

Chapter 5: Harsh Truth

After arriving at the locust tree with Zhi Gui, Song Jixin discovered that it was extremely packed, with close to 100 people gathered under the tree's shade. He sat down onto the stool that he had brought over from home, and there were still more children dragging their adult family members to get in on the fun.

Song Jixin and Zhi Gui stood side by side at the edge of the tree's shadow, and he spotted an old man standing at the foot of the tree. The man was holding a large white bowl in one hand with his other hand clasped behind his back, and he wore a vehement expression as he loudly declared, "Just now, I spoke about the general direction of the dragon vein. Now, let me tell you about the true dragon. This is a truly amazing story.

"Around 3,000 years ago, an almighty deity appeared under the heavens. First, he cultivated patiently in a certain blessed paradise, and after attaining the great dao, he explored the world on his own with his sword by his side. With his three-foot mettle in his hand, his prowess was unmatched. For some reason, he had a vendetta against dragons, and he spent three entire centuries hunting for dragons, only stopping after there was no longer a single true dragon in the world. In the end, he disappeared without a trace.

"Some speculated that he had gone to an extremely high plane where the Great Dao originated to discuss daoism with the patriarch of daoism himself. Some said that he had gone to the extremely distant western pure land of Sukhavati to discuss scriptures and Buddhism with the Buddha. There are even some who say that he's personally stationed at the gates of the underworld to prevent malicious wraiths and spirits from wreaking havoc upon the human plane..."

The old man was speaking with such vigor and enthusiasm that spittle was flying everywhere out of his mouth, but all of the town residents around him were looking on with lost and befuddled expressions.

"What's a three-foot mettle?" Zhi Gui asked with a curious expression.

"It's a sword," Song Jixin replied with a smile.

"This old man is way too pretentious and full of himself! He can't even speak properly!" Zhi Gui grumbled.

Song Jixin was looking at the old man with schadenfreude in his eyes as he said, "Barely anyone in our town even knows how to read. This storyteller's efforts are completely wasted here."

Zhi Gui then asked, "What is a blessed paradise? Does there really exist someone in this world that can live for 300 years? Also, isn't the underworld a place that only dead people go to?"

Song Jixin was stumped by these questions, but he didn't want to look stupid, so he said in a dismissive voice, "It's all nonsense. He probably read a few obscure unofficial historical texts and is regurgitating what he read to swindle uneducated hillbillies."

Right at this moment, Song Jixin noticed that the old man took a glance at him. It was unclear whether the glance was intentional or not, and it was only a very fleeting glance before his gaze was directed elsewhere, but Song Jixin was still sufficiently perceptive to have sensed it. However, he didn't think anything of it, merely chalking it up to a coincidence.

Zhi Gui raised her head to look up at the old locust tree, and she reflexively narrowed her eyes against the fragmented rays of light filtering through the gaps in the tree's canopy.

Song Jixin turned to look at her, and he was abruptly transfixed.

Zhi Gui had a side facial profile that was only just beginning to graduate from its baby fat stage. She was far different from the thin and emaciated little maidservant in Song Jixin's memories.

According to the traditions of the town, whenever a woman was married, an individual with a full set of blessings would be invited. The definition of such an individual was one whose parents and children were all still alive, and that person would be invited to shave off the fine hairs on the bride's face, as well as to trim her bangs and temples. The procedure was known as face opening, or brow elevating.

Song Jixin had also read about a tradition that didn't exist in the town from a book. Hence, when Zhi Gui was 12 years old, he bought the best newly brewed wine in the town, then brought out the porcelain vase that he had hidden away. The coloration of the vase was extremely beautiful, resembling a greengage, and he poured the wine into the vase before carefully sealing it in clay and burying it underground.

Song Jixin suddenly said, "When it comes to Chen Ping'an, my scholar ancestors would say that he's a piece of rotten wood that can't be carved, or a pile of manure that can't be built up into a wall, but at the very least, he's done one meaningful thing in his life."

Zhi Gui offered no response as she lowered her head, and it could be seen that her eyelashes were trembling slightly.

Song Jixin continued speaking, almost as if he were talking to himself. "Chen Ping'an is not a bad person, he's just way too dogmatic in his personality. There's no flexibility in the way he does things. That's why after becoming a potter, no matter how hard he worked, it was predestined that he would never be able to create a good product with any flair or spark. That's also why Old Man Yao never took a liking to him.

"He was a man with a keen eye, and he knew that Chen Ping'an simply wasn't cut out for this. That's what it means for him to be a piece of rotten wood that can't be carved. As for a pile of manure that can't be molded into a wall, what that basically means is that for someone meant to be impoverished like Chen Ping'an, even if you dress him up in the emperor's dragon robes, he'll still just be a good-for-nothing hillbilly."

A self-deprecating look appeared on Song Jixin's face here, and he sighed, "I'm actually even more pitiful than him."

Zhi Gui didn't know how to console him.

Song Jixin and Zhi Gui had always been a popular subject for gossip for the affluent clans on Fortune Deer Street and Peach Leaf Alley, and that was primarily thanks to Master Song, Song Jixin's illegitimate father.

