

EXTRA 1:

On Changming mountain where it snowed year-round, all within view was the surrounding span of whiteness, clouds beneath, and nearby stood a few small bamboo lodgings, a small yard, like a place where otherworldly immortals dwell.

Qi Ye was currently brewing wine.

A rich and penetrating aroma soaked through the window and diffused far away, which was what they call "Green foam on fresh, unfiltered rice wine, on a little terracotta stove (*)." It seemed as if a person like him could be stranded on high mountains or deep forests, but he would still be able to lead an elegant, comfortable life.

() a sentence from the poem “問劉十九” by Bai Juyi. English translation courtesy of Hugh Grigg.*

The head shaman, holding a book on one hand, sat beside him, and he would lift his head up to ask Qi Ye every time a question came up. Qi Ye still had his head lowered to stare at the little makeshift stove, but once a question was addressed to him, he could answer straight away without thought – if he were never born with royal's lineage, with this vast amount knowledge it would still be enough for him to score high on national exams and become government officials.

The head shaman shared a word here and there with him, during which he took hold of Qi Ye's hand and asked, "Are you cold?"

Qi Ye still had his hand near the burning stove, so he shook his head. Looking out of the window, he suddenly smiled, "Look at this place, this can be considered a 'heavenly mountain where birds abound, with humans nowhere to be seen'. After staying here for a while, I don't even know what time it is."

The head shaman felt something stir in him, and asked, "Do you like this place?"

Qi Ye looked at him out of the corner of his eye, smiling, "If I say yes, would you really stay and accompany me here?"

The head shaman considered for a moment, then said, his expression serious, "So far Lu Ta is still young, but if you really like this place, I'll return and teach him properly. After two or three years, I'll pass on Nanjiang to him, then I'll return here with you. Are you willing?"

Qi Ye was stunned for a moment, then suddenly broke out in laughter. Hitting the shaman lightly on the head, he mumbled, "Oh you wooden pestle, you really take everything seriously. Who would want to live in this bizarre place, with its chilling air and frozen ground? Nanjiang is still more spirited."

He lowered his head and smiled, "We can drink now." He quickly fetched two glasses of wine, carefully poured out two portions, then passed one to the head shaman while he raised one himself and brought it close to his nose, taking a deep breath. He squinted, "They say one part of cold is enough to hide a hundred parts of imperfections, only when it remains rich in flavour after brewing then you can call it high-end wine. There's the saying 'three glasses and you can see through the world, one bottle and you will become one with nature'. All worldly worries can only be solved by this one thing, which is ..."

His voice was interrupted by a series of 'bang bang bang' noises. Qi Ye sighed, his sudden interest in using poetry to accompany wine abruptly squashed. Taking a sip in annoyance, he scolded in a low tone, "This flea couple, making noise from morning 'til night. I see that Zhou Zishu is healthy now, we should take our leave tomorrow. My ears can't have a moment of peace."

Zhang Chengling's normal martial arts practice could not cause such a huge ruckus. This type of ruckus that sounded like it wanted to tear down houses all came from his two shifu fighting.

The head shaman had said that once Zhou Zishu could wake up, it meant the most dangerous period had passed. Zhou Zishu, clearly having experience in being beaten up, was only fragile for two to three days after he regained consciousness. It was not even ten days before he could get up, and only a few days more until his spirits became better. Once he could run and jump, things began to cease being peaceful.

With these two, who even knew who antagonised the other first, but like Qi Ye said, it took two to tango. They were so noisy from dawn to midnight, even when doing something like properly sitting down and having a meal, they could escalate from normal bickering to fighting with their chopsticks. At first Qi Ye had thought it was fascinating, but increasingly he found it bothersome and had since refused to share the same table with these two gorillas, lest he became collateral damage.

Qi Ye reminisced, rather annoyedly, "Before, Zishu was such a dependable person, why... Haiz, a man is truly influenced by the company he keeps."

The head shaman smiled, "Actually, this is a good thing. Reorganising a person's tendons and nerves is extremely painful, so it is already difficult to straighten them out again. Not to mention this is an incredibly cold place, it is even more difficult for a normal person to recover their mobility. Manor lord Zhou is not just moving, he is also forcefully stretching his muscles. While it is painful to do this now, it will be beneficial in the long run."

Wen Kexing had one arm around Zhou Zishu like he was about to embrace the other man fully. Zhou Zishu used this as leverage to twist away from his arm, his body not even landing fully before he used his foot to teasingly nip at Wen Kexing's chin, forcing him to take a step back. As fast as the wind, Zhou Zishu moved to ambush him. With his guard down, Wen Kexing got hit

and suddenly lost all the strength in his knee, almost forcing him to kneel. Right at the moment he was about to fall, he leant over and grabbed at Zhou Zishu's legs, forcing them both to fall in a roll together.

Anyway, since the ground was only ice and snow, plus with Qi Ye, the head shaman, and Zhang Chengling having always kept a healthy distance from them, it could be considered clean so it was no big matter to roll around on it. Wen Kexing, smiling like a thief, pressed down on Zhou Zishu, his arms on each side of Zhou Zishu's head, and asked, "Do you concede this time?"

Zhou Zishu had just recovered from serious injuries, his stamina not as good as Wen Kexing yet, so he was breathing heavily, "... this move from you is too despicable."

Wen Kexing leant down close, quietly saying, "Clearly you were the one who ambushed me first."

Zhou Zishu suddenly said, "Hey, Lao Wen."

Wen Kexing answered with a 'hmm', licking on his neck a bit, then said, "What?"

"I say..."

Zhou Zishu absentmindedly said something, but Wen Kexing could not hear it clearly, so he puzzledly asked, "Hmm?"

In that exact moment when his guard was down, he got hit in the chest. Wen Kexing yelped. In a blink of an eye, he got thrown down, feeling like the sky and earth have gotten reversed. His arms were twisted behind by Zhou Zishu, his body held immobile on the ground. Zhou Zishu learned from his despicable style and blew air in his ear. He laughed softly, "Now what, do you concede now?"

Wen Kexing used all his strength to twist his head around to look at him, asking, "A-Xu, do you really want to tie me up?"

Zhou Zishu raised his eyebrows, smiling, "Good idea."

He immediately moved to immobilise Wen Kexing acupuncture point, and only after seeing that the other man had been incapacitated temporarily, Zhou Zishu relaxed. He sat beside him and groped his face, lamenting, "Little wife, in order to pin you down, this husband has sweat all over my face."

A hand suddenly reached up to touch his forehead. He saw the supposedly 'immobilised' Wen Kexing slowly sit up and say, "Oh? Let me see, did you really sweat? Don't let yourself get a cold ah."

"You know to move your acupuncture point!"

Zhou Zishu, shaken, immediately leapt three metres away, guardedly looking at him. Wen Kexing side-eyed him seductively, “I know so much more.”

Then they started to rush at each other again, continuing their explosive fight.

In reality, the head shaman had some minor misunderstandings. For the two of them to fight from morning until night, tendons and nerves was one thing, but another reason was there was a problem that needed to be resolved immediately – until their win or loss could be determined, who emerged top or bottom would also not be decided. Meanwhile, they both had fire burning in their stomach, so fighting was the only outlet to release it.

At first, Zhang Chengling still excitedly ran over to watch them, thinking he could learn something, but afterwards he realised their fights were too fierce. Aside from learning specialties like “black tiger pulls out heart”, “monkey stealing peaches”, or something like “upending skies”, there was no value-added experience to be learnt. He then immediately lamented that no wonder they were martial arts masters, even their techniques are trimmed down to the basics. Hence, he went back to study his own martial arts orthodoxly step-by-step.

Yet in the young man’s heart, he still held some annoyance. His shifu kept criticising that his movements were ugly, but does he himself not frequently roll around on the ground in such improper style with senior Wen?

The two top masters had completely fallen to become two top street rats, all the while unintentionally misleading a young man’s growth path.

Only at every twilight, after Zhou Zishu took his medicine could both of them hold a ceasefire. The head shaman prescribed medicine on a case-by-case basis: with fragile bodies that could not withstand much, he prescribed gentle, slow-acting medicine, while with this Zhou Zishu who could brush away any pain and suffering, he only used the fiercest medicine. Every day after using his medicine, Zhou Zishu always suffered its after effects, needing to clench his teeth to endure the pain; after the medicine strength had passed, his body frequently became drenched with sweat.

Then he would wash up a bit and rest, recharging his spirits to continue jumping around the next day.

