white liquor) and daqu is a type of jiuqu (liquor mold).

59. Xiaowan (小婉), means Little Wan. Wan is a typical female name. Small bowl, in Chinese, is also (小碗). They are pronounced the same but written in different characters.

Chapter 6

Ch. 6: Broken Bowl [破碗]

This woman's name was Dawan. Although she looked weird and ugly, her hand was better looking than most women. Although her eyes were small, narrow, and slanted, when she smiled there was this grace and beauty to them. It was like the flowing spring water under the sunlight.

Her words seemed brash and harsh, but if you paid closer attention they seemed to have deeper meanings. Her actions seemed to put people on the spot and unreasonable, but you would eventually realize they were for your own good. If she did not wear his fur coat, ride his horse, and leave; he might not be alive right now.

Right now, she possibly gathered a lot of information about this situation from Feng Chaofan and them. However, she still hasn't considered Ma Rulong as a cold-blooded killer. Now, it seems like she is the only person in the world that would want to be his friend. What kind of person is she?

Ma Rulong suddenly said, "You are a good person." He sighed, "I used to think you are quite unreasonable, but right now I finally know you are a good person."

Dawan asked, "How do you know I am a good person?"

Ma Rulong said, "I can't say, but I know."

He also poured her a bowl of wine, "Come, I use this big bowl to salute you."

Dawan actually did drink this big bowl. She drank heartily.

Ma Rulong suddenly asked, "Do you, Dawan, have any kind of relation with that Xiaowan?"

Dawan replied, "No."

Ma Rulong said, "Pity."

Dawan asked, "Why is it a pity? Is it because you wanted to see this Xiaowan?"

Ma Rulong said, "I actually do want to see her."

Dawan said, "It's a pity you can't find her."

Ma Rulong bitterly smile and said, "It's a pity she's not called Dawan."

Dawan said, "What's so pitiful about that?"

Ma Rulong said, "If she's called Dawan, it'll be easier for me to find her. It's pity she just has to be called Xiaowan." He explained, "There should not be much women with the name Dawan. On the other hand, women with a name like Xiaowan are plentiful. I just know her name is Xiaowan. How can I find her?"

Dawan said, "Although you are not able to find her, there must be someone that will be able to."

Ma Rulong asked, "Who's able to find her?" Dawan did not answer and suddenly asked, "Today, how many bowls of wine did you drink?"

Ma Rulong replied, "Drank eight bowls, eight big bowls."

Dawan said, "How many more bowls can you drink?"

Ma Rulong said, "Don't know."

Dawan said, "Don't know means you can still drink a lot."

Ma Rulong said, "Don't know means I usually do not drink with bowl."

Dawan asked, "What do you use?"

Ma Rulong said, "Wine jugs." Dawan laughed again.

Ma Rulong said, "You think I am bluffing?"

Dawan said, "If your alcohol tolerance is really that good, then I can bring you to meet someone."

Ma Rulong said, "To meet who?"

Dawan said, "To meet a person that though never use a small bowl to drink wine, but can definitely find that Xiaowan."

Ma Rulong said, "What does he use to drink wine?"

Dawan said, "A broken bowl."

Ma Rulong, "A person that uses a broken bowl to drink wine, should be called Powan?!"

Dawan sweetly said, "Can't believe you are getting smarter and smarter."

Ma Rulong with a glimmer in his eyes, said: "The broken bowl you are talking about, is it "Broken Bowl" Yu Wu?60

Dawan said, "If it's not him, who else could it be?"

Other than this man, it definitely could not be another. It's absolutely difficult to find another man like him. No one could drink like him and no one understood how to drink alcohol better than him. No one could eat and no one understood how to eat better than him. He was renowned for these two qualities. He could definitely be considered the best of the world.

He was not only famous for these two qualities. In the past, Jianghu's best hero, Ye Kai, commented him with these sixteen words: "Poor as a dirt, rich as a country, famous around the world, no one can recognize."

These sixteen words describe him perfectly. The wealthiest in the world were salt merchant. The most profitable business were oil, rice, silk, lumber, and pawn shop. The Yu family in Jiangnan⁶¹ was not only the largest salt merchant, but also a magnate of these four businesses.⁶² Definitely could be considered the rich amongst the riches, wealth that could be compared to a nation. Jiangnan Yu family had five brothers; Yu Wu was the fifth master.

The poorest people in the world were, of course, beggars who beg for food. Yu Wu was also called the big brother of beggars, the current "Beggar Clan" clan leader. Although he was famous around Jianghu, few had met him before so even if people saw him they would not recognize him. However he had countless Beggar Clan followers, spreading over both side of the yellow river and vast reaches of the north and south. Therefore, if you want to find a person you just need to find him.

Ma Rulong asked, "You can find him?"

Dawan remarked, "If I can't find him, who could?"

Ma Rulong asked, "You know where he is?"

Dawan said, "Actually you should know, he is, of course, eating and drinking."

Beggar Clan members viewed the world as their home, ate anywhere and drank anywhere. Places with food and wine, though plentiful, were usually restaurant, inn, and tavern. Dawan brought Ma Rulong to a small restaurant, an extremely small restaurant. This restaurant only had two damaged tables and several worn out chairs.

Ma Rulong stepped in and could already smell a rotten odor. Even a plate of salted vegetable had already changed color and became dry and hard. It looked like a pile of rocks that came straight out of the sewer. Even a person, who starved for three days, wouldn't have the courage to eat this. For a clan leader that was usually critical about cleanliness and serious about eating, why would he eat and drink here?

There was not even a single customer here. Even the old storekeeper was taking a nap. However, Dawan went over and said something to his ear. He suddenly sprang to life; even his pair of dreary old eyes was wide opened. Jianghu was full of hidden dragons crouching tigers (latent talents). Could it be that this old man was a Wulin expert in disguised?

He had this strange expression while staring at Dawan. It seemed both amazed and excited; like a child suddenly meeting his long admired celebrity. Ma Rulong was a handsome figure, a rare beautiful man in Jianghu. No matter where he went, people noticed him. However this old did not even glance at him. Next to Dawan, this White Horse gentleman was not even noticeable. Ma Rulong thought this was interesting.

Old man suddenly let out a long sigh and muttered, "Can't believe it. Can't believe. I really couldn't believe it."

Dawan said, "You couldn't believe I would come?"

Old man said, "To have an opportunity to welcome guniang (miss), my life is not wasted."

He suddenly bowed down, all the way to the floor, and kissed Dawan's foot. His behavior was even more respectful than an extremely loyal court official seeing his emperor. Afterward he stood up and said, "Fifth master is in the kitchen at the back. Miss, please come with me."

Ma Rulong was quite amused. What was this strangely ugly woman's background? Even when other was so respectful toward he, she seemed as if it was well deserved; as if this was the proper and appropriate behavior. Dawan saw what he was thinking and said, "This old man was a servant at the kitchen of my house. Our household customs are always excessive."

Ma Rulong wanted to ask, "Do the servants of your house always greet people by kissing their feet? It seems like not even the imperial palace has that kind of custom."

He did not ask because at this moment they had already entered the kitchen.

No one could ever imagine in such a smelly and filthy small restaurant, there could be such a kitchen. The kitchen was huge, clean, bright, and everything was neat and tidy. Every plate and bowl was more polished than a mirror. There were not even any black ashes above the stove.

Hall of Divine Horse (Tianma Tang) was a prominent household and also meticulous about food and dining. However, not even Hall of Divine Horse had such a spacious and clean kitchen.

In the kitchen, there was person cooking some food. Any person cooking food would not look good but this person was an exception. This person holding a spatula is a like a classic painter, Wu Daozi⁶³, holding a brush, like the brilliant swordsman Ximen Chuixue holding a sword. Not only was the form and movement elegant and beautiful but also full of concentration and sincerity.

He was currently pan-frying some shrimp tofu. The tofu was not done yet. The old man stood behind and did not want to disturb him. Dawan, unexpectedly, also did not disturb him. He was not too tall, white and chubby face, wearing patched up but extremely clean clothes. He looked like an unrecognized talented scholar that failed the examination.

Ma Rulong can not bear and quietly asked, "Is he Yu Wu of Jiangnan?"

Dawan sighed and said, "Other than him, who else could it be?"

The tofu was now done and wok had left the fire. Using the spatula he lifted each one out, each piece was fried just right. Golden crisp tofu was fried in low heat. Sitting on the snow-white porcelain plate, it looked like pieces of gold. However gold would not smell this good and this enticing. Even he was satisfied with the plate of tofu. He held the plate with two hands and placed it on a fully cleaned table. Then slightly sighed and lifted his head. He finally saw Dawan and said, "It's you."

"It is me.", Dawan laughed. Without a hint of obnoxiousness, she said, "Can't believe Fifth Master can still recognize me."

Yu Wu's attitude toward her was also very affable and said, "Did you drink already?"

Dawan said, "I drank a little bit."

Yu Wu said, "Good, very good. I just wanted to have someone drink with me." He smiled and said, "Drinking wine is like playing chess. It must have two people drinking to be interesting."

Dawan said, "Three people drinking are much better than two. I found another person to drink with you."

Yu Wu finally saw Ma Rulong and questioned, "He also want to drink? Can he drink?"

Dawan said, "Heard he has pretty good tolerance."

Yu Wu asked, "Where did you heard it from?"

Dawan said, "I heard it from him."

Yu Wu remarked, "You believe in what he said?"

Dawan said, "Why don't you try to verify yourself?"

Yu Wu said, "Good. Very good."

The pan-fried tofu was also extremely good. Ma Rulong couldn't restrain himself and ate three pieces; he ate a piece tofu then drank a bowl of wine. He already drank three bowls; three big bowls. Yu Wu also drank three bowls.

He really did use a broken bowl, a very big broken bowl. It was already split into three pieces and they were repaired back together. The bowl was light blue; like the color of the sky after the rain.

Ma Rulong suddenly said, "Good bowl."

Yu Wu said, "You can tell this is a good bowl?"

Ma Rulong said, "This was made using firewood kilning. Moreover, it was done using the best kiln. Other than the imperial palace, throughout the world you can not find a third bowl like this."

Yu Wu said, "Not bad, in the world there are only two of these bowl." He looked at Ma Rulong, smiled and said, "Hard to imagine, you have a really good eyes. Not only can you see people well, you can see a bowl well."

Dawan coldly said, "The way he sees people, might not be that good."

Yu Wu laughed, "If his eyes are not good at seeing people, then what did he see in you?" Dawan acted as if she didn't hear these words. Ma Rulong blushed a bit.

Yu Wu suddenly said, "You people came to me, of course, isn't because you wanted to drink with me."

Ma Rulong said, "I want to find someone that I don't have the ability to find."

Yu Wu said, "You want me to help you find someone?"

Ma Rulong said, "Yes."

Yu Wu said, "Who are you looking for?"

Ma Rulong said, "I just know her name is Xiaowan."

Yu Wu laughed loudly and said, "Small bowl is not as good as a big bowl. Since you have a big bowl, why do you still want a small bowl?"

This famous hero of Jianghu did not seem to have good eyesight. He assumed Ma Rulong was Dawan's lover. These two people; one was extremely ugly, and the other extremely handsome. He should be able to tell they don't match.

Dawan deliberately asked, "Why couldn't small bowl be better than a big bowl?"

Yu Wu said, "No matter whether its holding wine or medicine, a small bowl can not hold more than a big bowl. Of course, a small bowl is not better than a big bowl."

Dawan asked, "How about a broken bowl?"

Yu Wu laughingly said: "Oh, a broken bowl is even better than a big bowl."

Dawan asked, "Why?"

Yu Wu replied, "If a bowl is broken, it must have been through sour, sweet, bitter, and spicy.⁶⁴ Just like a person, he'll grow old through trials and tribulations in life. An old man is obviously richer in experience than a young child. Ginger is also hotter when aged." He raised his broken bowl, drink it completely, and laughed, "So a broken bowl, of course, is much better than a big bowl."

Dawan also laughed, "Fortunately, we are talking about people not bowl. This Xiaowan is not just better than a big bowl, even the broken bowl."

Yu Wu said, "Oh?"

Dawan said, "I know. This Xiaowan must be a very beautiful woman and probably very gentle and romantic."

Yu Wu said, "How do you know?"

Dawan said, "Because she is Qiu Fengcheng's lover. The woman that Silver Spear gentleman likes, wouldn't be an ugly like me."

Yu Wu laughed loudly and said, "So this Xiaowan belongs to someone else. No wonder you let me help him find her." He did not let Ma Rulong defend himself and didn't ask anything else. Suddenly he said, "Why don't we make a trade?"

Ma Rulong asked, "What trade?"

Yu Wu said, "You stay here to drink wine with me using a big bowl. I'll help you find this Xiaowan."

Ma Rulong said, "Ok."

Yu Wu said, "Within three days, I promise I'll bring you some news."

Ma Rulong said, "I will stay here and drink with you for three days."

Yu Wu said, "Drink with a big bowl?"

Ma Rulong said, "You want me to drink however many bowls, I will drink however many bowls."

Yu Wu said, "That's right."

Yu Wu kept looking at him. After half a day, he finally asked, "Do you know what is my biggest ability?"

Ma Rulong said, "Please say."

Yu Wu said, "My biggest abilities are eating food, drinking wine, and sleeping."

Ma Rulong said, "Eating or sleeping, I have no confidence. Drinking wine, on the other hand, I might be comparable to you."

Yu Wu said, "You are not afraid of getting drunk?"

Ma Rulong said, "I will still drink even if I drink myself to death."

Yu Wu laughed, "Good, very good."

In the world, there are people that would rather die than admit defeat. Ma Rulong was this type of people. Watching them drinking one bowl after another, Dawan sighed and said, "When I came out, my mother warned me not to get drunk and get involved with drunkards. She said all alcoholics are the same, not only do they lose grasp of reality but all became unreasonable."

Yu Wu said, "Your mother is a very wise woman. You have to remember what she told you." He drank another bowl, "When a man gets drunk, he can do anything."

Dawan said, "So she said, when a smart woman meet a drunkard she should run away as fast as possible to avoid unnecessary trouble."

Ma Rulong said, "Reasonable." He drank another bowl, "Very reasonable."

Dawan said, "Two drunkards are obviously worst than one drunkard."

Yu Wu said, "Make sense." He drank another bowl, "The only thing in the world worst than a drunkard is two drunkards."

Dawan sighed and said: "Unfortunately, I will see two drunkards soon."

Yu Wu said, "Where? Where are these two drunkards?"

Dawan said, "It seems to be here, in front of me." Yu Wu and Ma Rulong looked at each other and then laughed.

"My mother only told me I should run away when I see one drunkard. But never told what to do if I see two drunkards?"

She laughed and said, "Fortunately, I know exactly what to do."

Yu Wu said, "Like what?"

"I will get myself drunk." She drank a big bowl of wine, drank even faster, and said: "Once I, myself, becomes a drunkard I will no have to worry about drunkards."

Yu Wu clapped and said, "Make sense."

Ma Rulong, "There is only one bad point."

Yu Wu asked, "Which point?"

Ma Rulong said, "Isn't three drunkards worst than two drunkards?"

Yu Wu said, "Yes."

He sighed, "I'm afraid the only thing in the world worst than two drunkard is three drunkard."

"Now I'll see three drunkards." Ma Rulong let out a sigh and said, "Because of these three drunkards, I am one of them."

Right now he was still not drunk, those were not drunk words. He had many feelings in his heart. A person can not escape from himself -- his own wrongdoing, his own sorrow, his responsibility, he could never escape; because like his own shadow, he can never run away from it.

_[Footnote]_____

60. Powan Yu Wu (俞五), powan means broken bowl is his nickname. Surname is Yu, given name wu means “five”.

61. Jiangnan (江南), refers to the region on the south side of the Yangtze River on the eastern end.

62. Five items, excluding salt, are listed but the text do say “four businesses”.

63. Wu Daozi (吴道子) a historic Tang dynasty Chinese painter.

64. suantiankula, lit. “sour, sweet, bitter and spicy hot” is an expression that means “joys and sorrows of life”.

Chapter 7

Ch 7: Xiaowan [小婉]

Ma Rulong was drunk. A person drinking with other people he trusted will get drunk. He will also get drunk easier. He trusted Dawan and he also trusted Yu Wu. A person in a bad mood or was mistreated would want to drink and get drunk. Although he believed his accusations would be cleared one day, his was still melancholic.

If a person gets drunk using a big bowl, he couldn’t remember what he said or did. Even if he remembers, it is such a blur he would think it was a dream, like those were other people’s words and actions.

He seemed to remember saying something that would even surprise him just thinking about it.

At that point everyone was drunk, he suddenly held Dawan’s hand and said, “Why don’t you marry me?” Dawan then laughed and couldn’t stop laughing. She laughed until she couldn’t breathe and then asked, “Why do you want me to marry you?”

“Because I know you are very good to me. Because even when others suspected me, thought I was murderer, and even wanted to kill me, only you believed me. Only you would want to help me.” He was saying honest words. When a person is really drunk, he usually speak out his true feeling.

Nevertheless, Dawan did not believe. "You want to marry me because you are drunk. Once you are fully sober, you will regret this." Although she was still laughing, her laughter had a bit sadness to it. "Once you see woman prettier than me, you would regret this even more." She said, "I am ugly, strange, and terrible. There are so much women better looking than me."

Now he was already sober and already forget whether Dawan agreed or not. However, he had to ask himself, "If she did agree, am I regretting it right now? Will I still marry her now?" He couldn't even answer these questions. At the time, he saw another girl. A girl that was much prettier than Dawan.

When he woke up he was not at the kitchen anymore. Yu Wu and Dawan were not here. By the time he woke up he was on a bed - a not very big but soft, comfortable, and pleasant smelling bed. This bed was in a room that was not considered big but very clean, comfortable, and smell good.

This room had several plum blossoms outside the window. Beneath the window was a small dressing table. The dressing table had a small copper mirror and next to the mirror was a vase of plum blossom. This girl was standing next to the plum blossom.

Plum blossom was very noble and beautiful. This girl was like the plum blossom, similarly beautiful and not low class. Although her clothes were bright red, her face was pale white. Although her eyes were lucid and beautiful, it carried a hard to say sort of melancholy.

She was currently looking at Ma Rulong. She was using a very strange expression to look at Ma Rulong, like it was curious and afraid. Ma Rulong's head was still hurting. He did not recognize this girl nor could he remember why he was here.

This girl suddenly asked, "Are you Ma gongzi? 'White Horse Gentleman' Ma Rulong?"

Ma Rulong said, "Yes I am."

The girl asked, "Several days ago, were you at the Winter Plum Valley?"

Ma Rulong said, "Yes."

The girl asked, "You saw Qiu Fengcheng?"

Ma Rulong responded, "You know him?"

The girl nodded her head. Her forehead furrowed a bit and gently said, "My surname is Su, name Xiaowan. I am the person you are looking for."

"What is this place?" Ma Rulong finally asked, "How did I get here?"

"A Master Yu Wu sent you here." She first answered his latter question and then clearly answered why she would take in an unknown drunk man. "Master Yu Wu said you are not only Fengcheng's friend, you also know his whereabouts."

Ma Rulong bitterly smiled. Yu Wu actually managed to send him here. Obviously, he was not as drunk as him.

He never thought someone could manage to get him this drunk. He suddenly realized he was overestimating himself. He, again, asked, "Is this your jia (home)?"

Xiaowan said, "I don't have a jia (family). This place can not be considered a jia (family)." Ma Rulong understood what she meant. "Jia" (Home) was not simply a building. No matter how beautiful a house is, it could not be considered a "jia" (family).⁶⁵

Xiaowan said, "I am originally just a...a prostitute at Yifang Yuan⁶⁶ in the city. I never had a father or mother since I was young. Fengcheng help released me out of my contract and bought this house for me." She smiled but her smile had this hard to say sadness, "But he is not here so how can this be considered a jia (home/family)?"

Ma Rulong couldn't help but sighed, "Couldn't believe he is such a romantic."⁶⁷ A prestigious gentleman like Qiu Fengcheng could actually be so passionate and love-obsessed toward woman of her background.⁶⁸ It was definitely hard for people to not felt touched by this.

Xiaowan said, "Though he had an unyielding temperament, he is a very kind person and had never wronged anyone." While speaking about Qiu Fengcheng, her eyes were filled with tender and love. "He was especially good to me, was always considerate of me. He never looks down on me. A woman like me being able to meet this type of man...I...I could die contentedly."

Ma Rulong said, "Both of you are still young, why talk about death?"

Xiaowan smiled again, drearily smiled, "If you had came one step late, you wouldn't be able to see me."

Ma Rulong suddenly thought about the pit Qiu Fengcheng dug.

Xiaowan said, "Before he left, he made an agreement. He would come yesterday night the latest."

Ma Rulong asked, "What if he didn't come back?"

Xiaowan bleakly said, "That would've meant he had already left this world. I would, of course, follow him." Though her voice was gentle, it felt fully committed to death. A pledge of eternal loves that last beyond life and death.

Ma Rulong lightly sighed and said, "Fortunately he hasn't die."

He really did felt fortunate for them. "Although he was like you, fully committed to death, but he hasn't die."

Xiaowan said, "Then where is he? Why hasn't he come back?"

Ma Rulong kept his mouth shut. Even he doesn't know where Qiu Fengcheng was. When Peng Tianba, Feng Chaofan, and Jue dashi were chasing after him, Qiu Fengcheng was not with them.

Jin Zhenlin's spear did not kill him, but he was heavily injured. An injured person, where can he go?

That day they were supposed to attend Madame Jasper's meeting. That was why they were at Winter Plum Valley. In the end, was Madame Jasper at Winter Plum Valley? Did Madame Jasper take him back to the Jasper Villa? Ma Rulong could not confirm.

Xiaowan was still staring at him waiting for his reply. He could real talk about his theories in heart. He doesn't want to hurt such a sentimental girl.

Xiaowan lightly sighed, "I know if he hasn't die, he would come back. Why did you have to lie to me?"

Ma Rulong said, "I..."

Xiaowan didn't let him continue and said, "You actually don't need to lie to me. I just need to know that he was as committed as I am. I am already satisfied."

Her attitude all of a sudden became cold and said, "Right now it's already dark. A man and woman alone together makes other people suspicious.⁶⁹ I don't dare let Ma gongzi stay." After these words, it was hard to say anymore.

Ma Rulong could only leave. Before he left, "I know your are committed. I will not force you but I hope you can wait three more days. Within three days, I will have information about Qiu Fengcheng to tell you."

She hesitated and finally replied, "Okay, I will wait three days."

The sky really turned dark. Outside was a very long narrow alley; Xiaowan house was at the end of the alley. Ma Rulong pulled his clothes together to prepare for the wind.

He came here to meet Xiaowan to confirm Qiu Fengcheng's words from that day. It was not that he was suspicious of Qiu Fengcheng. It was just that he had no other lead. It is like a drowning person, no matter what they see they would try to grab onto it.

Right now, he had already confirmed Qiu Fengcheng was truly a sentimental person and their love; even he was moved.

So he hoped he could help them out. Hope that within three days he could find Qiu Fengcheng's whereabouts. He hoped these two lovers could reunite.

However he still thought this matter was still strange. What was strange about it? He couldn't say. He thought Xiaowan's house was missing something and had something extra. What was missing? What was extra? He couldn't put a word to it.

Right now, was Dawan also awake? Was her head hurting like his? He suddenly realized he was thinking about her. This unbelievably ugly and unreasonable woman looked like she had a lovable side.

Unfortunately he did not know where she came from. Also did not know where she went. They actually barely knew each other and had already separated. From now on, it was possible they will never meet again. Ma Rulong let out a sigh and decided not to think about her.

Late winter at the remainder of the year. The end of the year was near; every household was preparing for the new year and buying new clothes. At these times, everyone's pocket needed some extra money so things that can be exchanged for money were taken out to be exchanged for money. Outside this alley was a small flower market. Chinese sacred lily and wintersweet were perfect for current situation.

The mistress of a small household brought a servant girl to help her buy new year's goods back: daylily, jelly fungus, red date, white nuts, dried apricots filled the basket. That servant girl was holding a basket and looking at pots of plum blossom. Which fifteen or sixteen year old girl doesn't like beautiful things? Who doesn't like fresh-smelling and red plum blossom?

She finally couldn't hold it and said, "Madame, why don't we also buy two pots of plum blossom back?"

"No." The madame with the silk clothing firmly replied with a serious face.

The servant girl did not give up, "These flowers were not expensive, what's wrong with buying some?"

"Because I don't have the mood for flowers."

Servant girl sighed and muttered, "Madame is truly....Master only hadn't come back for two three days. Madame doesn't even have to mood for flowers."

The servant did not want to but could only bit on her mouth and walked away with that gloomy madame. This was only an insignificant and minor matter, no one would have noticed or cared; yet Ma Rulong noticed this.

-- A simply housewife with husband only gone for two three days, she did not even have the mood for flowers.

-- Xiaowan vase of plum blossom on her table was newly added in.

-- If Ma Rulong had not came, she would've committed suicide for love. Why would she even have a mood for flowers?

Now Ma Rulong finally realized what was missing in the house? What was extra? That place was missing a servant and had an extra vase of flower.

Door was already closed. The alley only had small households. Xiaowan's place was comparably bigger with higher wall. The door made with sturdy and thick wood was already locked.

But it was not hard for Ma Rulong to get in.

He could jump over wall since he was ten. The lightness skill and swordplay of Hall of Divine Horse was admirable in Jianghu. He was already suspicious of Xiaowan, he just have to jump in and secretly spy on her. He also knew, the best way to find the true faces of people was to check on them when they were not in front of you.

However he would not do such a thing. Not only had he not done this before, he would not do this in the future. He decided to knock on the door but just as he was about to knock on the door he suddenly heard a strange noise.

He heard a person's laughter. Laughing is not a strange noise. Although there are a lot of tragedies in society, no matter where you go you could still hear laughter.

What he thought was strange was that was definitely a male's laughter and it came from the house. This was the house Qiu Fengcheng bought for Xiaowan, and only Xiaowan lived here. Why would there be a male laughter? Night was quiet. Ally was even quieter. Although the laughter was short, he could hear it clearly.

-- For anyone involved in this matter, they could get killed and die any moment.

-- Some people would laugh before they kill.

-- Right now, did someone want to kill and get rid of Xiaowan? Ma Rulong no longer scrupled and leaped in.

The furnace fire in the house was too warm. A window of a eastern side room facing west was opened. A pine tree mixed in with the plum blossom trees had a perfect view of the window. Xiaowan was standing next to the window in the room.

Ma Rulong leaped over the wall and happened to be on top of this tree. He did not want to spy on other's private matter but he already saw it. Not only did he saw Xiaowan, he also saw a man.

He could not see his face. This man had his back to the window and was facing Xiaowan. He was leaning on a soft couch.

He could only see that one of his legs was hanging next to the soft couch. The foot was wearing a very good-looking, high craftsmanship shoe. Only a wild and extravagant gentleman would wear this type of shoe.

Xiaowan was standing in front of him and looked at him with a strange expression, the coldly said, "You really wanted me to die?"

This man coldly laughed and said, "You really think I don't dare? You really think I'm afraid of you."

Xiaowan said, “Fine. You want me to die. I’ll die in front of you.”

_[Footnote]_____

65. jia (家), could mean either home or family.

66. Yifang Yuan (怡芳院) lit. harmony and fragrant courtyard. Typically brothel name.

67. Duoqing (多情), lit. mean “many love”. It is used to describe someone this is really focus or affectionate regarding love. I’m translating it as ‘a romantic’, ‘love-filled’, or ‘passionate about love’. I’ve seen it translated as ‘sentimental’, e.g. ‘Sentimental Swordsman, Ruthless Sword’. But they all seems a little bit off.

68. fengchen (风尘), lit. “wind and dust”. It’s a term to describe the prostitution world. However, the original text “a women in wind and dust” sounds more graceful than “a women in prostitution”.

69. Idiom Alert: guatianlixia (瓜田李下), lit. “melon field, under plum tree”. It’s a saying that means “tying shoe in melon field and fixing hat under the plum tree” make other people suspicious.

Chapter 8

Ch 8: Private Affair [私情]

Some people always love flower, no matter what was the mood they would have several flowers in the vase.

It looked like Xiaowan was not hiding anything, and definitely wasn’t having an affair. She really wanted to die. Why did the man wanted to force her to die? What relationship does this man have with her? Could it be one of Qiu Fengcheng’s friend wanted to force her to a love suicide? Perhaps he came to silence her?

While he was thinking, Xiaowan suddenly did something he would have never dream of. She suddenly went over, sat down on this man’s lap, wrap her arm around his neck, and nibbled on his ear, and said while gasping, “You want me to die. I also want you to die.”

Her top layer was already sliding off. Within her body tight silk robe, there was only a bright red dudou⁷⁰ (undergarment). The contrast made her skin looked even whiter. Ma Rulong could not watch anymore. This was someone else's private affair that he should not interfere with. However, he thought about Qiu Fengcheng's craziness and that pit -- originally he could have yelled and surprised these two people that wanted to "die". He could jump through the window. However he leaped back behind the wall instead and loudly knocked on the door. He knocked for a long while and then finally heard Xiaowan inside asked, "Who?"

"It's me."

"Who are you? How should I know who you are? Don't you even have a name?" Xiaowan's tone wasn't very pleasant but nevertheless she came out to open the door.

"It's you!" She was taken back after seeing Ma Rulong. However, she quickly composed herself and, with a serious look, coldly said, "Couldn't believe Ma gongzi came back. Are you afraid I will be lonely at night so you wanted to help Qiu Fengcheng take care of me?"

Those words were pretty extreme. After hearing these words, anyone that knows better would've left immediately. However Ma Rulong was exactly the type that does not know better, and said, "I know you are not lonely. I am just afraid people will harm you."

Xiaowan expression changed; her face was red for a moment, and then white for a moment. She suddenly turned around and walked toward the house. "You come with me." she said.

Ma Rulong followed her and she actually led him back to that room. The man before was not here.

"Sit." She pointed at the soft couch that man sat before and said, "Please sit."

Ma Rulong did not sit. He did not see that man but saw his shoes; the same good looking shoes.

This room had a bed and this bed had a cloth certain hanging over it. This cloth certain was very long and almost touches the floor. However it did not fully touch the floor so this pair of shoe was still showing.

Xiaowan said, "Why didn't you sit?"

Ma Rulong said, "This seat doesn't look like it's for me to sit."

Xiaowan laughed, an obviously very unnatural laugh, "If you don't sit on it, who else will sit on it?"

Ma Rulong said, "Looks like someone else is here."

Xiaowan said, "Besides Fengcheng, only you've come here before. Why would there be another person?"

She could really hold her emotion back. At this point, she could still fully deny there was someone else in this room.

Ma Rulong could not hold back any longer and quickly went over and opened the curtain. There was indeed a person behind the curtain. However, there wasn't "another" person here because the person here was actually Qiu Fengcheng.

Ma Rulong ran out the room, ran out the door, and ran out the long alley. Fortunately, it was already dark. Under these winter weathers, once it was dark there would be no one in the street. Otherwise, people would think he was crazy.

The only thing he wanted to do right now was to slap himself on the face a couple of times. He could not forget, the instant he opened the curtain, Qiu Fengcheng's expression and especially Xiaowan's expression.

However, he should've known Qiu Fengcheng could have come back any moment. Also, he should've thought this person could be Qiu Fengcheng. However he just happened to overlook this. He originally should've recognized Qiu Fengcheng's voice but unfortunately didn't notice that either.

Qiu Fengcheng was a well-raised son of a noble family, but at that point he unexpectedly smiled. However, to Ma Rulong, this was even worse than being slapped a few times on the face. He could only hurriedly leave, as if someone kicked him out with a broom.

Thus he was currently alone again; without any money or any place to go. Right now, he had absolutely no lead. It was like his whole body was tied up in mid-air by a thin rope and left hanging. There was no ground to stand on. Besides he could fall down at any moment and crack his head open.

Something was not right! He suddenly realized he was not alone, there was someone following him. He did not even need to turn around and already knew who was following him. Not sure why but his empty and wavering heart, that was left hanging in mid-air, suddenly became firmly established again. That person behind me already caught up, reached out a very nice-looking hand, and handed him something.

Ma Rulong accepted it. What he needed now was a medicine to help relieve his headache. What she gave him was packet of headache reliever medicine.

Once he swallowed this packet of medicine she stuck her hand out. On the hand there are seven, eight packets of medicines; some were pills, some medicine caplets, and some were medicinal powders. She gave it all to him.

“These are anti-alcohol drugs, these are zijinding⁷¹ (medicine pill), these are stomach pain relievers, these help recuperate stomach and intestine...”

Ma Rulong laughed, “What do you think I am? Am I a medicine jar?”

She laughed, “I know you are not a medicine jar. You are a wine jug.” She chuckled and said, “Unfortunately it is just a very, very small one. And it can’t hold much wine.”

Dawan did looked more spirited and looked better than him. “Could it be that her tolerance is better than mine?” Ma Rulong was not convinced and couldn't help but asked, “Your head does not hurt?”

Dawan replied, “Doesn’t hurt.”

Ma Rulong asked, “How come it doesn’t hurt?”

Dawan said, "Because I usually does not like to poke into other people's business." Getting involved in other people's business does indeed cause headaches. Not only does it make other people's head hurt, it makes your own head hurts too.

She asked, "Did you see that Xiaowan?"

"En."

"How is it?"

"What do you mean how is it?"

"How does she looks?"

"Not bad at all."

Dawan laughed, "Since she doesn't look bad at all, why do you look like you saw a ghost?"

Ma Rulong sighed and said, "It would've been better if I did see a ghost."

Dawan asked, "What did you see?"

Ma Rulong said, "I saw Qiu Fengcheng."

He actually told her everything that happened at first. These were embarrassing moments and he originally didn't want to talk about it. However for some reason, in front of her, he felt like he could say anything and didn't need to hold back.

Dawan actually did not laughed at him. On the other hand, sighed and said: "If I were you, at that moment I would've look for a hole and hide in it."

This was exactly how he felt at first. He suddenly felt this woman was not only sassy, extreme, and ugly; but also had a kind, understanding, and sympathetic heart. This was the first time he felt like this.

Dawan suddenly said, "However, I do not understand this."

Ma Rulong asked, "Understand what?"

Dawan said, "Qiu Fengcheng must've known you were there. Why would he need to hide?"

Ma Rulong said, "They are not truly a husband and wife. A person of his background should be a bit reserved. If I was him, I would've hidden myself too."

Dawan looked at him and said, "Can't believe you are such a considerate person."

Ma Rulong asked, "Originally, what kind of person do you think I am?"

Dawan said, "Originally I thought you are pompous and selfish. Someone that would not care about other people's life or death." Her voice became gentle, "However, now I know I was wrong." This unreasonable woman actually admitted being wrong. This was hard for someone to imagine.

Dawan said again, "After he saw you, what did he say?"

Ma Rulong said, "It was because he did not say anything, I felt even worst."

Dawan said, "What did you say?"

Ma Rulong bitterly smiled and said, "At that time, what else could I say?"

Dawan said, "Did he have any intention of taking you to Feng Chaofan?"

Ma Rulong said, "No."

Dawan said, "Did you asked him that day when you left, what happened at Winter Plum Valley? Did Madame Jasper came? Did she choose him as her son-in-law?"

Ma Rulong said, "I did not ask."

He suddenly asked her, "How do you know all of this?"

Dawan mysteriously laughed and said, "Of course someone told me."

Ma Rulong asked, "Who told you?"

Dawan replied, "A person that was drunk."

Ma Rulong asked, "Was this drunk person me?"

Dawan said, "At least you are not stupid."

Ma Rulong could only bitterly smile. He probably said a lot when he was drunk. Unfortunately, even he could not remember what he said.

"Actually Madame Jasper do not need to choose. Shen Hongye was already dead. You had become a person that is a rat being chased throughout the street. Other than the Silver Spear gentleman Qiu Fengcheng, who would be suitable to be Jasper Villa's son-in-law." She sighed and said, "Even if Madame Jasper want to choose, there is nothing to choose from." This was all true. After what had happened, the one who benefitted the most was Qiu Fengcheng.

Ma Rulong said, "But he is definitely not the culprit!"

Dawan asked, "Why?"

Ma Rulong said, "Because he already has someone he had pledged his undying love to. He doesn't really want to be son-in-law of Jasper Villa."

Dawan let out a sigh and said, "I also don't believe he did all those things. But if he isn't the culprit and you're not the culprit, then who is?"

Ma Rulong said, "It must be Tiansha (Heaven Kill)!"

Dawan asked, "Who is Heaven Kill?"

Ma Rulong answered, "Heaven Kill is not a person. It is a mysterious organization; an organization of killers."

Dawan asked, "Why would they do such a thing? Why would they frame you?"

Ma Rulong answered, "Because they wanted chaos." He explained, "If our families started fighting each other, Jianghu would be in chaos. They would seize this opportunity to rise."

His explanation was reasonable. It was not like these things had not happened before, and it would continue to happen in the future.

Ma Rulong said, "Right now they are simply an underground organization. Once their plan succeeded, they would change and become a legitimate clan sect. Because at the point, there would be not one in Jianghu that could contain them."

Dawan said, "Because at that point the houses and families would all sustain heavy casualties."

Ma Rulong said, "But I would definitely not let this happen."

Dawan asked, "What are you planning to do?"

Ma Rulong said, "I must first find the leader of Heaven Kill."

Dawan said, "How are you planning to find this leader?"

Ma Rulong did not say anything. He did not have a single lead or know where to start.

Dawan said, "This person must have know you four young masters would be at the Winter Plum Valley that day."

Ma Rulong said, "That's right."

Dawan said, "How does he know? Other than the four of you, who else would know? Did you tell anyone about this?"

Ma Rulong said, "I did not. However, Qiu Fengcheng..." He suddenly thought, Xiaowan did mention "Winter Plum Valley".

Xiaowan once asked -- "Several days ago, were you at the Winter Plum Valley?" She knew they were at the Winter Plum Valley; and, obviously, Qiu Fengcheng told her.

If Qiu Fengcheng could tell her this, he could've told someone else. Xiaowan could also tell someone else. Like other men, he could never believe a woman could keep a secret. This was his only clue.

Ma Rulong said, "We must go ask him. There are a lot of things we have to ask him."

Dawan asked, "Are you planning to go ask him now?"

Ma Rulong said, "Of course now."

He said he was going so he went. Dawan sighed and said, "You really know how to pick your timing. You couldn't have chosen a better time. Right now, if you go they're probably at the 'you're-killing-me-I'm-killing-you' state. If you can get there in time, you might be able to save them again. They would've thank you wholeheartedly."

He was not going anymore. He could also imagine if they saw him coming back again what type of expression they would have. This kind of mood killing and annoying thing, no one would want to be part of.

