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Dragon 5th is a powerful lord with incredible martial arts, and yet is wasting away from a fatal disease. The only medicine which can cure his sickness lies in the clutches of his venomous ex-wife, Madam Lovesickness, and is guarded by 7 dangerous killers, fugitives of the martial world. To retrieve the antidote, Dragon 5th hires Liu Changjie, a skilled martial artist who loves drinking and women, but has a mysterious past. All is not what it seems in this wuxia heist story. Translated by deathblade.

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Chapter 1 – A Meeting of Legends

Part 1

Du Qi's hand rested on the table, covered by a large straw hat.

It was his left hand.

No one knew why his hand was under the hat.

**

Of course, Du Qi had more than one hand. In his right hand he held a piece of hard bread. His body and the chunk of bread were very similar; dry, cold and hard.

He sat in a restaurant called Heavenly Fragrance.

Food and wine were on the table in front of him.

However, he didn't touch them, didn't even take a drink. He only slowly gnawed on the hard piece of bread that he had brought.

Du Qi was a cautious person, and he didn't want anyone to hear that he had been poisoned to death in a restaurant.

According to his calculations, at least 770 people in Jianghu [1] wanted to kill him. And yet, he still lived.

It was evening, before dusk.

Outside in the busy streets, a galloping horse appeared. It sped down the street, knocking over people, vendor stalls, and wheelbarrows before stopping in front of the restaurant. [2]

The person on the horse was lean and supple, and had a long sword hanging from his waist. As soon as he saw the sign "Heavenly Fragrance," he leaped from the saddle, body spinning, and flew up into the restaurant.

The restaurant burst into commotion, but Du Qi remained motionless.

When the large, sword-bearing man caught sight of him, his muscles visibly tightened; he let out a long breath before striding forward.

He didn't greet Du Qi. Instead, he leaned forward and lifted up the hat that was on the table, just a bit. He looked underneath for just a moment, and his ruddy face suddenly became pale. "Yes," he muttered, "it's you."

Du Qi didn't move, didn't even open his mouth.

The man drew his sword, which glinted as he slashed at his left hand.

Two bloody fingers dropped onto the table, a pinky finger and a ring finger.

Cold sweat dripped like rain down the man's pale white face, and with a hoarse whisper he said, "Is this enough?"

Du Qi didn't move, didn't even open his mouth.

The large man gritted his teeth and again raised his sword.

This time, a bloody hand fell onto the table. "Is this enough?" he asked.

Du Qi finally looked at him, then nodded his head and said, "Go."

The man's face was contorted with pain; nonetheless he let out a long breath and said, "Thank you very much."

Without another word, he staggered out of the restaurant.

The large man's movements carried great strength, and his martial arts were clearly very high. How could it possibly be that

after merely looking under Du Qi's hat, he was willing to cut off his own hand and then offer thanks?

What secret lay under this hat?

No one knew.

**

It was dusk.

Two people hurried into the restaurant. They wore silk outfits and looked like lords of some sort.

Catching sight of them, many people in the restaurant stood and bowed, faces filled with reverence.

Within 250 miles, there were few people who didn't recognize the "Golden Whip, Silver Blade, Duan Clan Elites," Duan Jie and Duan Ying. Even fewer people would risk being impolite to them.

The Duan brothers didn't greet anyone, not even Du Qi. They merely approached the table and looked under the hat. Their faces paled.

Exchanging a glance, they said, "Yes, it's him."

Duan Jie placed his hands at his sides, bowed and said, "Welcome, sir. Do you have any instructions?"

Du Qi didn't move, didn't even open his mouth.

Because he didn't move, the Duan Clan Elites also dared not move, and were forced to stand there awkwardly.

Two more people entered the restaurant. They were "Jinx Sword" Fang Kuan and "Invincible Iron Fist" Tie Zhong Da. Just like the Duan brothers, they lifted up the straw hat and looked under, then immediately bowed and asked "Do you have any instructions?"

There were no instructions, so they too stood silently. With no instructions given, no one would dare leave.

These people were all mighty heroes of the martial world [3], why, after merely looking under the hat for a moment, would they display such fear and veneration?

Could it be that underneath the hat was concealed some terrible magic?

**

It was after dusk.

Lanterns illuminated the restaurant.

The lantern light shone on the faces of Fang Kuan and the others, which dripped with sweat. Cold sweat.

No instructions had been given by Du Qi, so one might think they would be at ease.

But looking at their expressions, it seemed they expected something terrible to happen at any moment.

Night had fallen, and the stars were out.

Outside of the restaurant, in the darkness, there suddenly arose the sound of a whistling bamboo flute, piercing and shrill, like the wail of a ghost.

The facial expressions of Fang Kuan and the others changed yet again, their pupils contracting.

Du Qi didn't move. Therefore, they didn't move.

Suddenly, a booming sound erupted from the rooftop, and four holes appeared.

Four people floated down, strapping men, each over seven feet tall and bare-chested, their blood-red pants gathered at the ankles and secured at the waist by shining gold belts. Strapped to their belts were strangely-shaped machetes, hilts crafted from shining gold.

These four muscular men landed on the floor as lightly as cotton, and instantly assumed positions guarding the four corners of the restaurant.

Their expressions were nervous, and in their eyes could be seen an indescribable fear.

At the same moment that everyone in the restaurant laid eyes on the men, there suddenly appeared another person.

This man wore a golden crown and a brocaded golden silk robe. His waist was encircled by a golden belt, upon which was hanging a golden machete. His ivory-colored face was as round as the moon.

Even though the Duan Clan Elites and Fang Kuan were sharp-eyed martial arts masters, they were unable to see how this person had entered the restaurant, whether it was down from the roof or in through the windows.

However, they did know who he was.

The South Sea Millionaire, Golden Crown King of the Golden Mountain, Prince Wu Ji.