There weren't any important figures in the town, nor were there any exciting events. Hence, the kiln supervision official sent by the imperial court naturally became the most prominent figure in the town, much like the all-powerful judges seen in stageplays. Out of the dozens of kiln supervision officials that had been assigned to the town throughout history, Master Song was the most popular with the people.

He wasn't like the high and mighty officials that came before him. He didn't hide away in his official manor to work on personal cultivation, nor did he turn away all visitors and focus solely on reading and self-education. Instead, he always attended to matters related to the creation of imperial ware in person, and he was even more like a commoner than the potters working at the kilns.

During the dozen or so years in which he was at the town, his original scholarly appearance had been replaced by a dark tan, and his regular attire was no different from what was worn by the men working in the fields.

He never put on a high and mighty front when dealing with others, but unfortunately, the imperial ware fired using the dragon kilns in the town were never quite up to standard, regardless of whether it was in terms of shape and form, or their coloration and glaze. In fact, the imperial ware that was produced had regressed compared with before, much to the puzzlement of the old kiln masters.

In the end, the imperial court most likely felt like Master Song's efforts were very commendable, even though the outcome wasn't ideal, and he was given a decent evaluation on the documentation from the Ministry of Personnel summoning him back to the capital.

Prior to returning to the capital, Master Song spent all of his money to fund the construction of a covered bridge. After that, it was discovered that a certain child wasn't brought along on the convoy that Master Song had departed in, and the most affluent clans in the town immediately realized what this entailed.

It could be said that Master Song had accumulated a great deal of good karma in the town, and in addition to that, Song Jixin was being looked after by Master Song's kiln supervision official successor, so he didn't have to worry about food, clothing, or shelter, and led a carefree life.

As for his maidservant, whose name had been changed to Zhi Gui, there were many different theories and stories about her origins. The local residents of Clay Vase Alley claimed that she was a little beggar from out of town that had come to this place on a snowy winter's day.

She had fallen unconscious in front of the entrance of Song Jixin's courtyard, and if she hadn't been discovered in time, she would've already passed on to the afterlife. The old man taking care of menial chores at the official manor had a different story. He proclaimed with great confidence that she was an orphan that Master Song had purchased quite some time ago so that his illegitimate son, Song Jixin, would have an intimate companion, and that he had done this to compensate for leaving his son behind.

In any case, after the maidservant was named Zhi Gui by Song Jixin, the father and son relationship between Song Jixin and Master Song was confirmed beyond a doubt. This was because all of the most affluent individuals in the town knew that the characters "Zhi Gui" were engraved onto Master Song's favorite inkstone.

After returning to his senses, a bright smile appeared on Song Jixin's face. "For some reason, the thought of that tenacious four-legged snake just crossed my mind. Think about it, Zhi Gui. I already threw that thing into Chen Ping'an's yard, yet it still crawled into our home. How terrible of a place must Chen Ping'an's den be if even a little snake didn't want to stay there?"

Zhi Gui considered the question carefully before replying, "Perhaps some things are simply down to fate."

Song Jixin gave her a thumbs-up as he happily agreed, "That's exactly right! Chen Ping'an is just someone who isn't blessed with any fortune. He should be satisfied with just being alive."

Zhi Gui didn't say anything.

Song Jixin mused to himself, "After we leave the town, Chen Ping'an will look after everything in our house. Do you think he'd steal what was entrusted to him?"

"Surely not, Young Master," Zhi Gui replied.

"Oh? You know what it means to steal what's entrusted to someone?" Song Jixin asked with a smile.

Zhi Gui blinked innocently as she replied, "Doesn't it just mean what it says?"

Song Jixin smiled as he cast his gaze toward the south, and a hint of longing appeared on his face. "I heard that there are more books in the capital than there are plants in our town!"

Right at this moment, the storyteller declared, "There are no longer any true dragons left in the world, but dragonkin such as flood dragons, drakes, and hornless dragons still truly exist among us in this world, and perhaps..."

The old man intentionally paused here to try and build some suspense, but the audience remained unmoved, completely oblivious to what he was doing, so he could only continue, "Perhaps they're hidden right among us! The deities of Daoism refer to them as dragons lurking in plain sight!"

Song Jixin gave a bored yawn.

All of a sudden, a vibrant, green locust leaf came fluttering down from above, and it just so happened to land on his forehead.

Song Jixin grabbed the leaf and twirled its stem in between two of his fingers.

Chen Ping'an was considering whether he should go to the eastern town gate to ask for the five copper coins that he was owed, and he also saw a locust leaf fluttering down as he approached the old locust tree. He immediately sped up and reached out to try and catch the leaf, but the leaf glanced past his hand, carried away by a gentle breeze.

Chen Ping'an was quite agile, and he quickly took a step to the side to try and intercept the leaf, but it continued to evade him as it twirled around in the air.

Chen Ping'an refused to give up, making a few more attempts, but was ultimately unable to catch the leaf, much to his dismay.

An azure-robed young boy that was flunking his lessons at the private school passed by Chen Ping'an, and unbeknownst to him, a locust leaf had landed on his shoulder.

Meanwhile, Chen Ping'an continued on toward the eastern town gate. Even if he couldn't get the money, it was always definitely a good idea to exert some pressure on the gatekeeper.

Over at the fortune-telling stall in the distance, the young Daoist priest murmured to himself, "Who says there's a disparity in the cycle of fortune?"