Ma Rulong said, "When do you think I should go?"

Dawan suddenly revealed a strange expression and quietly said, "It's the best that you go now. Quickly go." Woman's heart is like the weather in May, it changes so fast.

Ma Rulong couldn't help but asked, "Why do you want me to go now?"

Dawan said, "If you do not go right now, you probably never have another chance."

She suddenly let out a sigh and said, "Actually I am afraid it is already too late."

At this moment, they entered the dark alley. Ma Rulong again asked, "Why?" He no longer needed to ask because right now he saw two heads. Some people were blocking their way. Seven people, seven people in black clothes.

_[Footnote]_____

70. dudou (肚兜), a traditional Chinese female undergarment that tightly covers the breast and stomach.

71. Zijin Ding (紫金锭), an eastern medication. Taken orally, it gets rid of toxic material, resolve phlegm, cause resuscitation, resolve adverse flow of qi. Applied externally to disperse swelling. Info taken from TCM wiki.

Chapter 9

Ch. 9: A Friend In Need Is A Friend Indeed72 [患难见真情]

A rich household must be living in this alley.

Rich household must have security against bandits and thieves. Therefore they rather not see daylight and prefer to build two high walls. So there were two high walls on both side of this alley. Even Hall of Divine Horse lightness skill was not enough to jump over such high wall.

The alley was very deep and dark. There were four people in the front, and three at the back. Seven people were wearing tight black clothes; and there was a black cloth covering their face. They were walking slowly and didn't seem to be in a hurry; because they knew these two people were like soft-shelled turtles in a pond, fishes in a net. There was nowhere to run.

Ma Rulong lowered his head and quietly said, "You don't need to be afraid. I would tell them to let you go."

Dawan responded, "They would let me go?"

Ma Rulong remarked, "This matter has nothing to do with you. Why wouldn't they let you go?"

Dawan replied, "You think they are here for you?"

Ma Rulong responded, "Of course."

Dawan said, "You are wrong." She let out a sigh and said, "I also wish they are here for you. Unfortunately that's not the case."

Ma Rulong asked, "Why not?"

Dawan said, "You are a branded a murderer. Catching a murderer is an honorable and upright thing to do. Why do they need to cover their faces with a black cloth?"

Ma Rulong finally remembered she was the same as him. She had her own trouble and there were people were after her.

Dawan said, "However you don't have to be afraid, I will tell them to let you go."

Ma Rulong asked, "You think I will go?"

Dawan replied, "We are not related to each other in any way. If other people want my life, do you really want to die with me?"

Ma Rulong said: "No matter what, I can't simply just leave you here alone."

Dawan asked, "Why?"

Ma Rulong replied, "I can not do such a thing."

Dawan said, "That is not a good enough reason."

Ma Rulong said, "However, to me, it's good enough."

Dawan said, "Hard to say, maybe I am a bad woman or a criminal. Maybe you should really help them catch me instead."

Ma Rulong said, "I know you are definitely not such a person."

Dawan asked, "How do you know? You don't even know my last name."

Ma Rulong replied, "However I believe in you."

Dawan looked at him and then suddenly let out a sigh, "I thought you are getting smarter. I can't believe you are still this stupid."

Although the alley was long and the seven people in black clothes were slow, they were almost near them. Seven people were carrying weapons, very rare type of weapons. There was a person carrying the a weapon that hadn't been used since Shangguan Jinhong⁷³ died by Little Li's Flying Dagger, the Dragon Phoenix Gold Ring. Another person was holding a pair of Mandarin Duck Kuahulan⁷⁴.

These weapons had disappeared from Jianghu for a long time. It was because even though these weapons were powerful, they were extremely hard to master. The people that were capable of using these weapons would definitely not have weak skills. Ma Rulong truly did not have the confidence that he could handle them; however, he was not discouraged or terrified.

She suddenly asked, "Hey! Are you people here to look for me? Or here to look for him?"

The man dressed in black, holding the Dragon Phoenix Gold Ring, was small and robust and his steps were steady. Between his black cloth face mask, it was revealing a brilliant pair of eyes, which was sharp like an eagle. Undoubtedly he was an expert. This man coldly responded, "So what if we are here to look for you? What if we are here to look for him?"

Dawan replied, "If you are here for him, then this has nothing to do with me. I am not a hero or gentleman. Even if you people kill him, I wouldn't get involved."

This person coldly said, "You don't need to say, I can tell."

Dawan added, "However, if you people are here for me, the situation will not be the same."

This person remarked, "Oh?"

Dawan replied, "Even though he has a lot of his own problem, he is not like me who refused to get involved. As long as any of you touch me, he will fight you to death."

This person said, "So if we are to touch you, we have to kill him first."

Dawan looked at Ma Rulong, "Isn't that right?"

Ma Rulong replied, "Yes."

He, himself, did not know why he said those words because right now he had plenty of things to do. Without finding out the truth behind his situation, he absolutely should not die. If he were to die here, not only would it be an obscure death but also he would also never be able to clear his innocence. However, he already spoken those words, he didn't want to go back on his word nor regret this decision.

Dawan asked, "Hey, did you people hear what he said?"

The man in black cloth coldly laughed, "Looks like he is not only a true hero but also a gentleman."

Dawan said, "It looks like it."

This person said, "Unfortunately this type of people doesn't live long."

Dawan sighed, "I had already told him that but he wouldn't listen"

With a "ding" sound, the pair of rings rattled and fire lights shot out everywhere. In the past, Shangguan Jinhong shook the entire world. He established the dominating "Jinqian Bang" (Gold Money Clan) in Jianghu. Not only did he have outstanding ability and grand vision, his wugong (martial art) were phenomenal. In Bai Xiaosheng's⁷⁵ Book of Weapons, the "Shangguan Gold Ring" was placed second but many in Jianghu believed his wugong was not inferior to the number one ranked Tianji Old Master⁷⁶.

The pair of Dragon Phoenix Gold Ring in his palms was considered the world most dominating weapon. This weapon was in the hand of this man dressed in black. Although it did not have the same quality

when it was with Shangguan Jinhong during his reign, this was still a phenomenal weapon. Dawan did not even pay attention to it, her eyes were looking at Ma Rulong. Her eyes had a hint of smile; a smile that had gentleness and delight.

Strong opponents with killing intents were already here. Life and death were on the line. She actually thought it was delightful because Ma Rulong did not even abandon her here. No matter what came out of her mouth, in her heart this was more important than her life or death.

Ma Rulong suddenly also thought it was becoming delightful; even her pair of droopy eyes right now became lovelier. There were no absolute standard between beauty and ugly. A person that made him delightful was a lovely person.

Dawan softly asked, "Are you afraid?"

Ma Rulong was not completely unafraid. Fear is always one of the hardest human weakness to conquer. Fortunately there are more beautiful human emotions that can overpower fear.

Dawan said, "If you are scared, you still have a chance to leave."

Ma Rulong replied, "I'm not leaving."

Dawan softly sighed and said: "Then I..." She did not finish her words. It was as if an invisible and incredibly fast dagger cut off her voice or an invisible devil grabbed onto her throat. Her eyes had an expression of extreme terror, as if she saw a devil no one else could see.

If Ma Rulong turned his head around, he would realize she only saw a person, an ordinary woman. She was wearing plain green clothes and holding a basket of flower. She just came into the alley. Ma Rulong did not turn his head so he couldn't help asked, "Are you alright?"

Dawan said, "I need to go. You're not going, I am." She actually really did leave. She hadn't even finished saying these words and already lightly leaped up over that high wall that no one would imagine she could've go over.

That plain looking flower girl continued walking with her head down. It looked like she did not notice that high wall blocking her path in front of her. Everybody saw her head hit the wall and her head was bleeding. Surprisingly the wall did not crack her head, but she cracked through the wall. With a “pu” sound, the two, three chi (feet) thick wall had a human shape hole in it. This plain looking flower managed to pass through wall as if it was a piece of paper.

Ma Rulong and everyone were startled at the scene. Dawan lightness skill was superb. This flower girl’s martial art was even better. The sky looked as though it suddenly turned dark. The wind felt as though it suddenly turned colder. Although they were gone, the people with killing intent were still here. The gold ring was still on that person’s hand.

Ma Rulong finally asked, “So are you people here for her or me?”

The man dressed in black replied, “For her.”

Ma Rulong said, “She already left.”

The man dressed in black said, “To you, that’s not good.”

Ma Rulong asked, “Why?”

The man dressed in black said, “Because you should know the a sharp blade out of its sheath must see blood or else it’s unlucky.”

His palm still had a killing weapon, eyes had killing intents, “We are all the same. As long as we start, we have to kill. Now she already left, we can only kill you.”

Ma Rulong said, “Very good.”

Actually he knew the current situation was not good. No matter who, this was not a very good situation. His palm did not have a killing weapon and his heart did not any killing intent. He did not have a choice either.

-- Why do people kill others? He despised violence. In certain situation, you can only use force to prevent violence. He already fully collected the qi and energy of his body. He only had one life and he did not want to die yet. He believed violence must be controlled.

With a “ding” sound, the gold ring was struck again. Fires like rains of comet shot out four times. Ma Rulong also shot out like an arrow.

He did not have killing intent. However, he had another qi, xueqi⁷⁷ (courage)!

His target was not the man dressed in black holding the gold ring; it was another. The phrases “capture the ringleader first” does not apply in this case. Right now, he needed to attack the opponent’s weakest link.

In a righteousness and evil cannot stand by each other world and an enemy and I cannot coexist situation, if I can survive I will need to survive. If I can destroy the enemy, I would need to destroy the enemy. His target of attack was Heiba (Black Lord).

Heiba’s last name was Huang but everyone called him Heiba. This was because he was the blackest, biggest, tallest, and most arrogant one within the organization. Heiba height was eight chi (feet) nine cun (inches) tall, shoulder breadth was three chi (feet), his arm was bigger than most people’s thigh, and his fist was bigger than a baby’s head.

Why would Ma Rulong think such a person was the weakest link? Is it because this person was always following closely on the soul-snatching gold ring’s side?

Wisteria can only rely on nearby tree to survive. Cunning fox can only rely on the might of the tiger to threaten. Weak obviously relies on the strong for support. A person’s strength could not be judged based on his appearance. Ma Rulong’s judgment was not wrong.

Heiba’s weapon was a pair of Hunyuan Iron Plate. It looked like a sixty to seventy catty heavy Hunyuan Iron Plate.

Ma Rulong charged forward, this pair of Hunyuan also started to attack; a swept and a clap. It was a pity that the strength of a weapon was not determined by its weight.

Ma Rulong waved his fist and went through the sweeping and striking iron plate. The fist was already struck a blow at his nose bridge. When this fist struck, there was only a soft noise; like a fist hitting a piece of dead meat. There wasn't even a cry and Heiba fell down facing upward.

Ma Rulong could rush over this fallen body and go toward the outside of the alley or through that hole in the wall. He did not do that because he suddenly thought he could fight these people and that it wasn't completely hopeless. As long as there was a chance, he would not give up. He faced an arrogant person, very arrogant looking person.

When Heiba fell down, he already used a toe to kick up a iron plate, grab it with left hand, seize this opportunity with a sweeping strike, and swept back the gold ring. His right hand already chopped on another person's wrist and made a judge brush fell.

The gold ring was still here in a pair intimidating hands. Then there was also another pair of terrifying hands holding a pair of kuahulan. These two pairs of hands and these two weapons were really life threatening. By the time the odd, immeasurable kuahulan and soul-snatching gold ring with unparalleled power attacked, he then would realized he made another terrible mistake. He underestimated his opponents and overestimated himself.

This type of mistake can never be repeated again, because one is already fatal! But he could still fight; he would risk his body and life to fight. A person that is willing to risk his own life is not only dangerous but also terrifying. A person will risk his one life only when this person is pushed to the edge. Why were these people not risking their life to battle him? -- Tiansha! -- They originally wanted to kill him. He suddenly thought this through.

Heiba struggled and stood up. He had trouble breathing with his bloody and broken nose. He suddenly ripped off his clothes wildly yelled, "Kill him! Kill him! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill!"

It was miserable holler and a killer willing to stake his life. Within the ripped clothes, his bare chest revealed those nineteen words in blood -- Tiansha! The one who was willing to using cruel method and sacrifice everything to kill him.

Ma Rulong tightened his fist, gritted his teeth, ready to die if he had to. Another person fell under his fist; he didn't see clearly who this person was. However, he suddenly saw a sliver of light. Glitter and blindingly silver light flashed through the air, it was a spear, a silver spear!

"Phoenix City, Silver Spear, Qiu." When he saw this spear, he heard Qiu Fengcheng's voice, "If you people want to kill, break this spear first. If you people want to break this spear, you must kill me first."

He never thought Qiu Fengcheng would come save him. However, Qiu Fengcheng was already here by his side. With one spear and one life, fighting with his own life with him. -- Why do people have to wait until times of adversity where they can finally see who are really considered friend? Where they can finally see the true face of another?

Spear sharply pierced through a person's throat. A fist, again, broke another's rib cage. This time everyone could hear the agony and pain of the crushed victim.

Those who hadn't fell suddenly disappeared. Two life-risking people were obviously more dangerous and terrifying than one. Beside, these two were Qiu Fengcheng and Ma Rulong.

Didn't know what time it is. The color of the night became dark. The narrow alley became chilly and dark. Ma Rulong could only feel a warm hand holding on to his hand.

Qiu Fengcheng's voice was also full of warmth, "I can tell what you needed the most right now? You needed to drink some wine."

_[Footnote]_____

72. Chinese idiom: huannanjianzhenqing (患难见真情), lit. mean "trials and tribulation see true feeling".

73. Shangguan Jinhong (上官金虹), surname Shangguan means high official, given name means "gold rainbow". Main antagonist of Sentimental Swordsman Ruthless Sword.

74. Kuahulan (跨虎篮), an ancient unique weapon. It's a short range double handed weapon; about 36 cm long, made out of iron, and in a crescent moon shape. There are sharp edge on both end of the crescent. The handle is at the middle section.

75. Bai Xiaosheng (百晓生), surname Bai means hundred, surname means “knowledge student”. Famous character in Gu Long’s lore, he collected knowledge regarding Jianghu.

76. Tianji Laoren (天机老人), tianji means mystery of the universe, so his name means “Old man of the mystery of the universe”.

77. xueqi (血气), lit. blood and qi (air/breath). It could also mean courage or uprightness.

Ch. 10

Chapter 10: Questions [问题]

The wine was not considered very good. It was not vintage wine and most definitely not nu’erhong. It was simply a huadiao (rice wine) that could be bought in any marketplace at any time. Ma Rulong did not really mind. Xiaowan still apologetically explained, “Fengcheng rarely drink here or have friends over. I just bought this wine at first.”

She bought this wine and cooked this dish herself because she did not have a female servant. “Fengcheng like being quiet and do not want to use servant so I did everything here.” Her voice was full of femininity; her life seemed to be centered around Qiu Fengcheng. She complied with whatever Qiu Fengcheng likes.

If a man and woman mutually loved one another, that was enough. What was the use for other people? What was the use for good wine? Ma Rulong suddenly felt envious of them. He couldn’t bear but asked himself: “If he also have a woman like Xiaowan that wholeheartedly follow him, do everything for his consideration, will he be willing give up everything and live such a plain and simple life?”

He suddenly thought of Dawan. If he married Dawan, would she treat him this way too? Ma Rulong did not think any further. This question was not only absurd and ridiculous, it was simply comical.

He, of course, would not marry a woman like Dawan. Even if he had a knife by his throat, he would not be willing. Although Dawan no longer looked as ugly and annoying, she was still not considered good looking or cute. How could a prince charming in a lot of young girls’ heart marry such a woman? Ma Rulong lifted the cup and drank all of its content and decided to forget about such a woman.

Qiu Fengcheng looked like he drank quite a bit. Since he was in such a mood to drink, Xiaowan also drank with him. Both of them looked a bit drunk and they were starting to get intimate. It looked like they had

already forgotten that Ma Rulong was still there. Ma Rulong finally realized he was an extra, so he was preparing to find a chance to bid farewell.

The questions he wanted to ask in the beginning, he didn't want to ask anymore. This is because he fully trusted Qiu Fengcheng now. Right when he stood up, Qiu Fengcheng toasted him again and grab onto Xiaowan's hand and smiled, "You also toast him three cups, three big cups."

Xiaowan chuckled and strongly shook her head, "I can only toast him one cup."

"It must be three big cups."

"Three big cups, I will drink to death."

"If you don't drink I will choke you to death."

Xiaowan smiled charmingly and playfully said, "I rather you choke me to death."

"Really?"

"Of course really."

"Good." Qiu Fengcheng was smiling and grab onto Xiaowan's neck and softly said, "Then I am really going to choke you to death."

Ma Rulong didn't really want to listen or watch anymore. He should leave immediately. But he did not leave because at the moment he stood up he suddenly witnessed something he would never imagine would happen. He saw Xiaowan's pair of eyes that was so full of love all of a sudden sticking out like a dead fish, her face already green and body stiffen. This time it was really for real. Qiu Fengcheng really choked Xiaowan to death.

Ma Rulong froze as if there was also an invisible hand holding his neck, breathing stopped, body stiffen, and leg and hand became cold. Xiaowan already fell down. Qiu Fengcheng saw her fell down and his face haven't change and was still smiling.

"Lying is a bad habit. I never lied." He was still smiling and said, "I said I was really going to choke her to death. I really did choke her to death. So from now on the words I say, you better believe it."

Ma Rulong couldn't even say a single word. He wanted to throw up. He wanted to throw up everything he drank and ate at first, but he couldn't throw anything up.

Qiu Fengcheng laughed even happier, "Why don't you ask me? Ask me why I choked her."

There was no need to ask, he started answering himself. "Actually I was prepared to choke her to death from the day I met her because she was not only pretty but also the type of woman crazy about love. A woman like her was perfect for my plan."

-- His plan? What plan? Although Ma Rulong was not stupid, he still didn't fully understand.

Qiu Fengcheng actually explained, "I wanted everyone to believe I already have woman fully committed to me that had a eternal vow with me never to be separated. Everyone would then believe I would not be interested in being Madame Jasper's son-in-law." He sighed, "Actually I wanted it really badly."

However his rivals were really strong, even he didn't have confidence he would be selected. "So I must get rid of the three of you first." Getting rid of these three people were not easy.

"Fortunately I know you were all drunkard and coincidentally know Little Du ordered a banquet of food and wine from Jufeng Lou."

So he bribed these Jufeng Lou employees to put poison in the wine and then used "Heaven Kill" assassin to kill these employees.

"The only one thing I didn't expect was that you didn't drink." He continued, "However I am a very cautious person and already had a backup plan."

His back ups were Jin Zhenlin and Peng Tianba. Jin Zhenlin was already persuaded by him. Peng Tianba originally was working with him. The jade placed next to his heart was, of course, part of the plan. After completely the task, everyone was killed off.

“Feng Chaofan and Jue dashi actually did not know a single thing. I deliberately used Peng Tianba to ask them to come over to Jufeng Lou to drink wine and then bring them to Winter Plum Valley. All for the purpose of witnessing this incident, to prove I am completely innocent and you are the culprit.” He smiled, “However you couldn’t blame me. Blame that you were unlucky, you didn’t drink the wine and you didn’t die. If you also died, then I wouldn’t have to go through this mess. “

Now he did not have any rivals and if Xiaowan did not die he cannot get rid of her and successfully become Madame Jasper's future son-in-law. Therefore Xiaowan had to die. Qiu Fengcheng looked at Ma Rulong. “As for you, it doesn’t matter if you are dead or alive because everyone already determined you are the murderer. You staying alive might have an advantage.”

“What advantage?” Ma Rulong finally said, “If I don’t die, what advantage would you get?”

Qiu Fengcheng sighed and said, “Could it be you never thought that I am the leader of ‘Heaven Kill’?”

Ma Rulong whole body was frozen stiff. “Heaven Kill” wanted to rise, and must first create chaos in Jianghu that would lead everyone to kill each other. If he didn’t die, it might create this kind of chaos. Now, he finally understood. He originally thought he might never know the truth behind this. However, he suddenly understood. He could never dream the real culprit would reveal all of this to him. He couldn’t hold it and asked, “Why are you telling me all of your secret?”

Qiu Fengcheng laughed, “Because...” Right after he said this, his expression changed like the change Du Qinglian had right before he died, his pale white face became deathly black. He struggled to stand up but tripped on a chair; he wanted to grab on but when the chair fell, he also fell.

End of Chapter 10

Chapter 11: Strappado [吊刑]

Ma Rulong was startled again. How could there be poison in the wine? Who put poison there? Did Xiaowan figured out Qiu Fengcheng was going to murder her so she put poison in the wine first? He drank from the same bottle of wine. Right now Qiu Fengcheng already died from poison, how come he was not affected?

There were too many questions, too complicated, and too sudden. His train of thought was all messed up. He couldn't even figure out the simplest question.

He smartest move was to leave this troubling place immediately. All these were part of a plan; this must be a trap. He already thought about this point, it's a pity by the time he realized this he had already fallen into the trap. A plan that was an even more meticulous, even more vicious trap. No matter who fell in, there would be no escape.

The room had four lamps lit up; four extremely expensive Persian crystal lamps. Really expensive items are good items. Even if this type of lamps falls on the floor, it would not even break. These four lamps were placed on the table, both squared and stable. Suddenly, with a "bo" sound, the four exquisite crystal lamps shattered at the same time and the lamplight went out.

At the same moment, Ma Rulong also suddenly felt an enormous pressure, like ocean waves clashing toward him from all sides. His heart was immediately beating faster, breathing almost stopped, blood coming out of his nose, and throat was getting dry. He eyeballs felt like popping out and he almost fainted. Once his dizziness had passed, all these strange phenomenons disappeared and there were now four people in the room. The first person he saw was Jue dashi; heartless, loveless, and spare-less killing Jue dashi.

With Jue dashi here, Feng Chaofan most definitely was here too. One was a skinny and bony with pitch-black face and skin ascetic monk. Although his monk gown seems heavily patched up, his hand was holding a string of priceless jade Buddhist beads. The other has big sleeved wide gown, topknot on his head, crystal-clear skin like jade, and looked like a person carved out of white jade. A striking contrast compared to the ascetic monk.

These four people came in from four directions. Before coming in, every person released their decades worth of trained eternal energy and qi, and sealing off Ma Rulong escape route and chance of attack. They were already very cautious of Ma Rulong and believed he was capable of doing anything.

When these forces rushed over, the forces from the west and east were far superior to those from north and south. From the east was that ascetic monk and the west was the jade taoist. The internal energies of these two were much better than the world-renown Jue dashi. Ma Rulong had never seen these two before but already guessed who they were.

The ascetic monk's Buddhist name was "Chiku" (endure hardships). He had endured untold hardships, journeyed thousands mile to the west, to faraway Tianzhu (India) and not for Buddhist scriptures. Since Bodhidharma came to the east, he wanted to discover the mystery of Buddhist martial art, which all martial artists dreamt of. His journey, undoubtedly, had gains.

The jade Taoist in former years roamed and shook Jianghu with one sword. A man all hero fear, and all women fell for. Seeing these four men, Ma Rulong's heart sank. In the world, there were absolutely no one that could escape from these four nor could anyone save someone from their hands. This was something no one could deny.

Lamplight did not die because they did not want the light to go out. The things they wanted to do would be completed, those things they don't want to do would not happened. They did not looked like they even noticed Ma Rulong. They were looking at Qiu Fengcheng.

Qiu Fengcheng breathing had already stopped. The wine bottle and wine cups all fell on the floor. Monk Chiku picked it up and sniffed it. A pair of eyes deep in his socket glimmered sharply like razor. He followed Tang Sanzang's journey to the west path to faraway India, a very tenacious road. Going through those barren mountain, untamed rivers, jungles, and marshes, there were poisonous insect, snake, beast, plants and tree that were lethal. He had seen nearly all the poisonous things in the world. With respect to this, his experience were comparable to Shennong (God of Farming) that tasted hundred of plants.

Although Jue dashi became a monk for many years, he still attained his fiery and irritable temperament. He already couldn't bear and asked, "What?" Monk Chiku not only kept his mouth shut, he also closed his eyes. Jue dashi became even more anxious.

If Monk Chiku could not determine which poison killed Qiu Fengcheng, there was no other person in the world that could. Luckily, Monk Chiku finally opened his mouth.

“There is no poison in the wine in the bottle.”

“Where is the poison?”

“On the cup he drank last.”

“What is the poison?”

“A poison made with three other poisonous herbs; qianji⁷⁹, duanchang⁸⁰, and xiaohun⁸¹. It’s called ‘Autumn Insect Powder’ (qiuchongsan).”

“Are you sure?”

“This poison powder is colorless and tasteless. It’s most suitable for wine because with alcohol the poison spreads even faster.”

“How fast?”

“Once the wine enters throat, poison immediately spreads. Once the wine enters stomach, death by autumn insect.”

“He had just been poisoned.”

“So the poison must be in the last cup of wine.”

“Can the poisoned be cured?”

“Autumn Insect does not guarantee death. As you as you can help him quick enough, it could be cured.”

“Can you cure him?”

“I can’t. He can.”

Monk Chiku turned his head, looked at Jade Taoist and said, “No one can compare to me in terms of recognizing poison. Curing poison, I’m inferior to you.”

Jade Taoist asked, “How do you know you’re inferior to me?!”

Monk Chiku answered, “Because you are a heartless person, I am not.”

Jade Taoist laughed. He could not deny this. Since he was sixteen, countless women tried to poison him. He had too many and not very faithful; many woman didn’t want to lose him. They knew unless they poison him, eventually he would become heartless. A sick person could become a doctor. A person that could be poison to death any day, how could they not know how to cure poison?

Monk Chiku said, “If he does not know how to cure poison, he would already be dead.”

Jue dashi said, “If he could not cure this Autumn Insect Powder poison, is there anyone else that could?”

Jade Taoist answered this himself and his answer was: “No.”

Ma Rulong finally understand. This was not merely a trap; it was a noose. If one said Qiu Fengcheng poisoned himself, who would believe he would poison himself. Therefore, the one that put in the poison was Ma Rulong.

Qiu Fengcheng’s poison symptoms were exactly the same as Shen Hongye and Du Qinglian. The poison in the wine at Winter Plum Valley was undoubtedly Autumn Insect Powder. So the person the put in the poison that time was also Ma Rulong.

Qiu Fengcheng already knew that Jue dashi and them would come. He already knew he would be saved so he put poison in his wine.

Even though he had already revealed the fact that he was the mastermind, besides Ma Rulong, no other person heard his confession. Also absolutely no one would believe a person would reveal all of his crime in front of another. So right now even if Ma Rulong said it all out, no one would believe him.

Since Qiu Fengcheng was poisoned by Ma Rulong, he would obviously be the one that choked Xiaowan to death. No one would investigate why he would choke her to death. A cold-blooded murderer like this would be able to do anything. Killer should die. Right now Ma Rulong had already been sentenced to be hanged.

_[Footnote]_____

78. Tang Sanzhang (唐三藏), protagonist and the monk from Journey to the West, or Xiyouji.

79. qianji (牵机), lit. 'pulling machine' is a ancient poison king used to put their subject to death. The main ingredient is strychnine. After ingesting, victims convulse and muscle tighten as if he went through a pulling machine, hence the name.

80. duanchang (断肠), lit. 'intestine breaking' refers to various poisonous plant. However, it's most commonly called the Heartbreak grass, aka, Gelsemium elegans.

81. xiaohun (销魂), lit. 'ecstasy'.

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Chapter 12: Jasmine [茉莉花]

Qiu Fengcheng really did not die. This was already his second time coming back from the dead. Ma Rulong thought of Jin Zhenlin strike and the piece of jade conveniently placed by his heart. Using an alibi like Xiaowan, he could logically explain the jade. Every step of the plan he laid out, every detail were carefully planned and arranged. Every time he put himself in the brink of death so no one would suspect him.

Now he already vomited out the poisonous content of his stomach. Everyone could tell he would live and perhaps could live 170-180 year, much longer than anyone. Right now their target switched over to Ma Rulong. Everyone eyes were like a sharp dagger.

The first one to open his mouth was Feng Chaofan, "What else do you have to say?"

Ma Rulong did not have anything to say. If he told the truth, who would believe Qiu Fengcheng choked Xiaowan to death? Who would believe he revealed his secrets? And who would believe he put poisons in his own wine?

Jue dashi coldly asked, "This time, what else do you want to settle?"

Ma Rulong's hand did not have precious sword, pocket did not have any gold, body did not have fox fur coat. He could not play the same trick twice.

Jue dashi said, "Now that there are undeniable proofs of your crime, but with your personality you would never admit it or turn yourself in."

Ma Rulong admit that right now he could not defend himself and had no chance to escape. He recognized all of this. He still had a mouth and would not give up retaliating.

Jue dashi said, "With the four of us, we could easily capture you. But we don't want to win with number."

Ma Rulong suddenly said, "I understand."

Jue dashi asked, "What do you understand?"

Ma Rulong replied, "You want to handle me yourself. You want to kill me with your own hand." He continued, "Because other than killing, you have no other pleasure."

These were like needle that pricked into someone's heart. Jue dashi had no response, coldly said, "If you don't want me to do it, you can select someone else."

Ma Rulong said, "I still choose you."

Jue dashi said, "Very good."

Ma Rulong said, "Actually I originally don't want to choose you. Although your internal energy isn't better than Monk Chiku and your swordplay isn't better than Jade Taoist, your experience in killing is richer than those two. You know how to kill better." He let out a sigh, "Unfortunately even though if I know this, but I still want to choose you."

Jue dashi could not help asked, "Why is that?"

Ma Rulong replied, "I chose you only because you are a cruel, arrogant, and egotistic person. Always thought you alone could determine others crime. Once you sentence others crime, you have to kill them no matter what." His voice getting emotional, "I chose you because I vents on behalf of those who were wrongfully killed by you. I am not your match but I can guaranteed that is a way for me to take you along with me to hell."

Jue dashi definitely could not ask: "What way?" These words coming out of Ma Rulong was hard not to believe. His facial expression was already changing. A person that put other to death, he, himself, was also afraid of death. This was not something he could conceal.

Ma Rulong suddenly laughed out loudly. "So you are not as ruthless as other say. So, like others, you also treasure you own life."

His laughs was full of cynicism, "Actually I didn't really have any way take you along with me to death. I just wanted to bluff you."

When fighting amongst experts, you could not be disturbed or get angry, otherwise you are letting them take the lead. Jue dashi always understood this principle.

However, he had already become mad. His eyes were turning red and his veins were showing, like eagle claws he extended his hand and walked, one step at a time, toward Ma Rulong.

The floor of this room was laid with glossy teak wood planks. The wood on the spots he stepped on cracked. He already concentrated all his energy within his body, once he strikes it could kill a person. He was not even considering whether he was killing the wrong person.

Other than noises of wood plank breaking, it seemed like the entire world was quiet. However, he suddenly heard someone selling flowers: "Zhulan⁸², Jasmine."

Clear and loud sound of someone selling flower but it seems like it was from far away. However, it suddenly seemed like it was getting close as if it was someone right next to your ear. On the beautiful plastered wall, there was suddenly a hole in the form of a human.

"Zhulan, Jasmine." A slender body flower girl wearing a bamboo hat and green cloth suddenly appeared through the hole with her hand holding a jasmine made with metal wire.

Jasmine flower were good smelling and beautiful. Her hands were also beautiful. Ma Rulong suddenly thought of the mysterious flower girl the scared away Dawan in that narrow alley. What was she doing here?

"Buy a jasmine flower." She suddenly placed the jasmine flower from her hand on Jue dashi eagle-claw like hands.

The energy in his hand was like a bowstring in full tension. One touch to set it off, but once it was set off it would even crumbled stone.

However his hand, unexpectedly, did not crumble this jasmine flower. The flower, however, looked it as if it was piercingly hurting his hand. Not only did it seem to pierce his hand, through his fingers it pierced through his heart. Because once he took this jasmine, he already jumped back and like an arrow flew out the window.

-- Who was this flower girl? What kind of power did this jasmine have?

Flower girl turned her body and faced Jade Taoist, "Buy a jasmine." Her hand was holding another flower, "This fragrant and pretty jasmine wither very fast. If you don't buy it, you will regret this."

"I want to buy. How are you selling it?", Jade Taoist asked.

"The price of my flower is always fair and honest." Flower girl with gentle voice, "One life, one jasmine."

Jade Taoist forcibly smiled, "I can't afford it."

He suddenly retreated back, like an arrow shot through the hold in the wall. Monk Chiku and Feng Chaofan left as fast as him.

Flower girl lightly sighed, "Such a sweet-smelling jasmine, how come no one wants to buy it?"

Ma Rulong suddenly said, "They don't want to buy it. I will buy it."

Flower girl with her back against him, did not even turn around. "You also have one life. You could not afford it either."

"What if I insist in buying it?"

"I would insist in not selling."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want your life!"

"This life, I picked it up anyway."

“Since you already picked it back up, you should really treasure it.” As she was saying this she was walking away. Ma Rulong was following behind her. They walked out the room really fast, in an instant already walked out to the dusky little alley.

_[Footnote]_____

82. Zhulan (珠兰), sometimes called Chinese perfume plant. Species, *Aglaia odorata*.

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Chapter 13: The Flower Girl [卖花女]

Cold night, sky with no clouds but there were stars. Under this dim star light, the back of this mysterious flower girl looked familiar as if it was someone he knew. She was not using her qinggong (lightness skill) or running away. Ma Rulong, however, could not catch up to her.

Once he started to use his well-known Hall of Divine Horse’s lightness skill, she was suddenly fifty to sixty zhang (yards) away. As he was trying to catch up to her, she was getting farther. When he slowed down, she also slowed down. When he stopped, she also stopped. It looked like even though she didn’t want him to catch up to her, she didn’t want him to get too far back either.

Ma Rulong suddenly asked, “You don’t want me to see you, don’t want me to know who you are, right?”

No answer nor denial.

Ma Rulong laughed, “It’s a pity because I already know who you are.”

The flower girl also laughed. Her laugh, in this lonely winter night, was like a bottle of hot wine. It could warm people up.

“You originally should know.” She chuckled, “Because you are not that stupid.”

She was obviously Dawan. She was originally scared away by a flower girl but why was she wearing that flower girl’s clothes and holding her flower baskets. Where did that mysterious flower girl go?

What Ma Rulong did not know was not just this; Dawan’s background, martial art, and origin were all mysteries. Why was she buried in the snow that day? Jue dashi, Jade Taoist, and these top Wulin experts — why do they fear her? Everything about her could not be explained with normal logic by a normal person. The more time he spent with her, the less he knew about her.

He definitely would not run away. Every time she appeared, there was always something strange and secretive happening. This time what did she do, what kind of interesting trick did she played? He really wanted to know. Dawan’s trick was appearing. Her eyes had a cunning look and suddenly said, “I know you are always fearless. I wanted to bring you to an interesting place.”

“To do what?”

“To meet a person.” Dawan deliberately tried to be mysterious, “A very interesting woman.”

“I have seen her before?”

“Roughly one time.”

“You are talking about that flower girl?”

“You really are not stupid.” Dawan glared at him and asked, “But I’m not sure if you dare to meet her or not?”

Of course Ma Rulong dare to go. Even if this flower girl was a man-eating female monster, he would still go.

Dawan closed her eye and asked, "You won't regret this? No matter what will happen after you meet her. You wouldn't regret this?"

Ma Rulong gave her an absolute answer. "I already did so many regrettable things, would another one matter?"

Dawan laughed, "Does not matter." She laughed pleurably, "Does not matter a bit."

So they went. On the road, Ma Rulong was constantly wondering where she would take him this time. He was thinking of a lot of strange places but couldn't find the answer. She actually brought him to the yamen (government official building) of this city.

Although this county's official's position was only seventh-ranked, it was nevertheless a respectable local magistrate. This county's yamen (government official building) was far larger than what Ma Rulong had imagined. The entrance was closed. They came in from the side door.

This was Ma Rulong's first time in yamen (government official building). There was an elevated wuhuan (justice-calling) drum, plank and stick in great hall, and all type of sentencing equipments and silencing plaque. Everything was interesting to him. The thing that was strange to him was the officers with red-tasseled hats. The city court had long been dismissed, why would there still be officers on duty in the official building? Every path they would see one or two officers. However it was as if they were all blind, and did not even noticed them two.

The officers were obviously not blind but he and Dawan were clearly walking in front of them. Why would they not notice? Did Dawan used some kind of mysterious magic and made them invisible?

Behind the main hall, there was a dark courtyard and there were also two red-tasseled hat officers guarding the outside. Ma Rulong suddenly went over and asked, "Hey, do you guys see me?"

Officers did not respond to him, didn't even look at him, and walked over to the other officers.

"Did anyone say anything at first?"

“No.”

“Did you see anyone?”

“No, not even a shadow.”

Ma Rulong realized he was indeed encountering something interesting. If Dawan had not pulled him back into this courtyard, he would try to pinch these two to see whether they hurt.

Dawan laughed, “Even if you do a flip in front of them, they will not see it.”

“Why?”

“Because they are a bunch of understanding people. They understand when they should pretend to be mute.”

She suddenly changed the subject, “Do you know what kind of place is this courtyard?”

Ma Rulong did not know. However, he already knew this place had a hard to say eeriness to it.

“This is a place where coroner performs autopsy.” Dawan casually mentioned, “All the victims of crimes that died. Their bodies are sent here first to determine the cause of death.”

Ma Rulong had not seen any corpse and did not smell any blood. However, his stomach was already starting to feel uncomfortable. At this kind of place, who wouldn't feel uncomfortable? Why did Dawan brought him here?

There were two buildings in the courtyard. Not only were there no light, there wasn't even a window. However the last room on the left side, not only was it shut but there was a lamplight pass through to the outside. Dawan went over there.

Ma Rulong couldn't bear it and asked, "The person you bring me here to meet is in this room?"

"Why don't you go in and see for yourself?" She pushed open the door.

This room did have a light, a dim light and a bed. On the bed, there was a snow-white bed cover with a person underneath. This bed cover was obviously too short. Although it was covering this person head, it could not cover her leg.

The first thing Ma Rulong saw was her leg. This pair of snow white legs; ankles were delicate and toes were gently beautiful. No matter who saw these legs could obviously tell these are woman legs and could also imagine this woman must be beautiful.

In this dusky and narrow alley, Ma Rulong did not see the flower girl's face and now could imagine. He couldn't help letting out a sigh.

"Is she dead?"

"It does look like it."

"Did you kill her?"

Dawan blandly replied, "She always looked down on me. Always thought she is more capable than I am and could defeat me anytime. I flee the instant I saw her just to make her underestimate me."