Even if one hadn't seen him before, a look at his clothing and impressive air should be enough to be able to deduce his identity.

Du Qi didn't move, didn't even look at him.

Prince Wu Ji stepped forward, lifted up the hat, and looked underneath. He let out a breath and said, "Yes, it is you."

At first his expression had been very nervous, but now he wore a comfortable smile. He suddenly unclasped his wide golden belt and from within produced eighteen smooth, sparkling pearls.

Prince Wu Ji placed the pearls on the table, surrounded by the belt, and with a smiling bow said, "Is this enough?"

Du Qi didn't move, didn't even open his mouth.

In the darkness, the sound of the bamboo flute became more and more urgent, nearer and nearer.

Prince Wu Ji's smile seemed forced as he took the golden crown off his head, a crown trimmed with eighteen pieces of verdant jasper.

He placed the crown on the table and said, "Is this enough?"

Du Qi didn't move, didn't even open his mouth.

Prince Wu Ji threw down his golden machete, and urgently barked, "Is this enough?"

Du Qi didn't move.

Brow furrowed, Prince Wu Ji said, "What more do you want?"

Du Qi suddenly said, "I want the thumb of your right hand!"

With the thumb cut off, the right hand could neither wield a blade nor throw daggers!

Prince Wu Ji's face distorted.

The whistling of the bamboo was even more urgent, even more near; the sound was like needles piercing the ear.

Prince Wu Ji gritted his teeth, extended his right hand and stuck out the thumb, then snapped, "Blade!"

One of the strapping, shirtless fellows in the corner drew his blade. There was a flash of gold as it flew across the room and then spun back into the man's hand.

A bloody thumb landed onto the table.

Prince Wu Ji's face was green. "Is this enough?"

Du Qi finally nodded his head and looked at him, "What do you want?"

Prince Wu Ji said, "I want you to kill someone."

"Kill who?"

"The Ghost King."

"Yin Tao?" asked Du Qi.

“Yes.”

Du Qi said nothing more, and did not move.

Fang Kuan, Tie Zhong Da, the Duan Clan Elites stood by pale-faced.

The name “Ghost King” Yin Tao was in itself enough to shake their souls.

Suddenly the blowing bamboo changed into the sound of a mourning woman, or a blind person playing music in the night.

In a low voice, Prince Wu Ji said, “Extinguish the lamps!”

The restaurant was brightly lit by at least twenty lamps.

The four bare-chested men waved in unison, and a golden light shone as the energy from their blades flew about, extinguishing the lamps in an instant.

Darkness filled the restaurant, but suddenly, dozens of lanterns sprang to life outside.

The lamplight was a sickly green color, floating on the wind quietly like foxfire.

Prince Wu Ji gasped: “The Ghost King is here!”

**

The night wind cut sharply and the sickly green lamplight shone on the people present. All of them had terrified, distorted expressions on their face, as if they were souls recently expelled from the depths of hell.

Within the lingering, mournful whistling of the bamboo, there suddenly burst forth a cold, evil laugh. “Correct! I have arrived!”

Long haired, with a face like wax, the Ghost King wore a long, white linen robe and was tall and thin like bamboo. He flew into the room and stood there swaying back and forth eerily.

His eyes were a diseased green color, and they flashed as he stared at Prince Wu Ji. With a sinister laugh, he said, “I already told you, you’re dead!”

Prince Wu Ji laughed coldly. “Actually, you are dead!”

“Me?”

“You shouldn’t have come here,” Prince Wu Ji replied. “Now that you have, you’re dead!”

“Who here could possibly kill me?”

“Not me,” Prince Wu Ji admitted.

“Well then? Who?”

“Him!”

“Him” was Du Qi, of course.

Du Qi still hadn’t moved, even his expression hadn’t changed.

Ghost King Yin Tao’s sickly green eyes stared at him. “You can kill me?”

The answer was simple: “Yes!”

Yin Tao laughed loudly. “What are you going to kill me with? Don’t tell me you’re going to use that crappy hat!”

Du Qi didn’t say a word. He just stretched out his right hand, and slowly lifted up the straw hat.

**

What was under the hat?

There was nothing under it, except a hand.

A left hand.

The hand was long, with seven fingers.

**

It was a rough hand, like a seaside rock that since ancient times has been pounded by the ocean waves.

When he saw the hand, Ghost King Yin Tao suddenly looked like he himself had seen a ghost. "7 Killers!"

Du Qi didn't move, didn't open his mouth.

Yin Tao said, "I didn't come looking for you. It would be best for you to mind your own business."

"It is my business."

"What do you want?" asked Yin Tao.

"For you to leave!" replied Du Qi.

Yin Tao's foot twitched. "Fine. Because it's you, I'll leave."

"Leave behind your head, then you can go!"

Yin Tao's pupil's contracted. "My head is right here, why don't you come and take it?"

"Why don't you deliver it me?" replied Du Qi.

Yin Tao laughed a shrill laugh.

As he laughed that shrill laugh, his body flew toward Du Qi like a specter.

Ahead of his body shot twelve pulsing green flashes of light.

Du Qi waved the straw hat, and the green lantern light that previously filled the air suddenly disappeared. At this exact moment, a long, jade-green sword appeared in Yin Tao's hand, stabbing toward Du Qi.

The sword flew through the air, with bizarre slashing movements, but only the glinting of the green handle was visible, making it impossible to see the exact direction from which the blade stabbed.

And yet, Du Qi's hand had already clawed forward.

Within the sickly green shine generated by Ghost King's attack, there was a long, gray, seven-fingered hand, clawing up.

The sword's shadow spun, and the hand's shape changed in kind. The hand attacked, seven moves in a row, and suddenly a "ding" sounded out, whereupon the flashing of the sword disappeared. The sword in Ying Tao's hand was now half a sword.

The sword light flashed again, heading toward Du Qi's hand.