The day after Zhou Zishu took his last dose of medicine, the head shaman and Qi Ye bided them goodbye and departed. While the culture in Nanjiang had always been open-minded, and the shamanet Lu Ta was holding down the fort, this trip had taken both of them too much time. After sending the two of them off, Zhou Zishu could have his first night not having to suffer through the medicine that made him feel like being skinned. That night, his demeanour was extremely calm.

Wen Kexing carried a jar of wine in, holding it out and shaking it in front of Zhou Zishu, and the latter took it with no formalities. He immediately moved to stick himself to Zhou Zishu, his sparkling eyes pinning on the other's side profile.

Zhou Zishu got stared at until goosebumps broke out, swallowed a mouthful of wine and asked, "What are you looking at?"

Wen Kexing smiled, "You're not afraid I'd drug you?"

"What drug?"

"What drug do you think?"

Zhou Zishu sneered and side-eyed him, "You dare? Drug me with aphrodisiac, are you not afraid I'd be overcome by my animalistic urges and do you?"

Wen Kexing pretended to be indecisive, frowning, "Oh right, that would really be bothersome." He propped his head on his hand and scanned Zhou Zishu from head to toe, shaking his head and lamenting, "You can just relent to me on this one thing. Or else if we continue like this, both of us are going to end up monks."

Zhou Zishu side-eyed him, "Then why is it not you who can just relent to me on this one thing?"

Wen Kexing slowly dragged a hand over Zhou Zishu's hips, seductively caressing up and down, and lowered his voice, "I can give you many things, but ..."

Zhou Zishu's wrists got pinned down, and they started going at each other again in their room, while controlling their strength to not blow out the roof.

Zhang Chengling walked past after finishing his martial arts training, noticed this disturbance with calmness and knew that the two had started fighting again. He silently thought, is being together not good enough, why do they have to scratch each other up like two kids, which is such an improper thing to do? He then mournfully sighed, and quietly returned to his room.

After three hundred rounds, both of them had run out of breath, so they came to a ceasefire. Wen Kexing grabbed back the wine jar to gulp down mouthfuls of drink, expelling a breath and falling back on the bed with his limbs splayed out, then waved his hand, "No more fighting, today I'm out of energy."

Zhou Zishu let out a breath of relief, having been waiting for this sentence from this master. He immediately sat down on bed and pushed him inside, saying, "Move for me."

Wen Kexing shifted inside, staring up at bed curtains. He looked like his mind has drifted away, and remained silent for a long while before saying, "A-Xu, after some more time, after you have completely recovered, can you accompany me down the mountain?"

Zhou Zishu, who was resting with his eyes closed, made an affirmative sound and said, “I have recovered quite a lot now, I can come down the mountain – what do you want to do?”

Wen Kexing fell silent. Zhou Zishu waited for a long while, sensing something unusual. He opened his eyes to see Wen Kexing still looking like his soul had travelled elsewhere, his gaze staring fixedly ahead. He quickly said, “What’s wrong?”

Wen Kexing’s eyelids fluttered, but he forced himself to smile and whispered, “Nothing. That year when my parents died in the wild, they didn’t even have a grave to bury their clothes and belongings. I’m an unfilial son that hasn’t been back for more than twenty years, so eventually I should...”

Zhou Zishu sighed, slowly wrapping his arms around the other’s waist. Wen Kexing followed his lead to roll over, placing a hand on his back, his fingers landing on Zhou Zishu’s butterfly bones and absent-mindedly tracing their shape. He buried his face in Zhou Zishu’s shoulders, sadly uttering, “And there’s still A-Xiang...”

Zhou Zishu said, “While you stayed in town to recover from your injuries, I returned there once and managed to find A-Xiang and Xiao Cao... together. I’ve buried them properly.”

“Thank you.” Wen Kexing muttered intelligibly, his arm hugging Zhou Zishu tightly, his voice barely audible, “Through half this life, I’ve always been alone by myself. I thought at least there’s still A-Xiang... but A-Xiang was gone, and during that time you were still unconscious, I wasn’t as calm as the head shaman, I thought, what if you... I...”

Zhou Zishu was shocked to feel his shoulder get damp. He could not help but lower his head to look, but Wen Kexing waved his hand to blow out the light, his voice slightly choked up and softly coming out, “Don’t look at me.”

Zhou Zishu never knew how to comfort someone else, so he could only let Wen Kexing hug him.

Gradually, Wen Kexing’s hands started to travel over his body. Zhou Zishu felt a slight discomfort, but the other man had no intention of messing around. He just kept calling out his name, like he was extremely unsure, his voice carrying a tint of fear and urgency. Zhou Zishu sighed in his heart, and thought, haizz, he was so pitiable, I would just let him have this one time.

He used an extremely large amount of force to restrain himself and relax. For the first time in his life, he laid down his guard and gave himself over to another person. When their hair became entangled and their temples touched, there were only the other man’s whispers that sounded like he was slightly pleading, “A-Xu, don’t go...”

Even in a place of extreme cold there was still warmth softly and quietly radiating from beneath the bed curtains, like it could bloom into flowers.

In the early morning the next day, Zhou Zishu slept in, which was a rare occasion. Wen Kexing opened his eyes to look at the person in his embrace, his face showing a small smile of satisfaction.

The moment he moved, Zhou Zishu awoke. He just felt like there was no spot on his body that was comfortable, and his body was even embraced by someone else.

He wanted to open his mouth and curse, but Wen Kexing had since prepared for this. The instant Zhou Zishu opened his eyes, he immediately suppressed his satisfactory smile and with a complicated expression filled with too many emotions to discern, Wen Kexing stared deeply into Zhou Zishu's eyes.

The phrase 'motherfucker' had not even left Zhou Zishu's mouth before he saw the other man's red-rimmed eyes and forced himself to swallow it down. With nothing to say, he awkwardly turned away and with his back to Wen Kexing, whispering, "If you want to wake up, wake up by yourself. Don't disturb me."

Wen Kexing immediately hugged him from behind, lying down together once again. From where Zhou Zishu could not see, Wen Kexing withdrew his fake pitiable expression, and smugly thought inside that a soft heart is even cuter than a soft waist.

But he did not stay smug for very long before sadly realizing something. He snuck a glance at the person lying next to him, silently thinking, but... is it really every time he wants to.... he has to muster up a crying session?

This was kind of... tragic.

EXTRA 2: Past Life, This Life

After death, some would reflect on their own lives, and upon finding nothing to linger on, their three 'hun's and seven 'po's (*) would mostly dissipate. Then they would follow the soul reaper on the Yellow Spring path, forgetting more and more as they walked on, and eventually arriving at Naihe bridge unknowingly. After drinking the bowl of forgetful water, they would forget everything about their previous life.

() components that made up a person's soul, in some beliefs. It is commonly believed the seven 'po's are tied to the physical body while the three 'hun's are tied to the metaphysical self and can re-enter life through the reincarnation cycle*

Those that did good would be rewarded, those that did evil would be judged, those destined for reincarnation would reincarnate, once they entered the reincarnation cycle all the past would be wiped away, and they could start again with a mind as pure as snow.

That was why the living always tried to fulfil whatever wishes the departed left before passing on, so those departed could suffer less on their journey on the Yellow Spring path.

If there were those whose wishes were not fulfilled, they would still feel restless even as their souls followed the reaper, their mind stuck on the fame and fortune of the living world. Then they should be dumped into the waters of the Yellow Spring to wash until they thought things through, and then they shall be fetched by boat to be reincarnated.

The dead should not care about affairs of the living.

How long was the Yellow Spring path? As long as it was needed for you to forget.

Only those that could not forget, those who still turned their head to look back even after four thousand four hundred and forty-four miles, they would wait for those they desired at the bottom of the Naihe bridge. Some waited one or two days, some waited twenty years, others could be waiting for the entire human lifespan.

Even if they could wait until the other person came, the person's mind might have been fogged over and they no longer remembered them; even if the person remembered, one of them would still be youthful while the other had grown old with age, so they might not even recognise each other, or could only hold each other's hands in tears before the ghost servant started rushing them, "You two, it's already time, let us depart –"

The living always liked to swear their love on mountains and seas, but it would only take a few decades and a round of reincarnation to revert them into 'you are you and I am me', was that not laughable?

Those words were what Cao Weining heard the ghost servant told Meng Po while he was sitting by Naihe bridge.

