

Chapter 2: Opening

Dawn was only just breaking, and Chen Ping'an had already gotten up even before the roosters began to crow. His thin blanket didn't do a very good job of keeping him warm, and he had developed the habit of waking up early and going to bed late back when he was learning to become a potter. He opened the door before stepping out onto the soft and loamy soil in the courtyard outside, then took a deep breath.

After stretching out his body, he made his way out of the courtyard and turned to discover a thin and frail figure. It was none other than Song Jixin's maidservant, and she was huddled over, trying to open the gate of the neighboring courtyard with her shoulder while carrying a bucket of water with both hands. It seemed that she had just drawn some water from the Iron Lock Well on Apricot Blossom Alley.

Chen Ping'an withdrew his gaze as he jogged through a series of streets and alleys toward the eastern side of the small town. Clay Vase Alley was situated in the westernmost part of the town, and at the town gate in the easternmost part of the town was a man who was responsible for conducting nightly patrols and overseeing the merchants and visitors entering and exiting the town.

On the side, he would also receive and deliver some letters sent to the town, and Chen Ping'an's job was to take those letters and deliver them to the town's residents for one copper coin per letter. This was an avenue of income that he had gone to great lengths to obtain, and it had already been arranged that he was going to be taking over this job after the day of the Longtaitou Festival.

In Song Jixin's words, Chen Ping'an was destined to lead an impoverished life, and even if the winds of fortune were to blow into his home, he wouldn't be able to keep them anyway.

Song Jixin often said some things that were very difficult to understand. He most likely took those esoteric sayings from the books that he read, and Chen Ping'an was frequently left scratching his head in befuddlement. For example, a few days ago, Song Jixin had been saying something along the lines of "Beware of the spring chill, for it has been the death of many a young man," and Chen Ping'an had no idea what that meant.

However, he had first-hand experience with the strange phenomenon where the initial period of spring felt colder than the winter each year. Song Jixin referred to this phenomenon as the unexpected spring chill, which caught many people off guard before claiming their lives, much like a sudden and unforeseen retaliation from an opponent on the battlefield.

The town wasn't surrounded by any walls, so even bandits and gangs were a problem, let alone petty thieves. The so-called town gate was actually nothing more than a row of old and uneven fencing materials, acting as a makeshift checkpoint for people and carriages to pass through in order to keep up appearances for the town.

While jogging past Apricot Blossom Alley, Chen Ping'an spotted many women and children huddled around the Iron Lock Well, and the well winch was creaking incessantly.

After passing through another street, Chen Ping'an heard the familiar sound of reading ringing out nearby. There was a private school there, and it was jointly funded by several of the most affluent clans in the town.

The teacher was from out of town, and back in Chen Ping'an's younger days, he would often squat down outside the window and listen to the lesson being taught in secret. The teacher was very strict during classes, but he never called out or got in the way of freeloaders like Chen Ping'an. After that, Chen Ping'an traveled out of the town to become a disciple at a dragon kiln, and he hadn't visited the school since then.

Jogging ahead a bit further, Chen Ping'an passed by a stone archway. Due to the fact that the archway was supported by 12 stone pillars, the local residents liked to refer to it as the crab archway. As for what the archway's actual name was, Song Jixin and Liu Xianyang had very different accounts.

Song Jixin swore that he had read in an old book by the name of "Local County Chronicles" that the archway was called the Grand Secretary Archway, and that it had been bestowed upon the town by the emperor at the time to commemorate an official in history who had made significant contributions in overseeing military forces.

In contrast, Liu Xianyang was just as much of a hillbilly as Chen Ping'an, and he insisted that this place was known as the Crab Archway. It had been referred to as such for several centuries, and in his eyes, there was no reason to give it a nonsensical name like the Grand Secretary Archway. In addition to that, Liu Xianyang had also posed a question to Song Jixin: "How big is the official hat of a grand secretary? Is it bigger than the opening of the Iron Lock Well?"

Song Jixin had no answer to this, and he was left flushing furiously with embarrassment.

Chen Ping'an ran a lap around the 12-pillar archway, and each side bore four large characters inscribed in strange fonts, all of which appeared to be different from one another.