But Du Qi had already sent the broken half of the sword flying back; it was embedded deeply in Ying Tao's throat.

The speed of the sword was indescribable. The movement of the hand was also impossible to see clearly.

The bystanders only heard a miserable gurgling, and the sound of Ying Tao dropping to the ground.

There was no sound, no light.

Outside the restaurant, the lanterns were all extinguished, and there was darkness everywhere.

A deathly silence, a deathly darkness.

Even the sound of breathing was absent.

After a period of time, Prince Wu Ji's voice could be heard: "Thank you very much."

Du Qi said, "Leave. And take Ying Tao with you!"

"Yes."

After that, the sounds of footsteps could be heard hurrying down and out of the restaurant.

Du Qi's voice again spoke out, "You four leave, too. Leave your weapons behind."

"Yes!" The four men responded in unison, dropping their weapons onto the table. A whip, two blades, and the Jinx sword.

"Remember," Du Qi said, "next time you bring weapons into my presence, you will die."

No one spoke a word. The four men left quietly.

It was silent again in the darkness. After a period of time, the light of a lantern sprang forth.

The lantern was in the hand of a person who had previously been drinking alone in the restaurant. All the other customers had departed, he had not.

He appeared to be an amiable, middle-aged man with a friendly smile. He looked at Du Qi. "One hand, seven killers," he said. "It really lives up to its reputation."

Du Qi ignored him, not even looking at him. Instead, he took the weapons and treasures from the table and placed them into a hemp bag, then slowly made to leave.

"Please, stay a bit," called the middle-aged man.

Du Qi turned his head. "Who are you?"

In a humble voice, the man replied, "I'm Wu Bu'ke." [4]

Du Qi laughed coldly. "Are you also looking to die today?"

Wu Bu'ke responded, "I have orders to deliver a message to you."

"What message?"

"There's someone who wants to meet Master Du."

With an ice-cold voice, Du Qi said, "It doesn't matter who wants to see me, they should come in person."

"But, this person ..."

"They can come to see me. You go tell them this, and also tell them the best thing is to come crawling. Otherwise they will leave crawling."

Without another word, he began walking down the stairs.

Wu Bu'ke was still smiling. With the same humble voice he said, "I will definitely take Master Du's message back to Lord Dragon Fifth." [5]

Du Qi suddenly stopped and turned his head again, and there was emotion on his stony face. "Dragon Fifth? The Dragon Fifth from San Xiang?"

Wu Bu'ke smiled and said, "Is there some other Fifth Dragon?"

Du Qi replied, "Where is he?"

"He'll be at the Heavenly Fragrance Pavilion in Hangzhou, on July 15."

Du Qi's face was covered with a very strange expression, and he suddenly said. "Ok, I'll be there."

Part 2

Gongsun Miao's hands were definitely not on the table.

His hands very rarely left the inside of his sleeves, as he was loath to let others see them.

Especially the right hand.

**

Gongsun Miao's voice was not very strong. He looked like an ordinary person, and wore ordinary clothes.

This was intentional, as he didn't want to attract attention.

But the person sitting across from him was quite opposite; he attracted a lot of attention. The clothing he wore was of the finest quality, clearly custom tailored. The ring on his finger was worth at least a thousand pieces of silver and was made from Han Dynasty jade. His hat was trimmed with pearls the size of lychee [6] fruits.

It wasn't just his attire that attracted attention. He was extraordinarily thin, with an unusually small head and a large, aquiline nose. As such, his friends called him "Big Nosed Hu." People who weren't his friend called him "Big Nosed Dog."

Actually, his nose was quite similar to a dog's, as he had the ability to smell things that the average person couldn't smell.

This time, he had caught the scent of something rarely seen in the world, a priceless luminescent pearl.

His voice was very low, his mouth nearly touching Gongsun Miao's ear as he spoke. "You've never seen this luminescent pearl, so you can't imagine how wonderful it is."

Gongsun Miao's lips twisted, "I don't even want to think about it."

Big Nosed Hu said, "When it's dark, it doesn't just glow, it glows brightly! If you have it in a dark room, you don't even need a lamp."

"I don't read," said Gongsun Miao coldly. "And if I did, I would prefer to use a lamp. Oil and candles aren't exactly expensive."

Big Nosed Hu's face had a bitter expression as he said, "But if I don't get my hands on that pearl, I think I'm going to die."

"That's your issue. If you want it, just go and get it."

"You know I can't get it," said Big Nosed Hu bitterly. "The pearl is hidden in an impregnable fortress. Only you could get in. And as for the iron safe it's stored in, only you could pick the lock. Other than you, there's no one in the world who could possibly get it."

"No one else?"

"We've been friends for thirty years, correct?"

"Correct."

"Are you really willing to see me dead on the side of the road?"

"Of course not."

"Then you definitely have to help me steal the pearl."

Gongsun Miao was silent for a while, before suddenly pulling his right hand out from his sleeve. "Have you ever seen my hand?"

There were only two fingers on his hand. The middle, ring, and pinkie fingers had all been cut off.

Gongsun Miao said, "Do you know how my pinkie finger was cut off?"

Big Nosed Hu shook his head.

Gongsun Miao continued, "Three years ago, I stood in front of my parents and wife and cut it off, a symbol of my vow to never steal again."

Big Nosed Hu waited for him to continue.

"But one day, I caught sight of eight beautiful horses carved from white jade. My hands started itching, and that night I couldn't help but take the eight white jade horses."

Big Nosed Hu said, "I've seen those horses before."

"My parents and wife saw them too," Gongsun Miao responded. "They didn't say a single word. The next day they began packing all their belongings to leave. They said they would never again have dealings with me."

"So to get them to come back, you cut off your ring finger?"

Gongsun Miao nodded his head. "At that time, I firmly resolved to never steal again. But ..."

Two years after that, he stole again.