The ghost servant claimed he was named Hu Jia while he was still alive; he was a person who loved to reminisce. Cao Weining heard him talking Meng Po's ears off all the time, but she paid no attention to him and continued on with her job of cooking soup. The Naihe bridge was an ever-changing entity; as the legends had it, the width of Naihe bridge was as wide as hoe much forgetful water you drank down, and after this one cup of forgetfulness, everything shall be wiped away.

Ghost servant Hu Jia had been blabbering away for half a day without warranting even a lift of a head from Meng Po, so he shifted over to strike a conversation with Cao Weining, "Boy, why are you not drinking the soup, are you also waiting for someone?"

The average normal human had shallow fortune and shallow emotions, it was rare there was someone as clear-headed as this person, so even those of the world of the dead would be still willing to spare some words for him.

"Ah..." This was the first time Cao Weining got to speak to a ghost servant, so he more or less felt startled at this opportunity, "Haha, right, sir, you are..."

Hu Jia totally had no intention of having a two-sided conversation with him, he must have been so bored he needed to find someone to talk at, so he directly interrupted Cao Weining's words, "Before, there was also a person here waiting for someone he knew; he waited for three hundred years."

Cao Weining, shocked, shakily asked, "Three, three hundred years... Who could live for so long? The person he was waiting for, did he have the surname Ye?"

"Haizz, who cares what surnames he had, aren't all names and surnames the same? This life you could be surnamed King surnamed Lord, after reincarnation who knows if in the next life you're gonna be surnamed Pig surnamed Dog." Hu Jia waved dismissively, then pointed to the Three Lives stone, "That person, he sat right there. After three hundred years of waiting, he got to return to the place where he met that person for the first time, but so what?"

Cao Weining continued encouragingly, "So what?"

"He chose another significant other," Hu Jia sniffed.

This time, Meng Po finally lifted her head to look at him, speaking expressionlessly, "Ghost servant Hu, be careful with your words."

Hu Jia made another 'haizz' sound, continuing, "Forget it, that other person has the fate of emperors and kings, and those have their own fates, who am I to say – boy, who are you waiting for then?"

Cao Weining said, "I'm waiting for my wife."

Hu Jia was not surprised, simply asking, “When you died, how old is your wife?”

Cao Weining replied truthfully, “Seventeen.”

“Seventeen... When I died, I also had a little wife at home who was seventeen, regretfully...” Hu Jia shook his head, it had been so long that he no longer remembered how that little wife looked. He told Cao Weining, “I would advise you to wait no longer, her life is still long, when she came down here she would have been an old granny of seventy, eighty and no longer remembering a man from when she was sixteen, seventeen. I have seen so many people spending all their time waiting only to receive suffering. You should also take a broader view; once you drink a bucket of Meng Po soup you can even forget wives and down to every single concubine.”

Meng Po lifted her head again, speaking expressionlessly, “Ghost servant Hu, be careful with your words.”

Hu Jia shut his mouth dejectedly, only to see Cao Weining smile broadly, “Then wouldn’t that be great? I’m anticipating it, it’s best she can’t even remember what I look like and can walk past with a smile and no regrets. Once I see her pass, all my worries would also be assuaged.”

Hu Jia spoke in surprise, “Don’t you feel upset?”

Cao Weining gave him a strange look, returning his question, “What would I feel upset about, she is my wife, not my enemy. Shouldn’t I be happy if she’s happy?”

Hu Jia was silent for a while before smiling, “You really do have a broad view.”

Cao Weining rubbed his head, embarrassed, “Is that so. This life I’m not good at much else besides having a broader view of things... Haizz, there is only this one thing, I died because my shifu killed me, I’m just afraid my wife can’t think this through and risk it all to have revenge.”

Hu Jia was surprised, “What kind of unfilial and immoral thing did you do for your shifu to kill you?”

Cao Weining said, “Ehem, what else could it be, it was those ‘good and evil are opposite sides’ kind of things. They said my wife is an evil ghost from Ghost Valley, but I insisted on following her, so shifu, after being embarrassed, was angered into killing me.”

His tone was so relaxed like this had nothing to do with him, it was nothing like how someone would recount their own death. Intrigued, Hu Jia squatted down next to him and asked, “Do you not bear a grudge?”

Cao Weining pointed to a reaper who was leading souls over to this side and said, “Along the way here, I heard that master cite ‘dust to dust, earth to earth’ so I just felt like even the biggest grudges are not worth bearing. I’m already six feet deep in the earth, why do I still have to bear grudges, wouldn’t that be making things difficult for myself?”

Hu Jia looked over and saw Hei Wuchang, his expression dark, floating by. Sighing, he whispered, “Oh that, don’t listen to them. Our underworld reaper only ever said that one sentence, they’ve been saying the same one for years and years, never changing once...”

Meng Po shifted her stare towards him, speaking expressionlessly for the third time, “Ghost servant Hu, be careful with your words.”

Hu Jia sighed, then pointed to Meng Po and told Cao Weining in a low voice, “See, our Meng Po is also like that. I’ve been hanging around this Naihe bridge for centuries and all she ever said to me was ‘Ghost servant Hu, be careful with your words’. This underworld is so lonesome.”

Cao Weining smiled, listening to this lonesome ghost servant chattering away by his ears on one hand while on the other looked over at the main path. He thought, if A-Xiang turned into a granny and walked over from there, what would she look like? She would definitely be a granny with high spirits, speaking away fluently and full of spite, she would...

Suddenly, Cao Weining stood up, his eyes round. He saw from a close distance away a familiar young girl was excitedly following a reaper over. She kept barrelling him with questions but the reaper’s resistance remained strong. He kept walking without paying her any attention, at worst he only uttered the one sentence ‘dirt to dirt, earth to earth.’

Cao Weining opened his mouth to call out, “A-Xiang...”

Gu Xiang stopped and turned her head to look over. Stunned, she stood there, looking like she was about to cry but in the end she suppressed it all, only leaving a shining smile. She leapt over like a little bird, calling out, “Cao dage, I knew you were waiting for me!”

Cao Weining embraced her tightly like he had not seen her for a lifetime, but then he thought, A-Xiang still looked like this, she had not turned into a granny, did that mean she died young? Deep in thought, he turned pained and restless, his emotions in great turmoil, and so his teardrops fell to the Yellow Spring, creating ripples after ripples of water, startling even the boatman.

Hu Jia closed his mouth, looking at the two embracing with a distant smile.

They only reunited at the bottom of the Naihe bridge, but it felt like they had travelled all the distance in the world to reach here.

Another ghost servant on the bridge called out, “You two, it’s already time, let us depart –”

They were like a dutiful pendulum-clock, they kept to the same sentence years upon years.

Gu Xiang looked up from Cao Weining’s embrace, aggressively glared at the ghost servant on the bridge, spitting, “What are you rushing for? Are you fucking calling souls or what?!”

The servant on the bridge was stunned, thinking, he was in fact, calling souls?

Hu Jia laughed out loud, commenting, “What a spirited lady, boy, you really have a strong wife.”

Cao Weining, still teary, cheerfully but politely replied, “That’s right, that’s right.”

Hu Jia stood up, pointing to the Naihe bridge, “Alright, you should depart to avoid missing the reincarnation time. Even if you missed it by a moment, your fate could turn from a wealthy master to a beggar by the street. If the fate between you two have not been exhausted yet, you can still meet in the next life.”

Then he led them both on Naihe bridge, stopping before where Meng Po was with her Meng Po soup. Gu Xiang hesitated before saying, “Will I forget everything if I drink this? Popo, can I not drink?”

Meng Po looked at her with a beautiful face as if carved from wood, silently shaking her head.

Ghost servant Hu Jia said, “Little lady, if you do not drink Meng Po soup, you would turn into the likes of horses and oxen in your next life.”

Gu Xiang’s eyes turned red again. She hung her head, and would not move regardless of anyone trying to convince her. Hu Jia could not bear to see it, so he turned to Meng Po, “Look, why don’t you give them a chance? They are already so difficult, and in this place of ours for hundreds and even thousands of years we might not even see a pairing like this that successfully ended up together, this is really...”

Meng Po spoke, “Ghost servant Hu...”

Hu Jia quickly continued, “Yes yes, be careful of my words, I’ll be careful with my words.”

Meng Po hesitated for a moment, then suddenly withdrew from her clothes two red strings, bringing them before Gu Xiang. Gu Xiang was startled, while Hu Jia quickly spoke from the side, “Little lady, quickly receive them, it’s Meng Po’s mercy on you. This is a sort of fate you can’t even cultivate for lifetimes. If you tie them on your wrist, you can still recognise each other in the next life.”

