

## Chapter 3: Sunrise

The town wasn't very large, home to fewer than 700 clans, and Chen Ping'an knew the majority of the impoverished clans in the town. As for the wealthy clans, they were too far above a poor hillbilly like him. In fact, Chen Ping'an hadn't even set foot in any of the wide and spacious alleys where some of the wealthy clans resided in clusters.

Those streets were mostly paved with large bluestone slabs, so there was no risk of having to slosh through mud even on rainy days. After centuries of being trodden on by people, horses, and carriages, the high-quality bluestone slabs had already been polished to the point that they were as smooth as mirrors.

Lu, Li, Zhao, and Song were the most prominent surnames in the town, and it was those clans who had pooled together the funds to open the private school. Each of those clans owned two or three large dragon kilns outside the town, and all of the past kiln supervision officials had lived on the same street as them.

Coincidentally, almost all ten letters that Chen Ping'an had been tasked with delivering were addressed to the renowned affluent clans in the town. However, this was quite a reasonable occurrence.

As the saying went, the offspring of dragons and phoenixes were destined to soar in the heavens, while the offspring of mice could only burrow in the dirt. Those who were traveling far away and were able to send letters back to their families had to have come from privileged backgrounds.

Otherwise, they wouldn't have had the courage and financial backing to go to such faraway places. For nine of the ten letters, Chen Ping'an only had to go to two places, namely Fortune Deer Street and Peach Leaf Alley. The bluestone slabs that paved these streets were as large as bedsteads, and he felt rather uneasy as he stepped onto them for the first time. He unconsciously slowed down, and was struck by a sense of inferiority, feeling as if he were soiling the ground with his straw sandals.

The first letter that he delivered was to the Lu Clan, which had an ancestor who had received a jade scepter bestowed upon them by the emperor. As he stood outside the doors of the Lu Manor, he was becoming more and more agitated and uneasy.

Wealthy clans were very particular about many things. Not only was the Lu Manor massive, there were two stone lions placed on either side of the entrance, both of which were as tall as a grown man, presenting a rather intimidating sight to behold. According to Song Jixin, these things were capable of warding off malicious and evil entities. Chen Ping'an had no idea what these malicious and evil entities were supposed to be.

He was only very intrigued by the round stone ball that each of the stone lions held in their mouths, wondering how those balls had been sculpted. He forcibly suppressed the urge to touch those stone balls, then made his way up the steps before using the bronze lion head knockers on the doors.

A young man quickly made his way out of the manor, and upon hearing that Chen Ping'an was here to deliver a letter, the man pinched a corner of the letter between two of his fingers and took it from Chen Ping'an in an expressionless manner. He then quickly strode back into the manor before closing the doors, which bore a colorful visage of the god of wealth.

The letter delivery process after this proved to be just as mundane and uneventful. On the corner of Peach Leaf Alley was a lesser-known clan, and Chen Ping'an was greeted by a benevolent-looking old man of a rather short and small stature. The man accepted the letter with a smile, then said, "You're working hard, young lad. Would you like to come in for some rest and a sip of warm water?"

Chen Ping'an shook his head with a bashful smile in response before jogging away.

The old man gently tucked the letter into his sleeve, but instead of returning to his courtyard right away, he raised his head and cast a pair of slightly murky eyes into the distance.

He looked up, then down, then peered into the distance before withdrawing his gaze, staring at the peach trees that lined the street, following which a faint smile appeared on his face.

The old man turned to depart, and shortly thereafter, a small oriole with adorable colors landed on the tip of one of the peach trees' branches, chirping gently as it did so.

The final letter that Chen Ping'an had to deliver was addressed to the teacher at the private school. Along the way, he passed by a fortune teller's stall, where a young daoist priest in an old daoist robe was seated behind a table with his back ramrod straight. He was wearing a tall hat that resembled a blooming lotus flower.