The inscriptions read "doing my part", "comply with the natural order", "refrain from looking outward", and "unmatched aura".

According to Song Jixin, aside from one of those inscriptions, all three of the other inscriptions had been smeared or altered at some point. Chen Ping'an was quite clueless about these matters, and he had never given this notion much deep thought. Of course, even if he had wanted to unearth some answers, he wouldn't have been able to. Even now, he still didn't know what kind of book the Local County Chronicles that Song Jixin frequently mentioned was supposed to be.

Shortly after passing the archway, he saw an old yet lush locust tree, at the foot of which was a tree trunk that had been moved there by someone. Slight modifications had been made to the tree trunk, and there were two bluestone slabs tucked under either end of it, transforming it into a crude bench.

Every summer, all of the town's residents liked to gather under the tree to stay cool. Some of the adults from the wealthier clans would pull baskets of chilled fruits and melons out of the well for the children to eat, and once they'd had their fill of fruits, the children would band together and play under the shade of the tree.

Chen Ping'an was already accustomed to rigorous travel, so he wasn't even out of breath as he jogged over to the makeshift town gate before stopping at the entrance of the lone earthen cabin.

Not many outsiders visited the town. Now that the town had been deprived of a major source of income in the form of the official kilns, it stood to reason that there would be even fewer visitors from outside.

Back when Old Man Yao was around, there was one time when he had a little too much to drink, and he told his disciples, including Chen Ping'an and Liu Xianyang, that they were the only ones under the heavens manning official kilns, that the chinaware that they produced was imperial ware used by the emperor and the empress, that no matter how rich or lofty in official status someone was, they would be beheaded if they dared to use imperial ware themselves. On that day, Old Man Yao had seemed like a completely different person.

As Chen Ping'an cast his gaze out of the town gate, he was surprised to discover that there were seven or eight people waiting outside, and there were people of both genders and all ages among them.

Furthermore, they were all unfamiliar to him. The local residents very rarely went through the eastern gate, regardless of whether they were tending to their fields or going to their kilns. The reason for this was very simple: the path leading out of the town's eastern gate didn't lead to any kilns or plots of farmland.

At this moment, Chen Ping'an and these outsiders were looking across at each other, separated by the makeshift gate.

Chen Ping'an was wearing a pair of straw sandals woven by himself, and he was very envious of the thick clothing worn by the people outside. In his eyes, the clothes looked very warm and were sure to be great for keeping out the cold.

The people outside the town gate were clearly split up into several groups, rather than belonging to one large group, but all of them wore aloof and indifferent expressions as they looked at Chen Ping'an. A couple of them had already looked past him and were peering further into the town.

Chen Ping'an was rather perplexed to see this. Could it be that these people weren't aware that the imperial court had already shut down all of the dragon kilns in the village? Alternatively, could it be that they felt like there was an opportunity to be exploited here because they knew the true reason for the closure of the kilns?

There was a young man wearing a strange tall hat in the group. He was tall and slim with a green jade pendant hanging from his waist, and he seemed to have grown tired of waiting. The gate had no lock, and he emerged from the crowd on his own as if he were going to push it open,

but right as his finger was about to come into contact with the gate, he suddenly stopped before slowly withdrawing his hand, then clasped his hands behind his back as he cast his gaze toward Chen Ping'an with a smile on his face. He didn't say anything; all he did was smile.

Out of his peripheral vision, Chen Ping'an inadvertently noticed that the people behind the young man seemed to all be displaying different emotions. Some were disappointed, some were amused, some had their brows furrowed, and some were looking on with derision in their eyes.

Right at this moment, a middle-aged man with a head of disheveled hair abruptly opened the gate, then erupted into a loud tirade directed at Chen Ping'an. "How desperate for money are you, you little bastard? Who in their right mind would come here at such an ungodly hour? Are you rushing off to reunite with your dead parents?!"

Chen Ping'an rolled his eyes in response, completely unfazed by the man's scathing words. He was living in a rural area filled with uneducated people; if he allowed himself to get mad every time someone directed some insults at him, then he might as well jump into a well and put himself out of his misery.