That time, what he stole was an enormous lucky Bok Choy statue, carved from a single piece of white jade. After catching sight of it, he thought about it day and night, and couldn't sleep for several days. In the end, he couldn't bear it anymore and stole it.

"Stealing is a kind of sickness," Gongsun Miao said bitterly. "Catching it is more frightening than catching smallpox."

Big Nosed Hu poured some wine into Gongsun Miao's cup.

Gongsun Miao glumly continued, "My mother's health was not very good; when she found out that my old sickness had resurfaced, she became so upset that she passed away. My wife was so angry that she bit my middle finger off in one bite and swallowed it, blood and all."

"So that's why you only have two fingers left on your hand," said Big Nosed Hu.

Gongsun Miao let out a long sigh and slowly placed his hand back inside his sleeve.

Big Nosed Hu said, "But, even though you only have two fingers on your hand, it's still more dexterous than all the other five-fingered hands in the world. If you don't use it ever again, wouldn't that be a huge shame?"

"We've been friends for thirty years, and you've saved my life before. But I also know that you owe a huge debt to someone, and the creditor demands the pearl as repayment of the debt. He knows that you will come look for me to help you, and told you that if you don't get the pearl, your life will be forfeit." He sighed again. "I know all these things, but I still can't help you."

Big Nosed Hu replied, "You've really made up your mind this time, haven't you?"

Gongsun Miao nodded. "Other than stealing, I would do anything for you."

Big Nosed Hu suddenly stood up. "Okay," he said, "let's go."

"Go where?"

"I won't ask you to steal it. But, there's no harm in just going to have a look, right?"

**

The wall was fifty feet tall and five feet thick, and the top was covered with flowering plants.

Very few people could surmount this wall. But for Gongsun Miao, it would be easy.

Big Nosed Hu said, "You can really get over?"

"If it was twenty feet taller," he replied calmly, "it would still be no problem."

"The pearl is kept inside a room called the 'Iron Library.' Other than the people guarding the door, no one else is inside, because it's assumed that no one can get over the wall."

Gongsun Miao couldn't help from asking: "Are the walls really made from iron?"

Big Nosed Hu nodded. "There are windows in the wall, but they are only one foot wide and nine inches tall. At the most, you could stick your head through."

Gongsun Miao laughed. "It's big enough for me."

After all, his bone-shifting technique was one of the martial world's long-lost arts.

Big Nosed Hu said, "After getting inside, you would still have to open the iron safe before you could get the luminescent pearl. It's said that the safe's lock was personally designed by the Tangram Kid. The only key is kept by the master of the house, and no one knows where he will hide the key from day to day."

Gongsun Miao calmly replied, "Just because the lock was created by the Tangram Kid, it doesn't mean that it can't be picked."

"You mean you've picked it before?"

"No. But there isn't a lock in the world that I can't pick. This I know."

Big Nosed Hu looked at him and laughed.

"You don't believe me?" asked Gongsun Miao.

Big Nosed Hu laughed again. "I believe. I really do believe. I think we need to get out of here."

"Why do we need to go?" It seemed like Gongsun Miao didn't want to leave.

Big Nosed Hu sighed. "Because if you get the impulse, you'll definitely go in to steal the pearl. If you couldn't get into the room, or couldn't pick the lock, you would have to come out empty-handed. It would be a big embarrassment, and it would be my fault."

Gongsun Miao laughed coldly. "Trying to goad me into doing it won't work. I don't fall for those kinds of tricks."

"I'm not trying to goad you," said Big Nosed Hu. "I'm just trying to get you to leave."

"Of course I'm going to leave. I'm not going to stand in this dark alley all night am I?"

Continuing to laugh coldly, he walked forward a few steps, then suddenly stopped. "You wait here for me. I'll be back in one hour at the most."

The words barely out of his mouth, he had already flown twenty feet into the air and landed on the side of the wall. Climbing up like a gecko, he reached the top in a flash, then disappeared.

Big Nosed Hu face had a satisfied smirk on it. Old friends always know the weaknesses of old friends.

Even though he was pleased with himself, it was still difficult to wait.

He had just begun to feel worried when suddenly from the top of the wall could be seen the flash of a human figure. Gongsun Miao floated down and landed in front of him.

"Did you get it?" Big Nosed Hu asked excitedly. He was nervous.

Gongsun Miao didn't open his mouth, instead grabbed Big Nosed Hu and ran, making several turns before stopping in the darkness of a small alley.

"I knew you wouldn't be able to get it," Big Nose Hu sighed.

Gongsun Miao glared at him and then suddenly opened his mouth. He didn't spit out a single word, but rather, a very large pearl.

A glowing, luminescent pearl.

The light was both soft like moonlight, and glittering like starlight. The entire alley was filled with its brightness.

Big Nosed Hu's face flushed with excitement as he grabbed the pearl and shoved it into his garment. Despite being concealed in his clothing, its light was still visible on their faces.

Suddenly, someone laughed in the darkness. "Superb. Gongsun Miao's hands really are unparalleled."

The person stepped out of the shadows. He appeared to be an ordinary, middle-aged man, with a happy smile on his face.

Big Nosed Hu saw him, and his face changed. He moved forward, the pearl grasped in his two hands. His throat tight, he said, "The item is already in hand. Can my debt be considered paid?"

It turned out this was the creditor, and yet strangely, he didn't seem anxious to collect his debt. In fact he didn't even glance at the luminescent pearl.

Could it be that what he wanted wasn't the pearl after all?

What did he want?

"I am Wu Bu'ke," he said humbly, smiling at Gongsun Miao. "The debt was my only option to have a chance to see Mr. Gongsun's marvelous hands at work. Actually, the debt is a trifling matter. I neither want nor need it."

Gongsun Miao's face fell. "Then what exactly do you want?"

Wu Bu'ke said, "I was especially sent here to invite you to go meet someone."

"Unfortunately, I have no desire to see anyone. I'm very shy."