-- Underestimating an opponent is always an unforgivable mistake.

She leisurely said, "She really did underestimated me so I am still standing. She is lying down and looks like she's dead."

Ma Rulong couldn't help but asked, "Only looks like she is dead?"

“En.”

“So she’s actually not dead?”

“Why don’t you go take a look?” Dawan smiled mysteriously, “Take a very good look.”

Take a good look meant he needed to lift the cover. Ma Rulong lifted the cover and then immediately put it back down. His heart all of a sudden was beating faster than usual. Although he didn’t take a good look, he did not dare take another look.

The woman under the cover was completely naked. He never saw such a beautiful woman, such a beautiful body, and such a beautiful face. It would be such a pity if such a woman really died.

Dawan again asked, “From what you see, is she dead?”

Ma Rulong couldn’t tell.

Dawan said, “With only one look, of course you can’t tell whether she’s dead or alive. However, you should at least tell she is a rare beauty.”

Ma Rulong acknowledged that.

Dawan said, “Then you should be able to tell she’s not dead.”

Ma Rulong asked, “Why?”

Dawan lightly sighed and said, “It’s because she’s too beautiful, even it was hard for me to let her die. Even if I really wanted to kill her, I couldn’t bear doing it.”

Ma Rulong also sighed.

Dawan asked, "Why are you sighing?"

Ma Rulong replied, "Because I realized I am really stupid?"

Dawan asked, "How did you come to that?"

Ma Rulong replied, "Now I have seen her and also believe she's not dead but it's harder for me to understand."

Dawan asked, "What don't you understand?"

Ma Rulong asked, "Do I know her?"

Dawan replied, "No."

Ma Rulong asked, "Do I have any relation with her?"

Dawan replied, "Until now, none."

Ma Rulong asked, "Then why do you want me to see her?"

Dawan replied, "Because even though you do not have any relationship with her now, in the future you definitely will."

Ma Rulong asked, "What relationship will we have in the future?"

Dawan mysteriously laughed, "I still can not tell you these things yet. However, I guarantee you, that thing I want you to do, you absolutely will not regret it."

Ma Rulong asked, "Right now what had you prepared for me to do?"

Dawan replied, "I have prepared for you to meet another person."

Ma Rulong asked, "Meet whom?"

Dawan replied, "A person that who like you very much and you seems to like him too."

Ma Rulong asked, "How do you know I like him?"

Dawan replied, "It is hard for people that had met him to not like him."

Ma Rulong immediately thought of a person that was hard for him not to like, "Jiangnan Yu Wu?"

Dawan said, "Other than him, who else would it be?"

Ma Rulong asked, "He is also here?"

Dawan replied, "Just on the opposite side."

Ma Rulong asked, "What is he doing here?"

Dawan replied, "What he is doing here, you would never be able to guess in your lifetime."

ch. 14

Chapter 14: Extreme Person Extreme Measure [绝人绝事]

The first time Ma Rulong saw Yu Wu he was making some dishes. There are many people in the world that cook; cooking is absolutely not a strange thing. However the famous Jiangnan Yu Wu was preparing dishes with his own hands, which made this seemed weird for anyone. This place was for storing and examining bodies; it was not a restaurant and did not have a kitchen.

"If you could guess what he is doing, I would be really impressed."

"I don't need you to be impress, I couldn't guess."

"He is combing hair."

Combing hair was not a strange deed, even Jiangnan Yu Wu needed to comb his hair. He was not combing his own hair. He was combing the hair of another person. He was helping a old granny who was so old that almost all her teeth had fallen off, comb her hair.

* * *

It was not sure when there was a light in a room on the opposite side. This old granny was sitting under the light, and was wearing red clothing like the same type of red clothes brides wore. She had one leg raised and her feet were wearing a red-embroidered shoe made of red silks. Her face had more wrinkle than the blocks on checkerboard. Her mouth lost so much teeth, she had less teeth than a two year old. However, her long hair was still black, shiny, smooth, and soft like silk. If you only saw her hair and clothes, you would had never guess she was an old granny.

What's more unimaginable was that Jiangnan Yu Wu would help this old granny comb her hair. The way he combs was like the way he fried the vegetables, elegant and beautiful. It did not matter whether his hand was holding a spatula or comb, he was still Jiangnan Yu Wu, the one and only Jiangnan Yu Wu.

Ma Rulong still could not understand why was he combing this old granny's hair. Nor did he understand why Dawan brought him here. Nevertheless, he, without noticing, was entranced in his own thoughts. Yu Wu did not even seem to notice they had come in. No matter what he did, he was always focused and concentrated on the task at hand. Therefore, the things that he did were better than others.

* * *

Now he had already used a long ebony hairpin and helped her tied up her last knot of hair. He was admiring his masterpiece. It was truly a masterpiece. Even Ma Rulong couldn't deny that. The old granny already looked much younger. Her eye had been shut the entire time; her facial expression was like she was currently in the care of her lover.

"No one can compare to you. Absolutely no can compare to you." Her voice was also old-sounding, but you can still tell that when she was young her voice was sweet and enchanting. She softly sighed, "If only your martial art is as good as the way you comb hair, you would've already been invincible in the world."

Yu Wu smiled, "Fortunately I do not want to be invincible."

"Why?"

"Because if a person is on top of the world, his days must be very lonely."

Old granny laughed and laughed loudly. "I like you, really like you. Even if you had not help me comb my hair. I will still help you with this." Who exactly was this old granny? What did Yu Wu want her to help him do? Ma Rulong was getting really curious but Dawan just had to pull him out.

"Right now you are probably getting more and more confused because you do not know what I wanted to do."

"What do you still want to do?"

"I still want you to meet one more person."

"Who is this person?"

"A person drawn on a piece of paper." Dawan said, "Even if you are a hundred time smarter than you are right now, you would absolutely never guess who this person is."

The room next door was also lit up. There was a painting hanging on the wall. In the painting there was an honest and plain looking middle-aged man. Ma Rulong had never seen this person before and even if he had he wouldn't have remembered. This was not the type of person that can be easily remembered, or deserved to be remembered.

"His surname is Zhang. His name was Zhang Rongfa⁸⁴. He was a very loyal and honest person. In the city, he opened a small general store and had a clerk that was equally honest like him."

Dawan was talking about the person in the painting. "This year he is already forty-four years old and born in the year of the pig. He married when he was nineteen. His wife name is Guizhi⁸⁵ that would get angry and sick all the time. Because they don't have any children, she gets extra angry and extra sick. In recent years, she was so sick that she couldn't get out of bed. Old Zhang has to feed her every time. In such a condition she gets extra moody, even her neighbors couldn't stand her." She suddenly stopped and asked Ma Rulong, "Are you listening carefully?"

Ma Rulong was paying close attention to every word she said but still did not understand why Dawan brought him here to look at this painting. In addition, she was introducing the man in this painting in details. He couldn't hold it and asked, "Could it be that this man also have some kind of relation with me?"

"A little bit."

"Why would I have any relation with him?"

"Because this man is you." Dawan did not look like she was joking, "You are him and he is you."

Ma Rulong thought it was absurd, so absurd that a person could laugh his teeth out, laugh his stomach out. However, he did not laugh because he could tell Dawan was not joking around and was not crazy. He deliberately asked, "This person named Zhang Rongfa...is me?"

"Absolutely."

“He does not even look like me.”

“However, soon you would look like him, very alike. In fact, you would look exactly like him.”

“Unfortunately, I can not change.”

“You can’t change, someone would help you change.”

Dawan suddenly asked him, “Do you know why Yu Wu would help that Miss comb her hair?”

Ma Rulong replied “That ‘Miss’ does not seem to be a Miss anymore, looks very much like an old lady.”

Dawan disagreed. “She is not an old lady. She is a Miss. Some people, even if they live to 180 years old, are always a Miss.”

“She is that type of people?”

“Absolutely.” Dawan said, “If she is not, then there are no such people in the world.”

“Why?”

“Because her last name is Yu.”

Ma Rulong finally thought of a person, “What relation does she have with the Miss Yu from sixty years ago?”

Dawan replied, “She is that Miss Yu. She is the ‘Exquisite Lily-White Hand’ Yu Linglong.⁸⁶”

_[Footnote]_____

84. Zhang Rongfa (张荣发), surname Zhang, given name means “glory/honor send out or issued”. It’s a very typical name.

85. Wang Guizhi (王桂枝), surname Wang, given name means “cinnamon”. Again, another common name.

86. Yu Linglong (玉玲珑), surname Yu means jade, given name means ‘exquisite’. Her nickname linglong yushou (玲珑玉手) is literally “exquisite jade hand”. However yushou (jade hand) is a term that describe a hand that is white and delicate like jade, so it’s figurative. I considered leaving it as "jade hand" but since it's not really talking about a hand made out of jade and yushou does have a meaning, I've decided to translate it instead. Who knows, I might feel differently later on and reverse this stance.

ch. 15

Chapter 15: The Exquisite Lily-White Hand [玲珑玉手玉玲珑]

Sixty years ago, in Jianghu there were three pairs of very famous hands: Heartless Iron Hand, Thief God Skilled Hand, and the Exquisite Lily-White Hand. Iron Hand was heartless, hand had never spared anyone that did not deserved to be spared. The Skilled Hand Thief God could steal anything other people couldn’t steal. Exquisite Lily-White Hand, mysterious and ingenious, was a pair of hand that could performed various mystical deeds. However everyone knew, who could go under her hand, within an hour could become a completely different person.

Ma Rulong finally understood. “Yu Wu helped her comb her hair because he want her to help me change my appearance, Zhang Rongfa’s appearance.”

“Correct.”

“We chose this place because this is a place that people in Jianghu would never go.”

“Correct.”

“Those officers did not see us only because they need a favor from Yu Wu and are taking this opportunity to exchange for a favor.”

“Correct.”

“Because I already branded a heartless, vicious murderer and have no where to go, you help me thought of this plan so I could live longer.”

“Not correct.”

Dawan’s attitude had become hearty and serious, “Yu Wu believe in you. I also believe in you. We also believe you are framed by another person. We also knew you would never hide in a little general and shamefully live out the rest of your life.”

Ma Rulong did not open his mouth for a long time. His blood was boiling and his throat seemed to be blocked by blood. After a while, he cackled and asked, “Why do you believe me?”

“Because I believe a person that had just killed would not just stop in the middle of running away, risking his safety to save a woman that would soon freeze to death.”

Ma Rulong did not have anything to say. His feeling could not be described with words.

Dawan said, “However you must believe in this world, justice still exist. Evil would eventually be destroyed. Conspiracies would eventually be discovered. For all the wrong you suffered through, eventually there would be a day where you would reclaim your innocence.”

She softly grab his hand and said, “As long as you have these beliefs, if you’ve to suffer temporarily then so what?”

Ma Rulong was silent for a while and finally asked, “Where is this general store?”

“In a narrow alley west of the city. Your customers are poor and kind commoners. It is already hard for them to have food to eat, they would not pay attention to other people’s business.”

She added, “Your clerk’s surname is also Zhang, other called him Laotu (old fashioned). Besides secretly drinking two cups of wine every now and then, he is absolutely reliable.”

Ma Rulong asked, “Would he be able to recognized that his boss is a different person?”

Dawan replied, “He eyes are never that good and his ears have problem.”

Ma Rulong asked, “Even if he couldn’t tell, how about the other?”

Dawan asked, “Other?” She suddenly laughed and said, “You mean his sickly wife?”

Ma Rulong bitterly smiled but couldn’t help but asked, “What kind of person is she?”

Dawan laughed and said, “Actually you could tell on your own.”

Ma Rulong asked, “I could tell? When have I seen her?”

Dawan said, “You saw her at first.”

Ma Rulong was startled. “Could it be that the I person I saw at first that looked dead is my...” He suddenly realized he not saying it right, so he changed to: “Could it be that she is Zhang Rongfa’s wife?”

Dawan replied, “Originally no, but she will be soon. Just like you are originally not Zhang Rongfa but you will become Zhang Rongfa soon.”

Ma Rulong asked, “Who is she originally?”

Dawan was pondering and looked like she did not intend to answer this question. Ma Rulong, however, did not let this go and asked again, "What kind of person is she originally? Right now, you wouldn't even tell me that?"

She finally let out a sigh and said, "Right now if I am not willing to tell, it might be a bit unreasonable." Ma Rulong also agreed.

Dawan said, "Her last name is Xie, her name is Xie Yulun. Xie as in thanks, Yu as in jade, Lun as in Mount Kunlun."

Ma Rulong said, "I know these three words, you don't need to define it for me."

Dawan said, "She is a woman."

Ma Rulong said, "You think I couldn't even tell whether she's a man or woman?"

Dawan bitterly smiled and said, "You should know I am deliberately holding back because I am still not sure how much I should tell you."

Ma Rulong asked, "How much could you tell me?"

Dawan finally decided, "Fine, I will tell you. She is nineteen years old. Probably have not yet touch a man and no man have touch her before."

Ma Rulong asked, "She is really only nineteen?"

Dawan replied, "Could it be that you thought she's quite old?"

Ma Rulong said, "She does not look old but she has such mature martial art. She went through that stone wall as if it was paper. Not even ninety years old have that type of martial art ability."

Dawan remarked, "My martial art is also not worse than hers. Do you also think I am old?"

Ma Rulong kept his mouth shut.

Dawan said, "One's wugong (martial art) are not achieved by just training. How high a person's martial art ability is not related to their age."

Ma Rulong said, "I understand."

Dawan said, "Her wugong is indeed very high. The hero and daxia (great chivalrous pugilist) you people know that could defeat her could not be more than ten. Because not does she have a good shifu (master), she practically trained since birth."

Ma Rulong asked, "Who is her master?"

Dawan replied, "I only agreed to tell you about her, not her master."

Ma Rulong bitterly smile and said, "Then, I will not ask."

Dawan said, "Her temper is not that good. The temper of a big Miss is never good. If she discovers she had became a rundown general store owner's wife, most likely she would be mad with anger."

Ma Rulong asked, "When she gets mad, would she kill the boss of the general store..."

This, he had to care and had to ask, because the owner of the general store is him.

Dawan chuckled, "You don't have to worry about this. She will not kill you."

Ma Rulong asked, "How do you know she wouldn't?"

Dawan replied, "Because she is sick, sick to the point she could not get off bed or stand up."

How could an expert that could walk through wall like it was paper the previous night suddenly become sick? Ma Rulong did not ask. He already could imagine where could this sickness come about. With Dawan's ability, it wouldn't be hard if she want someone to be "sick".

Ma Rulong said, "However she does not look like the wife of a small general owner."

Dawan said, "She does not look like it right now but in a moment she would. Additionally, she would look exactly like the original owner's wife."

Ma Rulong asked, "Yu Linglong really have such magical ability?"

Dawan replied, "Her ability, you will have a chance to see for yourself."

Ma Rulong let out a sigh and said, "Actually it's still rather hard for me to believe."

Dawan said, "When she wakes up, she would already be in a little room at the back of the general store."

Ma Rulong asked, "How about me?"

Dawan replied, "Of course you would be next to her taking care of her. Because you two are a pair of loving couple."

Ma Rulong can't refrain from bitterly smiling and said, "Too bad she would never acknowledge this."

Dawan said, "Of course she wouldn't but you have to always insist that she is your wife. Her surname is Wang, name Wang Guizhi, and had already married you for eighteen years. No matter what she said or how she behaves, you must always insist on this."

Ma Rulong said, "Eventually even she would be confused and then she herself would have doubt regarding who exactly is she."

Dawan laughed, "At least you understand this."

Ma Rulong said, "I only have one thing I don't understand."

Dawan said, "Go ahead."

Ma Rulong asked, "I have no animosity toward her, why should I do this?"

Dawan said, "Because not only would this benefit you, it would benefit her. This is also the only way that could clear your name and uncover this conspiracy." Her attitude became serious and hearty again, "I know you are a very prideful person, originally you would never agreed to this. This time pretend it's for me. I always trust you. You should trust me this one time."

Ma Rulong could not say any more. Because he was prideful, he didn't want to owe anyone. Whether this would really clear his name, he was not too concern. Usually the things he did were not for himself.

Right now, if someone asked him, "What kind of person are you?" His answer would not be the same as before. Only after a person endure a series of trials and tribulations, can he truly understand who he really is.

He only asked, "Right now what do you plan for me to do?"

"Of course, I need you to go drink wine." Dawan sweetly said, "Yu Wu is here, you are also here. If I don't let you two drink till you heart content, I would be too inconsiderate."

Behind these two rooms, there was a separate house. Slantingly collapsing back and dark grey wall gave you an old and eerie feeling. Any one could see this must be a storehouse where coroners stored their examination tools. Inside there must be full of creepy instruments, not only were there bone-shaving knife, rusted hooks, threads and needle for body part but...there should be also thing you didn't even want to and couldn't imagine what they were for.

However, once you entered you would change your opinions. The inside of the room was clean, open, and bright, with snow-white wall that was recently plastered. The table had a clean white tablecloth and on top there were several delicacies and six jugs of wine. Exactly four large jug of original sealed and non-tampered aged "Shanniang" (excellent brew) Shaoxing wine and two twenty-catties worth of nu'erhong.

Average people seeing this much alcohol would probably felt a bit drunk already. Ma Rulong was not an average person, his heart was already a bit scared, being drunk as a skunk was not a good thing. However, with Yu Wu here, it was hard to not drink. He only hope this time Yu Wu was inebriated first. He would just drink less. Yu Wu was smirking at him, as if he knew what was on his mind.

"I know you love nu'erhong, unfortunately it is hard to find much nu'erhong here."

"Shanniang is also a good wine."

"We should first drink nu'erhong, and then drink shanniang." Yu Wu was laughing cheerfully, "After each person drink a jug of nu'erhong, any wine afterward would taste the same."

"One person one jug." Ma Rulong looked at Dawan, "How about her?"

"This time I won't drink." Dawan laughed, "Miss Yu just told me, if a girl drink too much not only would you age faster, it would make you get tricked easier."

Ma Rulong sighed in his heart, he already knew his plan at first wouldn't work.

Miss Yu was obviously Yu Linglong. She was also in this room and was sitting at another long table. On that table there was jade-embroider silver box, about ten pure silver jars, and a pure silver face basin. The basin was filled with warm water; she checked the water's temperature and then placed both of her hand in the warm water.

Although this Miss was old enough to be a young lady's grandmother, her gesture was not old. Every movement maintained a youthful grace. No matter whom had just looked at her a few times, would not have thought she was that old. This was perhaps she, herself, did not believe she was old.

"You drink your wine. I will do my own thing." She carried a smile, "Although I never drink, I am not against other drinking. Beside, I enjoy watching other drink wine."

Dawan also smiled, "Sometimes I also think watching other people drink is more interesting than drinking it yourself."

Yu Linglong approvingly said, "Some people after they get drunk would spill a bunch nonsense a caused a lot of trouble. Some people after they get drunk became a mute and don't even say a word. Some people after they get drunk would cry. Some people after they get drunk would laugh. I think they're all interesting."

She suddenly asked Ma Rulong, "What are you like after you get drunk?"

"I don't know." He really didn't know. After people get drunk, their memory would became blank. After waking up, the person will only felt a dry mouth and forgotten whatever had happened -- all that you shouldn't forget, you forget. On the other hand, things you wanted to forget, you remembered even clearer.

Yu Linglong smiled and said, "In my life, I have only see two truly beautiful men. You are one of them, so even if you were drunk you would not look bad."

Yu Wu loudly laughed, "What he looks like when he's drunk, you'll able to see it very soon."

Although Ma Rulong did not get drunk fast, it was not considered slow either.

In the beginning, he could clearly see everything Yu Linglong did. After soaking her hands in the water for a meal-worth length of time, she placed them in a soft towel. She started cutting her nail with a small curved knife from the silver box. -- What was also in that box?

After taking care of her nails, she poured out seven eight different colored item from seven eight different jars; some were powder, some were liquid, some were yellow, brown, and white. She poured all of these in the smaller silver pot and mixed it with a silver spoon.

Ma Rulong could tell these were all prepared for yirong⁸⁷ (face changing). No matter what she was doing, with such a mysterious preparation, it should not be bad. After half a jug of nu'erhong, Ma Rulong suddenly had strange notion.

"If she could help other change their appearance, from beautiful to ugly, ugly to beautiful, old to young, and young to old, then why didn't she change her own and make herself into a young lady?"

Yu Linglong looked like she knew what he was thinking. "I only help other change appearance and would never do this to myself." She said, "Because if I make myself look young, even if I can deceive other I can never deceive myself." She dully said, "Deceiving others I would not mind, but deceiving myself I would never do."

After saying this, she took seven eight pure silver small knives, scissors, hooks, and chisels out of the box, and even a little saw. -- What was she planning to do with these?

If he were not drunk, he would probably try to run out the door. Unfortunately, he already drank too much and already drunk. The last thing he remembered was Yu Linglong massaging his face with her fingers.

Her finger was cold and smooth; her movement was skillful and gentle, very gentle...

[End of Chapter 15]

_[Footnote]_____

87. yirong (易容), the art of disguise.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16: The General Store [杂货店]

The room was really low; you could almost touch the ceiling with your hands up. The plasters on the wall were peeling. On it, there was a wood-carving picture of Guan-fuzi celebrating spring autumn, a Zhu-fuzi family proverb, and a hand written quanshiwen (life advice text), the writing was very careful and neat. This room had a window, a door, and a blue cloth that was so washed up it was becoming white hanging over the doorway.

A square table, though old but made of redwood, was placed facing the door. On the table there were a teapot missing the spout, three tea bowls, and also a shrine. Inside the shrine was not Guan fuzi (Guan Yu) but a child-carrying Songzi Guanyin (child delivering saint).

In one corner, there was a stack of three wooden boxes. In another corner, there was a dressing table that clearly hadn't been used for a long time. The flower-patterned bronze mirror was covered with dust and there were several broken wooden comb.

Otherwise, there was only one bed. The big wooden bed with four wooden pillars with a bed curtain hanging and flower carvings. A woman was sleeping on this bed with three layer of bed comforters on her. This woman's hair was disheveled and face had yellowed. She had a wearily thin and pale look on her face. Although asleep, she groaned once in a while.

The air had a strong medicine smell. Outside there was a sharp woman voice currently making a hassle. She was saying this store had too little chicken eggs, water in the oil, and salt was too expensive.

When Ma Rulong woke up, he was already here. He originally thought he was dreaming, because if it were not a dream why would he be at such a place. Fortunately, even though he was barely awake and head was hurting, he did not lose his memory.

He immediately remembered why he was here. His first reactions were jumping out of his chair, going straight to the dressing table, and holding up the bronze mirror. He cleaned off the dust with his sleeves. He thought his hand felt like it was trembling.

-- What exactly did Yu Linglong do to his face? He was anxious to see what he looked like now?

What he saw was not himself, it was Zhang Rongfa; absolutely not him, absolutely was Zhang Rongfa. When he was looking at the mirror, it was as if he was looking at that painting Dawan had shown him.

If a person looks in the mirror and saw another person, what is on his mind? He had never experienced such a thing. Even he didn't know what he was feeling right now.

Although he did not constantly remind himself, but he always knew he was handsome. Something that his most jealous rivals who hated him couldn't even deny. He couldn't hold it and asked himself: "In the future, would I be able to get back my original face?" He did not know the answer to this question. He only regretted not asking Dawan or Yu Linglong earlier.

* * *

The argument outside had quiet down. The woman in bed hadn't woken up yet. Ma Rulong couldn't help going over to take a look and with one look he was shocked.

This malnourished and sickly, weak and thin woman with a face without a glimmer of liveliness was the same beauty he saw after pulling that bed sheet the coroner examination room? Ma Rulong already knew he would become like that but he was still nervous and shocked. When she wakes up and suddenly discover what she had become, what would she do? Ma Rulong was already feeling sympathetic toward her.

* * *

Right now, this "Zhang Rongfa" had already seen himself, seen his room, and seen his wife. What does his general store looked like? What kind of person was his trusty clerk, Zhang Laoshi, like? He obviously couldn't wait to see.

The general items store was usually very "general" and filled with all types of "items": oil, salt, sauce, vinegar, rice, chicken eggs, duck eggs, salted eggs, preserved eggs, dried shrimps, pickles, sugar, needles and threads, knives and scissor, hammer and nail, toilet paper...

All the daily regular items used by a common household could be bought in a general store.

The general store was like this. There was a old store sign hanging above the entrance: "Zhang's General Items".

Outside was an alley that was not too narrow. When wind was blowing, it would blow dust and sands everywhere. When it was raining, the ground would become muddy. Neighbors were all poor families. Children with running noise were crying, playing, and fighting around in the alley. Ducks, geese, cats, and dogs' litters were everywhere. Every household's entrance was drying children clothes and diapers.

In this type of place with these types of families, other than playing with little children, there were no other entertainments. The heroes of Jianghu obviously would never come to such a place. Ma Rulong would never imagine he would suddenly became an owner of general store in a place like this.

* * *

Zhang Laoshi had short and stubby stature, sloppy appearance, a round face, eyes that looked like he had never sleep, and big red nose. Zhang Laoshi did not seem too polite to his boss, he was too lazy to say anything or look at him.

In such a rundown store, what should the owner be like? What should the clerk be like? Anyways, everyone here seemed to be just living day by day and waiting to die. Ma Rulong was actually quite satisfied with the situation here because if Zhang Laoshi was a chatty person or constantly flatters him, it would be worst for him.

Where were the store's original owner and his wife? Yu Wu already made other arrangements for them. The lives they were living at the current moment definitely must be better than before. Ma Rulong couldn't help asked himself: "How many days do I have to go through living like this?"

* * *

A customer came in, a pregnant young housewife bought a bronze coin worth of brown sugar. At this time, Ma Rulong heard a shout. Though not particularly loud, Ma Rulong had never heard of such a painful and scared shout. Xie Yulun must have woken up and already discovered those terrifying changes. Ma Rulong didn't really dare to go in to see her.

The pregnant housewife looked at him and said, "The owner's wife's sickness is getting more and more serious." Ma Rulong could only forced a smile, lift the blue cloth screen and went to the room in the back.

Xie Yulun was struggling out of the bed, her eye were filled with shock, anger and fear that was hard for anyone to forget. She softly groaned, "Who are you? What place is this? Why am I here?"

"This is your home. You have lived here for eighteen years. I am your husband." When Ma Rulong said this out, he, himself, felt like a rat bastard. However he had to continued, "I see. Your sickness is becoming more and more serious. You actually can't even recognize your house and husband." Xie Yulun was shocked and looked at him. No one could describe the expression in her eyes.

The very pregnant housewife came in through the door screen and sighed, "Owner's wife must've had a high fever. That's why she would say such nonsense. You better boil some brown sugar ginger water for her." Before she even finished, Xie Yulun already grabbed on to a crude bowl on the table next to the bed. Using all her energy, she tried to throw it at them.

Unfortunately she was too "sick", she couldn't even throw a bowl. She was very scared, and her whole body was trembling.

She knew her own martial art, what happened to her astonishing martial art? Young housewife finally sighed and went back home with her brown sugar. Within an hour, all the neighbors of the general store would know the owner's wife was sick to the point that she was going crazy. Xie Yulun was really going crazy. She already saw her own hand; the smooth and delicate pair of hand was now like chicken feet.

How about the other places? She moved her hand under the bed covers and suddenly pulled it back out as if a poisonous snake under the cover that had bitten her. Afterward she saw that mirror, she struggled over there and took a look straight at the mirror. With just one glance, she fainted.

Ma Rulong slowly bend over his hip and picked up the broken pieces of floor. Actually, he didn't really want to do this. What he really wanted to do was slap himself seventeen to eighteen times, and tell this Lady Xie the real truth.

However, he could not let down Dawan. Dawan believed in him and he also believed in her. There must be a reason for her to do this and this was supposed to benefit everyone. Ma Rulong took a long sigh and gently walked out. He instructed his clerk and said, "We would close early today."

[End of Chapter 16]

_[Footnote]_____

88. Guan fuzi (关夫子), an respectable way to call Guan Yu of the Three Kingdoms. "fuzi" is an archaic term for teacher. For example Confucius comes from Kong Fuzi.

89. Zhu fuzi (朱夫子), refers to Zhu Xi of Song dynasty. He was a Confucian scholar.

90. quanshiwen (劝世文) is kind of a reference text.

91. songzi Guanyin (送子观音), Guanyin is the Bodhisattva of Compassion or Goddess of Mercy. This is a child-giving variant.

92. miansifahuang (脸色发黄), lit. face becoming yellow. An expression that means face doesn't look healthy.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17: Things You Mustn't Do [有所不为]

Dinner was fried hot pepper with dried fish, only one dish. The other bowl was a soup boiled with meat and bone for the patient. The patient had already woken up, and just lying on the bed without moving and kept on staring at the ceiling.

Ma Rulong was also stupidly sitting next to the bed on the worn out cane chair. He was suddenly thinking about a lot of things; thought about all the things that he was once very proud of.

— Should he have really done all those things? Were they really that impressive?

— Between men, why are there always such a huge gap? Why is some men's life so lowly? Why are some so arrogant?

He suddenly realized, if he could close this gap between men then this would be worth being proud of. If he had still live the life before, he would definitely not thought of this.

— If a person could experience unexpected setback and suffering, would it benefit him?

— Dawan's way to handle Xie Yulun, was it because of this?

Thinking of this, his heart already felt better than before. He believed Xie Yulun used to be a very prideful person, and thought she deserved to be so prideful.

Didn't know starting from when, Xie Yulun was staring at him. She stared for a long time and suddenly said, "Say it again."

"Say what?"

"Say who you are and who I am."

"I am Zhang Rongfa. You are Wang Guizhi."

"We are a married couple?"

"A married couple of eighteen years. We always lived here and opened a general store. Everybody around here knows us."

Ma Rulong let out a sigh and said, "Probably because our lives are so dreadful and poor, you don't want to live such a life so you are trying to forget everything in the past." He comforted her, "Actually, this type of life isn't that bad. At least we can live in peace."

Xie Yulun glared at him for a long time. "You listen to me." While speaking each word clearly, "I do not know who you are or what is going on. However, I know that all of this must have someone behind the scene paying you to cause me trouble."

"Who would cause you trouble?! Why would they want to cause you trouble?"

"You truly do not know who I really am?"

Mu Rulong truly didn't know who she was so he couldn't help asking, "Who exactly do you think you are?"

Xie Yulun coldly smiled, "If you know who I really am, you might be startled to death." Her voice was full of pride, "I am god's daughter. In the world no woman can be compared to me. I can make you rich anytime, and can kill you anytime. So you better bring me back or else one of these days I will cut you up one piece at a time and feed you to the dogs."

She was indeed a very, very arrogant woman. Not only does she not put other people in her own eye, she also viewed other people's lives so lightly. In her mind, other than her, no one in this world was worth anything. A bit of hardship and suffering for someone like her would be the best.

Ma Rulong sighed again, "Your sickness is getting to you. It's better to sleep early."

Right after he said this out, he realized one problem. This room had only one bed, where would he sleep?

Xie Yulun, without a doubt, was also thinking of this and sharply said, "If you dare to sleep here and if you dare to touch me, I would...I would..."

She did not continue. She couldn't really do anything to him. She couldn't even stand up. If he wanted to do anything to her, she couldn't really resist. Ma Rulong did not really do anything to her.

Ma Rulong was a man, a healthy young man. Not only that, Ma Rulong already knew what she originally looked like and knew she was a very beautiful woman. In that dim room, under that snow-white bed

sheet...behind that...he did not forget nor could he forget. However he did not do anything to her. Although his view of things had changed and was not as prideful as before, there were certain things he would never do even if you were to kill him. Perhaps, this was something he should be proud of.

* * *

Every day passed like this and Xie Yulun actually slowly calmed down. When people encountered something in which they are completely helpless, there isn't much they could do. No matter who, it is better to show restraint and acceptance. Even if you don't, going crazy, creating a scene, or hitting your head till death is pointless.

How about Ma Rulong? The type of life was not just different from the way he lived before; it was drastically different. Before, he didn't look highly on plain, common, and poor people; but now he realized they have a kind-hearted and interesting side to them. At times he felt really irritated and wanted to go find out news from Jianghu and find Dawan and Yu Wu.

Even so sometimes he wanted to give up everything and live such a simple life. Unfortunately even if he felt this way, this was not how others saw things. In reality he was not Zhang Rongfa; he was Ma Rulong.

* * *

In recent day, a strange customer started appearing in the general store. Every day after nightfall, he would come in buy two chicken eggs, two cuts of toilet papers, two catties⁹³ of raw salt, and one catty of rice wine. A family that used twenty eggs and two cut of toilet papers every time was already suspicious. Every day using two catties of raw salt, who would have ever heard of such thing.

Although this was strange but the things he bought wasn't strange. Chicken eggs, toilet paper, salt, and wine were very common items. The person that bought these looked very plain, tall, and skinny that looked like any other man here. However, he conspicuously looked worried and tired.

Not until that one day that pregnant young housewife saw him, did Ma Rulong started to notice. Because the housewife unexpectedly said, "Who is this person? How come I have never seen him before?"

She knew everyone that live here and could recognize everyone. She sounded so sure. "This man does not live here and I'm positive he had never came here before."

Therefore, Ma Rulong was starting to take notice of this man. He was not very good at observing other people. Young masters of rich families were usually not very good at being observant of other people. But, even he noticed a few peculiar signs.

Although this man was fairly skinny, his legs and arms were especially thick. Every time he reached his hand out to pay or take his items, it seemed like he was trying to hide something. Not only that, he hands moved quickly, as if he didn't want people to see his hands. Besides he always came after nightfall, a time when everyone was home eating dinner and when it had the fewest people in the alley. Although his body was tall and his leg was big, his step were particularly light and you almost couldn't hear his footsteps. Sometime when it was raining, the muds on his foot were less than other people.

Although it was after the new year and was already springtime, the weather was still very cold. His clothes were particularly light but he didn't seem to be afraid of the cold. Although Ma Rulong was not a seasoned veteran in Jianghu, he could tell this man was trained in martial arts and he was trained very well. His hand probably had the strength of someone trained in Iron Palm⁹⁴.

Why would such a good fighter in Wulin come here everyday to buy chicken eggs and toilet papers? If he came here to hide from his enemies, there was no need to buy these things everyday. If he were sent by Yu Wu to protect Ma Rulong, why would he be doing these things that'll catch other people's attention.

Could it be that Qiu Fengcheng, Jue dashi and them already discovered that this general store was suspicious so they sent someone to investigate? If this were the case, why would he buy twenty chicken eggs and two catties worth of salt everyday. Ma Rulong was really scratching his head regarding this matter.

He shouldn't waste time thinking about something he didn't understand. However, Ma Rulong was getting more and more curious. Everyone could not avoid curiosity, and Ma Rulong was not an exception and neither was Xie Yulun. She also knew about this person coming here. One day she couldn't hold it and asked, "This person you people are talking about, is it really a man?"

"Of course it is a man."

“Is it possible that it’s a woman disguised as a man?”

“Absolutely not.”

Ma Rulong was already familiar with the magic of “Art of Disguise”. However, he believed this man could not possibly be a woman. Xie Yulun was evidently disappointed.

Ma Rulong already thought her question was strange, so he couldn’t help but asked, “Why did you ask such a question? Could it be that you hope he is a woman?”

Xie Yulun was pondering for a while, then sighed and said, “If ‘he’ is a woman, then it’s possible she came here to save me.”

— Why only a woman would save her? Ma Rulong did not ask, only said, “You married me for eighteen year. I always treated you well. Why do you need someone else to save you?”

Xie Yulun hatefully glared at him. Just by mentioning this matter, her eyes were already showing the pain and hatred she had. Once she became like this, Ma Rulong immediately left the room. He really didn’t dare or wish to see these eyes.

* * *

One night, not long after the mysterious man bought the items and went back, the young housewife, with surname Yu, suddenly lifted her huge stomach and came here. Her face seemed both nervous and excited. “I know, I know.” She was catching her breath and said, “I know where that man lives.”

Zhang Laoshi, which never really meddle or talkative, unexpectedly and couldn’t help asked, “Where does he live?”

“He lives in Tao Baoyi’s place.” Young housewife said, “I saw him went in with my own eyes.”

Tao Baoyi was the town crier. It was said that he had practiced martial art but he never mentioned it himself and no one had seen him training. The place he lives was the neighborhood's biggest house, built with red bricks. Town crier usually had a lot of connections; a friend living at his place wouldn't be strange.

However, his family was only him and his wife. With a friend, even if they managed to eat all twenty eggs, eating two catties worth of salt everyday would kill them.

Young housewife said, "I deliberately drop into Mrs. Baoyi's home. I did not see that person anywhere but I clearly saw him went in. I secretly asked Mrs. Baoyi why did that person buy two catties of salt everyday? Baoyi deliberately started an argument with the Mis'ess. At that point, all I could do was leave."

Zhang Laoshi had been listening and suddenly asked, "Today are you buying brown sugar?"

"Not buying it today."

"Are you buying pickled vegetable?"

"Also not buying."

Zhang Laoshi suddenly became serious, "Then why haven't you gone back home to sleep?"

Young housewife blinked and looked at him for a while and could only leave. Zhang Laoshi was already preparing to close the store and then muttered, "Poking into other people's business is bad. People that are nosy always annoy me."

Ma Rulong looked at him and suddenly realized this old man was also a bit strange. This was the first time he thought this Zhang Laoshi was strange.

[End of Chapter 17]

_[Footnote]_____

93. Catty is roughly 1.3 pounds or 600 grams.

94. Tieshazhang (铁砂掌), lit “iron sand palm” or more commonly known as “Iron Palm”.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18: The Person That Eats Salt [吃盐的人]

This night, like usual, he slept on a bed spread next to the bed. He couldn’t sleep.

Xie Yulun could not sleep either. He suddenly heard her called him. “Hey, are you asleep yet?”

“No.” People asleep couldn’t be talking.

“Why aren’t you asleep?” Xie Yulun again asked, “Is it because of that person’s matter?”

Ma Rulong intentionally asked, “What matter?”

Xie Yulun said, “That town crier used to practice martial art, is it possible he used to be a bandit? Could that person be one of his old partners? Coming here, they are probably planning to do something.”

Ma Rulong said, “What does that have to do with buying salt? What does that have to do with us?”

Xie Yulun said, “Maybe they are planning to rob this general store, buying salt because they were investigating.”

Ma Rulong couldn’t take it and asked, “What does this general have that is worth robbing?”

Xie Yulun said, "There is one thing."

Ma Rulong asked, "Which one thing?"

Xie Yulun replied, "Me."

Ma Rulong said, "You think they want to take you?"

This time he did not have any thought of laughing because he knew this was a possibility. Xie Yulun suddenly sighed and said, "Perhaps you really do not know who I am but you have to believe me. If I fell into the hands of these villains..."