In addition, this middle-aged gatekeeper was often the butt of jokes for the residents of the town himself. In particular, the bold and feisty women would not just verbally abuse him, but often hit him as well. The man was also always going around boasting to little kids who were still in their open-crotch pants, telling them about how back in his heyday, he had once beaten up five or six burly men at once in front of the town

gate, dishing out such a severe beating that his assailants were left to pick up their teeth from the ground, and that there was so much blood everywhere that the entire 20-foot wide path in front of the town gate had become as muddy as if it had just rained!

"We'll discuss your shitty job later," the man said to Chen Ping'an in a disgruntled voice.

No one in the town held any respect for him, but he was the one who decided whether outsiders could enter the town or not.

He made his way toward the makeshift gate while reaching a hand down into his own pants.

His back was facing Chen Ping'an, and after opening the door, he would take a small embroidered pouch from each of the people outside, then stow the pouches up his sleeve before granting them passage into the town.

Chen Ping'an had already stepped aside to let the people through, and the eight outsiders made their way into the town, roughly split up into five

groups. Two children who were around seven or eight years of age strode into the town on either side of the young man with the green jade pendant strapped to his waist. The pair of children consisted of a boy and a girl, and the former was wearing a festive red robe, while the little girl was as fair and delicate as a piece of premium porcelain.

The boy was almost a full head shorter than Chen Ping'an, and as he passed by Chen Ping'an, he opened his mouth, but didn't say anything. However, it was quite apparent that he had mouthed something very rude and provocative.

The middle-aged woman holding onto the boy's hand cleared her throat quietly, and only then did the boy display some restraint.

As for the little girl behind the boy and the woman, she was being led by a physically imposing elderly man with a head of white hair. She turned to Chen Ping'an and immediately began chatting away while pointing at the boy up ahead.

Chen Ping'an couldn't understand anything that she was saying, but he could tell that she was complaining about the boy.

The burly old man took a glance at Chen Ping'an out of the corner of his eye, and it was only a fleeting glance without any intention or malice, but Chen Ping'an reflexively took a step backward, as if he were a mouse that had run into a cat.

The chatty little girl's enthusiasm was instantly snuffed out upon seeing this, and she turned away from Chen Ping'an without affording him so much as a second glance, as if looking at him would be an insult to her eyes.

Chen Ping'an didn't have much life experience, but he wasn't so clueless that he couldn't read faces.

After those people had faded into the distance, the gatekeeper turned to Chen Ping'an before asking, "Do you want to know what they said?"

"I do," Chen Ping'an replied with a nod.

The middle-aged gatekeeper chuckled, "They were praising you for your good looks. They were all saying good things about you!"

Chen Ping'an gave a wry smile in response.

Do I look stupid to you?

The gatekeeper could tell what Chen Ping'an was thinking, and he began to laugh even more boisterously. "If you weren't stupid, I wouldn't have asked you to come and deliver letters!"

Chen Ping'an didn't dare to rebuke the gatekeeper for fear of irking him and losing this job.

The gatekeeper turned and cast his gaze toward the outsiders, stroking his stubbly chin as he mused to himself, "That woman just now had a pair of killer legs!"

Chen Ping'an hesitated momentarily before asking with an intrigued expression, "Is she a martial arts practitioner?"

The gatekeeper was rather taken aback by this innocent response, and he turned to Chen Ping'an with a serious expression as he said, "You really are a stupid kid."

Chen Ping'an was still none the wiser.

The gatekeeper asked Chen Ping'an to wait outside as he made his way into the cabin, then re-emerged with a stack of letters in his hand. It wasn't a particularly thick stack, consisting of only around 10 letters, and the man handed the letters over to Chen Ping'an before asking, "It's said that fortune favors the foolish, and karma favors the righteous. Do you believe in that?"

Chen Ping'an grabbed the letters with one hand while spreading open his other hand, blinking innocently as he said, "You promised me one copper coin per letter."

The gatekeeper pulled out the five copper coins that he had prepared earlier in a disgruntled fashion before slamming them down heavily onto Chen Ping'an's palm, then gave him a dismissive wave as he said, "I'll give you the remaining five copper coins some other time!"