Gu Xiang quickly received the strings from Meng Po, clumsily tying them on Cao Weining’s and her own wrists. Only then did the two of them hold hands, drink the forgetful water together and then enter the reincarnation cycle.

From the distance, the reaper’s voice could still be heard, “Dust to dust, earth to earth –”

There was also Hu Jia’s lament, “Ask this world what is love – that even Meng Po has to open her eyes.”

Meng Po could only continue, “Ghost servant Hu, be careful with your words.”

Fifteen years later, in Louyang city, the young lady of landowner Li welcomed her coming of age ceremony, and landowner Li's sworn brother, the martial hero Song, also came to first congratulate, and then with a wedding proposal.

These two children were raised together when they were new-borns. When the adults took care of them, they realised one of the two had a red birthmark on their left wrist, while another on their right. Was this not fate from when they were still in the womb? Thus, they decided to agree on marriage between the two.

In that season where the plum tree blooms, a young man rode a bamboo horse over... (*)

(*) 青梅竹马: *a phrase to describe childhood sweethearts / friends (usually to lovers)*, 青梅 *is plum trees*, 竹马 *is bamboo horse*

EXTRA 3: Baiyi, Jianghu

Legend had it, as Heavenly Ones neared the end of their lifespans, they would suffer the Five Losses (*). Once they had enjoyed the peak state of their immortality for long, it would become a habit, and once that was threatened, they would not be able to bear to let it go and started to show envy.

(*) legends say immortals/xianren will start to exhibit normal physiological responses when they start losing their immortality, such as greying hairs, sweating, growing dirty etc.

As written in the Liuhe Xinfu, once “Heavenly Ones” consumed food from the human world their body condition would start to decline; their hair would grow grey, their breath grew short, their stamina drained, no longer being able to enjoy the pleasures of life as they inched ever closer to their grave.

Currently Ye Baiyi was feeling these symptoms; his hair greying more and more as days passed, as if someone invisible was holding a brush to his head, and large patches of hair would suddenly fall out without any warning. Sometimes he would grow confused, forgetting where he just went, and where he wanted to go next. His spirits also remained low; there were some nights he could not sleep, while others he would sleep so deep it was hard to open his eyes the next day even as the sun rose high in the skies.

Yet he still felt much happiness and freedom, with not a single speck of envy in sight, so whatever the Liuhe Xinfu said was just bullshit really.

If he had to investigate why, it was probably because he never thought of himself as a Heavenly One but instead something like the living dead.

To him, descending the Changming mountain was like the living dead waking up once more. Even though it was only a few short years, even though he would once again travel on the path of “birth, age, sickness, death” of a normal person.

He ate a lot every day, sometimes he would even travel a very long distance just to taste a well-known and delicious local treat. People from the past often said ‘food and sex are basic natures of a person’; Ye Baiyi was already too old to have any interest in sex, so he directed all his passion to food. He was not picky, consuming and relishing in any and every dish, even a bowl of tofu from a small street vendor ordinarily made could make him stop and carefully enjoy it for a long time.

For someone who had to eat cold food and drink snow water for a century, the sour, sweet, bitter, and spicy of this world was that precious.

Ye Baiyi had investigated all those who knew of the incidents thirty years ago, travelled all the roads he could reach, and finally found the non-descript graves of Rong Xuan and Long Fenger.

He reclaimed the Guren Longbei covered in dust, placed their remains together to cremate them, then asked someone to help him deliver their ashes back to Changming mountain.

He originally wanted to stop these people who were fighting each other from opening the armoury, but after seeing the circus show, he only felt tired... What did their life and death have to do with him anyway?

He thought he was only a dying old man, there was nothing else he worried about on this earth, so he slacked off everyday and travelled to all corners of the country with his sole mission to taste all the delicacies ever made. And if one day he was no longer able to walk, then he shall die wherever it was.

Oh right, he also spent time reminiscing about Rong Changqing.

Rong Changqing, Ye Baiyi's only friend, had been dead for thirty years.

But Ye Baiyi could still vividly picture him and all his demeanours through the years, his young and gleeful demeanour, his youthful and prideful demeanour, even down the way when he first started to learn how to walk.

Ye Baiyi, who had always been prideful, did not want to recall just any insignificant nobodies; his memory with the most clarity since the moment of birth, was about that person.

Rong Changqing grew up with him ever since they were children, and unlike Ye Baiyi whose potty mouth invited others to hit him, he was a man who was easy to like; those who spent time beside him would feel like they've been brushed with a cool breeze. He liked good wine, famous swords, beauties, and even good books. As long as you gave him a cup of wine, he could befriend anyone on this earth. Regrettably, he only had one real friend – a Ye Baiyi who only knew how to insult others and practice martial arts.

“Ghost Hand” Rong Changqing became known through that moniker due to the Dahuang sword. Before that, Rong Changqing was only a youth with no name to himself, and without much care, casually traded the sword that later generations would call ‘the general of swords’ to a wandering beggar, in exchange for a jar of monkey wine and a secret book of martial arts.

The jar of monkey wine he brought back and split with Ye Baiyi, while the secret book of martial arts was the remnants of legendary ‘Liuhe Xinfu’ as known to later generations.

A long time after that Ye Baiyi heard that through some stroke of fortune, this same Dahuang sword that had been passed around jianghu ended up in the hands of the Zhang family's orphan, and suddenly felt the ridiculousness of it all. It felt like all of them and all these events were forming an unending cycle, and those within either died or grew old, turning into pathetic shadows of themselves with no happy endings awaiting any of them.

Rong Changqing had merely been a young person, in this world, how many martial artists could resist the temptation of this ‘heavens and I become one’? But his innate talents were insufficient – there were times when Ye Baiyi reflected on this, and felt that thing was a demonic book with all sorts of traps hidden inside that drew people in step by step until the point of no return, or one in tens of thousands there would be one person whom it chose to become the successor, and they shall turn into a thing that was neither demon nor human.

Rong Changqing was immensely talented so he wanted to use his own power to fill in the gaps of the Liuhe Xinfu remnants, and ended up going into qi deviation.

At that moment, Ye Baiyi had been out travelling; he was taken in by Changming mountain, feeling this was a place where people rarely stepped foot in, and thus suitable for his periods of seclusion. It was from there that the moniker ‘Old Monk’ was spread around by the villagers who lived at the foot of the mountain.

At that moment, Madam Rong, who was still an unwed maiden, risked her reputation to carried Rong Changqing up the mountain step by step to beg Ye Baiyi to save him.

The two of them thought of every method possible without seeing a positive change. Eventually, at his wits’ end, Ye Baiyi decided to trade a life for a life, wanting to displace all the power inside Rong Changqing over to his own body. Unexpectedly, in a twist of fate, he really understood that mysterious and magical Liuhe Xinfu.

This “cake” sent from the heavens that generations of people could only wish for fell on his head, a person who thought they would die for sure, just like that, and even had the smell of dogshit too.

Rong Changqing was a person who honoured his debts, and thus decided to repay his two saviours – first by marrying Madam Rong, and later by staying on Changming mountain to accompany Ye Baiyi for the rest of his life.

He was an idiot; he didn’t know Madam Rong never wanted to stay in this freezing place in the middle of nowhere to accompany another freezing man for the rest of her life, and neither did he know Ye Baiyi... did not want him to marry Madam Rong.

He was an idiot; using a famous sword to trade for a demonic book was an idiotic thing, being obsessed with that demonic book was the second idiotic thing, but even the first two combined could not be more idiotic thing than the third.

Could there exist something more ridiculous than this?

Yes, a more ridiculous thing was Rong Xuan, Rong Changqing’s son, was a child as idiotic as his father, and as determined a martial artist as his shifu Ye Baiyi. He managed to accumulate all the flaws of everyone, so it was predetermined his life would be a tragedy.

He could not understand why the ultimate wish of all martial artists was in the possession of his shifu and father, yet the two were incredibly cautious of it. They said it was an incredibly dangerous thing, but ‘danger’ in a youth’s point of view was much different in that of their previous generation.

When people were young, they all thought they were different from anyone else; things that no one could do, they could, and everyone else would die, but they would not.

Rong Xuan carried the Guren Longbei that Ye Baiyi personally passed on to him and ran away, causing Rong Changqing and Madam Rong to end up in a row. The lady who used to possess both beauty and talents and a steadfast, unwavering mind of the past, after decades of isolation amidst snow and ice, had turned into an aged and despairing woman. She was different from them; she was a flower that needed cheeriness, sun, and the human touch.

