

# Chapter 1: Spring Bloom

The second day of the second month on the lunar calendar was said to be the day that the dragon raised its head, also known as the Longtaitou Festival. [2]

In the darkness of the night, there was a thin and lonesome young boy in a secluded place by the name of Clay Vase Alley. At this moment, he was following the traditions of the area, holding a candle in one hand and a peach branch in the other. The young boy was using the candle to illuminate the ceiling, the walls, and the wooden bed in the room, and simultaneously, he was tapping the peach branch around to try and drive away creatures like snakes, scorpions, and centipedes.

At the same time, he was chanting an old mantra that had been passed down in the small town for generation upon generation: "On the second day of the second month, the candle illuminates the ceiling, while the peach branch taps the walls, leaving no place for snakes and insects to hide."

The young boy's name was Chen Ping'an, and both his parents had passed away at a very early stage in his life. The town that he lived in was extremely renowned for producing chinaware. Ever since the founding of the nation, the town had taken on the important task of producing

chinaware to be offered to the imperial court, and there were imperial officials constantly stationed in the town, overseeing the operation of the official kilns.

Without anyone to rely on, Chen Ping'an became a potter at a very young age. In the beginning, he was only able to perform some menial tasks and manual labor, toiling away arduously for several years under a reluctant master with a terrible temper. In a cruel twist of fate, just when he had begun to grasp some of the basics of pottery firing, the town suddenly lost the right to host official kilns. Over the course of just a single night, all of the dozens of coiling-dragon-like kilns throughout the town were ordered to be shut down by the authorities.

Chen Ping'an set down the newly snapped peach branch before blowing out the candle. He then made his way out of the room and sat down on the steps before looking up at the starry night sky.

He could still clearly recall that his old master was a man with the surname of Yao, and he had only been willing to accept him as half a disciple. One late autumn morning the previous year, he was discovered to have passed away peacefully while seated on a small bamboo chair, facing the kiln with his eyes closed.

However, ultimately, people who were as devoted and unyielding as Old Man Yao were part of the minority.

For generations, the potters in the small town had only engaged in this one line of work, and they didn't dare to overstep their boundaries and continue to produce imperial ware, nor did they dare to sell their stocks of imperial ware to the common folk. Thus, they could only turn to other avenues to make ends meet. At just 14 years of age, Chen Ping'an was also kicked out, and after returning to Clay Vase Alley, he continued to reside in this old and dilapidated house under bleak and impoverished conditions. Even if he wanted to be a spendthrift rich kid, there was simply no wealth for him to squander.

After drifting around aimlessly for a while, he was unable to find any sources of income. He was only just barely able to feed himself with his meager savings, and a few days ago, he heard that a foreign blacksmith with the surname of Ruan had arrived in Dragon Riding Alley, an alley that was a few streets away. The old blacksmith had declared that he was planning to take seven or eight disciples, and no wages would be provided, but meals were ensured.

Chen Ping'an had immediately gone to try his luck, but to his dismay, the old blacksmith only took a side glance at him before turning him away. At the time, Chen Ping'an had felt quite perplexed. Could it be that blacksmithing didn't rely on the strength of one's arm, but the charm of one's looks instead?

Chen Ping'an had a rather frail appearance, but his strength was not to be underestimated. He had developed great physical conditioning from many years of pottery molding and firing, and in addition to that, he had traveled extensively with Old Man Yao, exploring all types of places while carrying out the most tiresome and degrading tasks without any complaints. Unfortunately, despite his efforts, Old Man Yao never took a liking to him.

He was always disdainful toward Chen Ping'an for his lack of talent, an area in which he was severely outmatched by Old Man Yao's most prized disciple, Liu Xianyang. One couldn't blame the old man for playing favorites. Ultimately, the master was only responsible for teaching the basics, while the disciple's talent and hard work decided how far they would go. As an example of their disparity in talent, Liu Xianyang was able to achieve the same level of mastery in the monotonous task of pottery molding in half a year that Chen Ping'an reached after toiling away for three years.

Even though there was a chance that Chen Ping'an would never use this skill again, he still performed his usual routine, closing his eyes and envisioning a bluestone slab and a pottery wheel in front of himself. He then began to simulate pottery molding practice, continuing to hone his skills.

Once every 15 minutes, he would take a short break to shake out his wrists. Only after repeating this process until he was completely exhausted did he rise to his feet, strolling through the yard while performing some stretches. No one had taught him to do any of this, it was just a routine that he had made up himself.

All of a sudden, the peace and quiet was punctuated by the harsh sound of a mocking jeer. Chen Ping'an stopped in his tracks, and just as he expected, there was a boy roughly the same age as him squatting on the top of the wall, looking down at him with a derisive sneer and making no effort to hide his disdain.

The boy was an old neighbor of Chen Ping'an's, and it was said that he was an illegitimate son of the former kiln supervision official. That official had returned to the capital for a debriefing for fear of being impeached by imperial censors, and he had left his illegitimate son to be looked after by his successor, who was a rather close friend of his.

Now that the town had inexplicably lost the right to produce imperial ware, the kiln supervision official responsible for overseeing the operation of the official kilns was left without a job, and he had no interest in continuing to look after the illegitimate son of an imperial court colleague. After leaving some money behind, he hurriedly traveled to the capital to salvage his relations with powerful figures there.

Unbeknownst to the young boy, he had been completely abandoned, and he continued to live a carefree and leisurely life, constantly wandering the town with his personal maidservant, never having to worry about money, even though he didn't do a day of work throughout the year.

The earthen walls separating the homes in Clay Vase Alley were all very short, so the young boy could've easily looked over the wall to the other side, but he always liked to squat on top of the wall whenever he spoke to Chen Ping'an.