She didn't continue and seemed as if she had already thought of all kinds of terrible outcomes. After half a day, she gently said, "Although I couldn't understand why you are doing this to me, I could see in these days that you are not a bad person. Therefore, you must help me investigate that person's origin."

"How do I investigate?"

Xie Yulun suddenly coldly smiled again, "You think I couldn't tell you know martial art. Even if you are a owner of a general store now, you must've roamed Jianghu before. Also, you must be well known because I can tell your martial art is not bad."

Ma Rulong did not say anything. An expert that had been trained with over a decade worth of martial art will be different compare to ordinary people. He believed she could tell because she was staring at him all day. She didn't really have anything else to do or any other thing to look at.

Xie Yulun glared at him again, "If you won't help me do this, I would..."

Ma Rulong asked, "What would you do?"

Xie Yulun replied, "I would stop eating and drinking from now on. I wanted to die anyway."

This was such a masterful move. Ma Rulong obviously could not let her starved to death.

Xie Yulun asked, "How about it?"

Ma Rulong let out a sigh and asked, "When do you want me to go?"

Xie Yulun replied, "Now, go right now."

She pondered and said, "You should changed into black clothes and cover your face with a black cloth. If you are discovered and someone is chasing after you, you must never come straight back here. I am sure you don't want other people to find out where you are from."

It seemed like she knew these tricks from Jianghu more than him.

Xie Yulun said, "You must follow my words. Although I have never done this before, but an veteran of Jianghu taught me this." She sighed again, "I would rather hid in this rundown general store with half my life because I believed I would eventually find out what is happening. So you must never let other people find out about this place, or else we would most likely die." Ma Rulong could only listen and forcibly smiled. He never did such sneaky thing in his whole life, but this time he must.

* * *

It was already late at night. Poor family, due to — hard work in the morning, needing to get a rest, saving lamp oil, the only thing they can always enjoy, and other various reasons — sleep particularly early. In the dark and long alley, there were no light or people.

Ma Rulong stealthily left his general store. He already changed to black clothes and wore a black mask with only his eyes exposed. He knew which building Tao Baoyi lived in because he occasionally went out. There were five buildings build with red bricks; three were still bright and two were dark. For his house, however, the lamplights were already out.

The house had a courtyard at the rear. On the left side of the courtyard was a kitchen. Next to the kitchen was a firewood storehouse. There was a well in the middle. Ma Rulong was using his long neglected qinggong (lightness martial art). He went around the house and could find anything or hear anything. Tao Baoyi's wife was still young; he just couldn't poke a hole through the window and take a peek. So he came back instead.

* * *

Xie Yulun still had her eyes wide open waiting. Once he came back, she kept her eye and ear open and listened to what he said. She then gently sighed.

"I was wrong." While sighing, "I said you must be well known in Jianghu. Now I know I was wrong. You don't seem to know much about Jianghu."

She was not really wrong. Just because you are famous in Jianghu doesn't mean you are experienced. Just because you are experienced doesn't mean you are famous. Ma Rulong did not want to retort this but he had already looked and did what she said. Xie Yulun did not agree.

"You look at places you are not supposed to look and did not look at places you should."

"Where should I be looking?"

"Did you look in the kitchen?"

"No." Ma Rulong didn't understand, "I know the kitchen did not have anyone, why should I take a look?"

Xie Yulun asked, "Was the kitchen stove recently used?"

Ma Rulong was even more confused. Whether the stove was used recently, what did that have to do with anything?

Xie Yulun again asked, "Did you look in the well? Does the well have any water?"

“Why should I look there?”

“Because a stove with no fire and a well with no water is a perfect place to hide people. Inside there might be a secret compartment.”

Ma Rulong let out a sigh, “Person taught you this must be a veteran, and knows a lot of things.”

Xie Yulun said, “Now I’ve already taught you these things.”

Ma Rulong asked, “You still want me to go take a look?”

Xie Yulun replied, “You better go right now.”

* * *

The stove was hot and there was tinder next to the stove. Although there was a pot of water on the stove, there was no water in the well. Was that person hiding in the well? Ma Rulong could not tell.

He learned bihugong⁹⁵ (Gecko Martial Art) when he was young, so it wouldn’t be hard for him to go down. However, if there was person there, once he went down, that person will see him first. Once that person saw him, he would not let him come out of the well alive. It was possible that he could avoid their strike or he strikes them first. However why would he do this? He couldn’t think of a reason.

He was prepared to leave again, prepared to go back to listen to Xie Yulun’s angry nagging. Although he was still not someone’s husband, he could understand husband’s feelings when his wife was nagging him. He did not go but suddenly heard a voice from the well coldly asked, “Zhang laoban (boss), you came?”

It was low and hoarse voice. It was the person that bought salt. He had not seen the other person, but other person already seen him.

Ma Rulong bitterly smiled, “I came!”

Person that bought salt asked, “Since you are here, why don’t you come down to sit for a while?”

Ma Rulong originally could leave but since this person already know who he was so even if he left, this person would still go to “Zhang’s General Items” store. A refugee should never let other know where they were hiding. Ma Rulong understand this because he was a refugee, so he toughen himself and said, “I’m coming down.”

In the pitch black and deep well, there was suddenly a light. At the bottom of the well were two people, one was the one that bought salt, and the other was the one that was eating the salt.

This person had broad shoulder, long leg, wide forehead, and high cheekbone. He originally must be a big, tall, and strong person. Right now he was skinny as a stick. His skin was dried and cracked. The strangest part was he kept drinking water.

Drink a mouthful of water, eat a handful of salt, and swallow a raw chicken egg. He not only wasn’t afraid of saltiness, he did not even die from the salinity. Had no idea where the water he drank went. His dried skin looked like a cracked earth.

[End of Chapter 18]

_[Footnote]_____

95. bihugong (壁虎功), bihu is “gecko/house lizard” and gong/kung is martial art. It is a type of flexible martial art related to internal strenght, also call the “wall climbing martial art” or “picture hanging”. People who practice this could lean his back against the wall and use his shoulder strength to move on the wall and look like a house lizard moving on a wall.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19: Things You Must Do [有所必为]

— The person that bought salt was currently drinking wine, a bottle of rice wine he bought for himself. He was slowly taking one sip at a time. The way he was drinking wine was like a miser spending money. He wanted to drink but wasn't willing to because he could not be drunk. He needed to take care of his friend, the one that wasn't afraid of being salty and the one who was eating salt.

* * *

The bottom of the well was much wider than the opening. There was a bed, a small table and chair here. The lamp was on the table. The man that eats salt was on the bed. The man that bought salt was on the chair, quietly sitting here watching Ma Rulong using his Gecko Martial Art slide down the wall of the well. His hand holding the bottle of wine was huge and rough with blunt fingernails. Undoubtedly he was trained in zhushazhang96 (Vermillion Palm) type of martial art.

Next to his chair was a heavy bamboo rod that looked like it was at least forty - fifty catties. However, he did not strike out a deadly blow! He only coldly said, "Zhang laoban, we know you would eventually come. You actually did come."

"You know I would come?" Ma Rulong was confused, "How do you know?"

The man that bought salt took another sip of wine. "If I operate a general store and someone buys two catties of salt everyday, I would think it is strange too." He coldly smiled, "However a real general store owner, even if it is strange, would stay out of other people's business. It's a pity you are not."

"I'm not?"

"You originally should not be a general store owner." The man the bought salt said, "Just like I originally would not go to general store to buy salt."

"You can tell?"

The man the bought salt said, "You came here to investigate me. I also investigated you already." The man that bought salt slowly continued, "You originally should be Zhang Rongfa. You have already opened a general store here for eighteen years. You have a bedridden wife, an honest clerk, and you never like to be nosy." He suddenly sighed, "Unfortunately you are not Zhang Rongfa, absolutely not."

Ma Rulong again asked, "How do you know I am not Zhang Rongfa?"

The man that bought salt said, "Because your nails are too clean, hair is too neat, and also you bath everyday. I already found out that the original Zhang Rongfa was not a person that cares much about cleanliness."

Ma Rulong could not refute and had nothing to refute. This person was obviously a keen and experienced person in Jianghu. Before Ma Rulong was suspicious of him, he was already suspicious of this general store!

"If you are not Zhang Rongfa, who are you? Why do you pretend to be Zhang Rongfa? Where is the real Zhang Rongfa?" The man that bought salt continued, "I thought of these questions before, and was thinking for a long time."

Ma Rulong asked, "You've thought this through?"

The man that bought salt said, "I only realized one point."

Ma Rulong asked, "Which one point?"

The man that bought salt said, "This must be a well-crafted plan. Every small detail was secretly arranged. You could disguised as Zhang Rongfa and fool all of your customers who are regulars of eighteen years. It must be a brilliant art of disguise."

He said confidently, "Although there are a lot of people in Jianghu that know the art of disguise. In this world, only one can achieved it at this level."

This person, of course, was Exquisite Lily-White Hand Yu Linglong.

The man the bought salt continued, "Miss Yu have not pay attention to Jianghu's affair for over twenty years. Only one person could've persuaded her to come back and use her art."

Ma Rulong asked, "Absolutely only one person?"

The man that bought salt replied, "Absolutely only one person. Other the Jiangnan Yu Wu, no one would be able to persuade her. "

Ma Rulong forcibly smiled. He finally understands, there was no such thing as a perfect plan in the world. No secret that could remain hidden forever. Unfortunately, he still couldn't figure out the holes to Qiu Fengcheng's plot.

The man that bought salt again said, "You went through such a meticulous arrangement, wasted a lot of effort, and even disguised as a owner of a general store. As I can see you are the same as us, we are all refugees (fleeing). You are also trying to avoid being hunted and getting killed. The people that wanted your life must be worst than our adversaries." He laughed and said, "Since we are all refugees of Jianghu, why should I try to find out your secret? You originally did not need to investigate me. That's why I could still go to your store to buy these things everyday."

Ma Rulong sighed, "I originally do not want to come either."

The man that bought salt said, "Unfortunately, you are here."

Ma Rulong asked, "Do you want to kill and get rid of me?"

The man that bought salt replied, "Since you can get Jiangnan Yu Wu to do this, you must also have an impressive background. Even if I want to silence you, I might not succeed." He suddenly laughed, "If you are really who I guess you are, once I make my move, it is possible that I am the one that will die."

Ma Rulong asked, "The person you guessed is who?"

The man that bought salt replied, “Ma Rulong, Hall of Divine Horse’s big young master, and White Horse gongzi Ma Rulong.”

Ma Rulong’s heart jumped. If it were not because of Lily-White Hand Linglong altering his face, other people would have already discovered his expression had changed. However, he just had to ask, “Why do you think I am Ma Rulong?”

The man that bought salt said, “I have my reasons.”

His reasons were — right now in Jianghu the most wanted man was Ma Rulong. The only man that could asked Jiangnan Yu Wu for help was also Ma Rulong. He said, “Right now the three big families and five big sects in Jianghu had already posted a reward of 50,000 taels of gold for you. The top-rated experts that are after you are at least fifty to sixty people. Only the disciples of Beggar Clan did not seemed to care and did not get involve with this matter.”

Beggar Clan had the most disciples, had the greatest territories, their eyes were the most varied, and could gather informations the quickest. Beggar Clan had huge expenses, 50,000 taels of gold was not a small sum. The man that bought salt said, “Why would they not get involved? Of course because Master Yu Wu has a relationship with you.”

Ma Rulong was quiet for a while and then softly said, “You shouldn’t say these words.”

The man that bought salt said, “Is it because if I said it out, you would kill me afterward? Because you suspect I also want these 50,000 taels of gold?”

Ma Rulong asked, “You don’t?”

The man that bought salt assuredly replied, “I do not.”

Ma Rulong asked, “Why not?”

The man that bought salt did not open his mouth. The man that eats salt suddenly replied, “Because of me.”

He had been eating salt, the saltiest coarse salt. No one would have imagined there would be a person in this world that could eat this amount of salt. Two catties worth of coarse salt and he ate half already. After swallowing ten raw eggs, his face finally had a bit of liveliness to it and he finally spoke.

He said, "For twenty years, people that wanted my heads were no less than you. I'm also familiar with feeling of being wrongfully accused." Although he looked weak, his word a bit of heroism to it, "Although 50,000 taels of gold is not a small amount, I couldn't care less."

Ma Rulong asked, "How do you know I've also been framed?"

The man that eats salt replied, "Because I believed in Yu Wu. If you are not framed, the first man that wanted your life would be him."

Ma Rulong asked, "Who are you?"

The man that eats salt replied, "I am also like you; a person that had been framed, a person with a price on his head, and a person that could only lives like a wild dog that doesn't dare to see daylight. This is because we both don't want to die, and even if we die we want to die after we clear our name." He laughed again, a desolate and solemn laugh, "Regarding my name, it's better not to ask."

Ma Rulong looked at him for a while, and then looked at the man that bought salt. He suddenly said, "I believe you would not sell me out."

The man that eats salt said, "I also believe in you." He extended out his hand. His hand was like his friend's, a huge brute hand and cold as ice. However when Ma Rulong held on to his hand, he felt indescribable warmth.

The man that eats salt laughed and said, "You go. I'm not holding you here."

Ma Rulong said, "You can come back to buy salt. I'm not going to question you."

The man that eats salt looked at him for a while, and suddenly sighed, "It's a pity we met too late. I'd already suffered heavy injury and could no longer help you clear your name. Otherwise, I would love to have a friend like you."

Ma Rulong said, "Right now we can still become friends. Making friends is not about taking advantage of one another."

The man that eats salt suddenly laughed loudly. He laughed was hoarse and short, already couldn't laughed anymore, but was full of heroic spirit! He said, "It doesn't matter if you are Ma Rulong or not, and doesn't matter who you are, I want you as a friend!"

Ma Rulong firmly shake his hand. "I also do not care who you are. I also want to have you as a friend."

Dawn had not come yet; the spring was cold and chilly. Ma Rulong's heart was burning hot; his entire body was hot because he made a new friend, a person of unknown origin. Without a care about the outcome, yet friends that could treat each other with sincerity.

"You became friends with him!" Xie Yulun was still waiting for him and that was her first thing she asked, "You don't even know his name, and you became friends with him?"

Ma Rulong said, "Even if everyone in the world is his enemies, and wanted to kill him and dismember his body, I am still willing to become his friend!"

Xie Yulun asked, "For what?"

Ma Rulong replied, "Not particular reason."

Not particular reason? This is the truth in regard to making friends. If you needed a "particular reason" to make friends, then what kind of friends can you make? What kind of friend are you?

You could see the daybreak from the window. Ma Rulong was sitting under the window. Xie Yulun was leaning her head and then looked at him for a while, then lightly sighed and said, "I understand what you

mean but I couldn't do this." There are not much young girls that could understand these types of sentiments.

Xie Yulun suddenly asked, "Do you know why that friend of yours needs to eat salt?" Ma Rulong didn't know. He basically didn't even ask.

"I know." Xie Yulun said, "He must've been injured by Three Suns Lineage Ending Hand (Sanyang Juehu Shou)⁹⁷!"

"Three Suns Lineage Ending Hand?" Ma Rulong was from a prominent Wulin family but he had never heard of this.

"This palm skill had been lost for a while. When a person get struck by this palm, not only would his body dehydrates and skin dries up, he also lose his sense of taste and only want to eat salt. The more salt he eats, the more he would want to drink water and more injured he would get. At the time of death his body would completely dried up, as if he was burnt alive."

She pondered and said, "Although swallowing raw eggs is better than drinking water, this would only prolong his life for one and half more month. His outcome would still be death with no way of being saved."

"Absolutely can not be saved?"

Xie Yulun did not answer his question and asked, "What kind of person is your friend? What does he look like?"

"I believe he was originally a big and strong man. His shoulders were broader than regular people by at least a half. His hands and legs are also big. His waijia⁹⁸ (external family) palm skill must be really good."

Ma Rulong said, "Right now even though he's injured and close to death, when he speaks he still have this intimidating heroism to him."

Xie Yulun had a sparkle in her eyes.

"I already know who he is."

"Who?"

"This palm skill is even more potent and harder to master than Yin family and Cui family's Three Sun Lineage-Ending Palm, it could only be mastered by a person that never touches women."

A person that had never touched a woman, how many were there in Jianghu?

Xie Yulun said, "From what I know, in the past fifty years there is only one person that was willing to master this."

Ma Rulong immediately asked, "Who?"

"Jue dashi!" Xie Yulun said, "Although Jue dashi is heartless, ruthless and very willing to kill, but he wouldn't lightly use such a secret martial art skill. Unless his opponent palm skill is much better, forcing him to use this type of martial art."

Jianghu experts, most of them, have hidden ultimate martial art moves. Unless they were forced to, they would not reveal this move.

Xie Yulun said, "If he wasn't forced to a point where he had not other choice, Jue dashi would never use Three Sun Lineage-Ending Palm."

She asked Ma Rulong again, "How many people could forced Jue dashi into such situation?"

"Not many."

"Have you heard of the "Sky and Earth Turning" Tie Zhentian99?" Xie Yulun asked, "Can he be consider one of these people?"

Ma Rulong knew his facial expression must have changed. Of course he had heard of the name, “Sky and Earth Turning” Tie Zhentian. Roamed Jiangdong¹⁰⁰ for twenty years, kill people like nothing, accumulated cases like mountain; hard to know how many people wanted his head. Unfortunately it was hard to trace his whereabouts, no one could find him. Furthermore he had top-level martial art, cruel and vicious. Even for those that could find him, their souls were shattered by his iron fist.

Xie Yulun again asked, “Do you think your friend is Tie Zhentian?”

Ma Rulong refused to answer. That person was undoubtedly Tie Zhentian. “For twenty years, people that wanted my heads were no less than you... 50,000 taels of gold...I couldn’t care less.” Other than Tie Zhentian, who would have said this. He also said something else, “I’m also familiar with feeling of being wrongfully accused.”

Ma Rulong suddenly loudly said, “Doesn’t matter what he did in the past. I think he must have his own difficulties. Furthermore, he already had been push to the brink of death by these so called righteous and heroic people.”

Xie Yulun asked, “You think Jue dashi would wrongly accused a good person?”

Ma Rulong coldly laughed, “Being wrongfully accused by him, Tie Zhentian is not the only one.”

Xie Yulun sighed, “You are a good friend. A friend like you isn’t bad. Unfortunately this good friendship would not last long.”

Ma Rulong said, “There is really no way to save him?”

Xie Yulun slightly said, “If I am the big Miss of the Xie family, maybe he could be saved.”

She deliberately sighed, “It’s a pity I am only the general store owner’s wife. I couldn’t even cure my own sickness, how can I save other?”

Ma Rulong did not say anything.

He understood what Xie Yulun meant. If he really reveal the truth to her, it might be possible for her to save Tie Zhentian.

However if he did this, he would have betrayed Dawan and Yu Wu.

They were also his friends.

Xie Yulun turned around her body and avoided him, “I’m tired, let’s sleep!”

Ma Rulong did not sleep. He knew he couldn’t sleep.

Didn’t know whether Xie Yulun truly wanted to sleep or pretending to sleep but she did not mention this again.

Outside the window was just showing a fish stomach like color and there were still no sound from anyone.

Ma Rulong quietly opened the door and softly walk out.

[End of Chapter 19]

Footnote

96. zhushazhang (朱砂掌), lit. vermillion palm.

97. Sanyang Juehu Shou (三阳绝户手), sanyang, means “three yangs” or three positive/brightness, think yin-yang; juehu means household ending or family ending; and finally shou is simply hand.

98. waijiazhang (外家掌), literally mean “outer-family palm”. It refers to palm skills that are not from Shaolin or a Shaolin derivative.

99. Tie Zhentian (铁震天), surname Tie means iron, and given name means “sky shaking”. fantianfudi (翻天覆地), means “sky filling earth overturning” is an idiom used to describe everything turning on its head, a complete confusion.

100. Jiangdong (江东), lit. river earth, referring to the region eastern end of Yangtze River.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20: No Other Choice [别无选择]

Ma Rulong went out to the alley lane, and finally heard the baby of the household on the opposite side crying. After three more steps, a small door with Chaishen (god of wealth) on it opened. That young pregnant housewife was standing at the door seeing his young husband off to work. Ma Rulong pretended he did not see them. The husband was holding a small cloth bag and left. The housewife did not seem to notice Ma Rulong, turned around and closed the door.

Ma Rulong sprinted out, after three rises and falls, he entered Tao Baoyi's back yard. There seemed to be noises in the kitchen, the sound of rinsing and making rice. Tao Baoyi's wife was a hard worker, she was already preparing her husband's breakfast. Ma Rulong did not pay much attention to it. Tao Baoyi practiced martial art before; he probably used to be Tie Zhentian's subordinate. He didn't felt like a need to be cautious about this couple. He jumped into that well with no water.

* * *

The one catty of rice wine was empty. The man that bought salt was wide awake and was helping his friend tidy up his bed. The man that eats salt also did not sleep. Half of the remaining salt from last time was gone. They saw Ma Rulong but was not surprised and seemed as if they knew he would come back.

Ma Rulong went straight to the point and the first thing he asked was: “Are you Tie Zhentian?”

“I am.” His answer was also straightforward: “I am the infamous bandit Tie Zhentian that kills without blinking his eyes.”

Ma Rulong said, “Are you injured by Jue dashi's Three Sun Lineage-Ending Palm?”

“Yes.” Tie Zhentian was a bit taken back but he did not ask how he knew.

Ma Rulong continued to ask, “Your injury, can it still be healed?”

This time Tie Zhentian retorted, “Why are you getting involved in my business?”

Ma Rulong replied, “Because you are my friend!”

Tie Zhentian said: “You already know that I am the infamous bandit Tie Zhentian, you still want me as your friend?”

Ma Rulong said, “We are already friends. No matter who you are, that would not change.”

Tie Zhentian stared at him and suddenly laughed loudly, “I, Tie Zhentian, made a lot of mistakes in my life. However, I never had a bad friend.”

He was really laughing right now. As if as long as he could make new friends, even if he was wrongly killed, he could die with no regret.

The man that bought salt suddenly said, “He really did made a lot of mistakes because he was too reckless, too easily agitated. Also for friends, he is willing to do anything.”

He continued one word at a time, “However, this time he was not wrong.”

— This time what did he do? Why was he framed? Ma Rulong did not ask.

He believed in them, so he only asked, “Your injury, can it actually still be healed?”

“Yes.” The man that bought salt replied, “There is one medicine that could save him.”

“Which medicine?”

The man that bought salt dejectedly sighed, “Even if I said it out there is no use because we absolutely could not get this medicine.”

He forcibly laughed and said, “Not only can we not get it, we can’t steal it, can’t rob it. Otherwise, I would have went and took it.”

Ma Rulong again asked, “The medicine you want, was it made by a family named Xie?”

The man that bought salt changed his expression: “How do you their last name is Xie?”

His expression changed too fast, too weird, Ma Rulong said, “How come I shouldn’t know?”

The man that bought salt said, “Because...” His words were very hesitant like he was not willing to reveal the secret nor did he dare.

Tie Zhentian, however, loudly butted in, “Because that person is not willing to let other know her last name is Xie. Because she had a tragic history. No matter who, if they mention this, she would kill them.”

Ma Rulong asked, “Who is this person?”

Tie Zhentian replied, “Madame Jasper of the Jasper Villa. My injury could only be by her Jasper Pearl.”

Ma Rulong froze. — Madame Jasper’s last name was Xie. What was Xie Yulun’s relation to her? What did she have to do with Jasper Villa? He suddenly realized there were a lot of questions, questions he never thought of before.

Right now he didn’t have time to think.

He suddenly heard someone at the opening of the well said, "Tie Zhentian, you can not escape. Tie Quanyi101, you can not escape either."

* * *

The hunters already arrived, the refugees were in the well and they were like fishes in a net. Where else could they escape?

Ma Rulong's heart sank because he already knew the person above was Feng Chaofan. If Feng Chanfan was here obviously Jue dashi was nearby, and probably Monk Chiku and Jade Taoist could be here too. Even if they were not here for him, he couldn't escape either.

Tie Zhentian used one hand to cover his mouth, and put the salt on his other into his own mouth. He suddenly said, "That's right. I am here. My brother is also here, we are waiting for you."

There was no response from above after a long time. The people above were obviously surprised, how come Tie Zhentian had not died yet? His words still have such strength to it. After a long time, you could finally heard Jue dashi coldly said, "Tie Zhentian, you come up. I would spare Tie Quanyi's life!" Tie Quanyi was obviously the man that bought salt.

"Humph, us brothers already decided that we would die together."

Tie Zhentian laughed loudly, "Good, good brother!"

"If you want our lives, you better come down." Jue dashi did not go down, no one did. Although there was nowhere to escape down in the well, the first one the go down would also die.

"They would definitely not come down." Tie Zhentian lowered his voice and coldly laughed, "They are already daxia (great heroes). There's no need to be a hero."

"Besides they already know we have no where to escape." Tie Quanyi also softly said, "They are definitely waiting for us up there."

"However, they would not wait for long." Tie Zhentian said, "Soon, they would figure out to use fire or water, these vicious and cheap methods, on us."

Ma Rulong asked, "With their status, would they really use these methods?"

Tie Zhentian replied, "Because they have an excuse."

His smile looked as if he was mocking and grieving, "To handle monsters like us, no matter what they do, no one would criticize them. However if we do the same to them, it wouldn't be the same." He suddenly tightly gripped onto Ma Rulong's hand. "Are you my friend?"

"Yes."

"My age is older than you, shouldn't you listen to me?" Tie Zhentian said, "For this matter, you must listen to me."

"Which matter?"

"When they start to use fire or water on us, we would rush out."

"Good." Ma Rulong had no objection, "Actually we could rush out right now."

"We as in me and Tie Quanyi, not you!" Tie Zhentian kept his voice especially low, "They knew Quanyi and I are here, but they could never had guess there is an third person."

"They would of course couldn't imagine the owner of a general store could be here and became friend with the great bandit, Tie Zhentian. All they want was the two of us. Once they succeeded they would not stay here. Once they left, you would be leave safely." He was gripping even harder on Ma Rulong's hand, "Once we part today, there would be no next time. I don't want you to avenge me nor clear my name. As long as you continue to live, that's good enough for me."

Why did he become friend with Ma Rulong for? For nothing in particular. He only wanted his friend to live on because he knew for some people at certain times, just being able to stay alive was already hard enough.

Ma Rulong had been quietly listening and did not say a thing. He had a lot of things to say but he did not even say a word. Because these words did not need to be spoken out. He had already made a decision.

Tie Zhentian also did not say anymore and started to eat salt again. He swallowed a big handful at a time in his mouth. He still have a last breath of air, he could still fight to the death. He had the same type of attitude as Ma Rulong.

There hadn't been any movement above the well for a long time. The people at the bottom of the well could not escape anyway. Jue dashi and them were people that could hold their temper. Tie Quanyi pulled a Burmese knife out of his waistband and lightly touched the knife's edge. He then hatefully said, "Even if I have to die, I want to kill him!"

Tie Zhentian asked, "Who do you want to kill?"

Tie Quanyi replied, "Tao Baoyi."

Tie Zhentian said, "You can't kill him."

Tie Quanyi asked, "This time he must have betrayed us, why can't I kill him?"

Tie Zhentian replied, "Because he already has a wife and his wife is pregnant. In Jianghu, he is not the only one that betrays his friend. Beside this is not the first time you and I have been betrayed. Why must you kill him?" He suddenly let out a long sigh, "If you must kill people, the first one you should kill is me!"

Tie Quanyi said, "You?"

Tie Zhentian said, "If it weren't for me, how did you ended up like this?!"

Tie Quanyi looked at him and suddenly laughed, "Right. You are absolutely right. If it were not for you, I would not ended up like this. My parents were brutally murdered and my wife was raped. Other people said this was only my retribution. If it wasn't for you, why am I getting these reprisals? I..." His voice cracked, his distorted smiling was getting tear. Suddenly leap up vertically and hollered, "I, Tie Zhentian, have kill countless in my life. Today, I might as well sell you my head? All of you come and get it!"

He was not Tie Zhentian! He said this because he wanted to go out first and used himself as bait. This way his friend would have a chance to escape. He did not even care about his life and death.

Ma Rulong understand his intention. Tie Zhentian also understand and suddenly lift his head and laughed. "You can not take this from me. As to who would die, I should be first. As long as I am still alive, I will not let other harm you!"

While laughing, he used his skinny and bony body and rushed up. Using one leg he stepped on Tie Quanyi's shoulder, he leaped again and leaped out the well. There was immediately a dreadful cry above the well. Tie Quanyi also leaped out. It didn't matter who die first and who die later; they would die together. If this were one year ago, Ma Rulong would tear up seeing such a show of friendship. However Ma Rulong did not tear up, but his chest had blood — blood boiling. A person that was determined and prepared to shed blood would usually not shed tear. He knew what Tie Zhentian said was not wrong. If he quietly stayed in the well and wait until they die, he would be able to escape back to the general store. Then no one would come here to buy salt and his secret would be safe. He could also simply forget about this matter and forget about Tie Zhentian.

If he also rushed out, he would just die with both of them. Because if he rushed out, Jue dashi and them would eventually find out who he was. A typical owner of a general store, would not risked their life and fight alongside the great bandit Tie Zhentian. A reasonable person would never do such an idiotic thing. Ma Rulong was not an idiot; he knew what he had to do to keep his life.

A person only has one life. Like any other people, Ma Rulong also valued his life. However, he also realized that, in life, there are more valuable things than life.

Since Jue dashi was determined that there was only two people in the well, if a third person came out, they would be surprised. When they were startled, he would have his chance. If there were a chance, he would not let it go. Even if there were no chance, he would still do the same. He would still rushed out.

[End of Chapter 20]

Footnote

101. Tie Quanyi (铁全义), surname Tie, given name means “complete righteousness”.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21: No Turning Back on Honor [义无反顾]

Why would a person want to keep on living? Is it because he wants to do things that he thinks he should be doing? If a person could not do the things he thinks he should be doing, why should he keep on living?

Above the well was a courtyard. Right now the sun had risen. The sunlight was shining through the blood. There were other people’s bloods and Tie Zhentian and Tie Quanyi’s bloods. When Tie Zhentian went up, there was a steel sabre hacking toward him. He used one of his hands to twist this person’s wrist and the other hand to hang onto this person’s shoulder. With a loud yell, he broke this person’s arm. Unfortunately this person was not Jue dashi or Feng Chaofan.

Outside the kitchen were two chairs. Jue dashi and Feng Chaofan were sitting on these chairs, coldly watching. They brought other people to do their deed for them. With their status, why should they personally deal with a heavily injured man?

* * *

They indeed couldn’t imagine a third person would come out of the well. No matter whom, when dealing with matter out of their scope, mistakes bound to happen. Ma Rulong originally wanted to use this chance to kill them. As long as he strikes down one of them, he would have a chance to strike down the other one.

However by the time he came out, Jue dashi and Feng Chaofan were several zhang (yards) away. He still rushed over there. He had already decided to do this, no matter whether it succeed or fail. He would not look back.

His body still had the rough black clothes on. However not sure when but he already had his black mask pulled off. It was probably at the time when he went down the well. He was never afraid of people seeing his face and never had the habit of hiding his identity. However the face he had right now was not the face Jue dashi was familiar with.

The face he had on right now, no heroes in Jianghu had seen before. He was definitely not considered a top-level expert amongst the elites in Jianghu. However, he had practiced martial art since he could walk. Ma Rulong's wugong (martial art) might not be able to compare with Shaolin, Wudang, and these sects with rich histories, but Hall of Divine Horse's martial art had its own speciality.

A person would can succeed, gain fame, and survive, must have his own specialty, especially lightness martial art skills. Hall of Divine Horse's lightness skills were renowned. With Heavenly Steed Galloping Across the Sk102 (Tianma Xingkong), the power when striking down from mid-air was frightening.

A country hick wearing a crude clothes that no one recognize, suddenly came out of what was supposed to be an empty well. This person was charging toward you with frightening skills. No matter who encountered this, it was hard not being shock. Beside he wasn't the only one rushing over.

Tie Zhentian already freed his hand and was closing in behind Ma Rulong. He extended his iron fist but his target was not Jue dashi or Feng Chaofan. He suddenly grab Ma Rulong waistband with his index and middle finger. He pressed on Ma Rulong's acupoint at his back waist. With a growl, Ma Rulong fell back behind him.

He must stop Ma Rulong because he already saw Jue dashi's eagle claw turned from dark green to dark red. Even the green vein from his arm turned to red, like the brilliant and insipid color of the autumn setting sun. No one better than him understood the danger of the Three Suns Lineage Ending Hand, since he, himself, experienced it. He could not let Ma Rulong put himself in such danger. Jue dashi originally rose up, but now slowly sat back down and coldly stared at them.

"Who is he?"

"A friend."

"Can't believe you still have friends."

Tie Zhentian cackled, "Although Tie-mou¹⁰³ (I) had killed countless and made countless enemies but certainly do not have less friends than you. This type of friends, you don't even have one."

Jue dashi coldly glared at him for a while and then turned to Ma Rulong that recently got up, "You are really his friend?"

"Yes"

"You are really willing to risk your life for him?"

Ma Rulong said, "My life is mine. I still have one life to risk." He did not deliberately change his tone. However his tone already changed.

Jue dashi did not recognize his voice so he asked, "Do you know why I must kill him?" Ma Rulong did not know.

Jue dashi asked again, "Do you know the 'brothers and friends: respectful; filial and righteousness: unparalleled' three brothers of the Yang family?"

Ma Rulong knew. The three brothers of the Yang family were Hedong¹⁰⁴ Wulin heroes, and enormously wealthy people of several generations.

The three brothers were like one person; they had money, fame, power, frankness, straightforwardness, loyalty, and filial. The household of three brothers all lived in one mansion so they could take care of one another.

Jue dashi expression changed and said, "Do you know that the three brother's family of twenty-nine male members all died in Tie Zhentian's hand in one evening? Seventeen female members were sold to the border garrison as army slaves?"

Tie Quanyi suddenly yelled, "Do you know why did he do all these?" His voice was sad and shrill, "Do you know what the Yang brothers did to my parents, wife, and children?"

Jue dashi coldly laughed! "This is your retribution."

"That is their retribution." Tie Zhentian said, "I am the one who killed all the males and sold all the females of the Yang family. This has nothing to do with anyone else."

He was pointing at the people Jue dashi brought along; these people that were still glaring at him and wanted his life. "These people are all relatives, friends, and brothers of the Yang family. They all know I am injured by your Three Sun Lineage Ending Hand. They also know that killing me is a glory and fame-inducing deed. You are already a famous daxia, that's why you are not wrestling with them for a chance to kill me." Jue dashi actually did not deny this.

Tie Zhentian mightily yelled, "However, I am still not dead. If you want my life, it is still not that easy. I can still rip off the skull of three to five of them."

Jue dashi coldly said, "These people are seeking justice and vengeance. If they die, they will die with no regrets. I would not stop them or need to stop them."

Tie Zhentian asked, "Do you want me to fulfill their wishes?" He pointed his finger at Ma Rulong, "What I did had nothing to do with him.

If you let him go, whoever wants my head, I will not stop them."

Jue dashi coldly stared at him for a while and then turned to Ma Rulong! "Before today, I don't think I have seen you before." Jue dashi said, "You don't look like a bad person."

Ma Rulong only listened and did not speak, question nor deny. Jue dashi continued to ask, "How long have you met Tie Zhentian?"

Tie Zhentian replied, "Not long."

Jue dashi asked, "How long is not long?"

Tie Zhentian interrupted, "He only knew me for one day."

Jue dashi sighed, "For only one day and you already are willing to risk your life? There are definitely very few men like him."

He suddenly waved Ma Rulong away and said, "You can go."

* * *

Ma Rulong stood there and did not move. Jue dashi looked at him and asked, "You're not going?"

"I'm not going." Ma Rulong with determination said, "Definitely not going!"

Tie Zhentian roared, "You need to go. Leave immediately!"

"There is only one way I will go." Ma Rulong actually said this calmly, firm but calm, "Kill me and lift me out."

Jue dashi coldly said, "Killing you is not hard. At first if no one was holding you, you are already lifted out of here."

"I know."

“You must be lifted out?”

“Must.”

“Why?”

“No particular reason.”

Those words are already not right. A person can have “no particular reason” to befriend a person; he can disregard advantages and disadvantage, pay no attention to the consequences, and not have any objectives. However once he befriended this person, what he does for his friend is no longer for “no particular reason” but for some indescribable feelings. It is for the things you must do: the type of valor and code of brotherhood that honor does not permit you to turn back on. It is for you to be able to face your conscience and noble teachings. It is for a chance to not deal with not being able to sleep in the middle of the night. It is for you to live a life where you can look into your heart with no shame. And also for you to die where you can look into your heart with no shame.

Not for any particular reason? For what? So what if you succeed? So what if you fail? So what if you live? So what if you die?

Success without turning back, failure without turning back, live without turning back, and die without turning back! No turning back and no lowering your head!

[End of Chapter 21]

Footnote

102. Tianmaxingkong (天马行空), lit. heavenly horse walking on air. Here it's a martial art skill. The phrase itself is use to describe “out of this world” ability.

103. Tie-mou here means “this certain person named Tie” used by the person himself. You can essentially replace it with “I/me”. In Chinese, it's fine for an individual to speak in third person.

104. Hedong (河东), municipal located at the heart of Tianjin.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22: The Green Fog That's Not Fog [绿雾非雾]

Ma Rulong lifted his head up. The sunlight was shining on his face. Although this was not the face of a handsome man that would move young girls' hearts, he, no matter who saw him, still had a respectable and honourable expression. Tie Zhentian was looking at him.

"This was not a bad offer and was already agreed on. Why did you refuse?"

"Because I wanted to open another offer with them." Ma Rulong said, "One that is even better than yours."

"What offer?" Jue dashi asked, "What kind of offer is better than his offer?"

"He wanted to use two lives and exchange it for my one life." Ma Rulong smiled, "This kind of losing proposition, I would not do."

"What kind of offer would you accept?"

"Use my one life to exchange for their two lives."

Jue dashi coldly laughed, "This offer would not go through."

"Why?"

"No one can exchange one life for two lives." Jue dashi coldly said, "No one's life is worth that much."

“There is one.” Ma Rulong said, “I know at least one.”

“Who?”

“Ma Rulong!”

After hearing this name, Jue dashi pupil immediately contracted. Ma Rulong’s pupils were also contracting.¹⁰⁵

“I know the person you really wanted is not Tie Zhentian but Ma Rulong.” Jue dashi admitted.

“Using Ma Rulong’s one life to exchange for their two lives, will this offer go through?”

