

Chapter 4: Oriole

If he hadn't gone to Fortune Deer Street and Peach Leaf Alley, perhaps Chen Ping'an would've never realized just how dark and confined Clay Vase Alley was. However, not only was he not disheartened by his own living condition, he felt a sense of reassurance. He smiled as he extended both hands outward, and his wingspan was just enough so that he was able to touch the earthen walls on either side of him. He recalled that around three to four years ago, he was only able to touch those walls with the tips of his fingers.

After returning to his home, he discovered that the gate of the courtyard was wide open. Thinking that he had just been robbed by a thief, Chen Ping'an hurriedly rushed inside, only to find a tall and broad young man sitting on the doorstep. He was leaning back against the locked door, yawning with a bored expression, and he immediately jumped to his feet at the sight of Chen Ping'an as if his bottom had just been scorched. He then rushed over to Chen Ping'an and grabbed tightly onto his arm before dragging him forcefully toward the room as he hissed in a low voice, "Open the door! I have something important to tell you!"

Chen Ping'an was unable to struggle free and could only allow himself to be dragged to the door. The young man was two years older than Chen Ping'an and more physically developed, and after the door was opened, he quickly threw Chen Ping'an aside before sneaking his way onto Chen Ping'an's plank bed, then pressed his ear tightly against the wall to eavesdrop on the neighbors.

"What are you doing, Liu Xianyang?" Chen Ping'an asked with a curious expression.

Liu Xianyang paid no heed to him, and after about seven or eight minutes, Liu Xianyang returned to normal before sitting down on the edge of the plank bed with a peculiar mixture of relief and disappointment on his face.

Only now did he notice that Chen Ping'an was doing something rather strange. He was squatted down inside the doorway with his body leaning forward, using a candle to burn a piece of yellow paper. Only around a thumb's length of the candle remained, and all of the ashes of the burned piece of paper fell outside of the doorway. It seemed that Chen Ping'an was also chanting something, but Liu Xianyang was too far away to hear what he was saying.

Liu Xianyang was Old Man Yao's best disciple. As for Chen Ping'an, Old Man Yao had never truly accepted him as a disciple due to his mediocre aptitude for the craft. According to local traditions, no master and disciple relationship could be established unless the disciple offered a cup of tea to the master in a formal ceremony, and the master accepted and drank the cup of tea.

Chen Ping'an and Liu Xianyang weren't neighbors. In fact, their ancestral homes were quite far away from one another's. The reason why Liu Xianyang had recommended Chen Ping'an to Old Man Yao stemmed from their past history. Liu Xianyang was once a renowned delinquent in the town. Prior to the passing of his grandfather, there was at least an adult in the household to keep him in check, but after his grandfather

passed away due to illness, Liu Xianyang quickly became an absolute nightmare for his neighbors.

At the time, he was only 12 or 13 years old, but he was already no less physically developed than a young man, and one time, he somehow made enemies out of a group of boys from the Lu Family.

As a result, he was ganged up on in Clay Vase Alley and was handed a vicious beating. His assailants were all young boys who didn't think about the consequences of their actions, and Liu Xianyang was quickly beaten to the point where he was throwing up blood. All of the dozen or so clans that resided in Clay Vase Alley were bottom-class potters who made a living by working at small dragon kilns, and they didn't dare to intervene.

At the time, not only was Song Jixin not frightened by this horrific scene, he was watching with glee as he squatted on top of the wall, reveling in the chaos of the situation.

In the end, the only one who did anything was an emaciated child, who snuck out of his yard and rushed to the entrance of the alley, where he screamed with all his might, "Help! Someone's about to die here!"

Only after hearing the word "die" did the boys from the Lu Family receive a rude awakening. At that point, Liu Xianyang's entire body was covered in blood, and he was on the brink of death. The boys from the Lu Family finally felt a sense of fear at what they had done upon seeing this, and after exchanging a few glances with one another, they quickly fled down the other end of Clay Vase Alley.

However, after that incident, not only was Liu Xianyang not grateful to the child that saved his life, he regularly came over to bully the child instead. The child was an orphan, and he was very stubborn, refusing to cry no matter how much he was bullied, something that only served to further infuriate Liu Xianyang.

One year, Liu Xianyang could tell that the little orphan most likely wasn't going to be able to make it through the winter, and he was finally stung by his conscience. Having already become a disciple of Old Man Yao's at the time, he took the young boy to the dragon kiln that was situated beside Treasure Creek.

They headed west out of the town, traveling over dozens of kilometers of rugged mountain terrain under heavy snowfall. To this day, Liu Xianyang still couldn't understand how the emaciated young boy with a pair of legs as thin as baby bamboo shoots had managed to walk all the way to the dragon kiln.