The neighboring boy's name was Song Jixin, a name that was far more sophisticated compared with Chen Ping'an's shallow and tacky name. Even his personal maidservant, Zhi Gui, had a very elegant name. [3]

At this moment, Zhi Gui was standing on the other side of the wall with a timid look in her large, round eyes.

All of a sudden, a voice rang out from the entrance of the courtyard. "Are you willing to sell that maidservant?"

Song Jixin was rather startled by the question, and he turned to discover a completely unfamiliar brocade-robed young boy standing outside the courtyard with a faint smile on his face.

Beside the brocade-robed young boy stood a tall and broad elderly man with a fair complexion and a benevolent look on his face. The old man's eyes were slightly narrowed as his gaze roamed over the young trio in the two neighboring courtyards.

His gaze swept over Chen Ping'an without any pause, but his attention lingered on Song Jixin and his maidservant, and the smile on his face gradually grew more pronounced.

Song Jixin took a glance at the brocade-robed young boy out of the corner of his eye as he replied, "Sure, why not?"

"How much do you want for her?" the brocade-robed young boy asked with a faint smile.

Zhi Gui's eyes widened with incredulity upon hearing this exchange, making her resemble a panicked deerling.

Song Jixin rolled his eyes as he raised a finger and wagged it from side to side. "I want 10,000 taels of silver!"

The brocade-robed young boy's expression remained unchanged as he nodded in response. "Alright, I'll take her."

The boy didn't appear to be joking, and Song Jixin hurriedly amended, "Actually, I want 20,000 taels of gold!"

An amused smile appeared on the boy's face as he said, "I was just fooling around."

Song Jixin was far from amused.

The young boy paid no further heed to Song Jixin as he turned his gaze to Chen Ping'an. "It's all thanks to you that I was able to buy that carp today. After taking it back home, the more I looked at it, the more I fell in love with it, so I decided that I had to come and thank you in person. That's why I asked Grandpa Wu to bring me here to see you right away."



He tossed a heavy embroidered pouch to Chen Ping'an, then said with a vibrant smile, "This is my thanks to you. We're all clear now."

Chen Ping'an was just about to say something, but the brocade-robed young boy had already departed, leaving Chen Ping'an to look on with furrowed brows.

Earlier in the day, he just so happened to spot a middle-aged man walking down the street while carrying a fish basket. The man had caught a golden carp that was around the same length as a human hand, and it was flailing around vigorously in the bamboo basket. Chen Ping'an felt like the golden carp had a very festive and jubilant appearance, and he asked the man if he was willing to sell the fish for 10 copper coins.

The man had originally only intended to eat the fish, but he immediately jumped on the opportunity to make a profit from his catch, asking for an exorbitant price of 30 copper coins. The impoverished Chen Ping'an naturally didn't have that much spare money on his hands, but at the same time, he couldn't bear to leave the golden carp behind.

Hence, he began to barter with the man, and he was willing to take the fish for 15 copper coins, even 20. Right as the man was beginning to show signs of relenting, the brocade-robed young boy and the old man just so happened to pass by, and they bought the carp and the fish basket for 50 copper coins without any hesitation, leaving Chen Ping'an to look on with a wistful expression.

After glaring at the departing figures of the young boy and the old man for a while, Song Jixin withdrew his gaze with a resentful expression before jumping down from the wall. A thought then suddenly seemed to have occurred to him, and he turned to Chen Ping'an as he asked, "Do you still remember that four-leg from last month?"

Chen Ping'an nodded in response.

Not only did he remember it, it was a very clear memory in his mind.

According to the customs and traditions that had been passed down for several centuries in the small town, it was a good omen for ophidian creatures to make their way into one's home, and it was considered to be extremely taboo for the owners of such fortunate homes to chase out or kill said creatures. On the first day of the first month on the lunar calendar, Song Jixin had been sunbathing while sitting on his doorstep

when a creature colloquially known as a four-legged snake began to scurry into the house right under his nose.

Song Jixin grabbed the creature before throwing it out of the yard, but to his surprise, even though the creature was battered and disoriented from the fall, it seemed to only grow more and more emboldened and determined with each failure, attempting to crawl into the house over and over again.

Song Jixin had never been one to believe in superstitions, and he was so infuriated by the persistent creature that he threw it into Chen Ping'an's yard in a fit of rage. Much to his bewilderment, he discovered that very same four-legged snake lying curled up under his bed the very next day.

Song Jixin felt Zhi Gui tug on his sleeve, and there seemed to be a tacit understanding between them as he immediately knew what she wanted and refrained from articulating what he was about to say next.

What he wanted to say was that the hideous four-legged snake had recently developed a bulge on its forehead, as if a horn were growing there.

Instead, he said something else. "Zhi Gui and I are probably going to be leaving this place next month."

Chen Ping'an heaved a faint sigh in response. "Look after yourselves."

"There are some things that I definitely won't be able to take with me; you'd better not steal anything while I'm gone!" Song Jixin said, half in jest.

Chen Ping'an shook his head.

Song Jixin burst into laughter as he poked Chen Ping'an with his finger with a mischievous grin on his face. "You're such a coward! No wonder impoverished clans never produce noble sons. Not only are you destined to be bullied and derided by others in this lifetime, you'll probably suffer the same fate in your next life as well!"

Chen Ping'an offered no response to this.

The two young boys returned to their respective homes, and Chen Ping'an closed the door as he laid down on his plank bed, then closed his eyes as he quietly murmured to himself, "May there be peace all year round, may there be safety all year round, may I be safe and peaceful all year round."