The place where the gears of fate started to turn that then led to thirty years of chaos and bloodshed – maybe it started from Rong Xuan, maybe it started from Rong Changqing, or maybe even sooner, from that wandering old beggar, from the moment where the ‘Sword General Dahuang’ came into existence.

Maybe it was just a closed circle, rinse, rise and repeat, again and again within a person’s heart, passing down from generation to generation.

Thirty years later, Wen Kexing caught on to a hint of the truth and made his move, causing a huge ruckus.

But that was all in the past... One afternoon, while Ye Baiyi was in a small shop slurping up the rest of his noodle broth, he suddenly thought, rather indifferently: the living, and the dead, were all things of the past.

The pitiful souls who were trapped in this loop, like him, like Rong Madam, like Wen Kexing, like Zhou Zishu, like Zhao Jing, and even like Gu Xiang and Cao Weining, they all wanted to “jump out.”

Ye Baiyi wanted to jump out of the curse of being one with the Heavens, Rong Madam wanted to jump out of the eternally frozen Changming Mountain, Wen Kexing wanted to jump out of the pit of ghosts to return to the human world, Zhou Zishu wanted to jump out of Tianchuang to gain freedom, Zhao Jing wanted to jump out of the rules of jianghu and gain control over everyone, Gu Xiang and Cao Weining wanted to jump out of the deep-rooted prejudices of this world to claim an independent place to be together.

All of them fought and stole and devised machinations and risked death.

It was like an Abyss; those who could jump past could leave, while those who could not fell to their death.

That Abyss had a name – called jianghu.

Extra 4: My beloved, My soulmate

Everyone in jianghu caused a huge ruckus over it, but who among them had really seen the key to the Liuli Armor?

Wen Kexing had seen it.

He remembered clearly how he had held this “key” to so much conflict and bloodshed. In reality, it was only about 10 centimetres long, as thin as a cicada’s wing, and was almost weightless in his hands, as if it were just another strange-looking flower ornament decorating the temple of a young girl.

A deadly flower ornament.

On Fengya mountain, the fierce winds blew at Wen Kexing’s clothes, his palm still glowing green. The Hanged Ghost had just died under a blow from this hand, his corpse falling down the mountain not to be found again. Afterwards, many more would take their rest here.

A ghost-infested place that a normal human cannot enter?

Good! Then let me, this normal human, wreak havoc upon this place for you to see.

His hand pushed forward with force, and that thin key within his hold turned to ashes, scattering down the thousand-meter depth of the mountain.

“A-Xiang, let us depart.”

Wen Kexing placed himself in the shoes of a cool-eyed bystander, brought his little girl to tour this jianghu for about three months, waiting for all the interested parties to prepare their makeup for the stage. In those three months, he got to experience the lush forests where bamboos grow high, venture through the sea of sand of the great desert, drink the melted snow of first spring, hold the soft pale hands of the beauty from Goulan theatre, feast on his share of perfume-and-powder-laden wine made from pear flowers.

Then in Jiangnan, he met a beggar who was sunbathing in a corner of the street.

It was not rare to see beggars, what was rare was the pale light he saw concentrated in that person’s eyes, coalescing on that person’s eyelashes, making him feel like something had poked him in the chest. It was as if within that light he could see peace and ruins, and the multigenerational hatred and love, debts and favours that originally laid heavy on his chest could not help but be lightened up.

Wen Kexing suddenly cited aloud, “All sufferings in life pour into this wine jar... (*)”

(*) origin: 平生落魄溷区寰

A-Xiang: “What?”

She was a foolish girl who did not understand shit, who could not even speak like a person, let alone understand these tragic works about grief and regrets, so Wen Kexing could only smile dismissively.

He did not expect A-Xiang to lean over the window, look down, then spoke clear and loud: “Young master, would you look at that man! If he’s a beggar, why doesn’t he own a mere broken bowl? If he isn’t, then why does he keep sitting there the whole morning doing nothing and smiling foolishly? He must be an idiot, don’t you think?”

At that moment, Wen Kexing felt rather miffed, as if a secret corner of his heart had been peeked at without permission, or as if the pebble from that foolish girl had caused ripples on the surface of a lake originally as still as a mirror.

However, he collected himself, then calmly said, “He is sunbathing.”

From the corner of his eye, he saw how upon hearing his comment, the beggar lifted his head to glance at him. On this wide road with them sitting so high above, among the hustle of passerby, to have such a hearing capability...

Wen Kexing stroked the top of his chopsticks, his earlier lazed mood evaporated without a trace. To have decent martial arts, to make his way down to Jiangnan where undercurrents flowed strongly, in these turbulent times and among the gathering sects and clans, many with widely known figures, who is this person?

Once night fell, Wen Kexing took the opportunity to take A-Xiang to chase after that beggar, but unexpectedly, he turned out to witness an interesting play in that dilapidated temple.

In the current jianghu, the number of people with that knowledge and those martial arts could only be counted on one hand, so which of them was he? To be honest, even Wen Kexing could not tell if the decision to follow after him at that moment stemmed from his cautiousness, or simply because he was too curious.

For the few who have self-claimed themselves to be elites for a long time, once they have encountered someone who could hold their interest, they could not help but chase after them to look even more closely.

He just never thought this one decision to give chase was one that would be tied inseparably to the rest of his life.

From the run-down temple in the middle of nowhere, they started escorting that child who only knew how to cry to Tai Hu, while the Swordman of Qiushan Zhao Jing in Tai Hu was the biggest enemy in his life.

On the journey filled with jokes and indignant swearing, spending nights and days along with that person who sold himself for two silvers, occasionally Wen Kexing would think: if it were not for me stirring up this dirty pond, could it be that child Zhang Chengling can remain a nobody and keep depending on his elders' protection to live out the rest of his life?

Even though people on jianghu tended to feel it was such a waste when tiger fathers have dog sons (*), but as long as his tiger father was still there, his parents were healthy, his household well off, if he decided to just close the doors and live his own life, so what?

() a saying to describe when talented/powerful fathers have useless sons*

In his chest there were both responsibility and shame (*), plus an incredibly cold heart, so he could only bottle all feelings inside, reveal nothing outwardly, and stubbornly stick to that beggar A-Xu.

() wordplay: he has both 鬼 (gui), meaning he was the one responsible for the Zhang massacre, and 愧 (gui), meaning shame for causing it*

Regarding that person's true identity, Wen Kexing already had his own guess, but he could simply not imagine how a person of such high position and great responsibility could know exactly when to engage and retreat? Having experienced so much bloodshed it felt like a long dream, how could he still keep his heart unchanged?

That time the two of them descended to the path of the Yellow Springs, Wen Kexing could not resist but used the piece of Liuli Armor on that little ghost to test him, and yet he was met with tactful refusal.

A talented cultured person like that person, a majestic martial artist like him, how could he be involved in those heretical things?

In that moment, Wen Kexing felt this sickly man with his yellowish, ugly face, had just firmly imprinted upon the soft flesh of his heart.

After that, even Scorpion got involved, and all kinds of "heroes" rushed to squeeze on the stage, crowding out the tiny little space. A-Xu and he escorted Zhang Chengling back to these righteous sects who always kept "duty" and "morals" by their mouths. Along the way, seeing the other man teach martial arts to that stupid kid, he could stop his itch and decided to show off for once.

Unexpectedly, from the sword techniques that he had altered to be almost unrecognizable, that person pointed out the origins of Qiuming Sword in just a sentence.

Under the bright sky, in this large jianghu, who could still remember the guests in jianghu who pass by like shooting stars?

Only that person could.

Suddenly, with the sky and earth as his shelter, Wen Kexing had found a small piece of land where he could amicably sit beside someone to reminisce about an old married couple who, to the rest of the world, were not important at all.

With the wind and the chirping cicadas as background, he heard that person evenly said: "Think about it, isn't it too miserable of a life if all you have is yourself and you treat everyone else with wariness? It's too painful, being a bad person!"

At that moment, Wen Kexing was spurred on to confess all the sufferings he had endured in this life, to expose all the injustice he had felt for that not-explicitly-stated soulmate to see, yet he just could not do it, instead resorting to a tale made of fragmented pieces crudely stitched together to express some parts of his story.

Painful! He silently thought, being a bad person, it's too painful!

A-Xu, why could we both not meet each other ten years earlier? When we met, I have already turned into this thing that is neither human nor ghost, while you are severely injured and at death's door? Why do all harmonious, perfect families in this world have to be torn apart, why do all soulmates have to lament about meeting too late?