Even though Old Man Yao ultimately took Chen Ping'an in, the disparity in his treatment of the two boys was night and day. As his best disciple, Liu Xianyang wasn't spared from his beatings and insults, but even a blind man could sense the good intentions behind Old Man Yao's words and actions.

For example, there was one time when he went a little too far, inflicting a bleeding gash onto Liu Xianyang's forehead. As a tough young boy, Liu Xianyang didn't think much of this, but Old Man Yao was feeling very remorseful over his actions. However, he had always kept up a stern and authoritative facade in front of his disciples, so he couldn't bring himself to apologize or enquire about his condition.

In the end, he paced back and forth in his own room for almost an entire night, and he was still concerned about Liu Xianyang. Finally, he had no choice but to call over Chen Ping'an to deliver a bottle of ointment to Liu Xianyang.

Over the years, Chen Ping'an had always been very envious of Liu Xianyang.

He didn't envy Liu Xianyang for his remarkable aptitude, strength, and charisma. Instead, he envied Liu Xianyang's fearlessness. No matter

where he went, Liu Xianyang was never fazed by anything, nor did he ever feel like living alone was a bad thing.

Wherever he went, he was always able to quickly make friends with whoever he met, getting on such friendly terms with them that they referred to one another as brothers and would drink and play drinking games together. Due to his grandfather's ill health, Liu Xianyang was forced to become self-dependent from a very young age, making him a leader of sorts among the children in the area.

He was skilled at everything, whether it be catching snakes, fishing, procuring eggs from bird's nests, making bows, fishing rods, slingshots, bird cages... It seemed like there was nothing that he couldn't do. In particular, he was the undisputed king of the town when it came to catching catfish and fishing for eels in the channels of water running through plots of farmland.

Back when Liu Xianyang dropped out of the private school, the teacher there, Mr. Xu, had paid a visit to Liu Xianyang's grandfather on his sickbed, offering to provide Liu Xianyang an education free of charge.

However, Liu Xianyang refused to go back no matter what, telling the teacher that all he wanted to do was earn money, and that he had no interest in an education. Mr. Xu then offered Liu Xianyang a paid job as a scholarly attendant, but Liu Xianyang turned down that offer as well.

As it turned out, Liu Xianyang was doing quite well for himself. Even though Old Man Yao had passed away and the dragon kilns had been shut down, it didn't take long before he caught the eye of the blacksmith from Dragon Rider Alley, and he was currently busy building his own forge in the southern part of the town.

Liu Xianyang watched as Chen Ping'an blew out the candle before setting it down on the table, then asked, "Have you heard any strange sounds in the morning? Like..."

Chen Ping'an sat down on the bench, waiting for Liu Xianyang to finish.

Liu Xianyang hesitated momentarily, and in an extremely rare and uncharacteristic display of embarrassment, he blushed slightly as he continued, "Like how cats sound during spring?"

"Are you saying Song Jixin is imitating a cat? Or are you talking about Zhi Gui?" Chen Ping'an asked.

Liu Xianyang rolled his eyes and didn't waste any more time discussing the subject with someone who was clearly completely oblivious to what he was talking about. He placed his palms down onto the bed plank, then bent his elbows slightly before straightening his arms, supporting his own weight with his hands so that his bottom lifted up from the plank and his feet were lifted up from the ground.

He then pursed his lips as he sneered, "What kind of name is Zhi Gui supposed to be? Her name is clearly Wang Zhu. That little Song brat always liked to show off ever since he was a wee little pipsqueak. He probably just saw the character Zhi Gui from somewhere and decided to use it on a whim without even considering whether that name has good implications or not. Wang Zhu had to have accumulated a ton of bad karma in her past life. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been reincarnated as Song Jixin's servant and been forced to lead such a miserable life."

Chen Ping'an didn't echo Liu Xianyang's sentiment.

Liu Xianyang was still supporting the entirety of his own weight with his hands, and he harrumphed coldly as he continued, "Do you really not understand? Why is it that Wang Zhu never spoke to you again after you helped her carry her water bucket that one time? It's definitely because that petty little Song brat became jealous and threatened Wang Zhu with violence if she ever spoke to you again. I bet he told her that not only was he going to break her legs, he was also going to throw her into Clay Vase Alley."

Chen Ping'an couldn't bear to listen in silence any longer, and he interjected, "Song Jixin doesn't treat her badly."

Liu Xianyang was furious to hear this. "How would you know? You don't even know the difference between good and bad!"

Chen Ping'an's eyes were bright and clear as he said, "Sometimes, when she's doing things in the yard, Song Jixin would occasionally read that Local County Chronicles book while sitting on a stool, and she would often look at him and smile."