“It will!” Jue dashi was trying to control himself, “Unfortunately no one can find Ma Rulong.”

“One person can.” Ma Rulong said, “At least one person can find him.”

“Who?”

“Me!”

Ma Rulong was also trying to control himself, “If you let them go, I guaranteed I can give Ma Rulong to you.”

Tie Zhentian suddenly laughed! “You are a good friend and this is a good offer. However, this proposition will not succeed.” The laughter was hoarse, “Because no one will believe any of your words.”

Jue dashi ignored him. Ma Rulong also ignored him. The two were facing each other, staring eye to eye, the contracted pupil were like a sharp nail.

Ma Rulong clearly said, "You should know what I am saying is not a lie."

"I can see." Jue dashi firmly said, "However, I can not let them go first."

"You don't trust me?"

Jue dashi said, "Once you hand over Ma Rulong, I will immediately let them go."

Feng Chaofan immediately said, "I promise."

Ma Rulong coldly laughed, "If all of you don't trust me, why should I trust any of you?"

"Because I am Feng Chaofan and he is Jue dashi. You are just a person of unknown origin." Although he did not really answer the question, this was, however, the best reply.

"If you want this proposition to go through, you better listen to our demands." Jue dashi said, "Or else we will kill Tie Zhentian, and then you!"

His words were extreme. He originally was a heartless, ruthless man that kill without mercy! Ma Rulong had no choice.

"Okay, I believe you." He clasped his two hands, "I am that person you are looking for."

"You are Ma Rulong?"

"I am."

* * *

He was Ma Rulong. He handed himself over. He was the one that sold himself out. If someone asked him, "Why?" Even he could not answer this question. Because he could no longer answer: "No particular reason."

However he, himself, did not know why was he doing this? Was it because of impulse? Was it because he was hot-blooded heart? Or was it because of an indescribable loyalty and courage?

Ma Rulong still held up his head and the sun was still shining on his face. "You can not recognize me because my face had already changed by someone else." Ma Rulong said, "I have been hiding in the general store for a long time." He could not reveal his real face to them because he didn't know how to return to his original face.

Because Yu Linglong's Exquisite Lily-White Hand already modified his face from under his skin. He could not reveal this either because he did not want to drag other into this. However he was speaking the truth, every word of it.

So he asked, "Right now shouldn't you let them go!"

Jue dashi looked at Feng Chaofan and Feng Chaofan looked at Jue dashi. Neither of them had any expression.

"What do you think?" Jue dashi asked.

"How about you?" Feng Chaofan retorted, "If he is Ma Rulong, why would he hand himself in because of Tie Zhentian?"

"No reason." Jue dashi said, "Absolutely no reason."

Tie Zhentian suddenly laughed, "I already knew you could not fool them. You should've known that no one would believe you."

He almost laughed till he was out of breath. Ma Rulong wanted to laugh, laugh out loud and until he couldn't laugh anymore. He did not laugh.

He was not lying. Every sentences and words he said were the truth, but no one believe him! Was this matter worth laughing about? Should he laugh until tears shows up? If he laughed until tears show up, what kind of tears would it be? Tie Zhentian was still laughing like he would soon laughed to the point his eyes would tear up. If he laughed until tears show up, what kind of tears would it be?

“You are just an unknown figure of unknown origin. I am the ‘Sky and Earth Turning’ great bandit Tie Zhentian. Even if you have ten lives, you could not exchange it for my one life. You should leave quickly.”

Ma Rulong did not go. Tie Zhentian laughs suddenly stopped and suddenly roared, “Your proposal failed, why are you still here?”

“Because he is your friend, your best friend.” Jue dashi coldly said, “So he decided to die with you here.” Tie Zhentian quickly turned around, glared at him showing an extremely dreadful and angry expression.

“You said you will let him go.”

“I did.”

“Right now, are you not going to let him leave?”

“It’s not that I am not letting him go.” Jue dashi said, “It’s just that he is not willing to go. I will never force someone to do something they don’t want to do. So no one can force him to leave. Therefore if someone would force him to leave, I would kill that person first.”

Tie Zhentian glared at him, as if his eyes were going to pop out. “I understand. I understand.” His voice was sad and shrill, “Right now I finally understand.”

“What do you understand?”

Tie Zhentian clenched his teeth and gripped his hands, “Although you are petty, cruel and merciless, I still treat you as a human. You can’t separate between right and wrong, killed the innocent, yet I still consider you a human. I, Tie Zhentian, killed countless in my lifetime and sometimes it unavoidably I wronged a

good man. So what if I am being accused? So what if someone chopped my head off or even chopped my body in pieces?” He fiercely continued, “Now I finally understand, you are not even consider human.” Jue dashi coldly listened and suddenly asked, “You want to watch your friend die first? Or want your friend to watch you die first?”

Tie Zhentian angrily roared, body suddenly sprung up toward Jue dashi. His energy was almost exhausted but still had a sliver of strength that was as powerful as a lion or tiger. At this moment, in the courtyard there was suddenly a clear and sharp laughter, “Everyone is living so well, why does anyone need to die?”

When the laughter appeared, a billow of smoke fog slowly emerged from outside the wall. The mist looked like it was dark green color with a jasmine aroma. After saying these ten words, the fog already thickened; thick like smoke, green like jadeite.

This was not smoke, nor was it fog. There was no such thing as a dark green fog, but it just happened to look like fog. Just like how Ma Rulong was clearly Ma Rulong, but he just didn’t look like Ma Rulong.

[End of Chapter 22]

Footnote:

105. I have to admit, I’m not familiar with this expression. If I were to guess, i think it’s similar to “eyes wide open”. In that it’s expressing how the subject is showing great interest or awareness of what’s happening.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23: A Dishonest Honest Man [不老实的老实人]

Tie Zhentian’s thrust was originally his last strike, a life and death determining final strike. He was already determined to die. However he did not die because he did not really move forward. This time Ma Rulong was the one that pulled him back by grabbing onto his waistband.

Jue dashi was originally prepared to meet his attack, however that did not happen. After the laughter, the green fog was fading away. His motions suddenly stopped, his expressionless face suddenly had a strange expression. Then he could not see Tie Zhentian anymore.

This green fog seemed as if it was blown from the devil's mouth. The little courtyard was completely enveloped in such a short period. Other than this layer of green fog, nothing else could be seen. At this time, Ma Rulong already brought Tie Zhentian back to his general store.

* * *

Jue dashi and them could not see anything; Ma Rulong could not see anything either. However Ma Rulong already lived here for several months, and already came to Tao Baoyi's home before. He was not as cautious as Jue dashi and them. He was not afraid of sneak attack and not afraid of blindly hitting his head. A person that was already prepared to die, what was there to be afraid of? So he came back to the general store.

* * *

People who sleep early usually wake up early. The neighbors were usually people that sleep early, normally at this time the general store was already opened.

Today was an exception. Ma Rulong carried Tie Zhentian and weaved through the alley behind the general store. He jumped in over the wall.

Tie Zhentian appeared to be very weak. Although he did not strike out at first, his energy was completely released and depleted. Ma Rulong was pulling him so he could only follow. However he did not forget his brother. Although Tie Quanyi was not his real brother, throughout these years they had been through life and death together. Between the two of them, they had developed a thicker than blood relationship.

"I can not leave him there." Tie Zhentian said, "We must go back and bring him out." It was already too late to go back.

"They do not want him, only you." Ma Rulong said, "They still haven't caught you yet so they would not harm him."

In the backyard of the general store, the layout almost exactly the same as Tao's backyard except it was missing the well and had an extra room — Zhang Laoshi's room. The door to his room was opened; Zhang Laoshi was not in it. He was not in the kitchen either. Xie Yulun was here but seemed like she was really asleep. Ma Rulong quietly opened the door, went in, and did not disturb her.

He rested Tie Zhentian on his own bamboo chair that he had sat on all the time. Then he went to the front and brought back a bucket of salt and a basket of chicken eggs. Zhang Laoshi was not in the store either.

After swallowing a handful of salt and two eggs, Xie Zhentian asked, "This is your general store?"

"En (Yes)."

"Who is the woman on the bed?" Xie Zhentian again asked, "Your wife?"

Ma Rulong did not answer. He did not want to lie to Xie Zhentian. However even he was not sure whether to acknowledge or deny it. He didn't even know how to answer that.

Tie Zhentian also did not ask anymore. He suddenly sighed, "You should not have brought me back here, absolutely shouldn't have."

"I must bring you back here."

"Why?"

Ma Rulong said, "Because there might be a person here that can heal your injury."

Tie Zhentian eyes lit up. It was hard for him not be happy. As long as there was a chance to heal his injury, he would have a chance to go against Jue dashi. It was because he was too confident and was too certain; therefore he fought Jue dashi completely with palm skill. However, he would not repeat the same mistake.

“Who can heal my injuries?” These were the words he wanted to ask but before saying this, the sleeping Xie Yulun suddenly said, “You should not have brought him back here because there was no one here the can heal his injuries. Other than people of the Xie family, no one could heal his injuries.”

“However you.....”

Xie Yulun opened her eyes widely and glared at him. “I am not a person from the Xie family. I am only the wife of a general store owner.”

Still the same word, same meaning. She knew that this was the only way to force Ma Rulong to tell the truth. Of course, she would not let this chance go. Tie Zhentian suddenly stood up and swallowed another handful of salt and two eggs. “I’ll leave.” He really wanted to leave.

He had roamed Jianghu for twenty years. Obviously he could tell there must be a secret here. He did not want to make it difficult for Ma Rulong.

Xie Yulun did not let Ma Rulong open his mouth and said, “You should have left in the beginning.”

Unexpectedly Tie Zhentian suddenly sat down!

“I can’t go.”

“Why?”

The one asking was Xie Yulun but Xie Zhentian was answering to Ma Rulong. “If I stay here, I can still help you fight them when they come.”

“Looking for me?” Ma Rulong asked, “Why would they come here to look for me?”

“Right now, you would be the first person they would look for.”

Ma Rulong did not understand. Tie Zhentian let out a sigh, "You really thought they did not believe your words?"

Ma Rulong retorted, "You think they believe it?!"

Tie Zhentian replied, "Absolutely believe it."

Ma Rulong asked, "Why wouldn't they acknowledge it?"

Tie Zhentian replied, "Because if they acknowledge what you said was true, acknowledge that you are Ma Rulong, they would have to let me go." He coldly laughed, "Since we are in the palm of their hands, no one could escape. Why should they acknowledge it? Why should they let me go?"

Ma Rulong was startled. Right now he really couldn't laugh. Now he knew, the heart of Jianghu people was full of sinister and deceptions and absolutely not what he could have imagine. Xie Yulun was constantly staring at him and suddenly struggled to sit up.

"You are Ma Rulong?" Her voice became coarse, "You are that treacherous, malicious Ma Rulong that capable of doing any unimaginable evil deeds?"

Ma Rulong could only felt a suddenly surged in his chest. It was both vigor and anger.

"That's right, I am Ma Rulong." His voice also became coarse, "I am that evil-doer Ma Rulong."

Tie Zhentian was startled.

In recent years, there were very few things that could startle him. However, this woman was clearly Ma Rulong's wife, how could she not know Ma Rulong was Ma Rulong?

Xie Yulun was startled, after a while she sighed, "You are not that Ma Rulong."

"I am."

"You are not, absolutely not." Xie Yulun said, "That Ma Rulong was treacherous and malicious, and capable of doing anything." Her voice suddenly became gentle, "However I have already been with you for three months and twenty one days. I can tell you are not a bad person."

Ma Rulong did not say anything. He couldn't say anything; it as if his throat had been frozen. Right now he was already used to being insulted and accused, people's pity and understanding seemed harder for him to bear.

At this time, the front of the general store started to have a voice, Zhang Laoshi's voice. Ma Rulong didn't seem to want to face Xie Yulun, so he immediately rushed out. Zhang Laoshi was really in the shop. He was arranging the general items, looked like he was preparing to open the store.

Ma Rulong stared at him, "You came back."

"I did not come back." Zhang Laoshi said, "I didn't even leave, how would I come back?!"

He really didn't leave? At first he clearly wasn't in the room, kitchen, and the store had no other people.

Zhang Laoshi said, "I was at the bathroom at first."

He was not at the bathroom at first either. When he went to the bathroom, he would lock the door from the inside. However, at first, the bathroom door was locked from the outside.

Ma Rulong already learned how to pay attention to these small things. Because he knew, a lot of the larger things can be seen from the smaller things. He suddenly realized, this honest man was not really honest either.

[End of Chapter 23]

Chapter 24

Chapter 24: Regular Customer and Big Customer

Before a general store opened, there are a lot of thing to prepare, clean and tidy up. Zhang Laoshi was doing those things. For a person that managed a general store for eighteen years, when a store was suddenly missing a large bucket of salt and a large basket of egg, there was no way he would not know. Zhang Laoshi did not even seem to notice.

Yesterday after noon there was rain, the mud in the alley was not dry yet. There was mud on his foot and was not completely dry. Did he go out at first? Where did he go? Why was he hiding it? Ma Rulong suddenly realized he was not very honest, and he was mysterious and strange. This was the second time Ma Rulong felt this way.

Zhang Laoshi already prepared to open the store. When he wanted to unpin the door, Ma Rulong suddenly said, "Today, we would close down for a day."

Zhang Laoshi slant his head pondering, and asked, "Is today a holiday?"

"No."

"Is today a special occasion for the family?"

"No."

"Then why are we not opening today?"

Ma Rulong could not say the real reason but could not make up a good reason either. He was not someone that was good at lying. "Because I am the owner of this store." Ma Rulong said, "If I say not to open today, then we will not open today."

Zhang Laoshi tilted his head and pondered. This was not really considered a reason at all, but hard not to accept.

However someone in the room retorted. "Today we are opening like normal, ignore what he said." That was Xie Yulun's voice.

Ma Rulong rushed over there and seemed a little angry. "Why should my words be ignored? Why are you butting into my business?"

"Not that I wanted to. It's your friend that wanted to."

Tie Zhentian said, "Because today this general store must be open for business. Absolutely must."

Ma Rulong did not understand. "Right now they already know I am Ma Rulong and this general store's owner. They could come anytime. Why should we still openly let them in?"

"It is because they already know you are here, you must open this store."

"Why?"

"Because if the store was not open, they would just charged in." Tie Zhentian said, "Right now if we leave the door wide open, they would be confused about our strength and become extra cautious about coming in."

Xie Yulun coldly added, "It looks like everyone here could think more carefully than you."

Ma Rulong could only keep quiet. He could not deny it, Xie Yulun and Tie Zhentian could think more carefully than him but how about Zhang Laoshi? Could it be that this honest man that had never been around Jianghu could think of this?

The four door covers had already been taken off. Zhang Laoshi held an old worn broom and sweep the outside and inside around the door cleanly, as if he already knew there was an esteemed guest coming and wanted to specially welcome this guest. The alley lane outside was quiet.

Tie Zhentian suddenly asked, "Is that person sweeping outside your clerk?"

"Yes."

"What kind of person is he?"

"An honest man." Ma Rulong felt like he was lying to himself, "His name is Zhang Laoshi."

Tie Zhentian's eyes glittered. "I like honest man." His words seemed like it contained deeper meaning, "Only an honest man can fool all these treacherous, cautious, and petty men." He coldly laughed, "That world renowned righteous gentleman Jue dashi was a deceitful, skeptical, treacherous, petty little man."

Ma Rulong understood his anger.

"He believes you are Ma Rulong. He could still kill Tie Zhentian and then kill Ma Rulong. If he had the guts to do this, I would have respect him a bit more." Tie Zhentian coldly laughed, "But he doesn't dare because he doesn't want to turn back on his words in front of everyone. He wanted the world to believe that he is absolutely against evil and a just and righteous gentleman."

He grasp his fist firmly, "I only hate not being able to chop this 'gentleman' into pieces. Every one of them."

Xie Yulun suddenly sighed. "Unfortunately, you are not able to kill any of these 'gentleman', instead you will die soon."

* * *

This was the truth no one could refute.

How come truth was so heartless and cruel? Xie Yulun said, "Even if they could not grasp the strength of this place and don't dare to do anything recklessly. They must have surrounded this general store. None of you should even think about charging out."

Her voice has a strange implication to it; not sure whether it was pity, sadness, or mockery.

"So you people could only wait here and I could only wait with you people. Regardless they would eventually come in. Hard to say, they might already be preparing to send someone to investigate the current situation here." Xie Yulun said, "Investigating the situation here is not hard because this place is only a general store. Anyone can come in to buy something."

She bluntly said, "When they come in, it looks like I will die with all of you." This was also the truth, again hard to refute, an undeniable truth.

Xie Yulun glared at Ma Rulong. "I don't care whether you really did those things. I only wanted to ask you one thing." Her question was like a whip, "You are letting me inexplicably die like this with you. Could you really have a clear conscience about this?"

When this question was asked, it was like a whip lashed onto his body. Couldn't! He couldn't have a clear conscience about this.

"I could tell them you are innocent." Ma Rulong hesitantly said, "I could send you away first."

"Where could you send me? Would they believe I am innocent?" She coldly asked, "You wanted them to take me like a wild dog and then tortured and interrogated me?"

Ma Rulong felt like the one being tortured and whipped. "What do you want me to do?"

"I just want you to return several things back to me."

"Return what?"

“Return my real face. Return my martial art.” Xie Yulun suddenly became angry and agitated, “I don’t even know how you manage to take them away from me. If you still have a heart, you should return those back to me.”

Ma Rulong had no way to return those to her. He didn’t want to face her, didn’t want to lift his head. He felt like a thief. He wished she really did have a whip in her hand. He would rather be slashed and whipped. He would rather endure the cruelest punishment than to bear the guilt and conscience.

At this moment, Tie Zhentian suddenly firmly said, “It looks like your general store already have a customer here.”

Any customer that came here today could potentially be sent by Jue dashi to investigate them. Tie Zhentian’s forehead was showing green vein. “You go see what he came here to buy? Is it really a general item? Or wanted to come here to buy our lives?”

* * *

The one that came was the pregnant young housewife with the big stomach.

Ma Rulong could already hear her laughter. She was not only the noisiest person in the neighborhood, but also the one the like to laugh the most.

She laughed because she was in a good mood. She was in a good mood because there was a new life in her stomach.

Ma Rulong did not go out to take a look. He was very relief toward her.

“She is a regular customer and comes everyday.”

“Came everyday? To buy what?”

“To buy brown sugar.” Ma Rulong said, “To her, brown sugar is like ginseng. Not only is it nutritious, it can cure all.”

Those that couldn’t afford ginseng could only buy brown sugar. Brown sugar and ginseng both comfort the heart, like some believe god and some believe in Buddha.

However she did not come here to buy brown sugar. Ma Rulong already heard her talking to Zhang Laoshi, “I know you would think it’s strange.” She chuckled, “Because I am not buying brown sugar today.”

“What are you buying?” Zhang Laoshi asked.

“Buying salt.”

The general store sell salt. Everyone uses salt. People buy salt everyday; there is nothing strange about this.

“How much are you buying?” Zhang Laoshi asked.

“Today our family wanted to salt meat, the saltier it is the better it could be preserved.” The young housewife seemed to deliberately explain why she was buying salt, “I want thirty catties of salt.”

People buy salt from general store everyday, but very few would buy thirty catties worth at once. A typical general store would only stock thirty to forty catties of salt.

Tie Zhentian’s green vein on his forehead became thicker. “You get her in here.” He lowered his voice, “If she doesn’t want to, drag her in.”

Ma Rulong did not move. “Why didn’t you go?”

“She is pregnant.” Ma Rulong said, “I can not do this to a pregnant woman.”

“Even if you clearly know she was sent by that hypocrite. You would not do this?”

“I would not.”

No matter what the circumstances were, he would not do and not willing to do. He would rather die.

Tie Zhentian stared at him suddenly sighed, “You are truly a good man. I had never seen a good person like you. People like you are very rare nowadays.”

Xie Yulun suddenly also lightly sighed, “People like him, I have also never seen before.”

Zhang Laoshi already told her, “We already sold all the salt in the store. You better come back at night.”

The young housewife was still smiling as she was leaving; a general store that did not have any salt to sell, what a laughable matter.

Tie Zhentian said, “By letting her go, you are already telling Jue dashi that I am here and you saved up all you salt for me.”

Ma Rulong also knew about this.

Tie Zhentian said, “I believe your general store would have a lot of business today. Very soon there would be a second customer.”

He was not wrong. Not long after, there second customer already showed up at the doorstep.

* * *

The second customer was a big customer, and immediately after he came in said, "I want to buy something." This person had hoarse and low voice, "Whatever you have, I will buy."

"Buy everything?"

"Buying everything." This person said, "I want to buy everything you have."

[End of Chapter 24]

Chapter 25

Chapter 25: Dead Alley [死巷]

This was big customer and this was a big business. Business is business. If you have something to sell, other could buy. What other wants to buy, you should sell. How much other want to buy is how much you want to sell. Ma Rulong could tell Tie Zhentian's expression had already changed, also know his facial expression had changed. Unfortunately he could not see the expression on Zhang Laoshi's face, and could only hear him said:

"Our general store is not considered too big or too small. The items in the store are not too much or too little. Can you alone really carry all these away?"

"I can ask others to help me move them." This big customer said, "As long as you give me a price, I'll pay and call people to help me move them."

Calling people to help move? What people? Were they really going to take the products or the lives? Ma Rulong did not rushed out to confront this big customer. He suddenly had a strange feeling. He felt that this honest man must have a way to deal with him.

Zhang Laoshi already said, "I am only a clerk of this general store. I can not make a decision for such a big business."

“Who can decide?”

“Our owner.”

“Is your owner here?”

“Yes.” Zhang Laoshi said, “He’s just inside. You can go in and ask.”

“I’m not going in. Tell him to come out.”

“Why won’t you go in?”

“Why won’t he come out?” This big customer’s attitude changed.

Zhang Laoshi’s reply was also extreme, “Because he is the owner. No matter whether it a big owner or small owner, they tend to have a little bit of an attitude.”

Big customer did not look happy, “If he doesn’t come out, I’m not buying anything.”

Zhang Laoshi continued with extreme words, “Right now, even if you don’t want to buy. It wouldn’t do.” He said, “So you must go in.”

* * *

Tie Zhentian had been paying close attention to their conversation. His eyes carried a expression of deep thought. Their voices were not soft, so in there they could clearly hear every word. There was no need to pay such close attention to it.

He was trying to determine the big customer tones and dialect, he must’ve heard of this person’s voice before. Ma Rulong wanted to ask whether he knew the background of this person. Tie Zhentian already said it out.

“Wang Wanwu106!” His voice seemed nervous: “Be careful toward this man’s two arms.”

In Wulin there was only one Wang Wanwu, his Tendon Separating Bone Alternating Hand (Fenjin Cuogu Shou107) and Powerful Eagle Claw Martial Art (Dali Yingzhua Gong108), were unrivaled in Jianghu. His merciless heart and vicious hand were just as famous as his martial arts. Once he attacks, he’ll go after all of opponent’s vital joints. Those that fought with him were either dead or crippled.

Right now he already made his attack, Tie Zhentian warning came too late. Ma Rulong already heard the sound of bone being crushed. Very soft sound but it was very ear piercing; it pierced from the ear to the heart, straight through the stomach, and into the bone.

Ma Rulong just felt the stomach in contraction and spasm; even his joints were tingling. Doesn’t matter whether Zhang Laoshi was really an honest man, he was still his clerk and lived together for three months and twenty-one days.

The strange part was that he only heard the bone cracking but no painful groan. There were only two types of the people that can endure this without yelling out. One was hard-boned tough man. The other was a dead man or one that fainted due to near death.

Ma Rulong and Tie Zhentian wanted to rush out but they did not. Someone from outside was coming in. This person was falling back into the room. This person left arm and right shoulder were broken. The person face was sweating due to the pain, whole body with cold sweat, but he still endured it without yelling out.

This person was a tough man; everyone in Jianghu knew Wang Wanwu was a tough man. This person actually wasn’t Zhang Laoshi, but Wang Wanwu! The Wulin renowned Huainan’s109 number one expert who was famous for his Tendon Separating Bone Alternating Hand, Wang Wanwu. The Wang Wanwu that had broken countless heroes’ arms. Right now, his arm was broken by another person. It was broken by a clerk of a general store. He would never had believe such a thing would happen, and neither did Tie Zhentian and Ma Rulong. However those were not supposed to occur tends to occur unexpectedly, nothing is impossible in the world!

* * *

Wang Wanwu not only had a shocked and painful expression on his face, he was also in fear. He had never been scared in his life. However the attack from a clerk of a general store made him scared.

Tendon Separating Bone Alternating Hand and Powerful Eagle Claw Martial Art were Huainan's Eagle Claw King's martial art specialties. He was Eagle Claw King's direct successor and disciple and also Huainan's number one expert. However the instant he attacked, he was overtaken. The general store clerk could actually in one move block his path of retreat and broke his joints. He could only back away one step at a time and back into the room behind the worn hanging cloth door.

The cloth door was pulled down. He already could not see that normal-looking Laoshi, the wretched clerk, however he also did not see the people in this room. His eyes were full of shock, pain, and misery. He already couldn't see anything. Tie Zhentian suddenly stood up, pulled him, and placed him on that old worn bamboo chair. Wang Wanwu should recognize Tie Zhentian because they used to be friends. Later they became mortal enemies; mortal enemies were harder to forget than friends. However he did not seem to notice the man standing in front of him was Tie Zhentian. It seemed like he didn't notice anyone standing in front of him at all. He was still sweating, pea size cold beads of sweat, non-stop on his face.

"Who is that person?" His voice was as if he was in a nightmare, "Who is that person?"

This was precisely the question Tie Zhentian had in his mind. He turned his head and asked Ma Rulong, "Who is your clerk really?"

Ma Rulong had no way of answering. He only knew his clerk's name was Zhang Laoshi; he was a confused and good nature person. He had no glamorous past nor bright future, as if he could only make a living in this worn down general store till the day he die. This type of person, how could he use one move to succumb a renowned Wulin master Wang Wanwu? Ma Rulong did not know either. The owner of the general store was not the same owner before. Obviously, the clerk might not be the same clerk as before either. Ma Rulong already know this much but he could not tell who this clerk really was. He really couldn't tell.

* * *

Wang Wanwu face was still perspiring cold sweats; the mouth was still asking the same question he was asking many times before. Tie Zhentian suddenly slap him across his face. Wang Wanwu, in his life, might never have been slapped by anyone before. He was originally in a nightmare but this slap astonished and

woke him up. He finally saw the person in front of him; his past thoughts and memories were flooding back to him.

"It's you!" Wang Wanwu said, "You...you are here."

"It's me." Tie Zhentian undoubtedly was also thinking about their past, "You should already know I am here."

Wang Wanwu looked at him, his eyes seemed anguished, "I know you are here. I came here to kill you. Because I had wronged you and betrayed you, I became even more resentful of you instead."

These words seemed heartless but truthful. If you had betrayed another, you might be the same as him and hate that person instead and wanted that person dead. Because as long as he's still alive, your heart will never be at peace, will always be ashamed and regretful. Perhaps the one you hated wasn't him, but yourself. Wang Wanwu again continued, "Ten years ago, I betrayed you. Because at that time I already did something wrong to you I was afraid you would know, so that was why I wanted to use other to kill you."

"I know."

"If you already know, why didn't you kill me then?" Wang Wanwu had a painful expression, "I would rather die in your hand. At that time if you had kill me, I would not be where I am at today."

These were also truthful words. To die in the hand of the 'Sky and Earth Turning' great bandit, Tie Zhentian, was at least better than being defeated by a clerk of a general store. He was terribly and painfully defeated; Tie Zhentian understood this type of pain. The old grudges were already in the past. The "rabbit dies, fox grieves" type of pain and sorrow would be there forever.

It was already quiet outside, as if nothing had ever happened. Zhang Laoshi did not come in. Right now he must'd looked as if he was a real honest man sitting at the front of the general store. Still no one would be able to tell he was an expert with formidable skills. — Who exactly was he? Why did he stay at the general store with Ma Rulong? Ma Rulong suddenly rushed out, he wanted to know the answer to these questions more than Tie Zentian.

Zhang Laoshi was indeed sitting innocently at his regular worn chair. The general store still had its original appearance. However the situation outside was not the same. In typical days, the alley lane outside was quite busy. There were women drying laundry, mischievous children, dogs and cats urinating everywhere. Right now, they should be everywhere.

Although this alley lane was poor and dirty, it was usually vibrant and busy. Now this alley lane did not even have a single person. No people, no movements, no noise. The busy alley was now a dead alley.

[End of Chapter 25]

FOOTNOTE

106. Wang Wanwu (王万武), surname Wang, given name means “myriad martial”.

107. Fengjin Cuogu Shou (分筋错骨手), lit “separate tendon, wrong bone, hand”

108. Dali Yingzhua Gong (大力鹰爪功), lit. “giant strength, eagle claw, martial art”

109. Huainan (淮南), a prefecture-level city in central Anhui Province.

110. tusihubei (兔死狐悲) — A Chinese idiom that means ‘having sympathy with a like-minded person’. Idiom’s back story — A rabbit and fox had a common enemy, the hunter. They vow to share life and death, trials and tribulations. One day, while enjoying nature, a band of hunters came and killed the rabbit in one shot. The fox averted this. After the hunter left, the fox came back next to the rabbit crying.

Chapter 26

Chapter 26: Dead Land [死地]

The general store did not have a counter, just an old writing desk with accounting book and a cashbox. Ma Rulong sat down on a wooden stool next to the wooden table, staring at Zhang Laoshi.

Zhang Laoshi always had slow reaction and an expressionless face. Right now he was the same. If someone said that at first he use one move and defeated the Huainan’s number one fighter Wang Wanwu, no one would believe it.

— Was his face modified by Exquisite Lily-White Hand Yu Linglong? — Who was he originally? — How many people could defeat Wang Wanwu in one move? Ma Rulong stared at him for a long time, and suddenly called out a name.

“Dawan.”

“Dawan (big bowl)? You need a dawan (big bowl)?” Zhang Laoshi’s face did not have any peculiar expression, “Bowls are in the kitchen, do you need me to get it for you?”

“The Dawan I am talking about is a person.”

“Oh?”

“You haven’t seen her?”

“The dawan (big bowls) I’d seen were bowls, not a person.”

Ma Rulong let out a sigh and slowly stood up. Suddenly he struck out using his index and middle finger trying to gouge out Zhang Laoshi’s eye.

Zhang Laoshi closed his eyes. This was his only reaction, other than eyes, his body did not move a bit. Ma Rulong, of course, would not really do such a vicious thing. He suddenly realized he was pretty stupid, even if Zhang Laoshi was really an honest person he would know that Ma Rulong would never do something so vicious. Of course using this method, he would never be able to test out his martial art. Couldn’t ask and couldn’t test, what could he do? While Ma Rulong was thinking about what to do next, more customers had arrived.

* * *

“Du, du, du”, the sound of wooden staff touching the floor could be heard from far away. Two people came; they were both cripples. They were both holding crutches. From just looking at their upper body, it seem as if it was one person. These two wore the same clothes, manner, and face, like they were molded from the same cast. They have the same curve and slant, underdeveloped legs, softly hanging in

midair. It looked as if one of their original legs was cut off and was replaced with the legs of an infant. It looked like it had an indescribable ugliness and weirdness to it.

However both of them had a serious expression to them and also full of confidence. The only difference between the two was that one's defect was the left leg, and the other's defect was the right leg. Ma Rulong immediately thought of legend in Wulin, and two figures close to being mythical.

In the far north's Xingxiu Hai¹¹¹ (Constellation Sea), there was a pair of naturally born crippled twin brothers, one was called Tiancan (Heavenly Ruin), and other is called Dique (Earthly Defect). Their temperament was extremely weird; wugong (martial art) was equally strange. People they take in as disciples were also like them, naturally born crippled twins.

Every one in Jianghu knew about them, but very few ever seen them in person. Constellation Sea's disciples rarely partake in Jianghu's matters, almost none ever been to Jiangnan.

The only thing different from the legend was the disciples of Xingxiu Hai wore strangely magnificent attire. Some would even wear pearl clothes stitched together with real pearls. An innate inferiority made them enjoy showing off artificially. The clothes these two were wearing were rather ordinary, looked like what any other men would wear.

Disciples of Xingxiu Hai must complete their martial art training before entering Jianghu, until their seniors believe they were at an undefeatable stage. Cripples learning martial art was already more difficult than normal people. The time they entered Jianghu were usually at an older age.

However these two were young, at most twenty-three or twenty-four years old. Could it be that at such a young age they had already mastered Xingxiu Hai unique and special martial arts? Were they at a level where they could not be defeated?

* * *

Although these were just legends, it was already established in the minds of many. Deeply rooted legends are usually more "real" than the real truth, and more easily acceptable to people. Sounds of wooden crutches hitting the floor stopped, and they were inside the store. Ma Rulong turned around to face them. Although in his heart he already established them as Xingxiu Hai's disciples, he still asked, "What do you two wish to buy?"

“We do not want to buy anything?” The man with defective left leg first spoke and the man with the defective right leg continued, “We just wanted to come in to see exactly what kind of person you are, that could withhold Wang Wanwu here, and what method did you use to make him stay?” Their words were extremely straightforward and frank without any artificiality.

“My surname is Sun, name is Sun Zao¹¹² (early).” The man with the disabled left leg again said, “He is my twin brother and his name is Sun Chi¹¹³ (late).”

“Because I was born a bit later than him.” Their names were really ordinary, not like the fabled Xingxiu Hai’s disciple that were deliberately mysterious and mythical.

Sun Zao said, “We are twins with natural deformities, the type of people that usually like to pretend to be Xingxiu disciples.”

Sun Chi continued, “So you must have thought we are Xingxiu disciples.”

“But you are wrong.” Sun Zao said, “We have no relation with Xingxiu Hai.”

“Ten year ago we went to Xingxiu Hai once.” Sun Chi continued saying, “We wanted to search for these extraordinary figures to help impart these legendary, invincible, and world famous martial art to us.”

“Unfortunately we were disappointed.”

“That place was just a desolate and barren land. Summer was boiling hot, and winter was bitterly cold. A place hard for anyone to live in.”

“We are telling you all of this just so you know that our martial art are all from our own relentless effort and training.”

“So if you also wanted us to stay, you don’t need to hold back.”

* * *

Ma Rulong had been listening to them. After they finished, his heart had a lot feeling. They were still young. They were not artificial, not showy, not fake, and not unconventional. They had great desire to build up their reputation and name, without relying on anyone. Although they were handicapped, they don't have inferiority complex or given up in life. Ma Rulong did not want to be enemies with them. "I don't want to hold you here." He said, "You two could leave anytime."

They did not leave. The two brothers used the same eye expression to look at him. It was a very strange expression. The first one to speak was still Sun Zao.

"We could tell you do not view us as enemies." Sun Zao said, "If you are someone else, we could be friends."

"You are not really a cunning and dangerous person." Sun Chi said, "It's a pity you are Ma Rulong."

The two brothers sighed at the same time and then turn around. With "du" sounds, they seem to be preparing to leave. They did not seem to want to become enemies with Ma Rulong either. However, they had not left either.

When they are about to move, their crutches fell on the floor. Zhang Laoshi already raised his hands. Ma Rulong only heard a soft, sharp, and swift sound piercing through the air, the two crutches suddenly broke in halves. Two items also fell on the ground alongside with the crutches; they were actually two peanuts.

Zhang Laoshi loved to drink. Peanuts were common and good with alcohol. Zhang Laoshi had a bunch of peanuts on his table. However no one would have thought he would break these solid crutches with peanuts. Even with a sharp blade, it might not be able to break these crutches.

Sun Zao and his brother wouldn't thought of it either. Although they did not fell, they were standing on one leg. They were standing very steadily, as if they were nailed on the floor. However, their expression changed.

Ma Rulong expression changed also. "What are you doing?"

"I want to hold them here." Zhang Laoshi was still expressionless, "You don't want to, but I want to."

Ma Rulong did not ask why. At this moment, he suddenly felt the his fingertip, toe, edge of mouth, eye, and every sensitive places all had a sudden and mysterious change. The suddenly became stiff and frozen.

Also at the moment, Sun Zao and his brother suddenly jumped mid-air and dashed toward outside. Although they were crippled, when their body moved, not only were their postures elegant but they were also fast like hawks. Although they were crippled, their lightness martial arts were superb. There were very few people that could be compared to them.

However when they landed, they were still in the general store. Once they landed, they could not jump again because on the bodies of the two brothers, at least four acupoints had been sealed.

Around eight or nine peanuts fell off their bodies. A real neijia (inner family) expert could harm with flowers and leaves¹¹⁴. Of course could even flick peanuts through air to seal acupoints. However, no one ever saw that Zhang Laoshi was such an elite expert, and no one could've imagine.

How did Zhang Laoshi make his move, and how did the Sun brothers fell down? Ma Rulong did not see. His vision already blurred and entire body was numb and unresponsive. He also did not see Zhang Laoshi stood up and walked over to grab a bottle of medicine from Sun brothers' bodies.

Until Zhang Laoshi poured the medicine in the bottle into his mouth, he finally return to normal. Zhang Laoshi was still expressionless only calmly asked, "Now do you know why I have to keep them here?"

Ma Rulong already knew. Although there were things he'd never seen, he still know there were a lot thing that he did not need to witness in order to understand. He knew he was already poisoned by Sun brothers. A poison that could not be seen and could not be felt. It was a type of formless and untraceable poison.

What they had said might have been true, only true words could make other careless and negligent. When he had no animosity toward them, they released this formless and untraceable poison. Just like when someone already accepted another as good friend, the other backstabbed him.

It was not that Ma Rulong did not understand these things, but when he opened his mouth, the first words he said was, "Let them go." He said, "Right now, just let them go."

Zhang Laoshi couldn't help but ask, "Why?"

"Because I am Ma Rulong. Because they are only doing what they thought was right."

Because they were still young. Things young people do are like this. Because they wanted fame and wanted to be successful. This wasn't their wrong. A young person that wanted success and fame, absolutely was not wrong.

When the Sun brothers left they did not look back and take another look at Ma Rulong. Ma Rulong also did not look at them, he did not want to increase the shame and regret in their heart.

He only asked, "You really have never seen Dawan and did not know who she is?" Ma Rulong asked, "You are always the clerk of this general store?"

Zhang Laoshi did not answer. He already picked up the peanuts on the floor, cracked the shell open, and ate them. When he started chewing, he sighed and said, "Things he should asked about, he didn't. The person he should've asked, he didn't. However he kept on asking me these rubbish."

Ma Rulong said, "I know I should go ask Wang Wanwu, how many people do they have and who had came?"

"Why didn't you go ask?"