Heroes will be at road's end one day, beauties will eventually grow old, to be able to live according to one's wishes, how difficult is it?

It must have been from that moment onwards that a thought started to fester in Wen Kexing's heart like an obsession. He thought, "Why can't I act as I like for once? Why can't I keep him?"

In the puppet manor, as that person lay severely injured, at that instance Wen Kexing must have been possessed. He wanted to press his hand to that person's acupuncture point, he thought: a little more, even if it's a little painful, but a little more and he can have A-Xu in the palm of his hand for a very, very long time.

This ruthlessness that he had accumulated bit by bit along the way was eventually no match to that person's sad uttering "Others don't understand, but do you not as well?"

How can I not understand?

Of countless people he had met in this life, there was only one A-Xu who weighed heavily upon his heart. He relented to this beggar again and again, relented until it scooped into his heart and carved into his bones, and he would still not be willing to go against him even slightly.

This must be what it felt like to be human.

This was...

In this world, there were countless cowards who went with the flow, but there were some who would rise above the currents like Long Que. That new year spent in puppet manor was the happiest and most peaceful new year of his thirty years of life.

He, A-Xu, and that rascal Zhang Chengling, they killed chickens for stew, killed goats, killed cows, then shared with each other a cup of country rice wine.

He tucked A-Xu's hand that could easily get cold from his injuries into his chest for warmth, and felt like his heart had also melted, then Wen Kexing felt like he had also become drunk.

A-Xu had a harsh tongue, but his heart was very soft.

A-Xu had already grown so big but he still did not dare to eat walnuts.

A-Xu was someone who poured alcohol, regardless of good or bad, down his throat like an ox.

A-Xu was...

Someone that he only met by chance, but also his soulmate, his best friend... his beloved.

Yet all good dreams eventually came to an end, there were still matters to resolve in jianghu, and the bloodstained storm he stirred up had yet to cease. In the middle of it all was the ghost valley, where many factions had gathered, except for its anchor star who had yet to return to his original position.

The ghost valley master.

He was both the smooth-talking Lao Wen and the ghost master in blood-soaked crimson clothes. These two should be entirely separate persons, yet were bound by a bone-deep hatred in one body, was this not a strange thing?

Eventually, during the final battle, he used his own hands to stab his enemies but also lost his little girl in purple.

A-Xiang...

A-Xiang, brother will get revenge for you, so if there is a next life, please be born in a good family, with parents to protect you, brothers to love you, so when the time comes for ten miles of marriage dowry, you can continue your destiny with your foolish rascal Cao Weining, and your families would be matching this time, so there would be no more of this desperate star-crossed love torn between good and evil.

When he faced the scorpion leader alone, Wen Kexing's body was already soaked with sweat and blood. He stared blankly ahead, thinking his great revenge had already been carried out, while feeling an unspeakable weariness in his heart.

He silently thought: my bone-deep hatred has been resolved, this should be a meaningful death, if it has to end like that... so be it?

But that person would stubbornly not let him be.

When A-Xu appeared and brought with him the noble light from his Baiyi sword, Wen Kexing could never express what his feelings were then.

What ten years of hatred, what endure in silence to carry out his mission, what Liuli Armor, what greater picture, in a flash they all disappeared, leaving him with nothing but the beggar right in front of his eyes.

At that moment, Wen Kexing dazedly thought: if only he can grant me just a tiny bit of his pity, from this moment onwards, as long as he lives one day, I'll live that day with him; if he departs from this world, I'll bring grass and oil to cremate myself along with his body, so that even as we turn to ashes, we will still be together.

As long as you are willing, as long as you still want me.

Am I allowed to make an extravagant wish, to live with you until we are old and grey?

EXTRA 5: Wandering Jianghu

“There is a saying: ‘A secret is hard to keep if too many know it, and turtles can’t help but crawl around.’ The reason why bloody happenings are unceasing in jianghu can be summarised with this saying.”

“Of the famed figures that could upend jianghu with a stomp of their foot in the past, some have grown old, some have left, all are now impossible to track down, leaving new faces appearing to stir up trouble. Yet all chaos and fighting cannot escape four words: wine, beauty, money, fortune; in the end, how many upstanding heroes have lost their lives while being trapped by those words? An old man like me can only sit in Jiangbo pavilion and slam this wooden block on the table to say: “The moral degeneration of the world is getting worse day by day, so in this world, may you have today’s happiness forever.”

The Jiangbo pavilion, blessed with the spring winds, was bought by someone unknown to build a winehouse near the lake that was filled with people chatting and gossiping, creating a lively atmosphere. There was an elderly storyteller stationed there every day. It was unknown whether he was invited there by the owner, but despite being so old that he could no longer sit straight, this old man had a glib tongue. Many specifically travelled all the way to Jiangbo pavilion just to listen to him recounting tales from jianghu.

The elderly storyteller said, “For example, there is a large incident right now in town. Ladies and gentlemen who have travelled a long way from all corners of the land might not know all the details, so let this elder man unpack it for you, in return for a few coins as rewards.”

“In our town there is a landowner named Lu, who is one of the best philanthropists. He has never missed out on things like donating his wealth during drought years or giving free porridge whenever natural disaster strikes. He enjoys success in both his career and home life, and he used to dabble in all types of trade before passing on his wealth to his descendants and deciding to enjoy his retirement with riches. Say, such a landowner, he cannot possibly have any link to those heroes, bandits, good and evil right?”

Everyone voiced their agreement together, “That’s right.”

“And yet somebody is insisting on bringing trouble to this landowner. After midnight of the seventh of this month, a tiny flag bearing the picture of three golden flowers was erected outside the old landowner’s room. Attached was a palm-sized piece of paper that wrote, if Lu does not give up all his wealth and bring his daughter Miss Lu to the Buddhist convent in the north town to repent for his sins, they would announce all his past deeds to everyone. You may ask from god-know-where does this three golden flower pattern come from? Well, let me start again from the beginning, my friends, for some of the young heroes here have been born too late to know its origins.”

The elderly storyteller calmly brought up his cup of tea, blew the bubbles away, and took a sip to soothe his throat. Then, he continued, "People of the same age group as this lowly old man must all have heard of Four Seasons Manor. This Manor was built by an eccentric figure while the previous emperor was still ruling. Nobody even knew of his name, but everyone from that Manor was similarly mysterious. They were experts in disguising their faces, their qinggong was extraordinary, and while none knew who their manor lord's shifu was, or even his real face, the manor lord was the either the best or second-best martial artist."

"The Four Season Manor dealt in the business of secrets; it was said there was nothing in this world that they could not investigate, so there were hordes of people spending fortunes to buy information from them. However, Four Season Manor faded into obscurity afterwards. There were rumours that after the previous Manor Lord passed away, the young Manor Lord sold their organisation to the then-Crown Prince, who is our current Emperor. From then on, they receive salaries from the royals and no longer work in jianghu, but that flag with the golden flower is definitely a token of Four Season Manor."

At that instance everyone voiced out their surprise and multiple discussions began to arise, all scolding these court lackeys for meddling in things outside of their business, and how they were already enjoying privileges of the government but still wanting to get their pie and eat it too by touching on jianghu matters.

A rugged man yelled, "Can it be that one of these golden manor perverts is into the beauty of Lu maiden so they're attempting to marry into the family?"

At that moment, a series of breathless coughs sounded from the corner of the pavilion. In the corner sat two elderly men, their faces filled with wrinkles and greying hair on their temples. It must have been some elderly workers from the nearby farm who used their breaks to enjoy the strong wine with each other here.

One of them just choked on his wine, while the other sighed, then clapped him on the back while grumbling and rambling away non-stop, "You ah, why must you insist on being this old, your back is bent like a sphere, and you can't even tip back your head to drink wine, can you? Even if you want to be old, why must you make yourself appear so despicable, and why is your throat like a leaky pipe, how are you not choking to death yet?"

The person sitting beside them was confused, thinking, "Why does he make it sound like being this old is wrong?" However, these were two old men, not two great beauties or anything, so they could not hold the interest of bystanders for long. Even if someone did a double-take, they would forget about it after a while to wait for the next part of the storyteller's tale.

The one who choked on his drink pointed at his companion, his finger shaking like a leaf, but he still could not speak properly. The other old man sneakily glanced around, seeing that no one was

paying them any attention, then picked up that finger to fondle in his hand for a long while, while smiling with the corners of his eyes crinkled, still looking as not serious as ever.

This interlude happened without anyone's knowledge.