Liu Xianyang was quite taken aback to hear this.

All of a sudden, the thin plank bed snapped in half down the middle, unable to support Liu Xianyang's weight any longer, and he sat heavily down onto the ground.

Chen Ping'an placed his hands onto his own head, squatting down as he heaved an exasperated sigh.

Liu Xianyang scratched his head as he stood up, and he didn't apologize or express any guilt. Instead, he gave Chen Ping'an a playful kick as he grinned and said, "Get over it, it's just a crappy little bed. I'm here today to deliver a massive piece of good news to you, one that's way more valuable than this crappy bed!"

Chen Ping'an raised his head upon hearing this.

A smug look appeared on Liu Xianyang's face as he continued, "While Master Ruan was out of town and passing by the creek to the south, he suddenly told me that he wanted to dig a few wells. He doesn't have enough people for the job and wants some more help, so I mentioned you to him on a whim. I told him that I know a short kid who has some decent strength, and Master Ruan agreed. He wants you to go and see him in the next couple of days.

Chen Ping'an immediately stood up, and he was just about to express his gratitude when Liu Xianyang raised a hand to cut him off. "Stop! No need to thank me, just remember what I've done for you."

Chen Ping'an could only grimace in response.

Liu Xianyang looked around and noticed a fishing rod placed on a slant in the corner, a slingshot on the windowsill, and a wooden bow hanging on the wall. He was about to say something, but refrained from doing so in the end.

He took a big stride through the doorway, clearly intentionally avoiding stepping on the ashes of the burned talisman.

Chen Ping'an looked on at his departing figure, and all of a sudden, Liu Xianyang turned around to face Chen Ping'an again.

He then crouched down into a low stance before shuffling a few steps toward Chen Ping'an, then threw a heavy punch in his direction. After

that, he stood up straight again as he withdrew his fist and chortled, "Master Ruan told me in private that I'll only need to practice this fist technique for a year, and I'll be able to kill someone with a single punch!"

He didn't seem to be satisfied with his performance, and he subsequently made a strange kicking motion as he continued, "As the saying goes, a good kick to the crotch can kill a drunk donkey!"

Finally, Liu Xianyang pointed at his own chest with his thumb as he declared in a high and mighty manner, "While Master Ruan was teaching me fist techniques, I developed some theories and insights, so I spoke to him about some things, such as my understanding of the jumping burin, which was Old Man Yao's trump card technique in porcelain making. Master Ruan praised me, saying that I'm a generational martial arts talent. As long as you stick with me, you'll be living the good life for sure!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Liu Xianyang could see that Zhi Gui had already entered the neighboring house, and he immediately lost all interest in keeping up his heroic act.

After dropping the facade, he casually said to Chen Ping'an, "By the way, as I was passing by the old locust tree earlier, I met an old man who set up a new stall over there. He told me that he's a storyteller, and that he has a bunch of interesting stories that he wants to tell us. You can go and take a look there in your free time."

Chen Ping'an nodded in response, and Liu Xianyang departed from Clay Vase Alley.

There were many stories about the unruly young man going around in the town. However, the story that he personally liked to perpetuate was that his ancestor was a general who led armies in battle, which was why there was a prized suit of armor that had been passed down for generations in his clan.

Chen Ping'an had seen this supposed prized suit of armor once, and it was extremely hideous, like a suit of warts, or like the scarred and mottled surface of an old tree.

However, Liu Xianyang's contemporaries told a completely different story. They proclaimed that Liu Xianyang's ancestor was a deserter who had fled to the town and became a live-in son-in-law to a family here, and that he only managed to avoid being captured by authorities thanks to a huge stroke of fortune. They were extremely convinced of the authenticity of this story, as if they had personally witnessed how Liu Xianyang's ancestor had fled the battlefield before traveling to the small town.

After some contemplation, Chen Ping'an crouched down beside his doorstep and lowered his head to blow away the ashes.

Before he knew it, Song Jixin had appeared on the other side of the wall with Zhi Gui in accompaniment, and he yelled, "Wanna come play with us at the locust tree?"

"I'll pass," Chen Ping'an replied as he raised his head.

"What a spoilsport," Song Jixin grumbled with a displeased expression.

He then put on a smile as he turned to Zhi Gui and said, "Let's go, Zhi Gui. I'll buy you a whole temple jar of peach blossom powder."

"Just a small cricket jar's worth is enough," Zhi Gui responded with a shy expression.

Song Jixin clasped his hands behind his back, taking large strides forward with his head raised and his chest puffed out as he declared, "Our Song Family has been living in luxury and affluence for generations! I would be bringing shame to my clan if I were to be so stingy!"