Right as Chen Ping'an was jogging past, the young daoist priest hurriedly called out to him. "Don't miss out on a reading, young man. Pick out a stick and I'll tell your fortune. I can help you predict whether fortune or peril awaits you."

Chen Ping'an continued to jog past without pause, but he turned to the daoist priest and waved a hand in refusal.

The daoist priest was unwilling to give up, and he leaned forward slightly as he raised his voice and continued, "How about this, young man? I normally charge 10 copper coins for a reading, but today, I'll make an exception and only charge you three copper coins! Of course, if you pick out a good stick, you're free to pay a little extra for good fortune. Even if you're fortunate enough to pick out the best stick possible, I'll only charge you five copper coins. What do you say?"

Chen Ping'an had already jogged into the distance at this point, but he clearly faltered slightly in his footsteps. The young daoist priest instantly jumped on the opportunity, quickly rising to his feet as he declared, "It's still very early in the morning, so you'll be my first customer, young man. In light of that, I'll do you an additional favor. If you sit down for a reading, I'll write up some yellow paper talismans for you and help you pray to your ancestors so you can accumulate some good karma. With my skills, I wouldn't dare to guarantee that you'll be reincarnated into a wealthy clan in your next life, but I can certainly try and bless you with a bit of good fortune."

Chen Ping'an faltered slightly upon hearing this, then turned back around with a skeptical expression before taking a seat on the bench in front of the stall.

Thus, a modest daoist priest and an impoverished young man found themselves seated across from one another, each of them just as poor as the other.

The daoist priest smiled as he extended a hand, inviting Chen Ping'an to pick up the tube of bamboo sticks.

However, Chen Ping'an didn't hesitate even for a moment as he declared, "I don't want to draw a stick. All I want is for you to write up a yellow paper talisman for me. Can you do that?"

Chen Ping'an recalled that this young traveling daoist priest had already been staying in this town for at least the past five or six years. His appearance hadn't changed much during that time, and he was always quite friendly to everyone. On a normal day, all he did was tell people's fortunes through scapulimancy, face reading, and stick drawing, and he also occasionally acted as a letter ghostwriter for others.

What was rather interesting was that there were 108 bamboo sticks in the tube on the table, but during all his time here, not a single person had managed to draw the best possible stick, nor had anyone ever drawn a stick of misfortune. It was as if there were only good or neutral sticks in the tube, with no other options available.

Hence, whenever there was a festival, the residents of the town were willing to fork out 10 copper coins for a fortune reading purely for the sake of good fortune. However, no one experiencing any actual troubles would be willing to come here just to be scalped. It would be unfair to say that the daoist priest was a complete and utter fraud.

The town was not a very large place, and if all he did was intentionally confuse and defraud people, then he would've been kicked out long ago. Hence, it was clear that the young daoist priest's forte wasn't his fortune-telling. Instead, he had made a name for himself through his amulet water, which had consistently cured many of the town's residents of various minor ailments over the years.

The young daoist priest shook his head in response. "I never go back on my word. I promised that I was going to give you a fortune reading and a yellow paper talisman for five copper coins."

"It's three copper coins," Chen Ping'an argued in a low voice.

"But it'll be five copper coins if you manage to pull the best stick," the daoist priest chuckled.

After making up his mind, Chen Ping'an reached out for the stick tube, only to suddenly raise his head as he asked, "How did you know that I just so happen to have exactly five copper coins on me?"

The daoist priest replied with a serious expression, "I can see if someone is blessed by fortune or not, and in particular, I've always been very accurate when it comes to my readings of one's fortune in wealth."

After a brief moment of contemplation, Chen Ping'an picked up the stick tube.

The daoist priest smiled as he said, "Don't be nervous, young man. If it's meant to be, then it'll be. If it's not meant to be, then it can't be forced. Regarding impermanence with a peaceful heart is the solution to everything."