Ma Rulong said, "Because what I am asking here is even more important."

"Important?! What's so important about it?" Zhang Laoshi sighed again, "So what if I have seen Dawan? What if I didn't? Why must you ask these question?"

“Because I want to know where she is.” Ma Rulong firmly said, “I must know where she is.”

“Where she is, what does it have to do with you?”

“Of course it does.” Ma Rulong looked straight at him and said, “If you long to see someone, you should understand.”

Zhang Laoshi did not have any expression, but the peanuts on his hand suddenly fell on the floor! He bent his hip to pick them up, as if he was intentionally avoiding Ma Rulong pair of glowing eyes. At this moment, Xie Yulun yelled from inside the room, “You want to know about Dawan?! Why didn’t you come in and ask me?”

Ma Rulong immediately went in. As he turned and went through this door with a worn door cloth hanging on it, suddenly a group of people scrambled into this little alley.

* * *

There was a total of twenty-eight people; young, healthy, agile movement, and well grouped. On these twenty-eight people, they were wearing the black cloth with the same exact style and cut, with multilayer leggings, and hands were carrying the same exact size and shape back sacks.

What was in the black sacks? What were the twenty-eight burly men doing there? Most people would be curious; most people would stay to find out what were their intention. Ma Rulong did not stay, he only saw a glance and then lift the door curtain and went in. Other than Dawan, other people and other things didn’t seem to interest him.

* * *

Xie Yulun already struggle and sat up, expression in her eyes seemed complicated and strange. Was it pain, anger, or sorrow? Perhaps it was a little bit of all these emotions. She glared at Ma Rulong.

“You know Dawan? You two set this up to harm me?”

Ma Rulong did not deny this. He did not want to deny, right now didn't want to deny anymore. There was no need to deny. Xie Yulun pair of thin hand was gripping hard onto the corners of the bed sheet, but was still trembling.

"You were always thinking about her?" Her voice became coarse, "You are with me everyday but you are thinking about her everyday?"

Ma Rulong did not deny, he especially couldn't deny this. Xie Yulun's hands were shaking even more.

"Why do you have to think about her? Could it be that you like that ugly wretch?"

This was always what Ma Rulong constantly asked himself. — Why do I think about her so much? Was it because I already like her? Not like, rather love. Only love could be this persistence, this strong. However he did not dare think about this, nor did he dare to believe this.

Xie Yulun coldly laughed, "Do you want to know who she is?"

"I do."

"If you know who she is, perhaps you would be disappointed."

"I wouldn't, absolutely wouldn't." Ma Rulong answer was very firm and clear, "It wouldn't matter who she is."

"Fine, I will tell you." Xie Yulun seemed as if she was crying out, "She is only one of my maid."

Ma Rulong reaction was rather calm. "You are a big Miss. She is an servant. You are a beauty. She is an ugly. Doesn't matter who you are or who she is? I would still feel the same way about her." After finished saying this, he left.

Xie Yulun shouted, "You come back, I'm not finish talking."

Ma Rulong did not go back, he didn't even turn his head around. No matter what she said, he didn't want to listen. Xie Yulun suddenly fell down to the bed and buried her head under the pillow. She truly was a big Miss, perhaps even more prideful than a princess, even more honourable. No one had ever seen her cry. Could it be that she was crying right now? "Zhang Rongfa" was only a owner of a general store. "Ma Rulong" was just a wicked man that would do anything. No matter for whom, she should not cry.

* * *

Tie Zhentian and Wang Wanwu had been coldly looking at them. Tie Zhentian suddenly sighed.

"I am lecherous man. In my life, I at least had several hundreds women."

"I am about the same." Wang Wanwu said.

"But I still could not understand women." Tie Zhentian sighed: "I would probably never understand in my lifetime."

Wang Wanwu also sighed and said, "I am also the same."

* * *

Ma Rulong did not heard what they said. Once he went out, he was immediately shocked by the changes that had occurred. He would never had imagined in this lowly alley, in this lowly store there would be such a shocking change.

Zhang Laoshi did not change. He looked a little drunk. His worn table had an empty bottle; the cheap wine in the bottle was already in his stomach. He was lying on the chair. Not sure whether he was awake, sleeping, worried, or drunk. He was usually like this and this was not the first time. The shocking change was in the poor and ordinary alley.

Originally you couldn't see anyone outside. Originally did not know where the people living in the poor houses in this lowly alley went. However, even the poor houses in this lowly alley could not be seen. In this instance, all the houses had been removed. These twenty-eight young, muscular and agile men wearing black clothes removed them. Their cloth sack must have tools in them to remove these houses. They were very efficient.

The roof bricks and tile were removed one at the time, the wood planks were pried open, and the nails were pulled out. They were quickly moved away. The worn household furniture, clean and dirtied clothes, utensils and bowls, the broken children toys, women's novelty items, men's unrestrained wine --- were all moved away.

Although this lowly alley was poor and ordinary, to some people this was home sweet home. These are their homes. However, right now their homes had disappeared. Every single house was gone. This alley was no longer an alley. Other than this general store, everything else had been taken down and moved. The alley lane suddenly became a muddy and ugly empty land.

Barren land, dead land, open and empty — a dead land with absolutely nothing!

[End of Chapter 26]

Footnote

111. Xinxu Hai (星宿海), lit. "constellation sea" but I'd also seen it translated as "starry sea". There's a Xingxiuhai in Qinghai but the text did say "far north" so it may not be related to the Qinghai one.

112. Sun Zao (孙早), surname Sun, given name means "early".

113. Sun Chi (孙迟), surname Sun, given name means "late".

114. feihuazhaiye (飞花摘叶), lit. "flying flower plucking leaf". Typically used to wuxia to describe reaching an ultimate level.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27: Black Stone [黑石]

Up above were still the blue sky, white cloud, and sunlight. Far away was still city sound, people, and houses. Clear sky was still here, human society as before, but that was a place where Ma Rulong didn't belong. The distance between Ma Rulong and that place was very very far. What Ma Rulong could see was a dead piece of land! He was shocked, and couldn't understand.

Fortunately when he turned his head around, Zhang Laoshi had already woken up. Not sure whether he woke up from the worry, from the sleep, or from the drunken state. Sometime awake was not better than being asleep or being drunk, because immediately after he woke up his eyes had the same shock and fear.

Ma Rulong immediately asked him, "What did you see?"

"I did not see anything." Not seeing anything was absolutely more frightening than seeing something. Lost and cluelessness were always human worst fear.

Ma Rulong continued, "Even if they wanted to trap us in. There is no need to dismantle all the houses. They could hide in these buildings and use them as covers."

He couldn't understand why they would dismantle these buildings. He was hoping Zhang Laoshi could explain. Zhang Laoshi hadn't opened his mouth, twenty-eight burly men already scrambled into this lowly alley.

Ma Rulong could tell these were not the same twenty-eight men earlier, but they were just as young, well built and wore the same tailored black clothes. On their hands they were not holding a canvas sack but a black bamboo basket. In the baskets there were pieces of black round rocks; round as a pearl and shiny black. They looked like black color jade pearl.

* * *

Ma Rulong had never seen these rocks, nor could he tell whose command were these men under. These black rocks were not easy to get. It was not an easy getting one or two of these. Also very few people in Jianghu could support these black-clothed burly men. The strangest thing was that they placed these precious black stones one piece, one row and column at a time. It was as if they were seeding them on the ground.

Their actions seemed well organized, fast, and effective. The empty muddy land was very quickly covered with black stones. The baskets of these twenty-eight men were empty and they hurried away. Almost immediately there were again twenty-eight similar men, holding these same black rocks and came walking toward here at the same pace. Ma Rulong wanted to ask Zhang Laoshi whether he recognized whose subordinates were these, whether he knew who had the ability to support these type of men, and whether he knew what they were doing.

He still did not ask because he suddenly saw a strange expression on Zhang Laoshi's face. Within the lifeless eyes, an expression of extreme fear appeared. He suddenly rushed over as quickly as possible and put up the door planks back on. Today he said he must open for business, so the why did he had to close immediately? Ma Rulong was even more confused. Zhang Laoshi already grabbed him and quickly entered the room.

* * *

Inside was especially dark, the three people in the room looked even wearier than before. Zhang Laoshi took out an ebony bottle from his clothes and gave it to Tie Zhentian.

"This is for you." He seemed rushed, "First eat half and save the other half. Chew it first and then swallow it."

Tie Zhentian of course had to ask, "What is this?"

"This is a Jasper Pearl." Zhang Laoshi said, "Within an hour, it would healed your injuries by a half. After dusk, take the other half and it should restore you by eighty percent." He suddenly sighed and said, "Just hope you can live till them."

Tie Zhentian's eye suddenly lit up. What he was holding in his hand was the only medicine in the world that could've saved him. It was also one of the world's most precious medicines. However he did not swallow it because there was something he had to make sure.

"Who are you?" He asked Zhang Laoshi, "Why would you have Jasper Pearl?"

“This has nothing to do with you.”

“Of course it does.” He made sure to say it clearly, “I, Tie Zhentian, had never taken other people’s grace in vain. If I do not even know who you are, how can I take this?” A man that was adamant about grudges and gratitude would never do such a thing.

Ma Rulong suddenly interrupted, “You can take his medicine and accept his kindness. Also, you don’t have to pay him back.”

“Why?”

“Because he is my friend; in turn, yours also.” Ma Rulong said, “Between friends no matter who help who, there is no such thing as ‘repayment’.”

Tie Zhentian did not say a single word, open the bottle and swallow half the medicine.

Wang Wanwu took a long sigh and said, “Tie Zhentian, why don’t you kill me now. I will die with no regret.”

Because he already knew, the one that defeated him at first was not a nameless figure. Only subordinate of the Jasper Villa would have Jasper Pearl. To be defeated by a disciple of Jasper Villa was absolutely not a disgraceful matter. Since he was defeated, then what was death anymore?

Although Wang Wanwu did not say these out, Tie Zhentian already understood. Right now everyone had determined Zhang Laoshi was a subordinate of Jasper Villa. In these hundred of years, Jasper Villa did not have any male disciples. Zhang Laoshi was obviously disguised by a female. Ma Rulong stare at him and clearly asked, “Right now, shouldn’t you just admit it?”

“Admit what?”

“Admit that you are Dawan!”

Zhang Laoshi finally softly sighed and said, "That's right, I am Dawan."

* * *

The dishonest honest man was indeed Dawan, not the big bowl the hold foods from the kitchen but the Dawan with flesh and bone and that dare to do anything. Also the Dawan that Ma Rulong kept on thinking about. Was she also thinking about Ma Rulong?

If they were mutually thinking about each other, then why did she refused to let Ma Rulong know she was indeed the one he had been thinking about?

Ma Rulong could not understand. Woman's heart is always hard for a man to understand. Dawan stick her hand out, her fingertip touched his hand; and then immediate retracted her hand. No one know how to control their feeling better than her.

"Tie Zhentian would soon recover his energy. Wang Wanwu does not deserved to die. You also shouldn't need to die." She coldly said, "Once you have the chance, you should all blitz out."

Ma Rulong tried to control himself but couldn't help asked, "How about you?"

"I..."

Xie Yulun suddenly yelled, "Why didn't you people ask about me? What I should do?"

Dawan finally turned her head and face her; Xie Yulun's eyes were filled with hatred, fear, and anger.

Xie Yulun angrily asked, "Why did you have to do this to me?"

"I'm really sorry." Dawan said, "But you have to believe me, I am not intentionally harming you."

"Why did you have to do this?"

“Because I can not let you marry Qiu Fengcheng.”

Dawan continued, “We grew up together. I would not allow you to marry such a cruel and vicious man.”

Ma Rulong lost his voice and said, “She is Madame Jasper’s daughter?”

“She is.” Dawan said, “Madame Xie summoned all of you to Winter Plum Valley so she can choose a good husband for her.”

“You also went that day?”

Dawan nodded her head, “Not only did I go that day, I saw all of the changes happening.”

No matter who had witness the sudden change of situation that day, they would all think Ma Rulong was the culprit.

Dawan again said, “However I still believe there was a bigger conspiracy to that.”

Ma Rulong immediately asked, “Why?”

“There were too many perfect coincidence.” Dawan said, “I never trust anything with too many coincidences.”

— The pit in the snow land, Xiaowan’s jade, Jin Zhenlin’s spear piercing straight at the jade, Jue dashi and Peng Tianba arriving at the right time...these were all coincidences. Thing with too many coincidences were usually preplanned.

Dawan continued, “Madame Xie wanted me to go there because she wanted me to choose. This incident affects the future of the big Miss. I can not make a brash conclusion.”

She looked at Ma Rulong, "So I deliberately let you escape so I could test you out. I wanted to see what kind of person you are?"

— Being buried in the snow and sticking out a hand was her first test.

Dawan said, "If you had not stop and save me, that day you would've die under my hand."

A culprit fleeing would never risk their life to save a strange woman. Not only that, he gave her his only item that kept him warm, his fox fur coat, and his own white horse. However one test was not enough so she continued to test him over and over again.

"After numerous tests, I started to believe you are not a cruel and vicious person. And I was starting to get suspicious of Qiu Fengcheng." Dawan said, "It's a pity this plot was too perfect. Even I could not find any flaw to it. Although I know you have been framed, I have no way to proof your innocence." She softly sighed and said, "Because I had no evidence. In order to make Madame Xie believe you are innocent, I needed solid evidence."

Ma Rulong bitterly smiled, "Even if Madame Jasper is willing to believe, Jue dashi and them would not let me go." A person that had some many Jianghu heroes believing was the murderer, how can he be Jasper Villa son-in-law.

Dawan said, "Later I found out that while I was trailing you Madame Xie had already decided to select Qiu Fengcheng as the son-in-law candidate. She even decided on the date of the wedding ceremony."

Wang Wanwu suddenly interrupted, "I seem to have heard of this too."

"What Madame Xie already decided on, it was hard to change." Dawan said, "Unless I can find solid evidence to prove that Qiu Fengcheng was the culprit."

She did not find it. When Qiu Fengcheng did things, he did not leave behind any evidence. The most ingenious part was that Qiu Fengcheng actually confessed the entire ordeal to Ma Rulong. Unfortunately whatever Ma Rulong said at that point, no one would believe. Not only not believe, other people would think he wanted to push blame to Qiu Fengcheng. It would just make other believe he was the culprit

more. Qiu Fengcheng put himself in the brink of death and than cleverly escaped death, because he understood the psychology of human.

Dawan sighed again. "Not only was his plot ingenious and secretive, but it was very ruthless. Even I was impressed by him. However for me to watch Miss marry him, I am not willing to accept that." Xie Yulun suddenly sighed, "At the point I already came out. Not that I wanted to see Qiu Fengcheng, but I wanted to find you."

"I understand." Dawan gently said, "No matter what you said. In your heart you treat me as a sister."

Xie Yulun bitterly smiled, "But I could not had imagine you would forcibly take me."

Dawan said, "It was the only thing I could do."

Because she needed time to find evidence, she needed to push back the wedding date set by Madame Jasper. If the bride was missing, the wedding ceremony could not go on.

Dawan said, "I was thinking back and forth, the best way was to hide both of you together so other could not find any of you. This way you can also understand what kind of person Ma Rulong is." She continued and explained, "I deliberately let him see your real beauty first. This was also to test out whether he could control himself in the dark room."

"So you also stayed with us." Xie Yulun said, "Because you are still not at ease."

Dawan admitted, "If he dare do anything to you, he would not be standing here."

Xie Yulun suddenly sighed. "I was not wrong about him." Her voice became gentle, "He is definite is not a bad person!"

* * *

Ma Rulong had been quietly listening. He was just finding out all of these details.

Tie Zhentian suddenly let out a long sigh and said, "He is really a good person. This was originally a good plan. Unfortunately, he made a bad friend."

"Friend is a friend." Ma Rulong said, "There is no such thing as a good or bad friend because there are only one type of friend. If you backstabbed or betray me, you are not actually my friend. The word friend should not be used at all." His attitude became serious, "I don't believe in god, don't believe in Buddha, but I do believe in friends."

"I understand what you mean." Tie Zhentian said, "However, if you did not have a friend like me. Your identity would still be hidden. No matter what, I dragged you down."

"Do you regret having me as a friend?" Ma Rulong asked, "Or should I regret having you as a friend?"

"I don't regret it." Tie Zhentian said, "I know you don't regret it either."

Within the term "friendships", there should be no "regret".

Wang Wanwu suddenly also sighed.

"Seeing the two of you as friends, I realize I never had anyone considered a friend in my life."

Ma Rulong's secret was indeed revealed all because of Tie Zhentian. How about Dawan? If it wasn't for Ma Rulong, who would have known she was "Zhang Laoshi"? Who would know she was a subordinate of Jasper Villa? If it were not for Ma Rulong, why would she have to give up this plan in the middle? However she did not complain nor regret, because if it were not for Ma Rulong she would not have done all of these.

Ma Rulong ask her again, "When we were surrounded, did you release the green fog?"

"That was not fog." Dawan said, "That was Jasper Villa's 'Jade Winter Smoke', it was thicker and spread faster than fog. Once the winter smoke spreads, you can't see anything."

“It was because you spread the Jade Winter Smoke, they know that someone from Jasper Villa was here.”

“Perhaps it was because they knew the people from Jasper Villa are here, they would not do anything brash.”

Dawan continued, “As long as they don’t move and we could delay a bit of time, we could still have a chance. Unfortunately the currently situation had changed, we can no longer fully retreat.”

Ma Rulong asked, “Why?”

Dawan asked him back, “What did you see at first?”

Ma Rulong replied, “Saw about sixty to seventy people wearing black clothes.”

Dawan asked, “What else did you see?”

Ma Rulong replied, “Also a large amount of black color stones.”

[End of Chapter 27]

Chapter 28

Chapter 28: Legend of the Dead Valley [死谷传奇]

What so scary about black colored stones? As long as no one forced you to swallow it or used it to smash your head, it didn’t matter whether it was white, red, blue, yellow, or black, it shouldn’t be scary. The strange thing was that Dawan was evidently very scared of them. Xie Yulun actually seemed to be scared of them as well.

Xie Yulun suddenly asked, "The stones you saw, was it very, very black? Round, black, and black to the point it is shiny?"

"Yes."

"Where did you see them?"

"In the hand of those people in black clothes," Ma Rulong said, "Each of them held onto a big basket of black rocks."

"And then?"

"And then they laid these black rocks on the ground."

Xie Yulun did not ask anymore and did not say anything. Her eyes seemed to reveal the same expression as Dawan, one of extreme fear like a child seeing a monster, that could only appear in nightmare, right in front of their eyes. Why do they fear these black stones?

Tie Zhentian was now full of curiosity and couldn't bear asked, "Are there any of these black stones nearby?"

"No," Ma Rulong said, "Even if there is a few, there couldn't have been that much."

Wang Wanwu helped him add, "When I came here I already check nearby several hundred li (500 m.). There are plenty of stones here but round, black, and shiny stones, I didn't see any."

"So these stones must've come from outside several hundred li (500 m.) away."

"Definitely."

Tie Zhentian was curious, "Why would someone want to shipped rock several hundreds li away to place it on the ground here?"

Although he did not really expect this be answered, Dawan did reply.

She said, "Because he is a madman."

Dawan continued, "A real madman is not scary. However those that look completely normal but are really mad in heart are the ones you should fear."

She explained, "Normally you see him all proper and well mannered attitude. However once he goes crazy, he's capable of doing anything. Even those things that madman would not do."

The most fearsome part was nobody knew he was mad and when he would become mad so no one was cautious of him. Once you believed he was a modest gentleman, he would suddenly cut off your nose and feed it to the dogs. Even after your nose was gone, you still would not believe he did such a thing.

Dawan said, "The madman I'm talking about is this type of people."

Tie Zhentian asked, "You'd seen him before?"

Dawan replied, "I have not, and originally thought I would never see him ever!"

She sighed and said, "Unfortunately, I would meet him soon!"

Xie Yulun suddenly tightly held onto her hand.

"Would he really come?"

"He would definitely come." Dawan said, "It's the Jade Winter Smoke that drew him here."

“You saw those black rocks and knew he would come?” Ma Rulong asked.

“That’s right.” Dawan said, “In this world, only the place where he lives would have this type of black rocks.”

“Where does he live?”

“Dead Valley,” Dawan said, “A dead valley with absolutely nothing except for these black rocks.”

She slowly continued, “That place rarely have people, even bird rarely flew over. No matter who, it’s hard to live in such a place. Hard to believe he could actually live there, and lived rather well.”

“Why did he have to live in such a place?”

Dawan said, “It wasn’t his choice, someone forced him there.”

“Who forced him?”

“There is only one person in the world that could defeat him.” Dawan said, “So there is only one person the could force him to do something he doesn’t want to.”

She suddenly asked, “Do any of you know that thirty years ago, Jianghu had a person called ‘No Thirteen’ (Wu Shisan)?”

“Wu Thirteen?”

Dawan said, “No, not the Wu in Zhou Wu Zheng Wang (common surnames). The wu as in nothingness.”

“Why is he called No Thirteen (Wu Shisan)?”

“Because he said he was a person with no name, surname, father, mother, older brother, younger brother, older sister, younger sister, son, daughter, wife, and friends.”

“That’s only twelve no’s.” Ma Rulong asked, “What is the last no?”

“Wudi (No rival).¹¹⁵”

“Wudi (Invincible)?” Ma Rulong in disbelief, “Really invincible?”

“Thirty years ago, he was only twenty three years old, yet dominated Jianghu and unrivaled in the world.”

Ma Rulong still did not believe. “Thirty years ago was not a long time, how come no one know about him today?”

Tie Zhentian suddenly barged in, “Some one knows, I know.” He said it in detail and affirmatively, “That year was Gengzi¹¹⁶, I was nineteen. It was Chongyang¹¹⁷ of September (September 9th) when I hear of his name.”

“You’re old yet still remember this so clearly.”

“Because that was my birthday.” Tie Zhentian said, “It was also because that day he defeated Lian Shanyun¹¹⁸.”

Lian Shanyun was an expert at the time with his “Covering the Day Across Cloud Forty-Nine Sword”¹¹⁹ was famous in Jianghu. The power of the swordplay was the beneath the Bashan’s Taoist Gu who created “Willow-less Revolving Wind Forty-Nine Sword”¹²⁰.

Tie Zhentian said, “He was defeated before he even used a single move from his forty-nine swords. He was defeated by a new youngster in Jianghu who took his sword with his bare hand.”

Ma Rulong asked, "This youngster was No Thirteen?"

"At that time, I already hear of the a famous swordsman in the past name Yan Shisan. However afterward for the next three months, all I have heard of was Wu Shisan (No Thirteen)." He reaffirmed, "Exactly three months, ninety days."

Ma Rulong couldn't help but asked, "How come you remember it was exactly ninety days?"

"Because within that ninety days from Chongyang to Laba¹²¹ (December 8th), he defeated the Jianghu's forty-three most famous experts." Tie Zhentian said, "The last one was Iron Sword Sect's grand master, who was at the time eating Laba congee with his disciples, was thrown by him into the pot of congee."

"And then?"

"And then there was nothing."

"Nothing?" Ma Rulong asked, "What do you mean nothing?"

"Nothing means after that day, the man, 'No Thirteen', disappeared." Tie Zhentian said, "Afterward, no one in Jianghu heard of the name 'No Thirteen'."

"And no one knew about his whereabouts."

"None."

"Yes." This time Dawan butted in, "Someone knows. I know."

She tend to know thing other people didn't know. After that day, No Thirteen somehow managed to find "Jasper Villa". On Chuxi (New Year's eve) of that year, he battled Madame Jasper outside the villa at Emerald Slope. This time the one that was defeated was of course No Thirteen.

No one had won a battle against Madame Jasper, absolutely no one. The strange thing was, Madame Jasper did not kill him that day. She only trapped him at Dead Valley and made him swear he would never leave the valley. A dead valley where no grass grew and no birds came, was like the Xingxiu Hai in the extreme north. An environment no one could survive. So No Thirteen from the day became “nothing”, and was quickly forgotten by the people.

Dawan said, “However we did not forget about him because Madame always said if there is anyone in the world the survive in Dead Valley, it would be him. As long as he lives, he would wait until he had confidence for revenge. He would definite break his vow and leave Dead Valley.”

Ma Rulong asked, “Dead Valley only has him?”

Dawan replied, “Only him.”

Ma Rulong said, “However, right now it seemed like he already has eighty-four subordinates.”

Dawan sighed and said, “I’m afraid not even Madame knows how he could’ve live in Dead Valley and would definitely not know where these people come from. However Madame did say, what other couldn’t even imagine doing, he could somehow.”

* * *

Outside was originally extremely quiet. At this time there was suddenly a clear and loud laughter. A person with a very graceful and pleasant voice said, “Very thankful for Miss Xie and young lady’s concern. To be honest, even I originally didn’t have the ability to do all of this. It’s just that I was extremely lucky.”

The person speaking was very far away from this room. However when he spoke, everyone in the room could hear it clearly. Everything everyone said in this room, he could hear it clearly.

Dawan casually asked, “You are No Thirteen?”

She did not raise her voice, the person outside could still hear.

"I am." He answered.

Dawan deliberately sighed. "Your hearing is very sensitive, even better than rabbits."

Dawan was obviously deliberately agitating him and wanted him to storm here all by himself. The person outside was laughing even more cheerfully. "I've trained this all by myself. I was all alone by myself in Dead Valley for two years. Couldn't hear a single thing and was bored to death. The only thing I could do was listened to sound other people couldn't hear."

"What sound?"

"The noises of poisonous snakes mating underground, insects crawling under the ground, snake eating insects, insects eating maggots, and turtle laying eggs." No Thirteen laughingly asked, "Have any of you heard any of these noises before?"

No. No one heard of it before.

No Thirteen said, "However I can hear all of these noises. In fact, I could hear them clearly."

If a person could hear all of these things clearly, what else could they not hear?

No Thirteen continued, "Fortunately I don't need to hear these noises anymore!"

"Oh?"

"Because five years later, I already have many people to talk to." No Thirteen said, "That Dead Valley with no people, right now already have 824 people for me to talk to. What I want them to say, they would say. What I say, they would listen."

Dawan asked, "Where did you find all these people to talk to?"

"Because my luck is especially good," No Thirteen smiled, "At that Dead Valley, there is one more thing besides black rocks."

"What thing?"

"Gold," No Thirteen was laughing joyfully, and said, "I can guaranteed none of you had never seen so many gold in your life."

With so many gold, what else couldn't he do?

No Thirteen said, "So my days became happier and happier. My martial art also improve a bit, so I couldn't help coming out for a walk. The most important part is that I wanted to see Madame Xie and her daughter. If it isn't for her, how would I have today?"

Dawan couldn't help but asked, "How do you know Madame Xie's daughter is here?"

"Of course I know," No Thirteen laughed, "Once a person have this much gold, there are very little things he doesn't know."

"Why don't you come in to see her?"

"I'm not in a hurry." No Thirteen said, "I already waited for twenty years, what's another couple of days?"

"What are you waiting for?"

"I have already sent people to purchase all kinds of silks and satins, invite tailors with the best craftsmanship, to help Miss Xie tailor make some clothes. And especially brought Jingcheng's jewelry and cosmetics." No thirteen laughed, "After Miss Xie changed into her new clothes and put on her makeups, I would come request to see her." He smiled and said, "Right now I'm not in a rush because I always dislike sordid woman."

His voice was still very pleasant, have not said any indecent or used any vulgar words. Dawan's heart already sank, she already hear the unnerving implication in his words.

— He like woman dressing up attractively. Once Xie Yulun dressed up beautifully, he would prepare to “like” her.

Tie Zhentian, of course, knew what he was preparing to do. He suddenly asked, “Is he human?”

“Seems like it.”

“Then very good.” Tie Zhentian asked, “Since he is human and I am human, why can't I go out and take a look at him?”

No Thirteen from the outside immediately said, “Please come out. Please come out quickly. I have already set up a grand feast, welcoming all of you.”

Tie Zhentian laughed, “Comfortably feasting on a meal is exactly what I need.”

He suddenly asked Wang Wanwu, “Do you want to?”

[End of Chapter 28]

Footnote

115. wudi (无敌), lit. “no rival” means unparalleled, invincible, etc.

116. Gengzi year (庚子年), the 37th year in an ancient Chinese sexagenary cycle (60 years cycles). However, when converted to western calendar cycle as a reference year 1900AD was a Gengzi year. Therefore, 1960 and the upcoming 2020 are Gengzi years.

117. Chongyang (重阳), also known at the “Double Ninth Festival” that occurs on the 9th day of the 9th month of the lunar calendar.

118. Lian Shanyun (连山云), surname Lian means connected, given name means “mountain cloud”.

119. HengyunZheriQiQiSishijiuJian (横云遮日七七四十九剑), lit. “across cloud, concealing day, seven seven forty-nine sword”.

120. HuifengWuliuQiQiSishijiuJian (回风无柳七七四十九剑), lit. “Return wind, no willow, seven seven forty-nine sword”.

121. Laba Festival (腊八), a new harvest festival the occurs on the 8th of the 12th month of the lunar calendar. It’s customary to eat sometime call the Laba congee on this festival.

122. Jingcheng (京城), lit. “capital city.”

Chapter 29

Chapter 29: Feast [盛宴]

Wang Wanwu already stood up. “I also wanted it to the point of death.” The feast had not started. The muddy empty land was covered with round and shiny black rocks. However there was a folding chair¹²³ made of fine wood and high craftsmanship. Behind the folding chair, a brocade curtain was hanged high. There was also a curly beard and sideburn, depressed green eye Persian slave. He was wearing bright red hat with blue silk ribbon on top. He was wearing a golden embroidered black robe fastened with a bright red waistband. His hand was holding a curved sabre and standing behind the folding chair. No Thirteen was sitting on the folding chair.

He did not look like a orphan with no name, surname, father, and mother. And he absolutely did not look like a madman. His face was very pale white but was very handsome. His body gesture was very polite and elegant. His pale white face made it hard for anyone to figure out his real age. His refined smile and magnificent noble attires also made it even harder for people to notice his age.

Although the feast hadn’t started, numerous guests already arrived. Jue dashi and them were his guests. And like any other guest, they stood in front of the folding chair because other than this folding chair there was no chair or any place to sit down.

Other than this folding armchair, there was absolutely nothing else. However once Tie Zhentian and Wang Wanwu came out, the host used the most polite manner to invite them to “sit down”.

He first asked the Persian slave, “Did you see whether there are any other guest coming?”

"I did not see any." No Thirteen immediately raised his hand to greet the guest, and with a genuine smile he said, "Please sit. Please be seated before we start talking."

The first to "sit" was actually Jue dashi. He was sitting on a non-existent chair. His face had no expression, hanging in mid air as if there was actually a chair underneath him. Therefore, everyone else started "sitting". Only Tie Zhentian was still standing.

No Thirteen asked, "Why didn't Jue dashi sit?"

"I like to stand up to eat." Tie Zhentian smartly replied, "Standing up to eat, you can eat more."

"Make sense!" No Thirteen clapped his hand, smiled, and said, "Today everyone should eat more. Today I have prepared for everyone Eastern Sea mullet, Northern Sea shark fin, Southern Sea bird nest and lobster, Jingcheng's lamb and roast duck, Jiangnan's vinegar fish and steamed crab, and whole cattle and sheep. Enough for everyone to eat till their heart's content."

There wasn't any of the things he said but he used the most hospitable attitude to urge the guest to "eat a bit more". He also prepared a few vegetarian dishes for Jue dashi.

The first to eat was also Jue dashi. Since even Jue dashi started to eat, everyone else of course could only comply and eat. These people were all renowned Wulin heroes from everywhere, real men of Jianghu. Right now they were all like little children "playing tea". Every person was holding onto a non-existent chopstick, sitting on a non-existent chair, and began eating non-existent food. The only difference between them and children was that they, themselves, did not believe play pretending was very fun. Although their actions seem very comical, their looks were very stern and serious.

Other than Jue dashi, every single one of them looked as if there was an invisible hand holding onto their necks. Jue dashi's face still had no expression, picking up food with his chopstick one at a time and masticating slowly. When he was chewing, not sure whether he was angry, scared, or had a mouth full of bitterness. Since he had become famous, he had not done a matter that was disgraceful in front of people. However right now his hard earned reputation, was chewed and swallowed one bite at a time by these non-existent things.

Tie Zhentian had a body full of goosebumps from what he saw. He could not imagine why Jue dashi would do such a thing? Why such fear toward this madman? However, he finally understood exactly what kind of madman was No Thirteen.

Although Dawan already explained it carefully to him, however Tie Zhentian finally understood no matter how detailed she said it she could not describe the madness he possessed. No Thirteen was also staring at Tie Zhentian. Only Tie Zhentian was the only one that did not move his chopsticks.

“Why don’t you eat a bit?”

“Eat what?”

“The taste of lamb and vinegar fish aren’t bad,” No Thirteen said, “Roast ducks are better eaten hot.”

“Where are the roast ducks?” Tie Zhentian asked, “Where are the vinegar fishes?”

“You couldn’t see?”

“I couldn’t see.”

No Thirteen said: “Other people could see, why couldn’t you?”

“Because I am not as smart as them.” Tie Zhentian said, “These things you said, probably only smart people can see them.”

No Thirteen stared at him again for a while and suddenly laughed, “So you are a fool, only a fool could not see so many delicious foods here.”

His voice suddenly stopped and his face had an angry expression. He turned his head and sneeringly stared at Feng Chaofan. He loudly asked, “How could you do such a thing?”

Feng Chaofan was startled, "What did I do?"

"There are so many good foods here that you choose not eat, why did you have to eat my little dog?"

"Your little dog?" Feng Chaofan did not understand what he was saying. "Where is your little dog?"

"He was here at first." No Thirteen said, "Right now he was eaten alive by you with skin and bone."

Not only was he angry, he was also sad. "This little dog had been with me for several years. He was like a son to me, why did you have to eat him? Why are you so cruel?"

Feng Chaofan expression changed. "Sky Offering Daxia" Feng Chaofan was already famous thirty years ago with a pair of sixty-three catties Hunyuan Iron Plates roamed between the white mountain and black water¹²⁴. What haven't he seen before? Obviously, he could tell No Thirteen was deliberately causing trouble for him. He hoped Jue dashi could give him a hand and fight against this madman. They were long time friends. Jue dashi should at least say something on his behalf!

Unexpectedly the first person to say something was not his friend, but the abhorred and great bandit Tie Zhentian. "There isn't a single dog here." Tie Zhentian said, "No big dogs or little dogs."

"You are a fool. Of course you couldn't see." No Thirteen said, "I saw it with my own eyes, it was definitely not fake!"

"I'm afraid you saw it wrong this time."

"You insist there is no dog here?"

"Absolutely none."

"However I said there is and it was already in his stomach eaten by him." No Thirteen suddenly had a mischievous smile and clearly said one words at a time, "Do you want to bet with me?"

“How to bet?”

“Bet whether that dog is in his stomach,” No Thirteen chuckled, “Use your head as a betting chip.”

Tie Zhentian suddenly felt his hand and leg became cold, his stomach was about to throw up. He already figured out what the madman wanted to do. Feng Chaofan obviously figured it out too. He suddenly howled and charged at No Thirteen. His “Tiger Claw Kung Fu” and his Hunyuan Iron Plates were famous Guandong Wulin unique specialities.

Jue dashi face actually changed and madly yelled, “Stop! Quickly Stop!” He said it a bit too late, Feng Chaofan’s body already fell down. No Thirteen’s Persian slave behind him had his curved blade out of his sheath.

A flash of blade, fresh blood shot out like arrows.

— There is only one method to see whether someone’s stomach had a dog inside. The most rudimental, forceful, and cruelest method; the kind only madman would use. This madman was already using this method. The Feng Chaofan that roamed Jianghu for thirty years actually couldn’t dodge his blade — a chest-cutting, belly-opening blade.

Everyone’s expression changed and some were already throwing up, some were running away outward, and some were pouncing forward. No Thirteen was still chuckling, a mad laughter that was surreptitious and wicked. No one would forget this after hearing it once. The flashes of blade were still moving, one blade one life. No one could escape the blade of this Persian slave. Because once his blade strikes, a black stone already flew over. They came from No Thirteen’s hand.

No Thirteen using his middle finger to flick the black stone, once you heard the noise the black stone already hit the target’s acupoint. The only one that could dodge it was Jue dashi and Tie Zhentian but they had no way to avoid that folding chair. The blade’s light and blood already blind their eyes. They almost could not see where No Thirteen was. At this time, they could see Ma Rulong.

Ma Rulong broke through the blade and blood. He was not here to die, but was here to save lives. Although he didn’t have confidence to fully retreat, he still have to risk it. No one could hold him back,

he would rather die than let this cruelty continue. He must rescue all that he could rescue. At this moment, he was not really concern with his own life.

He did not die. He knew he did not die and beside he saved several people. However when he rushed back to the general store, he was already injured and exhausted. He collapsed right after entering the door! He went through hell and risk his life to save whom?

[End of Chapter 29]

Footnote

123. huchang (胡床), is an ancient Chinese folding chair.

124. baishanheishui (白山黑水), lit. “white mountain, black water”. It refers to the area between Mt. Changbai (lit. long white mountain) and Heilongjiang (lit. black dragon river), i.e. the northeast China.

Chapter 30

Chapter 30: Tailor, Make Ups, Bridal Sedan Chair [裁缝胭脂花轿]

When Ma Rulong woke up, everything was all quiet. The world became lonesome. He was already carried inside by someone and placed on the only bed in house. This was his first time sleeping on this bed.

Xie Yulun was by his side looking at him, it was only the two of them in this room. Ma Rulong forcibly smiled at her and immediately asked, “Where are the people?”

“What people?”

“The people I rescued.”

Xie Yulun did not answer and asked him back, “Do you know who you rescued?”

"I know." Ma Rulong said, "Tie Zhentian came back with me."

"Other than him, who else?"

"Also Jue dashi." Ma Rulong was very calm. "Jue dashi came back with us."

He said this calmly. Xie Yulun seemed rather agitated. "So you know you rescued him?"

Ma Rulong laughed. "Why wouldn't I know?"

He actually laughed. Why did some people always laugh at time where they shouldn't be laughing?

"You knew?" Xie Yulun seemed even more agitated. "You know he was the one that forced you into a corner. A person that was determine to have your life, and you saved him?"

"I saved a person." Ma Rulong said, "As long as he is human, I would not let him die in the hand of that madman. It doesn't matter whether he is a friend, enemy, or anyone; it was all the same."

Xie Yulun looked at him strangely and after a while asked, "Are you speaking the truth? Or are you intentionally doing all this for me to see?"

Ma Rulong did not answer this question; he refused to answer.