The elderly storyteller continued, "How can it be a good thing to offend such a large organisation? Currently all theories are floating around, but that flag with golden flowers set out a three-day time limit. Tonight would be the third night, so let us see how the old landowner would explain this."

Beneath the storyteller's chair was a small bowl meant for others to reward him with coins, but he never looked at it, not caring if anyone dropped in coins, nor minding when some were stolen. He then slammed his wooden block on the table again, splashed away the leftover tea, and left.

By sunset, all those who were free in Jiangbo town had gathered outside the back of the Lu family house to wait for something to happen. The Lu family has a young son named Tianshu, with eminent brows and clear eyes, who was well-trained in both scholarly and martial arts. He had been admitted under a famous shifu to learn martial arts since young, graduated at eighteen, and only recently returned to the Lu family to take over their business.

When Lu Tianshu was still travelling around jianghu, his manners were impeccable so he was very well-received and had connections with many. It was rare to see his brows so furrowed like this.

When he hurriedly came out, a man with thick eyebrows and large eyes was waiting for him at the main reception hall, "Lu-xiong."

Lu Tianshu forced a smile, "Chengling, when did you arrive?"

This young man had lately been one of the most newly-prominent figures in jianghu, Zhang Chengling. This person had a rough past; he was originally from a famed family, but in his adolescent years he had been swept up in the then Liuli Armor incident. After his entire family was massacred, he had to wander far from home alone, then disappeared without a trace. Five years later, he reappeared in jianghu. No one knew from whom he learned from, but while his soft heart was unchanged, his martial arts abilities were enough to shake up jianghu.

The two men first greeted each other, then sat down on opposite sides. Chengling then said, "I was only passing here and should not have disturbed you, but I just heard about the incident about your family at Jiangbo pavilion so I came by. If Lu-xiong has something that needs doing, you can entrust them to me."

Upon hearing this, Lu Tianshu smiled with knitted brows, thinking: this Chengling person, when he first met him in the north, there were some who thought he must be an idiot who knew no fear; however, judging from his current actions, he must have intentionally gone to check out

every place where trouble arose, it was truly a wonder how such a genuine gentleman could come to be.

Lu Tianshu only smiled without replying, holding on to the pridefulness in his heart. He was willing to share fortunes with others, but when he himself was in trouble, he did not want to trouble them with it.

When Chengling saw that Lu Tianshu only smiled without speaking, his expression wanting to imply something, he realised he must have come off too forward. Even though he spent his adolescence with his two shifu who were as devious as hulijing (*fox spirit), he never learnt even a little bit of tact. Not knowing what was appropriate to say, he hurriedly added on, “That day when Lu-xiong drank with me in Beihai, you said even though we just met we felt like we have known each other for a long time, and if there is an opportunity, we must swear to be brothers. If we are already brothers, when I know Lu-xiong is in trouble, how can I pretend to be ignorant?”

When Lu Tianshu was still travelling, his bands of “brothers from a different womb” must have amassed hundreds, if not thousands of people, yet among them there was only this one anomaly who took these words to heart. Seeing how Chengling stuck out with his bullheadedness, he felt a little touched and thus said something sincere for once, “Brother, I understand your good intentions, it’s just... haizz, I’ll arrange a place for you to stay first.”

The flag with the golden flower was erected right beneath his eyes. Lu Tianshu had always thought with pride how he had tricks up his sleeves, but as he got directly defeated while he did not even know the identities of the other party, he realised the Lu family could not afford to offend these people. However, landowner Lu kept refusing to reveal the truth, and as his son, Lu Tianshu could not press him for an answer. Judging from the older man’s expression, however, there must be something deeper he was hiding.

Landowner Lu was born with an explosive personality that tolerated not even a bit of dust in his eyes. Whenever he saw something unreasonable, he would immediately explode without needing anyone to provoke him first. For someone like that, how could he be intimidated by just a flag?

Lu Tianshu tried to brush over things, wanting to call over a servant to bring Chengling to rest first. At that moment, a servant came stumbling and rushing over, saying, “Head young master, you must quickly come outside. There is a gang of men wearing burlap sacks at our front gate!”

Zhang Chengling found that extremely odd, so he directly asked: “Wearing burlap sacks over their faces, are they not afraid of suffocating to death?”

The servant anxiously looked at him; he did not know whether those people were suffocated or not, but the head young master’s expression was so terrible he looked like he was suffocating to death.

While they were talking, Lu Tianshu was already on his way outside. There was a sea of people outside the Lu manor, every single one waiting to see the trainwreck, and even places like the top of the walls or high on tree branches were filled with people who were salivating at the hint of trouble. It can be seen that regardless of whatever reaching out you did to people who were in need, or how you had been kind to people around you, outsiders would still gain satisfaction from seeing you in bad luck – who said Lu family had to be so well-known?

In this world, just how many people could not tolerate seeing others be well-off?

Landowner Lu was already standing by the front gate, his hands tucked in his sleeves. The oldest Lu daughter appeared to want to barrel forward to demand an explanation but was currently being held back by both the male and female servants and escorted inside. She could still be heard yelling profanities: “Let me go, I want to see what kinds of things are these ugly-ass freaks who dare not show their faces! You dare to dream of me...”

There was a saying about how daughters resemble their fathers; this young miss Lu actually did have her father’s style.

Lu Tianshu walked up but he was stopped by landowner Lu when he was about to speak.

Tens of strange-looking people were standing before the front gate, their faces completely covered by silk embroidered with golden flowers just like a bunch of supporting characters on stage surrounding a man dressed in black.

The black-clad man wore a large bamboo hat, his body more than two meters tall. He was a big man but had the same style of hiding his face like the others. His face was covered by a bronze mask, his pointed jaw being the only identifiable feature.

“Lu Tong,” the black-clad man said, “Thirty years have passed, do you still remember me?”

Landowner Lu’s given name was Maode and not that “Lu Tong” whatever, so once the black-clad man spoke, people who were more senior in the crowd broke out in exclamations. “Tie Shan Gu (*) Lu Tong?”

() Tie Shan Gu is the title, Lu Tong is the name*

Tie Shan Gu Lu Tong was not some top-tier martial artist. Thirty years ago, he was considered one of the talented new faces. Unfortunately, before he could make a mark for himself, he had disappeared without a trace. This person used a fan made of iron (*tie shan) that was more than 40cm long, his martial arts style belonging to the fierce path, and was generally considered a good hero.

Yet after disappearing without a trace, he had become this old landowner with a protruding belly?

Landowner Lu spoke gravelly, “Li-xiong.”

The black-clad man gave a harsh laugh, his voice sounding like an owl’s hoot, “How difficult must it be for you to remember this drifting ghost. Then you must also know what I am here for?”

Landowner Lu’s expression turned sour, not saying a word.

“Everyone,” the black-clad man seemed to be making a public service announcement, but his eyes never left landowner Lu for even a second, “Thirty years ago, my shidi and I obeyed our shifu’s instructions to offer gifts for the birthday celebration of Elder Huang of Taishan sect. On our way back, we met this thief near Taishan and saw a woman with him whose face was turning green, showing signs of poisoning. My shidi followed a famous master to study medicine when he was young, and unwilling to let such a young soul depart so early, he used his skills to save her life.”

Landowner Lu replied without raising his head, “That is right. Your shidi has saved my wife, so this Lu has always imprinted that fact in my soul.”

“Imprint that fact in your soul?” The black-clad man coldly laughed, “We must have been blind to treat you as if we’ve known each other since forever and drank with you through the night. After much alcohol, I carelessly got drunk and accidentally revealed the Tianyi Pavilion’s token...”

The crowd broke out in exclamations once again.

Tianyi Pavilion was where the Fan family in Ningbo accumulated their possessions. While the Fan elder was traveling the world, he had collected many martial arts classics and hidden them inside a pavilion. In his old age he became the grandmaster of a sect, and once he passed, left behind a sect that flourished for many generations.

Someone started discussing in low voices, “Tianyi Pavilion? Thirty years ago... the current pavilion master would still have not left his shifu’s guidance, right?”

“True, when he was young, sect leader Song already had learnt skills from another master before joining Tianyi Pavilion. He used to be a disciple of ‘The Doctor in a Straw Coat’, so he definitely is well-versed in medicine.”

“Then this person must be...”

“That’s right, I used to be the head disciple of Tianyi Pavilion, Li Ang. At that time, shifu’s health was deteriorating, so he had decided to pass on the Tianyi Pavilion’s token to me.” After saying this, the black-clad man took down the bronze mask himself; his face was marred with gorges everywhere with not a single piece of skin left intact, looking incredibly frightening.