Wu Bu'ke laughed. "No one who meets Lord Fifth Dragon needs to feel shy. He never forces anyone do anything difficult, and he never says anything to embarrass anyone."

Gongsun Miao had already begun to walk off. He stopped and turned his head. "Lord Fifth Dragon? You mean Fifth Dragon from San Xiang?"

Wu Bu'ke laughed again. "Don't tell me there's another Fifth Dragon in the world?"

Gongsun Miao's face had a strange expression. It was hard to tell whether it was amazement, excitement, or dread.

"Lord Fifth Dragon wants to meet me?"

"Very much so."

"But he is like a divine dragon from heaven. No one knows his whereabouts. How could I possibly find him?"

"You don't need to go looking for him. He'll be at the Heavenly Fragrance Pavilion in Hangzhou, on July 15."

Gongsun Miao didn't need to consider for even a moment. He immediately said, "Okay, I'll be there."

Part 3

Shi Zhong stretched out his hand and picked up a handful of peanuts. [7]

When other people grabbed a handful of peanuts, they would grab about thirty. When Shi Zhong grabbed a handful, it contained seventy.

His hand was three times larger than the average person's hand.

On the peanut vendor's stand was a sign that read: "Five-Spice Peanuts, two coins per handful."

He threw thirty coins onto the stand and grabbed fifteen handfuls of peanuts. Soon the stand was almost completely empty.

The young girl selling peanuts started to cry.

Shi Zhong laughed and dumped all the peanuts onto the ground, then strode off.

He didn't really like to eat peanuts, but he liked making other people cry.

He seemed to be able to cause mischief at any time, unable to allow others to live peacefully.

At the "Mysterious Sublimity Temple" on the top of a nearby mountain, there was an extremely heavy bronze ritual cauldron. It was said that it weighed thousands of pounds, and that dozens of the strongest men around couldn't think of a method to move it.

One early morning, everyone was shocked to find the giant bronze cauldron in the exact middle of the street.

Clearly, the cauldron did not move itself.

In the whole world, if there was anyone who could move the cauldron, it had to be Shi Zhong.

Therefore, everyone went looking for him.

With such a giant cauldron in the middle of the street, it was impossible for horses and carts to pass through, and business was at a standstill.

The people begged Shi Zhong to take the cauldron back.

He ignored them.

Only after everyone began beseeching with tears did he finally laugh loudly and step out onto the street. Grasping the cauldron with his enormous hands, he let out a loud breath and shouted, "Heave!"

He lifted the enormously heavy cauldron into the air as if it were a feather.

At that exact moment, a voice from the crowd said, "Shi Zhong, Lord Dragon Fifth is looking for you."

Shi Zhong immediately flung the cauldron to the ground, and, seemingly oblivious to anything else, walked forward ten steps. Looking around, he said, "Well, where is he?"

"He'll be at the Heavenly Fragrance Pavilion in Hangzhou, on July 15."

Part 4

It was July 15th, and the moon was full.

At the Heavenly Fragrance Pavilion in Hangzhou, it was business as usual. It was almost time for the dinner rush, yet there wasn't an empty table to be found.

But today was different. Every table was full, both upstairs and downstairs, yet all the customers were strangers; the usual clientele were all refused entry.

In fact, even Heavenly Fragrance's best customer, Hangzhou City's renowned Master Ma, couldn't get a table.

Master Ma's face was flushed, and he was about to lose his temper. When Master Ma lost his temper, it was definitely not enjoyable.

Heavenly Fragrance's proprietor hurried forward and bowed respectfully with hands clasped. Apologizing profusely, he promised to provide a complimentary meal comprised of the best dishes, as well as 50 fresh hairy crabs, delivered directly to Master Ma's residence. Then he leaned forward and quietly whispered into Master's Ma's ear.

Master Ma's brow furrowed, and without a word, he spun around and left, followed by his retinue.

The proprietor had just let out a sigh of relief when another group of people arrived. It was the Hangzhou 10,000 Victories Armed Escort Agency's "10,000 Victories Golden Blade" Zheng Fanggang, accompanied by a group of armed escorts. They wore colorful clothes and rode powerful horses.

Head Escort Zhang was not as reasonable as Master Ma. "If all the tables are full, make some people leave."

He waved his hand dismissively at the proprietor as he prepared to go up the stairs to the second floor.

On the stairs suddenly appeared two people, blocking his way.

They were young men, delicate looking, almost pretty, wearing white stockings. Their hair was pitch black, unadorned by any sort of hat, and very long. Their waists were cinched by thin, silver belts.

How unexpected that people would be willing to block the path of Head Escort Zhang!

The 10,000 Victories Armed Escort Agency's most highly ranked fighter, "Iron Palm" Sun Ping, was the first to step forward. "Do you want to die?" he snapped.

One of the youths, who wore a green colored robe, smiled and said, "No, we don't want to die."

Sun Ping responded, "If you don't want to die, then get out of the way so these great masters can enter."

"They cannot enter."

"Do you know who they are?"

"No, I don't." The green-robed youth continued to smile. "I only know that today, it doesn't matter if you are a great master, a normal master, or an apprentice, the best thing for you is to stay away."

"And what if the great masters demand to enter?" Sun Ping replied angrily.

"If they step one foot onto the stairs," the young man said calmly, "the living masters will quickly become dead masters."

Sun Ping howled and leaped forward, his "iron palm" already stretched out.

His five fingers were flat as they shot forward. His iron sand palm technique was clearly quite exceptional; the hand move extremely fast.

It shot forward, the wind generated by the palm powerful, and sharp as a blade.

The green-robed youth smiled. Suddenly, his hand shot forward as well, chopping at Sun Ping's wrist.

Sun Ping had begun making his name at 17 years of age, climbing the ranks from initiate to full escort and winning hundreds of fights in the process. He was no fool. As it turned out, his initial move was a feint! His stance changed as his wrist dropped, and his hand shot toward the green-robed youth's abdomen.