"You are real." Xie Yulun said, "Because you were really risking your life for him at first!" She suddenly sighed, "I originally would never believe you are such a good person, however right now I really couldn't not believe."

* * *

Jue dashi had been quietly standing at the corner next to the wooden shelves with general items. He was standing there since he came to the general items store. He didn't move, speak, or take a look at anyone. His body had bloodstains, clothes were shredded, and also suffered some injuries. However, he still remained calm and composed.

The people that came back with him, other than Tie Zhentian, were two people that were originally his fellow colleagues. However these two looked as if they had never seen him before. They acted as though they would contract incurable diseases if they approach him. Of course, they knew who these people in the general store were; they were his enemies. They did not want to be dragged down by him. Jue dashi also did not look at them; his eyes were blank like he did not see anyone.

The first to speak was Dawan, "I know it is hard for you to stay here. However as long as you are willing to stay, we would not force you out."

Jue dashi remained silent.

Dawan again asked, "Do you have something to say?"

"Yes," Jue dashi suddenly opened his mouth, "However what I have to say, I could only say it to one person."

"Who?"

"Ma Rulong."

* * *

The little shed was messy and plain. Dawan stayed in this little shed for nearly four months. Right now there were only two people inside. Jue dashi could finally meet alone with Ma Rulong.

"This time you saved me." He said, "If it weren't for you, I would not be here. If I am not here, I would surely be dead like others outside." He slowly continued, "However I would not let you go because of this. As long as I am not dead and you are also not dead, I would never let you go."

Ma Rulong smiled and lightly said, "I rescued you not so you would let me off, otherwise why would I even save you?"

Jue dashi said, "However, these are in the past."

Ma Rulong sighed, "Correct, no matter how you treat me in the past, it doesn't matter anymore because we might not even be alive tomorrow."

"However we are still not dead yet." Jue dashi said, "The tailor still hasn't come and make ups haven't been sent, thus that madman would not come in for the moment."

"Hopefully so."

"It must be like this." Jue dashi said, "I understand this madman. He sees us as fishes in the net, he is not in a rush to kill us."

He continued, "So we might have a chance to escape. Therefore I came to tell you, no matter whether we are friends or enemies. In this period, I will follow your, Ma Rulong's, lead. In my lifetime, I never take orders from anyone. However this is an exception."

Ma Rulong was staring at him and after a while asked, "Is this what you wanted to tell me?"

"Yes."

Other than Tie Zhentian and Jue dashi, two other people came back with Ma Rulong. One was Wang Wanwu; his shoulder joint was shattered. Surprisingly, he still hadn't die by the curved blade that no one could avoid.

When Dawan arranged for Jue dashi to meet with Ma Rulong, he suddenly asked Tie Zhentian, "I know a brother of yours ended in the hands of Jue dashi. Don't you want to know whether he is dead or alive?"

"I do."

"Why didn't you ask?"

"I couldn't ask, nor want to ask." Tie Zhentian said, "I am afraid he already die under his hand."

If Tie Quanyi really died under Jue dashi's hand, he would never let him go.

"But I can't kill him." Tie Zhentian said, "Since Ma Rulong brought him back, I should not harm him."

When Dawan came back, Wang Wanwu suddenly told her, "I want to see him alone."

"See who?" Dawan asked, "Ma Rulong?"

"Yes."

"You also have something to say?" Dawan asked again, "The thing you need to say, you can only say it to him?"

Wang Wanwu nodded.

When he nodded, his eyes were looking at Tie Zhentian because he knew Tie Zhentian must have something to say to him.

Tie Zhentian indeed asked him, "Do you know why you still haven't die?"

Wang Wanwu spoke. "I did not die because you always protected me. Although we were rival, right now it seemed like you consider me as a friend."

"However the words you have to say could only be said to Ma Rulong himself." Tie Zhentian said, "Why couldn't you say it to me? Obviously you don't believe in me."

"I believe in you," Wang Wanwu said, "It's just that I trust Ma Rulong even more."

"Why do you have to trust him?"

"Because Jue dashi also trust him." Wang Wanwu asked, "Is Jue dashi his friend?"

"No."

"A person that is equally trusted by his friends and enemies, how could anyone not trust him?"

Tie Zhentian suddenly laughed. "Right. You are right." He firmly pat on Wang Wanwu shoulder, "You go then."

Ma Rulong also could not believe Wang Wanwu wanted to see him alone. Also couldn't believe the first thing he said was to tell him a secret.

"I haven't die yet not because Tie Zhentian was protecting me." Wang Wanwu said, "I haven't die because No Thirteen didn't really want me to die."

He also told him another secret. "His 'Finger Flicking God Art125, Flying Stone Hitting Acupoint' is definitely in a more advance state than anyone had ever attained. His Persian slave skill is definitely much faster than anyone. However the people that was killed by them were not killed by the flying stone and under the curved sabre."

"No?"

"Those people died because among them at least half of them had been bribed."

Wang Wanwu explained, "For example, let's say Zhang San and Li Si were friends. However Zhang San was already bribed by him but Li Si did not know. When that Persian slave slash with his sabre and Li Si died under it, would other people think the Li Si's death was because he couldn't avoid Persian slave's strike?"

"Yes!"

"When other people saw No Thirteen flicked a throwing stone, would other people think Li Si's death was because No Thirteen flying stone hit his acupoint?"

"Yes."

"Actually that wasn't the case." Wang Wanwu said, "Actually No Thirteen did not hit his acupoint. It was because he was hit on the acupoint by his brethren amidst the chaos."

He also said, "I must come here to tell you this because I don't want you to underestimate No Thirteen martial art, and also don't want you to think he is a god."

Ma Rulong, of course, asked him, "How do you know this secret?"

"Because I was brought out by him," Wang Wanwu forcibly smiled, "so I didn't die."

"Why do you have to tell me this secret?"

"Because I trust you," Wang Wanwu said, "Right now I am confident that you would not betray anyone."

Those that came back with Ma Rulong, other than Tie Zhentian, Jue dashi, and Wang Wanwu, there was also one more. This person was not too old or too young, not too handsome or too ugly, didn't dressed too glamorously or too shabby. This was the type of person you see plenty of everyday.

Right now he still haven't die was probably because he was too normal looking. There were a few people that knew sometimes "normal" was a great cover, sometimes it might not even be normal at all.

Dawan happened to be one of these few people. She was well aware of him. She suddenly asked, "What's your name?"

This normal looking person smiled, nodded, and shook his head.

Dawan again asked, "You can not hear what I said or can not speak?" The person responded the exact same way. He was still smiling, nodding his head, and then shaking his head.

No one would be able to understand what he meant. Dawan didn't understand either. His intention was so people wouldn't understand.

Dawan suddenly also laughed. "Of course you are not deaf or mute. You just don't want to mention your name." She slightly continued, "I asked you, of course you don't have to answer. However when others ask you, it would be difficult for you to not answer."

The person suddenly asked her back, "Are you people waiting for someone?"

"Waiting for who?"

"Waiting for a tailor," The person said, "The tailor No Thirteen sent here to help make new cloth for a lady Xie."

Dawan stared at him.

"How do you know No Thirteen sent a tailor here?" Dawan asked, "How do you know we are waiting for him?"

"Of course I know." This person said, "I also know this tailor already arrived. Not only did he brought silk fabrics and make ups, but also brought a bridal sedan chair."

“Where is this tailor now?”

“In here.” This normal person suddenly revealed an abnormal smile. “I am this tailor.”

[End of Chapter 30]

Footnote

125. TanzhiShengong (弹指神功), lit. “flicking finger divine martial art”.

Chapter 31

Chapter 31: The Miraculous Tailor [神奇的裁缝]

Carefully looking, this person was indeed a tailor. Again carefully looking, you would think he looked like anything. If you casually said that he did something, no one would suspect it. Every occupation had people like him: plain and normal looking, common clothing and polite smile.

“I am a good tailor. Within several hundred li (Chinese mile), there are absolutely no tailor better than me.” He smiled and said, “The clothes I make are guaranteed to be novel and form fitting.” People normally welcome a good tailor. However this tailor was an exception, absolutely no one here welcomed him.

Dawan forcibly smiled, “I can tell you are a very good tailor. However no matter how good you are, without fabrics and materials you can not make any clothes.”

Once the clothes were completed, No Thirteen would not let them comfortably stay here. She hoped this tailor could not finish the clothing. She could not see any clothing materials on him.

But this tailor said, “I’d already brought them here. I can guarantee they are the best materials with the best color, newest designs, highest quality, and absolutely would not fade.”

“Where are the materials you brought with you?”

“Right here.”

No one could see where his materials were. However once he turned around, his hands suddenly had two bolts of silk fabrics. One was a scarlet red silk fabric that was also embroidered with a golden peonies flowers. Everyone was startled. No one could tell what kind of method he used and where he pulled these two bolts of silk fabrics. Suddenly like magic, he conjured up a big bag of robes, perfumes, and face powders. No one could tell where on his body could he be hiding all of these things.

Tie Zhenlian sighed, “Couldn’t believe us old Jianghu could overlooked this. Couldn’t believe this fellow here is an expert.”

Tailor smiled and shook his head. “I am not an expert (gao ren, lit. “tall man”). I am not tall (gao) at all. You are taller than me. Tall people with the right appearance look much better wearing clothes.” He glanced at Tie Zhenlian from head to toe, “Unfortunately the clothes you are wearing aren’t good. Next time, if we have a chance, I’ll help you make two sets of clothes.”

“At first I heard you brought over a bridal sedan chair.”

“Once the time is right, the bridal sedan chair will show up.” Tailor smiled, “Since the brides and bridegroom are not in a hurry, why are everyone so anxious?”

When the words “bride and bridegroom” were mentioned, everyone’s expression changed.

They definitely did not guess wrong, No Thirteen did have wild ambitions. If he could marry the big Miss of Jasper Villa, not only would it angered Madame Jasper, Dawan would need to die too.

Tie Zhenlian suddenly asked Dawan, “Can we let him make cloth for Miss Xie?”

“No.”

Tie Zhentian said, "Is there such thing as a tailor that doesn't make clothes?"

"Seems like there's only one kind."

"What kind of tailor would not make clothes?"

"A dead tailor."

The tailor looked as if he did not understand their meaning and actually laughed. "I am not a dead tailor. I am a good tailor."

"It's a pity a good tailor can also become a dead tailor." Tie Zhentian coldly laughed and slowly extended his arm. His injuries were already getting better. When his iron fists were extended, his joints on his body cracked, dense like firecracker.

Even if this tailor was an idiot, he should understand his meaning. He suddenly yelled, "Wait! I still have something to say."

"Say it."

"What I have to say, I can only say it to Ma Rulong."

"He doesn't want to hear it." Tie Zhentian inched forward, "I know he doesn't want to hear it."

Ma Rulong suddenly went over.

"This time you are wrong," Ma Rulong said. "He is also human. He have something to say, why wouldn't I listen?"

* * *

Ma Rulong left with the tailor. No one stopped and no one disapproved. As long as Ma Rulong already decided, no one could disapprove. What kind of secret does this tailor have to tell Ma Rulong? Why was he only telling him? No one knew and no one wanted to know. Everyone trusted Ma Rulong like they trusted themselves. No one knew when did this started; however every one knew this was how it was right now.

* * *

After a long while, Ma Rulong came back by himself. Dawan immediately asked him.

“Where is the tailor?”

“At the back, helping Xie Yulun tailor clothes.”

“Why do you let him go?”

“Because he is a tailor, this is what he is suppose to do.” Ma Rulong said, “He isn’t the only tailor in this world. If I don’t let him, other tailors would come.”

His explanation wasn’t really satisfying. Right now what they needed the most was time. The more time they get the better chance they would have. Ma Rulong should understand the well but it doesn’t look like he really understood this point. Everyone in the general store couldn’t help but sighed. Outside the general store, No Thirteen suddenly laughed loudly.

“I haven’t admire anyone for a long time.” No Thirteen said, “Right now I have to admire you.”

“You admire me?” Ma Rulong actually asked, “Why do you admire me?”

“Because I know you are that Ma Rulong. The people here are all you enemies and rivals. They should’ve killed you a long time ago.” No Thirteen said, “However, right now every one seem to submit to you. For

any secret, they are only willing to tell you. Even if they think what you are doing is stupid, they still did not protest. People like you, shouldn't be waiting for death along with them."

"What should I do?" Ma Rulong actually asked.

"You should come out. Meet me face to face and become friends."

Ma Rulong actually immediately agreed. "Good, I'll come out."

He actually really went out. No one would've thought he would really go out. Even No Thirteen, himself, might not have thought he would come out. However, he actually did do the exact thing no one would imagine him doing. Could it be that he really wanted to become friends with this madman? Could it be that he really did not that he might die on his hand once he step out? Could it be that he was also mad like No Thirteen where he didn't look crazy normally but was demented inside?

* * *

Looking at him pulling open one of the door and walking out, everyone jumped back. Tie Zhentian was looking at Dawan, and Dawan was looking back at Tie Zhentian. These two couldn't believe Ma Rulong suddenly became like this.

"Is he crazy?"

"Doesn't look like it." The one that understood Ma Rulong the most was Dawan. Right now even Dawan wasn't too sure.

"He doesn't look like an idiot either."

"He absolutely not stupid."

"Only god knows." These things did indeed seemed like only god knew.

Tie Zhentian suddenly asked, "Do you think the tailor is a bit strange?"

"Not just strange, but extremely weird." Whoever could suddenly grab two large bolt of silk fabrics out of thin air, was definitely not a normal person.

"I know in Jianghu there was a 'heart-absorbing' art that could make a person lose his self."

"There is."

"Do you think Ma Rulong is hypnotized by this 'heart-absorbing' art? Therefore he is acting strange."

This was definitely a high possibility. Another possibility was that tailor already taken Xie Yulun hostage and used her to threaten Ma Rulong.

Tie Zhentian and Dawan already thought of these and at the same time went into this room with the door curtain. Once they went in, they were startled. Even more startled by Ma Rulong's display at first. And even more startled than seeing ghost. Tie Zhentian roamed Jianghu for decades; he had never seen such a shocking thing. He almost couldn't believe his own eyes. What exactly did they see?

[End of Chapter 31]

Chapter 32

Chapter 32: The Frightening Hand [吓人的手]

The situation inside the room had changed greatly since they were last here. The big bed, that was like pious Buddha in people's home, arranged in the middle of the room was demolished and removed. Xie Yulun, who normally took struggles and took a great deal of effort to clean and dress, was standing up right now. This was not the reason why Dawan and Tie Zhentian was shocked.

They were shocked because they saw Ma Rulong again. The one standing next to Xie Yulun was not the tailor, but was actually Ma Rulong. They clearly saw Ma Rulong leaving in front of them with their own eyes. However, they also clearly saw Ma Rulong standing right in front of them with their own eyes.

* * *

Actually who they saw was actually not “Ma Rulong”, who they saw both times was “Zhang Rongfa”. In their own mind, “Zhang Rongfa” was “Ma Rulong”. The two were the same person. In here there was only one “Zhang Rongfa”, he already left at first, why was he still here? How come the tailor, on the other hand, was no where to be seen?

* * *

The big bed that was in the middle of the room was also gone. However Ma Rulong and Xie Yulun seemed to be very interested in it and were standing there. Their eyes were always staring at the empty spot. Seeing Dawan and Tie Zhentian, Ma Rulong lifted his index finger and place it next to his mouth, telling them to be quiet. Dawan and Tie Zhentian were very capable of holding themselves back, they at least did not make any noise. They did not forget that this madman could even hear snakes copulating and turtles laying eggs.

Dawan immediately blitzed out and grab the accounting book, brush, and ink that she normally used and went back in. She was relying on the brush and ink to communicate with Ma Rulong.

‘Who are you?’

She already couldn’t tell whether this person was Ma Rulong disguised as Zhang Rongfa. This person was Ma Rulong, Xie Yulun could confirmed this.

‘What was the person that left at first?’

‘It was the tailor.’

Although Dawan and Tie Zhentian already thought of this, but it was still rather hard to believe.

‘How did that tailor became Zhang Rongfa?’

Ma Rulong smiled and use the brush and ink and worth on the book: “Since she can disguised me as Zhang Rongfa, why wouldn’t she be able disguised herself as Zhang Rongfa?”

Dawan froze. She was too shock and too happy. She couldn’t believe that this person would appear. Right now of course she understand what was going on. Tie Zhentian still didn’t understand. “Who did you say that person was?”

Dawan immediately wrote out that person name, a miraculous person, a miraculous name.

‘Exquisite Lily-White Hand Yu Linglong.’

A what appeared to be complex and mysterious situations, after being said out the answer was actually really simple. Right now Tie Zhentian already understood, “Exquisite Lily-White Hand Yu Linglong”, already said everything. With her brilliant art of disguise, she became a plain looking man that did not catch other’s attention. Then replaced the tailor sent by No Thirteen and came here.

No one expected her to come so no one realized this. When she was alone with Ma Rulong, she used the medicine and tools she had prepared and transformed herself to another Zhang Rongfa.

Dawan right now finally realized that “tailor” and “Zhang Rongfa” looked similar. Only with slight alternation by Exquisite Jade Hand, she can very quickly became Zhang Rongfa. Obviously, she already planned all of this. Why did she do this? Why did she have to used Ma Rulong’s identity to meet No Thirteen? Dawan and Tie Zhentian still couldn’t figure this out.

* * *

The place where there was originally a bed, besides some dust there was nothing else. What was Ma Rulong and Xie Yulun staring at? Why did they dismantled and removed this bed?

Dawan and Tie Zhentian also couldn't figure this out. They asked Ma Rulong but Ma Rulong only smiled at them, so all they could do was foolishly stood there with them and stared at that the empty spot. Right when they felt really foolish, they were suddenly taken aback. Because they saw something very shocking.

This time they saw a hand. This empty spot with nothing on it suddenly had a hand popped out from beneath the ground. A rather large, thick and strong hand that looked like a small tree growing from the ground. The middle finger, ring finger, and little finger were extremely straight, where the index finger and thumb formed a circle. This hand gesture usually meant everything had been solved, and there were no problem.

Whose hand was this? Why did this hand popped out from beneath the ground? Obviously this a living person's hand. A dead person's hand would not make hand signal. They had been living here for several months, why was there a living person underground?

Looking at this hand would've frighten anyone, but Ma Rulong actually wasn't a bit surprised. He also reached his hand out and used his finger to flick this hand's thumb three times. After a while, another three flicks. He repeated this a total of three times. This hand suddenly retreated back and into the ground.

The empty spot suddenly became empty again, except for an extra hole. A hole that could have a hand reached out and retreated back in. The hand disappeared but the hole was still here.

The hand came from within the hole, where did the hole came from? This piece of land was a solid ground. The dirt on this piece of land wasn't different from any other land. It also capable of growing green grass, flower, and tree but would definitely not grow a hole. A hole that could have a hand come out anytime.

[End of Chapter 32]

Chapter 33

Chapter 33: Inside the Hole [洞中]

Dawan looked at Tie Zhentian, Tie Zhentian looked back at Dawan, and then they both looked at Ma Rulong. They did not understand what was going on but they knew Ma Rulong definitely knew. Ma Rulong did not look at them, he was fully concentrated on staring at this hole.

What was originally a hole the size of a bowl suddenly became bigger. The hard ground around the hole suddenly rippled like water. The waves became bigger and the shaking became stronger, like a boiling pot of water. Suddenly the frothing soil calmed down. The small hole suddenly became a large hole and even larger than a table surface. A person popped out from the hole. His face was covered in mud but his eyes were shiny. He smiled at Ma Rulong, smiled at Dawan, and smiled at everyone. However he did not recognize them and they did not recognize him. They had never seen him before.

The person already came out, and stood next to the hole where he came from. He was looking at this hole; his eyes were filled with delight and admiration, like an artist appreciating his own masterpiece. He was looking at it for a while and then turned around, took the brush and ink, and wrote these words on the worn out accounting book: 'Please enter the hole, sir'

* * *

The hole seemed very, very deep. This hole was not really a hole; it was a tunnel, a deep and long tunnel. The tunnel was dug from a very far away place; the exit was definitely outside of this land filled with black rocks. Dawan finally understood. Everyone understood. This tunnel was their only chance to live. Therefore, everyone entered this hole.

The tunnel was longer than expected, the exit was outside several streets at a dim but wide cross alley. At the exit there was a luxurious horse carriage that only the noble, powerful, or rich could get. The jet-black carriage compartment was shiny enough to see one's reflection. The four horses were undoubtedly well-trained colts. There were also three of the exact same horse carriages waiting on both side of the cross lane. The drivers also had his whip ready.

A man dressed in green clothes, who came out of the hole, explained to them, "To avoid No Thirteen's pursuit, we prepared three additional carriages. These carriages also have six males and one female, a total of seven people. The tracks left behind by these carriages would be the exact same." He said six male one female because Dawan was still disguised as a man. He was already prepared to take a seat in this carriage.

“We do not need to wait for Miss Yu. She will have her own way to deal with No Thirteen. She would definitely have a way to withdraw safely.”

He was looking at Ma Rulong, who was hesitant to get on, and smiled, “She specifically ordered me to make sure you mustn’t wait for her because she knew you are a bit stubborn.”

Fortunately he did not show his stubborn behavior this time. Once he got on the carriage, the driver immediately whipped the horses. Sixteen horses raised their hooves synchronically; and thirty-two wheels moved at the same time. The carriage tracks left behind on the four roads were identical.

The man in green clothes said, “Among these four roads: one leads to Hall of Divine Horse, one leads to Mt. Song, one leads to Jasper Villa.”

“How about the other one?”

“The other one is where No Thirteen came from.” The man in green cloth said, “It leads to Dead Valley.”

“Which one are we taking?” Xie Yulun was full of hope, “Are we returning to Jasper Villa?”

“No!” Dawan said, “Definitely not.”

“Why?”

The man in green clothes said, “Because No Thirteen would definitely figure out we would most likely go there.”

Xie Yulun sighed. Dawan said, “Where are you planning to send us?”

“Dead Valley.” The man in green clothes said, “Because no one would think we would go to Dead Valley.”

He added, "Anyway, Miss Yu insisted we must go this route. She would also go to Dead Valley." No one asked: "Why does she have to go there?" Everyone believed Miss Yu must have her reasons.

* * *

The carriage was moving steadily and quickly without any trouble. The carriage compartment was spacious and comfortable. Dawan had been paying attention to this man in green cloth. She suddenly asked, "Are you a disciple of Beggar Clan?" Everyone believes he should be. To be able to carry out such a plan, only the Beggar Clan had the manpower and resource to accomplish this. Beside only Jiangnan Yu Wu would dare to get involve in this matter.

The man in green cloth shook his head. "I am not a disciple of Beggar Clan," He smiled and said, "I actually had never roamed Jianghu."

The answer surprised everyone. Dawan again asked, "What is your name?"

The man in green cloth hesitated, seemed unwilling to reveal his name as if saying it out was an embarrassing matter. However, he still said it out. "I am Yu Liu (six)."

"Yu Liu?" Everyone was even more surprised and couldn't help but asked, "Who is Jiangnan Yu Wu (five) to you?"

"He's my fifth brother."

Jiangnan Yu Wu was famous throughout the realm, and commanded the world's number one clan. He had relative, friends, and acquaintances throughout Jianghu. His younger brother should definitely be a very famous figure. The strange thing was, no one ever heard of a person name "Yu Liu".

"All of you mustn't have known Yu Wu has a younger brother like me." Yu Liu said, "All of you must think it's strange. How come Yu Wu's younger brother never reveal himself in Jianghu?"

"Why didn't you?"

Yu Liu bitterly smiled, “With an older brother like Yu Wu, why would I be in Jianghu? Even if I am here for one hundred years, I would still be Yu Wu’s little brother.” He looked at his wide, firm, and rough pair of hand and slowly said, “Furthermore, I have no ability. I could only dig holes.”

Ma Rulong looked at him, his eyes revealed a sign of respect. He always respected a person with a backbone, respect this independent personality.

“You said you have no ability and could only dig holes.” Ma Rulong said, “However outside four streets, digging a hole 70-80 zhang long (zhang, approx. 10 ft. or 3.3 m.) and having the exit exactly in the middle of a room inside the general store.” He sighed and said, “You said you have no ability, but other than you who else could dug out a hole like this?”

Yu Liu laughed. “Listening to what you said, it made me feel as if I have a bit of ability.” He looked at Ma Rulong with his smiling eyes. “Right now I finally understand why fifth brother would say that.”

“What did he say?”

“He said your strongest point is that you never forget the other people’s good point.” Yu Liu said, “He also said, he had only seen two people like you.”

“Which two?”

“One is himself.” Yu Liu smiled. “And the other is you.” His smiling eyes were full of warmth. “So he wanted me to ask you, whether you are willing to become friend with a person that can only dig holes?” Ma Rulong already reached out his hand.

[End of Chapter 33]

Chapter 34

Chapter 34: Mansion and the Sinister Night [華屋惡夜]

Jiangnan Yu Wu was not only a famous hero in Jianghu, but also a celebrated and gifted scholar with startling brilliance, carefree and candid. Yu Liu, on the other hand, was a completely different person, like what he said himself. He actually did look like a crude man; rough hand, thick leg, ordinary and simple. On his clear and square face, there wasn't a sign of intelligence on it. Only when he was smiling, he showed a slight resemblance to Yu Wu. However, right now every one was curious about him because he didn't seem as simple and ordinary as he looked. Every one had a lot of questions to ask him because everyone wanted to know exactly what kind of person he was.

"You had never roamed around Jianghu? What do you typically do?"

"I do a little bit of everything," Yu Liu answered, "But I often help others build houses."

"Are you a mason or a carpenter?"

"I do both masonry and carpentry." Yu Liu said, "However, usually I just build the look."

To build a house, you first have to build up the look, which is you must have a blueprint. How tall the house should be? How many degree of slope should the roof be? How much weight should it support? How deep is the foundation? Everything should be calculated carefully; there should be no mistake. If there is any mistake, the house could collapse quickly.

Tunneling is the same; you also had to plan it out, measure the distance. As long as there is one mistake, the tunnel exit would not be at its original planned position. If he dug the exit of the tunnel outside of the general store and in front of No Thirteen, he would just be digging the graves for him and these people.

Dawan sighed again. "Now I know, why your fifth brother specifically requested you to dig the tunnel." Dawan said, "Digging a tunnel like that must be even more difficult than building a house."

"That tunnel was not something I could've dug alone. The people on those three other carriages were all my helpers."

These were all already planned out. Those people came to help dig tunnel, and upon leaving could be used to help mislead No Thirteen's pursuit. Everyone was used efficiently and effectively.

"They all must be sent by your fifth brother, must be Beggar Clan's disciples."

Everyone thought so, however Yu Liu laughed. "They are not Beggar Clan's disciples." He said, "They are all people that constructed houses with me, so they also know how to dig tunnel."

Everyone was very surprised. "You planned all this out?"

Yu Liu smiled, "Since my fifth brother wanted me to do this, of course I have to manage it well."

Such a thorough plan and such a large-scale operation, was actually all led by this "crude man". He looked crude, filthy, and dense; his hands, face, clothes, and shoes were covered in mud; and even his nail cracks were filled with dirt. However no one thought he was crude, filthy, or stupid anymore.

There was only a person that asked, "Where's your fifth brother?"

Yu Liu sighed. "He handed over the entire task to me. He, himself, did not get involve in anything."

Tie Zhentian suddenly sighed. "If I also have a brother like you, I would be like Yu Wu and not worry about anything."

When he sighed, he eye was staring at Jue dashi. Everyone knew he must had been thinking about his brother Tie Quanyi. Though his brother might not be comparable to Yu Wu's brother, his brother was definitely able to do something other people's brother could not do. His brother was willing to die for him anytime.

Jue dashi had no reaction. No matter what others were saying, it seems as if he did not hear anything.

* * *

Midnight. When they got on the carriage, the sky was already completely dark. Right now, only over four hours had passed. Everyone thought Yu Liu would continue on throughout the night, but they were wrong.

They just entered a rather large town and passed through a very wide main street. From the carriage window, although the stores of this street were already closed, one could tell this a very busy and prosperous town. Just as they were looking out the window, the carriage turned into a dead alley.

The alley was a dead end. There was only a single house, a seemingly large and rich family. A rich family house with red-lacquered gate and a pair large stone guardian lions crouching outside the gate. There was also a pathway suitable for a carriage to ride through. The red door entrance was closed, their horse and carriage, however, were still riding along this pathway. Just when the carriage was about to crash into these large doors, the red doors suddenly opened and the carriage rode straight in. They stopped at a very large courtyard. The instant the horse and carriage were inside, the large doors closed. Yu Liu opened the carriage door.

“Everyone please get off of the carriage.”

“Get off? Get off for what?”

“Tonight, we will stay here!”

“Why are we staying here?”

Yu Liu smiled. “Because No Thirteen would definitely think we would ride through the night.”

Everyone thought they would continue on through the night, therefore he deliberately stop here. Tie Zhentian suddenly also smiled. “This is a great idea!”

* * *

The courtyard was large. The house was also very large with carved beams, painted rafters, and newly pasted snow-white window papers, which under the moonlight seemed to be glowing white. However, there was nothing inside the house — no people, no tables and chairs, no household furniture, no lamp lights. Although there was no lamplight, there were, however, starlight and the moon. Although there were the starlight and moonlight, it made the empty mansion even more cold and miserable.

Yu Liu explained, "This is a new house I helped construct recently. The owner of this mansion is a retired high-ranked government official. He will start moving in next month."

Right now the last quarter moon was still hanging high in the sky, which was why there were no one here.

"Who was the person that opened the door at first?"

"Also one of the people that help me built houses." Yu Liu said, "I can guaranteed he will not reveal our secret."

That person, of course, would never give away their secret. That person was a deaf, not only deaf but also mute. Deaf, mute, crippled, hunchback, and old. Already did not have any hope towards life. Nothing in the world would move him.

* * *

An empty and desolate mansion, a slow-witted and ugly handicap, a barely-lit and tattered lantern, a cold, windy, and frigid night in spring, and seven fugitives. The tattered lantern was swaying in the wind. The ugly hunchback carried the lantern, limping one step at a time, leading the group from the front. Other people didn't want to look at him. He didn't want others to look at him either.

He led the seven people into four separate rooms. Ma Rulong and Yu Liu in one room, Dawan and Xie Yulun in one room, Tie Zhentian and Wang Wanwu in one room, and Jue dashi occupies one room by himself. No one wants to get near him and he doesn't want to get near anyone. On a cold spring night, a person like him staying alone in a house without anything; when thinking about the bitter past and present, how will he cope?

* * *

Everyone felt really tired, extremely tired, but not many people could sleep. Xie Yulun did not sleep. There was a straw mat laid on the floor, she was sleeping on this straw mat. The wind outside the window sounded like a woman weeping.

“Are you asleep?”

“No.” Dawan couldn’t sleep either.

“How come you couldn’t sleep? What’s on your mind?” Xie Yulun asked.

“I’m not thinking of anything.” Dawan said. “I just wanted to have good night sleep.”

Xie Yulun suddenly laughed. “You don’t have to lie to me. I know what you are thinking about.”

“Oh?”

“You’re thinking about Ma Rulong.” Xie Yulun said, “I know you really like him.”

Dawan neither admit nor deny this. She just asked back, “Why aren’t you sleeping? Do you also have something on your mind?”

Xie Yulun’s reply undoubtedly would have surprised anyone.

“I’m like you. I’m also thinking about Ma Rulong.” She sighed, “These several months, he had been sleeping with me in the same room. Every night I could hear him breathing. Why wouldn’t I be thinking about him? How could I be able to sleep?”

Dawan didn’t say anything else. She suddenly stood up, walked to the window, and opened it up. In this calm deep night, a girl like her being affronted about her emotion, what else could she say?

Xie Yulun seemed as if she still had a lot to say.

"I do not have any sisters. In my life, you are the one closest to me." Xie Yulun said, "I have never thought you would harm me, so that day when you suddenly hit my acupoint, I was surprised."

She took a deep breath. "Now even though I finally understood your good intention, I was still surprised back then!"

Dawan did not look back and did not open her mouth.

Xie Yulun continued, "It would've been better if I had completely lost consciousness. Unfortunately I was still very much awake, I still remember every thing you did to me." Xie Yulun slowly continued, "I would never forget those things."

She sighed again. "You brought me to that yamen (government office). You shut me in the small room, stripped me naked, and laid me down on that cold and hard wooden bed. You also brought a man to inspect my body. I know everything."

Dawan suddenly sighed and said, "At the time I thought you'd already faint, so..."

Xie Yulun did not let her continue and asked, "Do you know how I felt back then?" Xie Yulun asked, "Do you know what it feel like for a girl to have another see her like that for the first time?"

"I don't know."

"Of course you wouldn't know." Xie Yulun said, "Because you haven't had another stripped you naked and have a man look at you before."

She suddenly laughed, "However I promised you'll know soon enough."

Dawan's complexion changed, suddenly darted toward the window. Unfortunately she was too late. As she was trying to jump up, Xie Yulun already aiming for her back and struck her acupoints.

Xie Yulun wanted revenge. — Dawan was already aware of this, which was why she was preparing to escape. This seems very logical. However if this is what you're thinking, then you're wrong, very wrong.

Dawan face changed and was preparing to jump up not because she was aware of what Xie Yulun was trying to do. She actually didn't even hear what she was saying. She was trying to jump out the window because she saw something extremely shocking. Saw something she would never imagine seeing.

If she could speak, she could have prevented those dreadful events from happening. However she could not speak. Xie Yulun already hit six, seven of her acupoints, and even sealed her yaxue (mute point). She couldn't even utter a word.

If Xie Yulun happened to know what Dawan saw, she would've been shocked. However Xie Yulun didn't know, so she was smiling, smiling happily.

"Soon you will understand how I felt back then." Xie Yulun chucklingly said, "Because I will do exactly what you did to me. I also wanted Ma Rulong to look at you."

Ma Rulong also did not sleep. He wanted to have a chat with Yu Liu, but Yu Liu already feel asleep the instant he dropped on the straw bed. Yu Liu was not a man in the Jianghu (martial art world), not a well-known martial artist, not a young master from a renowned family. He did not have glory of famous people, nor share their burden. Ma Rulong was sighing in his heart. He also wanted to be an average person like Yu Liu, where one could just fall asleep the instant they go to bed. Unfortunately, he was Ma Rulong.

The window was half opened, half shut. The wind was wailing outside. He suddenly saw some signaling with their hand outside the window. It was Xie Yulun beckoning him to come out.

"I want to take you somewhere to see something." Xie Yulun's eye lit up and said, "I promise you, you'll love it."

She was smiling mysteriously. Ma Rulong couldn't help but to follow her. They went back to Xie Yulun and Dawan's room. There were two straw mats on the floor. She laid Dawan on one of them and covered her up using the second one.

"Go ahead and lift up the straw mat." Xie Yulun said, "Then take a look from this end to that end."

She wanted Ma Rulong to look Dawan's leg and then Dawan's face. Ma Rulong did exactly what she said. He saw one end and his face changed, saw the other end and his expression looked as if someone stabbed him.

Xie Yulun laughed, and said smiling, "I thought you wouldn't be this surprised because you should've known that I would get even."

Ma Rulong was even more stunned, after a long pause finally asked, "Who are you trying to get even at?"

"Dawan, of course." Xie Yulun was chuckling, "What she did before, I'm doing the same to her now."

"What she did to you before, you're doing the same right now." Ma Rulong repeated what she said, voice also sounded as if someone was stabbed him.

"Did you also sealed her pressure point? And also put her underneath this straw mat?"

Xie Yulun nodded, nodding and smiling at the same time. Ma Rulong did not say anything else; suddenly lift up the straw mat on the top. Xie Yulun couldn't smile anymore, look on her face seemed as if someone stab, cruelly stabbed and twisting the knife. At first, she clearly put Dawan there and covered her up with the straw mat. However, the person right there was not Dawan. Lying on the straw mat was that deaf, mute, hunchback, and old cripple.

[End of Chapter 34]

Chapter 35

Chapter 35: Panic in the Sinister Night [恶夜惊魂]

Right now that cripple was not that different from other people, because he was already dead. Everyone eventually dies. Dead people are the same. It didn't matter if you were a hero or a beauty when you were alive, they would all be the same when they were dead — only a dead person. The only difference between this dead person and any other dead person was that both of his fists were clenched tightly like a miser clenching onto his wallet. What was he holding?

Ma Rulong pull opened his hands, and the expression on his face looked as if he had taken a blow with knife. The cripple's hand was holding a black stone, a very round and shiny black stone. Only Dead Valley had this type of stone.

Xie Yulun let out, "No Thirteen (Wu Shisan)!"

If No Thirteen really came, where was Dawan? Neither Ma Rulong nor Xie Yulun could answer this question. Didn't even dare to think about it. Also another mystery was Yu Liu's plan extremely careful so how did No Thirteen manage to come here.

* * *

Tie Zhentian was already asleep. A veteran like him would've taken any chance to sleep. He also thought Yu Liu's plan was very meticulous, and this place was very safe.

However, a veteran like him would also be easily woken up. He was woken up by a very strange noise. By the time he woke up, Wang Wanwu was no longer in the room. Even the straw mat on the floor was missing.

The only door and two windows in the room were locked. He also did not hear any noise from Wang Wanwu opening any door or window. Also, the door and window can only be lock from the inside. If Wang Wanwu went out, there was no way he could lock up the door or window. So there were no sign of anyone opening the door or window but Wang Wanwu was not in the room. How did he leave this room?

The only explanation was there was a secret exit. It was common for large house like this to have a secret passage or hidden wall, especially considering this house was built by Yu Liu.

However, Tie Zhentian could not find this exit so he was especially dumbfounded. Wang Wanwu, like him, was here for the first time. Then how come he couldn't find this secret exit that Wang Wanwu could? There was also another mystery. Why didn't Wang Wanwu stay in the room and sleep? Why did he quietly sneaked out of the room? Even if he wanted to go out, there was no need to sneak out through a secret passage?

Tie Zhentian did not spend much time on these questions. He never liked to dwell on any complicated and confusing matters. The moment he came out of his room was the same time Xie Yulun asked Ma Rulong to come out. Tie Zhentian saw them but did not call out to them.

On the cool calm night, a young man and a young woman wanted to talk in private so why would he want to disturb

them? He never liked to spoil the moment. He only wanted to find Wang Wanwu.

They were staying in the side rooms of Chinese-style courtyard. Outside was an extremely large backyard. The garden was not particularly decorated. In this quiet spring night, there seems to be a hard to describe eerie and desolate quality. He went through an alley paved with round rocks, suddenly heard someone groaning behind the rock garden. He couldn't tell who was groaning but could tell that this person was in a great deal of pain.