Chen Ping'an set the stick tube back down onto the table, then asked with a serious expression, "How about this? I'll give you the five copper coins, and I won't draw a stick. All that I ask is that you write up the yellow paper talisman a bit better than you normally do. Is that possible?"

The daoist priest's smile remained unchanged, and after some thought, he nodded in response. "Sure."

A set of writing tools and paper had already been prepared on the table, and the daoist priest carefully enquired to Chen Ping'an about the names, birthplaces, and birth dates and times of his parents, then pulled out a yellow paper talisman before quickly inscribing something onto it.

As for what had been written, Chen Ping'an had no clue.

The young daoist priest set down his brush before picking up the talisman, then blew on it to dry the ink. "Take this home, and all you have to do is burn this outside your doorway while standing inside your doorway."

Chen Ping'an accepted the talisman with a solemn expression, then carefully stowed it away as if it were a priceless treasure. He then placed five copper coins down onto the table before bowing in gratitude.

The daoist priest waved a dismissive hand, indicating that Chen Ping'an was free to go, and he immediately rushed away to deliver the final letter.

The daoist priest sat back lazily in his chair, then took a glance at the copper coins before bending over and scooping them close to him.

Right at this moment, a small oriole flew down from the sky onto the table, gently pecking one of the copper coins before quickly losing interest and flying away again.

"The oriole wishes to pluck a flower, but the peach blossoms are still yet to bloom."

After casually reciting that poem phrase to himself, he rustled his sleeve in a carefree manner as he sighed, "If it's not meant to be, then there's no point in forcing things."

As he rustled his sleeve, two bamboo sticks fell out from within before clattering onto the ground. The daoist priest yelped in alarm as he hurriedly picked up the bamboo sticks, then looked around in a sheepish manner and was very relieved to see that no one had caught sight of what had just happened. After that, he tucked the pair of bamboo sticks back into his loose and baggy sleeve.

He then cleared his throat and put on a serious expression, waiting for his next customer.

At the same time, he couldn't help but muse to himself that it was easier to get women to spend money on things like this.

As it turned out, there were two bamboo sticks concealed up the daoist priest's sleeve, one of which was the best possible stick, while the other

was the worst possible stick, and both of them were reserved for earning big money.

However, he never revealed this to anyone, and Chen Ping'an was naturally oblivious to these hidden machinations as well.

He jogged lightly to the private school, and there was a lush and vibrant bamboo forest nearby.

He slowed down outside the school, and the mellow voice of a middle-aged man rang out from inside. "The radiant sun shines down upon the pristine woolen coat."

The phrase was immediately repeated in unison by a collection of tender voices. "The radiant sun shines down upon the pristine woolen coat."

Chen Ping'an raised his head to find that the sun was only just beginning to rise in the east, and he was momentarily dazed.

By the time he returned to his senses, he discovered that the children in the school were reciting a passage in a well-rehearsed manner as instructed by the teacher. "At the time of Jingzhe, heaven and earth stirs, and all living things begin to flourish. Sleep late and wake early, take regular strolls, do so slowly, for good health and vitality."

Chen Ping'an was standing at the entrance of the school, and he wanted to say something, but refrained from doing so.

The teacher was a middle-aged scholar with gray sideburns, and he gently made his way out of the room.

Chen Ping'an offered the letter to him with both hands as he said in a respectful voice, "I have a letter for you, Sir."

The man accepted the letter, then encouraged in a warm voice, "If you have some free time, you can come here and listen to my lessons."

Chen Ping'an was reluctant to make any promises. He couldn't guarantee that he would have the time to come and listen to these lessons, and he didn't want to lie to the teacher.

The man gave a considerate smile as he said, "It's alright. The knowledge is all in the books, but the way to be a good person is something that needs to be learned outside of books. You can go now."

Chen Ping'an heaved a faint sigh of relief before taking his leave.

After a while, he was struck by the urge to turn back for some reason, even though he was already very far away from the school.

The teacher was still standing at the entrance, basking under the sunlight, resembling a deity from afar.