This was the deadly strike of a killer; he clearly didn't shy from taking lives.

But the green-robed youth's move was faster. Almost the same instant that his hand shot forward, his two fingers had already reached Sun Ping's throat.

With a puffing sound, the two fingers stabbed like swords into the jugular.

Sun Ping's eyes bulged, and the muscles in his body convulsed. His body appeared to lose control of itself as tears, mucus, saliva, blood, urine, even fecal matter oozed out from every orifice. He made no miserable sounds as one might expect; he merely collapsed to the ground.

The green-robed youth slowly pulled out a snow-white handkerchief, and carefully wiped the blood from his hand. He didn't cast a single glance at Sun Ping.

The armed escorts stared blankly, looking about to vomit.

They had all killed before, and had all seen people be killed, but seeing this, their stomachs shrank. A few couldn't endure, and emptied their stomachs.

The young man slowly folded up the handkerchief. "You still haven't left yet?" he asked blandly.

His martial arts were frightening, but if they left now, how could the 10,000 Victories Armed Escort Agency ever show their faces in Jianghu again? From amidst the armed escorts, there were already two who were getting ready to leap forward and fight.

Before stepping a foot onto the stairs, they'd already placed one foot in the grave. [8]

Zheng Fanggang stretched out his hand and blocked their way.

He'd noticed something very peculiar.

Even though the restaurant was filled with strangers, there was something they all shared in common.

Not a single person wore a hat of any type, and everyone's hair was tied by a slender, silver-colored ribbon.

There was blood splashed all over the stairs, but not a single customer had turned a head to look.

Zheng Fanggang's breath was forced as he said in a low voice, "Friend, may I ask, what is your honorable name? Where are you from?"

The green-robed youth smiled, "You don't need to know. Knowing just one thing is enough for you."

"What's that?"

"Outside the restaurant are the leaders of the Seven Great Sword Schools, and the heads of the Five Great Martial Sects. But even they can only stand outside. If they take a single step inside, they will die."

Zheng Fanggang's face twisted. "Why?"

"Because," replied the green-robed youth, "there's someone inside who is waiting to treat some guests. Other than those three guests, he doesn't want to see anyone else."

Zheng Fanggang couldn't help but ask, "Who is this person?"

"You shouldn't need to ask that question. You should be able to figure it out on your own."

Zheng Fanggang's face became pale white. "Don't tell me it's ... him?" he asked hoarsely.

The young man nodded. "Yes, it is."

Zheng Fanggang turned to leave, accompanied by the armed escorts.

As they walked off, one of the escorts quietly asked, "Who is it?"

Zheng Fanggang didn't respond at first. He let out a long sigh, and finally said, "He lives among the clouds in heaven, and he is the greatest hero in the world."

He sat in the upper floor of the restaurant in an elegant private room, on a wide bench.

His face was pale white, his body thin and haggard, and in his eyes he carried an unspeakable exhaustion.

He appeared to be not only tired, but also physically weak, even sick. Despite the heat of the day, the bench he sat on was covered with a colorful, spotted leopard fur, and his legs were concealed by a blanket of Persian felt. It was impossible to tell what material the felt was made from, but it glowed with a silvery light.

He himself seemed to lack any bit of health or color whatsoever, and in fact appeared to have some sort of chronic illness. It looked as if he was weary of life, and that he had completely lost hope and faith in his own existence.

Standing tall and majestic behind him was a man with silver hair and a ruddy face, aged, but seemingly as powerful as a deity. This man was clearly in the winter of his life, yet his body seemed to be filled with the energy of a fierce predatory cat. His eyes shined with a brilliance that could shock a person's soul, and would prevent most people from even daring to look in them.

Yet, his attitude toward the sickly young man was extremely respectful. Anyone who witnessed this level of respect would never guess that in former years he had subdued all under heaven, and had stared down his nose in disdain at Jianghu. With his one-hundred pound iron hammer, he'd swept through the southern seven and northern six provinces, and defeated all the greatest of the outlaws. He had become one of the greatest masters of the martial world, had survived a hundred battles without a single defeat. He was the "Lion King" Lan Tianmeng.

In addition, there was another man in the room, robed in green, with white stockings, face expressionless. A middle-aged man with graying temples, he was currently preparing tea for the sickly youth.

His every move was made with extreme precision, as if he was afraid of making the slightest mistake.

The tea that came out of the teapot was scalding hot; he held the teacup with both hands, carefully tasting the tea to check its temperature. He continued to hold the cup until the tea had cooled some.

The sick young man accepted the tea, and carefully took a sip.

His hands were devoid of color, the fingers long and delicate, and it seemed as if even holding a cup of tea was an exertion.

And yet, he was the greatest hero under the heavens, Dragon Fifth.

**

There was no one else in the room, and no one entered.

Dragon Fifth let out a light sigh and said, "I haven't waited for anyone in at least five or six years."

"Correct," said Lan Tianmeng.

"And yet today I've been waiting for over an hour."

"Correct."

"Last time I had to wait, I think it was for Magistrate Qian."

"And he won't be making anyone wait ever again."

Dragon Fifth sighed lightly. "He died very miserably."

No one would wait for a dead person.

Lan Tianmeng said, "In the future, no one will wait for Du Qi and the others, either."

"That is a matter for the future."

"For now, they can't die?"

"They can't."

"You absolutely must use them to handle this matter?"

Dragon Fifth nodded his head and said no more. It seemed he had decided that too much had been said, that he was too tired. He wasn't a person of many words.

He was also the type of person that was willing to listen, but did not wish to hear too much. If he wasn't willing to open his mouth, other people usually shut theirs.

The faint aroma of tea filled the room. Outside was very quiet. Even though there were more than twenty tables filled with people, not one word could be heard.