Chen Ping'an sat down on his doorstep as he rubbed his own forehead in exasperation. When he wasn't talking nonsense, Song Jixin actually wasn't a bad person to be around. However, at times like this, if Liu Xianyang were here, he would've definitely expressed to Chen Ping'an an urge to smash a brick into the back of Song Jixin's head.

Chen Ping'an leaned against his doorframe as he thought about what the next day was going to be like. It was most likely going to be just like this day, and the day after the next day was going to be just like the next day. In his mind, he was going to live out his life in this repetitive cycle until he passed away just like Old Man Yao.

Everyone relied on the earth for sustenance for their entire life, but upon their death, they would be devoured by the earth in return.

After closing one's eyes for the final time, the next time one reopened their eyes, they could be in the next life already.

Chen Ping'an looked down at the straw sandals on his feet, and a smile suddenly appeared on his face.

It was definitely a different feeling to step on bluestone slabs rather than soppy mud.

After leaving the alley, Liu Xianyang was just passing by the fortune teller's stall when the young daoist priest called out to him. "Come, young man! I can see that you have the complexion of a fire fueled by oil. That's definitely not a good omen! But do not fear, I have a way to help you avert disaster!"

Liu Xianyang was rather surprised to hear this. He knew that this daoist priest had always been telling people's fortunes based on the sticks that they drew, and setting aside whether his fortune-telling was accurate or not, Liu Xianyang couldn't ever recall an instance where the daoist priest had actively tried to rope in customers. Almost all of his customers had voluntarily gone to him. Could it be that with the closing of the dragon kilns, the daoist priest's business was also impacted, and he was struggling to get by, thereby leading him to go after all potential

customers with discretion?

Liu Xianyang chuckled in disdain, "The way you're going to help me avert disaster is by having me give you money, right? Piss off! You're never getting a single copper coin out of my pocket!"

The young daoist priest remained calm and collected as he yelled out, "Everyone hopes for fortune and prosperity, but who knows what troubles life has in store? People only turn to the gods when things go wrong, but to have a safe and stable life, one should regularly offer burning incense to the gods."

Liu Xianyang suddenly turned around before rushing toward the fortune-telling stall like the wind, putting on a menacing display as he scoffed, "You want me to burn incense? How about I burn down your stall first!"

The daoist priest was clearly very much intimidated by this threat, and he immediately turned and fled, leaving his stall behind.

Liu Xianyang stood beside the stall, chortling with mirth at the sight of the daoist priest's cowardly display. He then spotted the bamboo tube on the table and casually pushed it over. All of the bamboo sticks inside were instantly tipped out, fanning themselves out across the table.

Liu Xianyang pointed at the daoist priest, who had stopped in the distance, and threatened, "From now on, I'm gonna beat you up every time I see you!"

The young daoist priest could cup his fist and bow as he begged for mercy.

Liu Xianyang was finally willing to let him off the hook.

Only after Liu Xianyang had gone far away did the daoist priest dare to return to his seat, and he sighed, "These are difficult times. People are no longer as kind and accepting as they used to be, and it's getting harder and harder to make a living."

Right at this moment, his eyes suddenly lit up, and he hurriedly closed his eyes as he recited, "One often blames external distractions for spoiling their peace, but the true distraction comes from within. Achievements are nothing more than lily pads on water, going whichever way the wind blows."

The pair of youths passing by clearly heard him, but unfortunately, they displayed no intention of stopping.

The daoist priest opened his eyes ever so slightly, and seeing that more potential customers were about to pass him by, he hurriedly slammed a palm down onto his table as he raised his voice and continued, "Champion scholars and prime ministers were nothing more than normal people before their rise to glory. With great knowledge comes great renown and confidence."

Song Jixin and Zhi Gui continued onward without pause.

The daoist priest was greatly disheartened by this, and he murmured to himself, "It's over."

All of a sudden, Song Jixin turned around without any warning before tossing the daoist priest a copper coin from afar with a bright smile. "Thanks for your blessings!"

The daoist priest hurriedly caught the coin before spreading his hand open and taking a look, only to discover that it was the smallest money-value copper coin possible, and his mood wasn't lifted at all.

The daoist priest gently placed the copper coin down onto the table, and all of a sudden, an oriole quickly flew down onto the table, gently pecking at the copper coin before picking it up with its beak. It then looked up at the daoist priest with a pair of bright and intelligent eyes that were no different from a human's.

The daoist priest sighed, "Go. This is not the place for you."

The oriole departed in a flash.

The daoist priest swept his gaze over his surroundings, and in the end, his eyes settled on the tall archway in the distance. He just so happened to be facing the plaque that read "unmatched aura", and he mused, "What a pity."

He then added, "If I could take this outside to sell it, surely it would fetch at least 800 to 1,000 taels of silver."