Li Ang said, “This two-faced Lu Tong saw my Tianyi Pavilion’s token and remembering the wealth of martial arts classics inside, he started to have malicious intent. After getting us drunk, he took advantage of my inebriated state to poison my wine. Once my martial arts had disappeared, he pushed me off a cliff. Fortunately, I did not die, and there was a frozen lake at the bottom of that cliff. Every time my poison started acting up, I would crawl in there in agony to dull the pain and ease the itchiness. Thirty years have passed just like that, and I have also turned into this shape.”

Landowner Lu did not speak up.

Li Ang said, “Li Tong, I heard that in your youth, you made your fortune by doing delivery all the way from North to South, becoming so powerful right? Do you still remember the ghost that you pushed down the cliff that night?”

Landowner Lu’s face turned pale.

Li Ang whispered, “Why are you not dead yet?”

Upon hearing this, landowner Lu raised his head and spoke, “What you said is true. My actions were indeed despicable, but my children Tianshu and Wenling are innocent. If I take my own life now, you must leave them alive.”

The black-clad Li Ang did not reply, only coldly laughed.

Lu Tianshu exclaimed, “Father!”

Landowner Lu only passed him a glance then shifted his eyes away.

The leader of the group of men in golden-flower masks spoke in a low voice, “I’m afraid this is not up to you.”

In the wake of his words, the group of men in golden-flower masks took one step forward simultaneously, like they were about to rush in by force. With this one step, the signboard made of blue stone in front of landowner Lu’s house was crushed beneath their feet, demonstrating their abilities.

The leader swung his hand, “Catch them!”

Right at this moment, a person suddenly spoke up, “Wait!”

Lu Tianshu turned his head and saw Zhang Chengling step out from the crowd. Tens of the golden-flower masked men naturally surrounded him, but Chengling stood firmly with no sign of being intimidated, then raised his fist to say, “Elder Lu, your son and I are acquainted with each other, so though I am an outsider, I must be thick-faced and say a few things.”

Lu Tianshu said, “Chengling!”

Zhang Chengling glanced at him and raised his voice, “My book knowledge is not good, so I can’t tell you grand truths and such, but I do know that what someone does is solely on their shoulders. Even if elder Lu has wronged you, is there even a thing such as guilt by association? If I have to be sacrilegious, even the current emperor would not order nine kinship exterminations (*) without good reason. And if he was such a despicable and shameless person like you have described, how can he immediately agree to take his own life based on your word...”

(*) nine kinship extermination: when a person was convicted of a severe crime (usually treason), emperors could order ‘nine kinship extermination’ where anyone related to that person by nine degrees would be executed, i.e the convicted, their spouse, their children, grandchildren, their parents, grandparents, their in-laws, their cousins...

Landowner Lu let out a soft sigh, interrupting his words, “Thank you, good nephew.” Then, he did not waste any time to justify himself, but silently took out a strange-looking iron fan from his clothes and aimed it directly at the top of his head (*).

(*) *tian ling gai*: a place on top of the head, believed in martial arts to be a vital position (also where Cao Weining was hit when...)

Zhang Chengling exclaimed, “You can’t –”

He reached behind and a large sword left its sheath, directly blocking the path of the iron fan. The group of masked men behind him took the opportunity to leap forwards; Zhang Chengling forcefully turned his body, the large sword in his hand swinging in circles to trap the multiple weapons that aimed for his head from behind. With a shout, he forced all of them backwards.

Amidst the sounds of weapons clanging, a generous space was maintained in front of Lu family manor by the crowd.

Zhang Chengling was at once fighting alone against many, while also having to pay attention so that landowner Lu would not actually take his own life. As time passed, he started to become flustered. At the moment, a whistling tune sounded from afar, just like the tune a naughty child would use to tease pets, playful and mocking.

Zhang Chengling was startled at first, then his eyes brightened and his expression slightly shifted. He mouthed something indiscernible, then whispered, “Shifu?”

That person whistled a few tunes from all kinds of regions, his tone light and naughty, but unbeknownst, his voice carried some sort of demonic energy. Everyone could do nothing but pause, feeling these ordinary tunes somehow contained a sort of creepy power that threatened to steal away their souls. Once you let down your guard, it would make your inner energy churn up, vaguely as if you were qi deviating.

Alarmed, the crowd saw two men come up side by side, both tall and lean. The person whistling had a smile on his face, wearing a robe dyed a rich red, while the other man was in black robes, his expression coldly indifferent and his hands clasped behind.

The man in red stopped whistling, then asked the man beside him with an exaggerated smile, “I heard you old men like gossiping about other people's business the most, how about you tell me what peculiar story is behind this golden-flower flag?”

The man in dark robes listened, appearing a little displeased, then said coldly, “Although Four Seasons manor might not be anything good, they also do not have the hobby of pasting diapers on their faces.”

The men in golden-flower masks heard this and immediately stopped entangling with Zhang Chengling, turning to the two men. One of them stepped out from the crowd, seemingly the leader, and asked, “Who are you?”

Everyone just felt a blur in front of their eyes and then the man in dark robes were no longer there. With this highly unpredictable moment style, in a flash he had approached the leader. Nobody could see clearly how he did it, but he reached out his hand and managed to pull down the golden flower-embroidered cloth from his opponent's face, revealing a very ordinary face of a middle-aged man.

The middle-aged man had never witnessed such out of this world martial arts, immediately wanting to flee in fright.

The man in dark robes laughed coldly, “Does this kind of technique deserve to be called ‘disguise’? Deserve to be in Four Season manor?” Then, he raised his hand again; his movement was not quick while his opponent did quickly move backwards, yet for some reasons he could not escape.

A human skin mask as thin as the cicada's wing was torn down along with something on the middle-aged man's neck. It was a tiny piece of magnet placed on his throat, which could supposedly change a person's voice.

Seeing things were taking a turn for the worse, the middle-aged man wanted to run, but the black-clad Li Ang, who had stood there stunned all this time, suddenly stepped forward, stopping him from leaving, and spoke in disbelief, “Song shidi, why is it you?”

The man in red robes who whistled had also come closer unbeknownst to everyone. He swung an arm over Zhang Chengling's shoulder, leisurely saying, “Aiya, you with the black as charcoal head, is there a pit inside your head? Why would an outsider want to steal your Tianyi Pavilion's token? Please, even if you give me for free, I wouldn't want it. These kinds of things even kids would know are done from the inside.”

Li Ang was still in disbelief, “I clearly saw...”

The man in red robes laughed uproariously, “Your shidi is right beside you right now, didn’t you also give him money to help you find your enemy? You ah, you didn’t die because other people harmed you, you’re just dead because you’re stupid.”

Li Ang broke down, “Then why did he have to admit to it!”

The man in red robes rolled his eyes, replying, “Because this surname Song saved his wife, duh.”

His eyes swept over the man in dark robes, then he spoke meaningfully, “If my wife became severely ill and there’s someone willing to save him, I will also be willing to go through fire and tread on water for them; not to mention, this is just admitting to a crime, what’s the big deal. A-Xu, is that right?”

The man in dark robes did not bother raising his head, turning over to leave, “Rubbish! Why are you still standing there?”

“Aye aye, the head of the household has spoken, let’s quickly follow.” The man in red robes clapped Zhang Chengling on the shoulders with force, then they both quickly flew up to follow like a father carrying his son.

The situation had suddenly flipped the other way around, making the crowd who had been listening explode in discussions. Amidst them was a man standing stock-still who had not been blinking; after a long while, he whispered, “Zhou... Zhou zhuangzhu?”

He pushed down with force to gain momentum then chased after them with all his might, but the man was nowhere in sight.

He almost spent an entire day in Jiangbo town dazedly looking for them, but these two were seemingly just like a beautiful, unrealistic dream of his, disappearing without a single trace. Had Manor Lord Zhou not died?

Could there be a person who survived after being stabbed with Seven Orifice Three Autumn nails?

If it was truly that person, then it was not impossible either...

Standing there, the man dazedly thought back to the year he first entered Tianchuang and chanced upon a Manor Lord Zhou who looked like a scholar. Caught by surprise, he had called him by the wrong title, and the other man had corrected him with both amusement and concern.

Shaking his head, he gave up on tracking their footsteps; it was better to return for new orders.

What if he had found him? He had already decided to leave Tianchuang, it was not like he would come back.

Jianghu was chaotic, amidst all the event currents, there was no need to dissect every single truth.