The recently replaced room curtain, now made of green fabric, suddenly parted, and a waiter entered. He wore a short-sleeved blue jacket and his hair hung down. Claspd in his hands was a lidded, blue and white porcelain vessel.

Lan Tianmei frowned and said, "Get out of here."

The waiter didn't leave. In a humble voice he said, "I'm here to serve some food."

"Who asked you to serve food?" said Lan Tianmei angrily. "The guests aren't here yet."

The waiter suddenly laughed, then calmly said, "I'm sorry to say the three guests won't be coming."

Within Dragon Fifth's weary eyes suddenly shone forth an expression as sharp as a blade. He stared at the young man's face.

His face was round, with a sincere smile, and even though there were wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, his eyes were still young. They carried a youthful innocence and purity.

Anyone could see that he was a soft-hearted individual with a good temper, a person who liked to make friends, and who cared for children.

Any woman who married a man like this would not suffer at all, and would never have any regrets.

Dragon Fifth starred at him, and after a while, slowly asked, "You're saying the guests aren't coming?"

The waiter nodded. "They definitely won't be coming."

"How do you know?"

The waiter didn't respond. Instead, he placed one hand on the blue and white porcelain bowl, set it down carefully on the table, and then slowly lifted off the lid.

Dragon Fifth's pupils suddenly shrank, and a strange smile appeared on his lips. "This looks like a great dish," he said slowly.

The waiter smiled. "It's not just a great dish, it's an expensive one."

Dragon Fifth had to agree. "Definitely extremely expensive."

This dish actually couldn't be eaten. In the bowl was neither mountain pheasant and bear claw soup, nor shark fin soup, nor humpback grouper stew, but instead... three hands.

Three human hands!

**

The three hands were neatly arrayed within the blue and white porcelain bowl. One very large hand, and two others, a left and a right hand.

The large hand was larger than the average person's hand by three times. The left hand had two extra fingers, and the right hand was missing three.

In the entire world, there was no dish that could contain any ingredient as expensive as these three hands. Even if the dish was filled with jasper and gold and pearls, it still would be lacking. In fact, no one could truly estimate the value of these three hands.

Dragon Fifth obviously recognized the three hands. He couldn't help but quietly sigh, "It appears they really won't be coming."

The waiter smiled. "But, I have come."

"You?"

"Even though they haven't come, my coming is the same thing."

"Oh?"

The waiter said, "They definitely weren't friends of yours."

"I don't have friends," responded Dragon Fifth, coldly.

His eyelids drooped. He appeared to be very tired and lonely.

The waiter seemed to understand the mood he was in and said, "Well, if you don't have friends, then you must not have enemies, either."

Dragon Fifth looked at him again. "You aren't stupid."

"If you invited them here, it must be to accomplish some great task."

"You really aren't stupid!"

The waiter laughed. "So, here I am. Whatever they could do, I can do too."

"What those three could accomplish together, you can accomplish alone?"

"I've been looking for something to do."

"Splitting light and catching shadows, one hand seven killers." Dragon Fifth gazed at the left hand in the bowl. "Do you know how many people this hand killed? Do you know how quickly he could kill people?"

"No, I don't."

"The Miracle Hand Thief, nothing can be hidden safely." Dragon Fifth fixed his gaze on the right hand, which was missing three fingers. "Do you know how many rare treasures this hand stole? Do you know how nimble and dexterous it was?"

"No."

"The Giant Spirit Palm, power to lift a thousand pounds." Dragon Fifth glanced again at the third hand. "Do you know how mystically strong this hand was?"

"No, I don't."

Dragon Fifth laughed coldly. "You don't know anything, and yet you think you can accomplish what these three could?"

"I only know one thing."

"What's that?"

The waiter's calm reply was, "I know that my hands are outside of this bowl, and those three are inside!"

Dragon Fifth head lifted, and he gazed at the waiter. "Is it because of you that their hands are inside the bowl?"

The waiter laughed again. "If one wants to sell something, they should first provide something for the customer to look at."

Dragon Fifth's eyes shined sharply again. "What do you want to sell?"

"Myself."

"Who are you?"

"I'm surnamed Liu, as in willow tree." It was a strange surname. "My given name is Changjie. 'Chang' as in long, 'jie' as in street."

"Liu Changjie!" exclaimed Dragon Fifth. "What a strange name."

"Many people have asked me why I picked such a strange name," said Liu Changjie. "It's because I like long streets." He continued, laughing, "I always thought, if I could be a very long street, lined on both sides with willow trees, with all types of shops on either side, then every day, all different types of people would walk on my body; young girls, married women, little kids, even old grandmothers..."

His eyes appeared to be that of a child imagining some fantasy scene, a strange and beautiful fantasy. "Every day I would

watch these people strolling happily across my body, chatting under the willow trees, buying things in the shops. Wouldn't that be such an interesting thing? Much more interesting than being a person."

Dragon Fifth laughed.

For the first time a smile fell across his face, and he laughed. "You are a very interesting person." As soon as the sentence was out of his mouth, his smile disappeared. "Help me kill this very interesting person!"

Lan Tianmeng had been standing like a rock behind him, but as soon as the word "kill" was spoken, he leapt into action.

The instant his hand stretched out, his entire countenance changed to that of a fierce male lion. Except, he was faster and more nimble than a lion.

His body spun, and he was in front of Liu Changjie, the five fingers of his left hand curled into a claw, striking toward the chest.

Anyone could see that this attack could rip apart a person's chest and tear out their heart and lungs.

Liu Changjie sidestepped, avoiding the claw. His movement was ingenious and extremely fast.

Surprisingly, Lan Tianmeng had anticipated this evasive maneuver. The five fingers of his right hand straightened, and a "hand blade" chopped down, slicing toward the artery on the right side of Liu Changjie's neck.

This second move was not only lethal, it had never been evaded by a single enemy.