Behind the rock garden was a lotus pond. Even though there wasn't any lotus yet, the pond water was being pulled in. A naked body came out of the lotus pond and fell on the ground next to the pond. His whole body was convulsing due to the pain. This person was not Wang Wanwu. Surprisingly, this person was Jue dashi.

Tie Zhentian stood there and stared blankly. He would never imagine Jue dashi would be in this state. However, he would soon realize why Jue dashi would be in this pain. Jue dashi was also human, also has human desire, and also experience time when he was tormented by these desire. However, he had no way to vent this out like regular people; therefore, he could only sneak out in the middle of the night and use cold water to cool himself off. Tie Zhentain suddenly realized he was a pitiful person. His cold-hearted and stubbornness was only a result of his long years of suppressive lifestyle. Jue dashi was alarmed, suddenly jumped up, put on his monk gown and looked at Tie Zhentain with a shocked face.

Tie Zhentian sighed, "You don't need to worry about me telling anyone. What I saw tonight, a third person would never know."

Jue dashi was startled, embarrassed, regretful, at a loss and then said, "Do you know Tie Quanyi is dead?"

Tie Zhentian clenched up his fist, "Did you kill him?"

"Doesn't matter who killed him. If you want to avenge him, you might as well make your move now."

Tie Zhentian looked at him. Not only did he not make any move, he actually sighed and said, "Right now I could not kill you."

"Why?"

— Because right he only felt pity and sympathetic towards him, no murderous intent. Tie Zhentian did not say this out; at that moment there was a loud shriek. It came from Xie Yulun right when she saw the cripple's corpse.

* * *

The corpse did not have any blood or open wound. The fatal wound came from the fact that his pulse was severed by an internal palm technique. An extremely soft class of internal palm technique, which did not even leave any external signs after severing arteries. When Tie Zhentian came here, Yu Liu also arrived. There was visible display of panic and anger.

"Who killed him?" Yu Liu asked, "Why come here and killed a pitiful cripple?"

Tie Zhentian was similarly enraged. "That murderer would not need any reason to kill."

"Are you referring to No Thirteen?"

“Who else would it be?”

Yu Liu was even more surprised. “How did he find this place? Perhaps our plan was leaked out?”

Everyone was thinking about this question.

Xie Yulun suddenly asked, “I understand.”

“Understand what?”

“That devil can even hear a turtle laying an egg, why wouldn't he be able to hear you tunneling?” Xie Yulun said, “He must have waited outside the tunnel exit, watching us.”

“No,” Yu Liu said confidently, “There was no way he was able to hear me digging the tunnel.”

“Why?”

“If you put his ear on the ground and concentrate, he might be able to.” Yu Liu said, “He must be using this way to hear turtle laying eggs.”

Also “turtle laying egg” was simply a figure of speech. Was there any sound when turtles lay egg? No one had heard of it and no one knew.

“When I was digging the tunnel, he was only focus on the noises within the convenient store. How could he be listening to ground noise far away?” Yu Liu asserted, “Our operation was very scrupulous, barely any sound was made.”

He had the utmost faith in himself. Everyone also had faith in him, therefore the problem remained.

“If No Thirteen did not hear the digging and tunneling and there was no leak in the plan, how did he manage to get here in half a day?”

Tie Zhentian suddenly said, “There is only one loophole to the plan.”

“Where’s the loophole?”

“On Wang Wanwu.”

Yu Liu immediately said, “You think he was a spy? On the way here, he left secret markings to allow No Thirteen to catch up to us?”

These questions, in itself, were the answers. Other than Wang Wanwu, there wasn’t anyone that could be a mole. Without a mole, No Thirteen couldn’t catch up to them.

“Where is Wang Wanwu?”

“He already disappeared.” Tie Zhentian said, “When I woke up, he was already gone.”

“Why did you wake up?”

“I was awoken by a very strange noise.” Tie Zhentian said, “Originally, I have no idea what that sound was. Thinking about it right now, it sounded like a secret passage opening.”

Yu Liu immediate confirm this, “This room was originally meant to be the master’s study room. When he was in charge, he must’d offended some people so he deliberately requested to have a secret passage created.”

Tie Zhentain said, “But I could not find it.”

Obviously it would be hard for other people to find the secret passage Yu Liu built. Luckily, it shouldn't be hard for the man himself to find it.

* * *

Since this room was intended to be a study room, it wouldn't be too small. Wang Wanwu originally slept at a corner near the window.

The entrance to the secret passage was below the spot where he had slept. Once you activated a trigger, the passage entrance would open up. Tie Zhentian simply could not find this trigger. The trigger was a simple relief carving on the decorative windowsill. Yu Liu pulled on the sculpture and the floorboard opened up revealing the entrance to the underground passage.

The passage was damp and dark; the exit was inside a well. Of course, this well did not have any water in it. Although there was no water, there was a person.

A dead person, one that was wrapped in a straw mat. This was the same type of cheap straw mat they were sleeping on. The dead man was Wang Wanwu.

[End of Chapter 35]

Chapter 36

Chapter 36: After Midnight [三更后]

The corpse also did not have any traces of blood or open cut. Wang Wanwu also struck by that soft and gentle palm technique that severed his heart pulse and killed him.

"How come he died?" The person asking the question was Xie Yulun. The one answering was Tie Zhentian.

"Of course he needed to die." Tie Zhentian say, "Being a spy, this is how they usually end up."

“You think No Thirteen silenced him?”

Absolutely, this question, in itself, was also the answer, the only possibility, the only answer. The questions that no one could answer were, “Where was No Thirteen? Where was Dawan? What did No Thirteen do to Dawan?” No one even dare to think about these questions.

* * *

Far away, a night watcher’s gong was struck to indicate sangeng¹²⁶ (third night period, around midnight). Sangeng was always a period where one feels the most overwhelmed and unsettled. They suddenly thought of Jue dashi.

After hearing Xie Yulun cried out, Tie Zhentian rushed there and Jue dashi was left at the side of the pond. He and Tie Zhentian both heard the cry at the same time, must’d known something terrible happened here and should’d come. However, he was not here.

— Perhaps he was like Wang Wanwu, was stealthily assassinated somewhere in the grand house’s dark and hidden corners? His hand also holding a black stone.

The place was now shrouded with bleak signs of deaths; any one could potentially meet death at any given moment. The first one to die was the cripple. The second one was Wang Wanwu. The third one could potentially be Jue dashi. Who would be next?

* * *

Sangeng had passed, the night grew darker. There could be more deaths through the rest of the night. The murderer was like the grim reaper that could suddenly appear at any moment. Right now could be hiding in the shadow waiting for its next target. Ma Rulong understood that it was a pivotal point where he needed to make a decision.

“All of you, leave.”

"Leave?" Xie Yulun asked, "To where?"

Ma Rulong said, "Anywhere you want, as long as you quickly leave this place."

"If we go, what about you?"

"I..."

Xie Yulun suddenly loudly said, "I know what you are doing. You want to stay here to find Dawan. If you can't find her, you would never want to leave."

Ma Rulong admitted, "Are you telling me I shouldn't look for her?"

"Of course you should look for her. " Xie Yulun sneered, "But why don't you think about this? Can you really find her? And if you did, then what? Could it be that you're capable of rescuing her from the hands of No Thirteen? Could it be that you don't think No Thirteen would kill you?"

She was getting more and more agitated, "You're only thinking of looking for her. Besides her, you don't have anyone else in your eyes? Why aren't you taking other people into consideration? Why aren't you thinking about yourself?"

After she finished those two sentences, tears were already forming in her eyes, and were about to fall at any moment. Everyone could tell why she would cry, Ma Rulong, of course, also should know why. Still he did not utter a word, not saying a word meant he had already finished saying what he wanted to say. No matter what other people said, he was determined to stay here.

Xie Yulun bit on her lip and stomp on her feet. "Fine, if you are looking for death and go die by yourself. We'll leave."

She clearly decided to leave, but still hadn't even taken a step. She was stomping on her feet. However her leg seemed as if it was tied together by an invisible silk rope, couldn't even take one step forward.

Ma Rulong finally sighed and softly said, "Actually you should understand. If the one that was missing wasn't Dawan but you, I would've done the same."

Before he even finished his word, Xie Yulun's tear already rolling down her face.

Tie Zhentian suddenly looked up and laughed, "I finally understand."

"What do you understand?"

"Originally I always thought those who are not afraid of death are people who are loveless, now I know I am wrong." Tie Zhentian said, "Actually people with love are even less afraid of death, because their heart already possessed by love, already threw away everything else."

He heavily patted on Ma Rulong's shoulder and said, "If you won't leave, we won't leave either. If we can't find Dawan, no one would go."

However right after he said those words, he darted out. Ma Rulong and Xie Yulun followed him and went out, because they heard a frightened hiss. Not from a person, but a horse.

* * *

The main entrance was opened again. However after hearing the horse frightened neigh, and the wheels rolling, by the time they got there both the horse and cart vanished into the dust. The coachman of the carriage, however, fell dead onto the stone steps, hands and feet were already ice cold, hand tightly gripping onto a black stone. Who was driving the cart away? Who was taken in the cart?

With faint evening wind and cartwheel and horse hiss noises, it wouldn't be difficult chasing it. "Chase after it!" Tie Zhentian both arms shook, actually executed his "Eight Step Pursuing Cicada"¹²⁷ lightness martial art, and headed toward direction of the cart and horse noise.

Everyone in Jianghu knew this lightness martial art. Everyone hear of the name "Eight Step Pursuing Cicada". However, people capable of mastering this skill was far fewer than anyone would imagine.

Fortunately Ma Rulong's "Heavenly Steed Galloping Across the Sky" was also a long renowned special lightness martial art skill. He caught up to Tie Zhentian in no time. Being able to match the world famous Tie Zhentian shoulder to shoulder, was something worth being proud of. Tie Zhentian was proud of him, even gave a pat on his shoulder, expressing his praise. However soon they realized that compare to what they originally thought of themselves, they were not that worthy of being proud of.

Because Xie Yulun also caught up to them, light as a feather following besides them. Didn't even seemed like she was exerting any kind of energy. After being treated by Miss Yu's exquisite lily-white hand, her power had been fully recovered. With their combined forces, was it enough to handle No Thirteen and the Persian slave that was capable of drawing his saber in a flash?

Lightness martial art biggest use wasn't for "attack", but for "retreat" and "defense". No matter in what kind of battle, effect of "retreat and defense" was not any less than "attack". The energy exerted were something greater than that needed for attack. The physical strength used up when using lightness martial art definitely wouldn't be less than any other martial art. Xie Yulun, unexpectedly, could also easily open her mouth and speak.

"We can never catch up." She said, "The four horses pulling the carriage are good horses. Not only well-trained, but also had great stamina. When I sat in the carriage, I already calculated how fast they were going." She still needed to take a breath before continuing, "Initially, we will be faster than them, that's why it looks like we will catch up. After three to five li (Chinese mile), we would start to slow down, on the other hand they would speed up."

Ma Rulong also knew Xie Yulun calculation was right. However he still continued to chase, even knowing he couldn't catch up. This was the answer. It was because human have this fighting spirit despite setbacks, even knowing you could not but still do type of perseverance, therefore humankind could have lasted.

* * *

They indeed could not catch up. The carriage was pulling further and further away, slowly couldn't even hear them. Behind, the sound of another carriage appeared and it was coming closer and closer. The person driving the cart was Yu Liu. In the beginning he was comparatively slower. However he now almost caught up, approaching with a four horses, six wheels large carriage. He let the originally far ahead and speedy people onto his cart.

“We will definitely catch up,” Yu Liu guaranteed. “This is a straight road, they could only go on this road.”

“Where does this road lead to?”

“Dead Valley.”

* * *

Catch up to them in Dead Valley and then what? If they were no match for No Thirteen, wouldn't chasing them meant death? They hadn't even thought of this question.

Right now everyone seemed to have acquired Ma Rulong's temperament, doing things on principle and disregarding any consequences. Their attitude could be described by Xie Yulun's words.

“No matter what, Dead Valley is not a place anyone can go. It's not easy even for us to be able to see the place.”

No one had been to Dead Valley. No one had an idea exactly what kind of place was Dead Valley. But everyone had some idea, that place was not the desolate and uninhabited place it once was. Because that place had gold, and unimaginable amount of gold.

Gold had become everything in that place. There was already a large amount of healthy, outstanding young people attracted to there, constructing many magnificent and wonderful architectures. Everyone would think like this, unfortunately they would all be wrong.

[End of Chapter 36]

Footnote

126. Chinese text said “sangeng” which means the third night period, usually around 11am to 1pm. I translated it as “midnight”.

127. Babuganchan (八步赶蝉), literally mean eight steps pursuing cicada, which mean a person can catch a cicada in flight within several steps. Supposedly a very common qinggong used by a lot of wuxia characters.

Chapter 37

Chapter 37: Dead Valley [死谷]

Dead Valley was still Dead Valley; no gold, no buildings, no anything. The carriage they were chasing, once it entered Dead Valley’s narrow mountain pass, it mysteriously vanished.

Early in the morning, the sun had risen. Sunlight was shining on the bright black stones, shimmering as if it was gold. Unfortunately black stones were still just black stones, no matter how much they glimmered they were not gold. Where were the gold?

If this place never had any gold, how did No Thirteen bought off all those people? If this place did have all these gold that people mentioned, how come they haven’t even seen a speck of gold?

Ma Rulong wasn’t concerned about the gold; it was Dawan. He believed once he find the carriage he’ll find Dawan.

— Where did the carriage go? How can a four-horses, six-wheels, large carriage vanish into thin air under the bright sunlight?¹²⁸

Ma Rulong suddenly said, “Below.”

“What’s below?”

“Carriage, gold, people are all below.” Ma Rulong said, “They must’ve built a large scale secret structure underground.”

This was not delusion. Gold could destroy a lot that originally couldn't be destroyed. Gold can also create a lot that originally couldn't be created.

If there was a secret underground structure, the only person that could find the entrance was Yu Liu, but Yu Liu shook his head.

"You're wrong," He said, "They are definitely not below us. They are above."

"Above?"

Ma Rulong turned his head around, looked toward where Yu Liu was looking, then saw the shaft around a blood red belt holding the curved sabre. That Persian slave, who can draw his sabre as quick as lightning, was standing on a rock beside the narrow mountain pass greeting them.

"Ma Rulong!" The Persian slave's voice was loud and clear. "Who is Ma Rulong? If you want to find Dawan, follow me. If any one else comes along, Dawan will die."

* * *

Sky was clear blue, sunny and bright, life was colorful, who wanted to die? However there was always that kind of people, people put their life on the line. As long as they believed something must be done, they would do it even knowing they would die.

Ma Rulong was this type of people. He slowly turned around, facing his friends, they all understood what kind of person he was. Tie Zhentian originally didn't want to say anything, because no matter what he would say it didn't matter. However, there was something he had to say.

"That person is a madman." Tie Zhentian said, "He never need a reason to kill anyone."

"I know."

“Besides this time he has a reason to kill you.” Tie Zhentian said, “Because you already fooled him once, this time he wouldn’t let you go. After he kills you, he can still kill Dawan.”

“I know.”

“You still want to go?”

Ma Rulong gazed at him. “If you were me, would you go?”

Tie Zhentian sighed. “I would still go, definitely would go.”

He came over and strongly grabbed onto Ma Rulong’s hand, Yu Liu also came over and grabbed his other hand, then silently walked away. They also knew Xie Yulun still had a lot to say to him. They didn’t want to hear, couldn’t bear hearing.

The sunlight was shining on Xie Yulun’s face, such a beautiful sunlight, her complexion was nevertheless pale as the cold moon.

“I also know you would definitely go.” This time she didn’t shed any tears, on the contrary smiled. “If I was in their hand, you would also go.” She continued, “I just hope you understand one thing.”

“What?”

“No matter whether you are dead or alive, no matter who’s in your heart, I am already yours.” Xie Yulun smiled again. “Have you ever asked yourself, other than you, who else can I marry?”

Ma Rulong left. He left without saying a word. He couldn’t answer her question and couldn’t bear looking at her smile. After he left, the sky was still blue, sunlight was still beautiful, and the black rocks on the ground still gleamed like gold. Nothing in the world would all of a sudden change due to the life or death of a single person. He left for a long while without coming back.

Xie Yulun suddenly said, “We should go.”

Tie Zhentian asked, "You want us to leave? Why should we leave?"

Xie Yulun replied, "You should all know he would not come back, why are we still waiting here? What's the point waiting?"

Yu Liu suddenly yelled, "There is a point!"

Xie Yulun again asked, "What's the point?"

Yu Liu said, "I've found it!"

Xie Yulun asked, "What have you found?"

Yu Liu did not say any word, he replied with his action — He already found out what was Dead Valley's secret, already found the secret hinge button.

* * *

The black stones under the sun was lit up by the sunlight, thousands and myriads of black stone all looked the same. In reality, it was not the same.

If you also have Yu Liu's experience and eyesight, you would be able to see within these thousands and myriads of stone, there were forty-nine pieces that were not the same. Ma Rulong wasn't wrong. Dead Valley's secret was indeed on the ground, the secret underground chamber's entrance lies within these forty-nine different stones. Yu Liu already found this secret's trigger; unfortunately Ma Rulong wasn't able to see it.

Within this dangerous path on a desolate mountain side, not even a blade of grass grows. Ma Rulong silently followed the Persian slave walking forward, not even knowing where he was going, and not knowing how long he had been walking. However, he did know where the carriage they were chasing

was. The carriage did not disappear or enter the valley, but turned around this dangerous rock and went into this mountain path.

Hard to believe that on this mountain path, which people seldomly traveled on since ancient time, was actually perfectly wide enough for this carriage to easily travel on. In other words, the fact this magnificent carriage could even manage to travel on this road was also something few people would even think of. This mountain path's width and slope seemed to be carefully designed specifically for this carriage. That carriage's width, speed, also seemed to be made specifically for this path.

However at the end of mountain path, there wasn't any grand palace. There wasn't even a house. It only had what seemed to be a very deep cave, which was also enough for that carriage to pass through. Sunlight didn't enter the cave. Ma Rulong couldn't see what was happening inside the cave. He only saw No Thirteen, who seemed very relax, standing in front of the cave with both hands behind his back.

Ma Rulong was finally able to take a clear look at this person. No Thirteen was also looking at him. The two people, face to face, were gazing at each other for a while. No Thirteen suddenly had this weird smile, which no one could really explain. He suddenly spoke what no one would ever imagine him saying. He suddenly asked Ma Rulong, "This show we had going on, shouldn't we complete its final act?"

[End of Chapter 37]

Footnote

128. I remember earlier in the text, there were 32 wheels for 4 carriages...so wouldn't that be 8 wheels per carriage. Since Xie Yulun mentioned the speed of the carriage when she was on it, this would be the same carriage. So why is it six wheels now?...I dunno...

Chapter 38

Chapter 38: Suspicion and Confusion [疑云重重]

There also wasn't any gold underground. There was no palace, and not even the missing carriage was here. Although the tunnel's entrance was ingeniously built, what was underneath was very simple and

crude. The underground chamber only had a bed, a table, and a chair. They were all made out of mud. On the outside there was a layer of black stones.

Could this really be No Thirteen's home? For such a legendary and mysterious figure of Wulin, how could he be living in such a place? Every one was very shock and disappointed, even found it hard to accept.

However if they thought about this carefully, they would realized this was what it was supposed to be like.

This was the Dead Valley that was devoid of anything. No Thirteen was still a man, not a god. Even though he was capable of applying his wit, skills, and strength to create this ingenious secret passage, he still could never create a bed out of thin air.

If he wanted a bed, he could only make it out of the available dirt and black stones. This place only had dirt and black stones. This was something anyone could see and able to understand. What no one could understand was — how did those capable and outstanding subordinates, the well-trained youngsters, came about? Where did they came from? Where did they live? What was even more baffling was that even though he could not find a real bed and a real table, there were still a bed comforter on the bed and a lamp on the table.

The comforter on the bed was a very soft and comfortable silk comforter. It also had embroidery on it. The lamp on the table was a very expensive Persian crystal lamp. The lamp still has oil in it. If the place was devoid of anything, where did the lamp come from? Where did the bed cover come from?

Yu Liu used the huozhezi¹²⁹ (Chinese fire starter) he was carrying around and lit up this crystal lamp. Once the lamp was lit, everyone couldn't help but gasped. Even Tie Zhentian, widely regarded as a strong-willed, dauntless, strong-fisted person¹³⁰ by the people of Jianghu, couldn't help let out a loud gasp. They had seen something that they would never imagine seeing.

They saw a person. In this Dead Valley, which seldomly had any people, there was actually in a person inside this underground chamber.

Not only was there a bed cover on the bed, there was person sleeping on this bed. The person was covered by the embroidered silk comforter. This person was evidently so deep in slumber; he couldn't

even hear people coming in. They couldn't see what this person looked like. The only thing they could see was the fully white hair that was exposed outside the cover and draping over the pillow.

Tie Zhentian rushed in front of Xie Yulun and Yu Liu. He roared, "Who are you?"

Only a deaf wouldn't be able to hear his voice, so a person deep asleep should wake up. This person had no reaction. If this person wasn't deaf, then this person must be dead. Who could this dead person be? How come there was a corpse here?

Tie Zhentian was not made of iron, but it seems as if his guts were. Like an arrow he bolted forward and lifted up the bed cover.

The person under the cover was not exactly a "dead person". The person under the cover was already a skeleton. Beside the completely white hair, there was only skeleton and clothes. On the skeleton there was a sharp bamboo stick. It was pierced through the back straight to the heart.

Undoubtedly someone snuck up behind his back and killed him while he was asleep. There was no sign of resistance. He was killed in one blow. The killer was precise and fierce. If this was not done stealthily, then it was done by someone he was familiar with, in which he didn't put any guards up.

— Who was this person?

— Why did No Thirteen leave a dead person here?

Xie Yulun suddenly said, "This person is No Thirteen." Tie Zhentian and Yu Liu looked at her with a shock of disbelief. They couldn't imagine why she would say such a thing.

"You said this person is No Thirteen?"

"Absolutely." Xie Yulun said in an affirmative tone.

"How could you tell?"

"He went to Jasper Villa before."

"Were you born back then?"

"No."

Tie Zhentian sighed and said with a force smiled. "You were not even born then, how could you even tell?"

Yu Liu said, "Even if you had seen him before, there's no way you can tell."

No one could determine a person's history, name and origin based on just a skeleton. Xie Yulun still seemed confident.

"Although I had never seen him before, I could still tell."

"Because my mother told me a lot things about him." Xie Yulun said, "With just one thing, I could recognize him."

"One thing?" Yu Liu asked, "Which one?"

"Teeth."

"Teeth?"

"That's right, the teeth," Xie Yulun said, "Although a person appearance may change, the teeth couldn't change, besides every one's teeth look different."

Teeth also would definitely not rot away.

Xie Yulun said, "My mother said: In the world the person with the strangest set of teeth is No Thirteen."

Yu Liu and Tie Zhentian were both looking at the teeth on this dead person, still couldn't see which was so strange about it.

Tie Zhentian couldn't help but asked, "What is so strange about his teeth?"

"He has four more teeth." Xie Yulun said, "He has thirty-eight teeth. Including wisdom teeth, it's forty."131

She asked Tie Zhentian, "Have you ever seen anyone with forty teeth before?"

Tie Zhentian did not, neither did Yu Liu. Although they rarely notice other people's teeth, they did know everyone has thirty-six teeth, like how everyone has two eyes. The dead man did indeed have forty teeth.

"I had already counted. I counted it twice." Xie Yulun said, "That's how I determine that he is No Thirteen."

Tie Zhentian was startled. Yu Liu was also startled. After a long while they finally spoke.

"If this dead man is No Thirteen." They both practically asked at the same time. "Who exactly is that No Thirteen?"

"A fake."

"Fake?"

Xie Yulun answered, "This place simply does not have any gold. No Thirteen also could not have recruited all those people to serve him. Therefore that No Thirteen is definitely a fake."

She added, “Beside no one has really seen No Thirteen before, so no one could tell whether he is real or fake, therefore any one can pretend to be him.”

“Why pretend to be him?”

Xie Yulun hadn’t even opened her mouth; suddenly there was another person’s voice. This underground chamber only had the three of them, however she heard a fourth person’s voice. Although the voice was soft and must have come from somewhere far away, she still could hear it clearly. She could clearly hear this person said, “This show we had going on, shouldn’t we complete its final act?”

[End of Chapter 38]

Footnote

129. huozhezi (火折子), like of an ancient Chinese match. It’s a roll up piece that require you to blow into it to generate a fire source.

130. Lost in translation, wordplay on his name (tie=iron) thus original text is iron heart, iron gut, iron fist but I translated them instead. Lost that a little bit of that touch.

131. These numbers are killing me...it doesn’t make sense. Someone is drunk I guess. FYI, in real life, most people have an average of 32 teeth (with 4 wisdom teeth included, so 28 with wisdom teeth removed). I guess since this is Gu Long’s universe, people in his world have an average of 36 teeth. By the way, I check several sources and it did say 38 teeth (40 including wisdom)...even if it’s wrong it’s not even consistently wrong...LOL...

Chapter 39

Chapter 39: The Answer [解答]

Every person needs to breath; therefore an underground chamber should have an air ventilation. Because this underground chamber also had an air vent, No Thirteen corpse decayed and rotted away. This chamber’s air duct was created by a giant stick of bamboo inserted from ground above. What they had heard also came from this air duct.

At the moment they heard it, they couldn't tell who's voice was it. Afterward, they hear another man's voice in a shocked tone asked, "Show? Who's acting on a show? Acting on what show?"

They were all familiar with this man's voice. They could immediately tell it was Ma Rulong. Who was he talking to?

"Of course yours and my show."

"You are not No Thirteen?"

"Of course I'm not," The person laughed, "You clearly spent five thousand tael of silver to have me play this role. Why are you still pretending to be dumb?"

"I asked you to pretend to be No Thirteen?" Ma Rulong seemed even more surprised.

"Of course you did."

"Why would I do such a thing?"

"Because you wanted people to see you are greatest man in the world, therefore you asked me to pretend to be world's greatest evil. You wanted me to be the killer so you can be the savior. This way other people would see with their own eye what a hero you are."

"So you didn't kill those people?"

"Of course not me." This person laughed, "I don't have the ability to kill anyone? You bribed their comrades, caused confusion, and allow them to sneakily attacked amidst the chaos. Finally you let your Persian slave use this opportunity to take their heads. I am merely a puppet."

"How about those people who were tearing down those houses with you?"

“They are also your people. Hall of Divine Horse has wealth and power, what can’t it do?”

This man laughed, “I have to hand it you for laying out such a plot. You even convinced people that Dead Valley has gold. You are a genius.”

Ma Rulong did not say anything.

The man laughed again, “What’s even more impressive, I clearly have no strength in my hands. You created a device that shoots out stones, told me to hid in my sleeve, and fire these black stones out, convincing people I have powerful hand strength.”

After a while Ma Rulong finally asked, “Could it be that you don’t know martial art?”

“Although I know a little, I definitely couldn’t compare to you people.”

“Then how could you hear us speaking in the general store?”

“What did I hear?” The person said, “The thing you people were saying, I couldn’t hear any of them.”

“You were not the person outside at that time?”

“Of course it wasn’t me.”

“If it wasn’t you, who was it?” Ma Rulong asked.

“How would I know who it was? At that time, there was no one outside saying anything.” This person said, “You arranged this show, how would I know the details?”

He sighed, “No matter what, right now this act is finally over. That lady, Dawan, and that old monk are inside the cave, hurry and take them back. This way you not only can play the hero rescuing the princess,

you can make that old monk admires and thankful of you. I only accepted your five thousand taels. If you have any decency, you should..."

His voice suddenly stopped. At the instance his voice stop, there was only a "pu" sound, and then nothing. There was no sound at all.

* * *

The underground chamber was also silent. No one said anything, not even a word. Ma Rulong was their friend, and now he unexpectedly did all those things, what else could they say? Not knowing how long had passed, Yu Liu finally said, "Couldn't believe he's that kind of person."

This was indeed something no one would imagine. If they weren't here in this underground chamber and happened to hear this conversation, they would've been fooled their entire life. Fortunately heaven is fair and the guilty will not escape, at least they know the truth.

Tie Zhentian suddenly said, "There is one thing I don't understand."

"Which one?"

"The fake No Thirteen did say he did not hear what we said in the general store. At the time we heard No Thirteen speaking, who was talking?"

"If I am not wrong, it must've been someone inside the general store." Yu Liu said after pondering.

"However no one in the general store at that time opened their mouths."

"Some people can speak without opening their mouth."

"Which people?"

“People that knows ventriloquism.” Yu Liu said, “I have seen this type of people before.”

“That’s right.” Tie Zhentian said, “I’ve also seen this type of people that can speak from their abdomen. You clearly thought the voice was coming from somewhere else, but it was actually coming from the stomach.”

He sighed, “No wonder why I thought he sounded strange at the time, also it sounded as if the people speaking was next to me.”

“Could you guess who that person is?”

“It was definitely Wang Wanwu.” Tie Zhentian said, “Absolutely must be him.”

“Why?”

“He didn’t need to intentionally walk himself into the trap.” Tie Zhentian, “He came to the general store because he wanted to spread misinformation. He wanted us to believe No Thirteen has these unattainable and otherworldly abilities, wanted us to believe that No Thirteen was the real No Thirteen.”

“Therefore he was later silenced.”

Tie Zhentian coldly laughed, “That type of people deserved that type of ending.”

What kind of ending should Ma Rulong receive?

“We should go back up to wait for him.” Tie Zhentian gripped onto his fists. “We will see what else does he have to say.”

He was about to grab Yu Liu and leave, but the Xie Yulun that hadn’t spoken a word suddenly said, “Wait.”

“Wait for what?”

“I lost something here.” Xie Yulun said, “I have to find it before I go.”

How could she lose something here? What did she lose?

She really did lose something here, missing three beads of pearls, seems like it came off a chain of pearls.

She found it at the corner next to the doorway.

Tie Zhentian and Yu Liu thought this was strange, couldn't help but asked, “This is yours?”

“Yes.”

“How could your thing be missing here?”

Xie Yulun answer was even more surprising, “Because I came here before.”

Tie Zhentian and Yu Liu were stunned. They stood there for a while and finally asked, “Why would you come here? What for?”

“To look for my uncle.”

“Your uncle?” Tie Zhentian lost his voice and asked, “How come No Thirteen is your uncle?”

“He was my mother's blood-related brother, why wouldn't he be my uncle?”

Xie Yulun sighed and said, "Unfortunately I have never seen him before, because Jasper Villa never let a man stay. Even though we're blood-related, there was no exception. Male, after birth, would be sent far away."

Right now Tie Zhentian finally understood why he called himself No Thirteen. After he found out about his origin, it was hard not to be sad and angry. That was why he said he had no father and no mother. Therefore he was determined to seek out Jasper Villa, to strive for vindication. Unfortunately, in the end he still lost. Right now Tie Zhentian finally understood why Madame Jasper made an exception and spared his life? And how she knew he had forty teeth?

Xie Yulun said, "Although my mother exiled him to Dead Valley, she haven't forgotten this brother. Therefore she always mentioned him in front of me. That's why I was determine to find him."

"If you already know he was dead, then you must've known that No Thirteen was fake."

"That's right."

"Why didn't you reveal this?"

"Because I need to take this chance to find my uncle's murderer," Xie Yulun said, "This is my only chance."

— Only the real murderer would know he was already dead, would dare to ask someone to pretend to be him.

Xie Yulun said, "Therefore I only need to find out who was the mastermind behind all of this, then I would be able to find out who's the murderer."

Yu Liu couldn't help and took a long sigh. "You would never imagine the perpetrator would be Ma Rulong."

Xie Yulun suddenly had this strange glare on him, after a while finally spoke one word at a time. "You are wrong."

"I'm wrong? What's wrong?"

"The perpetrator is not Ma Rulong." Xie Yulun said it confidently, "Most definitely not."

"If it is not him, who is it?"

Xie Yulun stared at him for a long while, eyes filled with grief and condemnation. "It is you!" She pointed her finger at Yu Liu. "The murderer is you!"

Yu Liu laughed. "You must be joking, but this joke is not funny."

"This joke is not supposed to be funny, because this is not a joke."

"You really think I am the murderer?"

"I originally didn't think it would be you." Xie Yulun said, "Fortunately I happen to know something other people wouldn't know."

"What do you know?"

"I know Yu Wu did not have a younger brother." Xie Yulun said, "Definitely did not."

She spoke one word at a time, "Because Yu Wu also happens to be my uncle!"

Tie Zhentian was startled, Yu Liu was still smiling!

"With just this, you determined that I am the murderer?"

"No, not enough." Xie Yulun said, "Fortunately, Dawan also happen to had seen something."

"What?"

"She saw you killed Wang Wanwu! She saw it with her own eyes."

Yu Liu couldn't smile anymore.

Xie Yulun said, "At the time I didn't let her expose your plot, because at the time we still do not know who you are."

Yu Liu couldn't help but asked, "Right now, you already know."

"Right now I already know. You plotted all of this because you wanted to frame Ma Rulong," Xie Yulun said, "Because you know everyone slowly realize what kind of man he is, all knew he wouldn't do such a thing, so you planned all this to frame him."

She suddenly asked Tie Zhentian, "Do you know who wanted to harm him the most?"

Tie Zhentian obviously knew, answered without hesitation, "Qiu Fengcheng."

"Yes." Xie Yulun said, "Of course it's Qiu Fengcheng."

She pointed at Yu Liu, one word at a time said, "You are Qiu Fengcheng!"

This "Yu Liu" suddenly laughed again.

"It seemed like you already know everything, there no need for me to deny." He actually said, "That's right, I am Qiu Fengcheng."

Xie Yulun sighed, "This is definitely something hard for people to imagine, and even I didn't expect you to admit it so casually."

"There was also something you would never imagine."

"What?"

"I am also No Thirteen's only disciple."

He really was. He always had wild ambition, ambition to rule the world, however he also knew with only Qiu's family silver spear, he couldn't accomplish that. One time, he accidentally heard stories about No Thirteen.

"He was definitely a strange man." Qiu Fengcheng said, "His background was strange. His history was strange. I was fascinated by him. Thought of countless of ways and finally found and came to Dead Valley. Coincidentally at that time, No Thirteen wanted to take in a disciple, who was willing to avenge him."

No Thirteen truly took him in as disciple, and taught him his life-long abilities. No Thirteen's ability wasn't isolated to one.

"This digging ability was taught by him." Qiu Fengcheng said, "Qimendunjia (Ancient Chinese Art of Divination), gathering and spreading information, traps and mechanisms, using poison, art of disguise; not one unknown to him, not one that isn't brilliant. "

"Why did you kill him?"

"He was always controlling and limiting my actions. I had already learned all his abilities." Qiu Fengcheng actually laughed, "So why wouldn't I kill him?"

"Not only did you kill him, you also killed your peers Du Qinglian and Shen Hongye, and also lured Ma Rulong into Dead Valley. You should be very content." Xie Yulun again asked, "Why do you even have to do this?"

"Because what you said isn't wrong, I had also realized all of you are slowly started to have confidence in him." Qiu Fengcheng also couldn't help but sighed, "Ma Rulong really isn't a simple person."

"In reality, you really didn't need to do any of this. We basically couldn't find any of your mistakes, and couldn't gather any evidence on you." Xie Yulun also sighed, "Too bad you're too smart for your own good."

"Being too smart doesn't matter, whether you find any evidence is all the same."

"Same, how could it be the same?"

"Because you will all die regardless." Qiu Fengcheng suddenly asked, "Do you know at first what that 'pu' noise was?"

"Sounds like a dao (sabre) striking someone's neck."

"Whose neck? Whose sabre?"

Qiu Fengcheng answered his own questions, "If you think it was that fake No Thirteen, then you're wrong."

"Oh?"

"The neck was Ma Rulong's neck, the sabre was Peng Tiangao's 132 sabre." Qiu Fengcheng explained, "Peng Tiangao is that Persian slave. He is also Peng Tianba's younger brother. His sabre skill is far more impressive than Peng Tianba's. Unfortunately, he was born from a concubine. His mother was a female Persian slave; therefore he will never be the legitimate successor of Wuhu Duanmendao (Five Tigers Breaking Down the Door Sabre). Pang clan's vast wealth is something he is only able to look at."

"That's why he was persuaded by you, willing to aid you, and help you kill Peng Tianba."

Qiu Fengcheng smiled and nodded admittedly, but he suddenly changed the subject. “When No Thirteen was alive, I once asked him, what things he wanted the most?” Qiu Fengcheng said, “I couldn’t believe the things he most wanted was a bed comforter and a lamp.”

“You obviously gave these to him.”

“I gave him the best bed comforter and the best lamp, even the lamp oil was the best. Only the last one was the exception.”

“What was the last thing you gave him?”

“It was the lamp oil and lamp wick soaked in drugs.” Qiu Fengcheng laughed and said, “Of course the drug was also the best, just like the one you both unknowingly inhaled at first.”

He laughed exuberantly, but the laugh didn’t last long. In a sudden, with a ding sound, the light on the table went out, outside the entrance there was a fire. Under the flickering firelight was a person. A person he thought he would never see again. He saw Ma Rulong.

Ma Rulong appeared along with Dawan and Jue dashi. Obviously they had not died, Dawan’s capture was a trap set by her and Xie Yulun.

Xie Yulun finally told Qiu Fengcheng, “I intentionally told Dawan all those words, intentionally let you hear, and letting you think I wanted revenge.” She said, “Obviously I also intentionally went to look for Ma Rulong, giving you a chance. In reality, I already released Dawan’s acupoints.”

Dawan innocuously followed, “So when you heard the sabre blade cutting down on the neck, the sabre was Peng Tiangao’s sabre, the neck was also his neck.”

[End of Chapter 39]

Footnote

132. Peng Tiangao (彭天高), surname Peng, given name means “sky high”.

END

Epilogue 尾声

Qiu Fengcheng, of course, received his deserved punishment. Jue dashi went to Mt. Kunlun's summit to mianbisiguo (confined himself for self-reflection). After Tie Zhentian and Ma Rulong drank whole-heartily for three days, on a windy and moonlit cold night they disappeared. Their current locations were unknown.

Jiangnan Yu Wu was still leading the Jiangnan wulin (martial art world). Miss Yu was still untraceable, appearing and disappearing unpredictably. How about Dawan and Xie Yulun? What kind of end should they have with Ma Rulong?

* * *

Several years later someone in Jiangnan ran into Ma Rulong. He was said to be accompanied by two beauties as delicate as flowers. One must be Xie Yulun, was the other Dawan? No one knew. But why was her charm and grace so similar to Dawan?

[END of Bixue Xi Yinqiang]