After the age of 40, "Lion King" Lan Tianmeng had rarely used this second stance when seeking to kill an enemy.

The power of Liu Changjie's defensive move was depleted, there was no way for him to exert any more effort defensively, and no way for him to change his movement.

The Lion King was sure he wouldn't need to use the third stance to complete the kill.

He definitely didn't need to use the third stance. Because he suddenly noticed that Liu Changjie's hand was beneath his arm. If he continued to chop down, his arm would definitely strike Liu Changjie's hand. The elbow joint was soft and brittle, and if Liu Changjie's finger, hooked like a phoenix eye, struck the elbow, the joint would be shattered.

He would not court that type of danger. His hand stopped in mid-air, and in that exact moment, Liu Changjie dashed out of the room.

Lan Tianmeng didn't make a follow-up attack, because Dragon Fifth had already stretched out his hand to prevent him, and said, "Come back in."

When Liu Changjie entered the room again, Lan Tianmeng was again standing like a rock behind Dragon Fifth. The green-robed, middle-aged man with white stockings stood in the far corner of the room, not moving a muscle.

"You said I'm a very interesting person. This world doesn't have very many interesting people in it." Liu Changjie sounded very bitter. "Why do you want to kill me?"

"Sometimes I like to tell lies," said Dragon Fifth, "but I don't like to be lied to."

"Who lied to you?"

"You did!"

Liu Changjie laughed. "Sometimes I like to hear lies, but I never tell them."

"The name 'Liu Changjie,'" said Dragon Fifth. "I've never heard it before."

"I've never really been a famous person."

"Du Qi, Gongsun Miao, Shi Zhong. They are all famous names, and you defeated them."

"So, you think that I should be famous?"

"I think that you are lying."

Liu Changjie laughed. "I'm thirty years old this year. If I was seeking fame, I would be dead on the floor right now."

Dragon Fifth gazed at him, and a smiling expression could be seen in his eyes. He understood what Liu Changjie meant.

Seeking fame took a lot of hard work; practicing martial arts also took a lot of hard word. Not very many people could do both things at the same time.

Liu Changjie did not appear to be an extremely intelligent person, so he could only select one of the two options.

He had chosen to practice martial arts. Therefore, he was not famous, but still alive.

His words were not necessarily easy to understand, but Dragon Fifth understood them, so he lifted a finger and gestured at the chair in front of him. "Sit down."

Not very many people got the chance to sit in front of Dragon Fifth.

Liu Changjie didn't sit down. "Are you getting ready to kill me?"

Dragon Fifth said, "Interesting people are not common, and useful people even less common. Yet you are both."

Liu Changjie laughed. "So you're getting ready to buy me?"

"You really want to sell yourself?"

"I'm not a famous person," Liu Changjie replied. "And I have nothing else I can sell. But when a person reaches thirty years of age, it's hard to avoid the desire to enjoy life."

"For people like you, there should be many opportunities to sell yourself, why did you come looking for me?"

"Because I'm not stupid. Because the price I want is very high. Because I know you can afford the price. Because ..."

"These three reasons are enough!" interrupted Dragon Fifth.

"But these three reasons aren't the most important."

"Oh?"

"The most important is that I not only want to make a large amount of money, I also want to accomplish something great. If someone wants Du Qi and the others to accomplish some task, that task is obviously very important."

On Dragon Fifth's pale white face, there once again appeared a smile. He lifted his hand and said, "Please, sit."

This time, Liu Changjie sat down.

Dragon Fifth said, "Bring wine."

[1] Jianghu literally means "lakes and rivers", and is the sub-community of China in which Wuxia stories are set. Jianghu is made up mostly of martial artists who are usually congregated in sects, clans, disciplines and various schools of martial arts. It is also inhabited by others such as nobles, thieves, beggars, priests, healers, merchants and craftsmen.

[2] The literal translation is: "there were many people on the street, when suddenly a horse galloped urgently, knocking over three people, two vendor's tables, and a wheelbarrow."

[3] The specific word being used here is 武林 wu lin, which refers to the martial artist sub-community of Jianghu.

[4] He uses a title to address himself which means "my humble self." There's no real equivalent that I can think of in English, so I'm changing the translation a bit. He speaks in a very humble and formal tone.

[5] Lord Dragon Fifth's name in Chinese is 龙五公子. It means that he is from a family with the surname "Lóng" (dragon), and that he is ranked 5th among the brothers. Furthermore, 公子 gōngzǐ is a title for you men that implies that they come from a rich or noble family. So, the literal translation would probably be something like "Young Master and 5th brother of the Dragon (Long) Family."

[6] In Chinese it actually says his hat is trimmed with pearls the size of longan fruit. But I'm pretty sure most westerners aren't familiar with longan, as opposed to lychees, which are more common. Longan and lychee are generally the same size, so I think it's an appropriate choice.

[7] Shi Zhong's name in Chinese is 石重 shí zhòng. The first character means stone or rock, and the second character means heavy, so his name literally could be translated as "heavy stone."

[8] The translation is completely different from the original Chinese, but I think it carries the same meaning and sounds cool. I couldn't think of a good way to translate the original Chinese directly, and have it sound cool. The original basically is like, "The bowl of rice they were about to eat, was prepared with life-risking rice." Something like that. Sounds cool in Chinese, but pretty silly in English.

[9] His name 柳长街 could be literally translated as Long Street Liu.

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Chapter 2 – Injury of the self-inflicted nature

Part 1

The cups were tall and ancient, filled with mellow, thirty-year old wine.

The green-clad, middle-aged man poured six cups.

Dragon Fifth said, “You alone can accomplish a task set for three people. You should also be able to drink the wine of three.”

Liu Changjie replied. “This is good wine. I could drink thirty cups!”

His alcohol tolerance was high, and he drank quickly.

And got drunk.

People who have a high alcohol tolerance but drink quickly, also can get drunk easily.

Suddenly, he slipped off the bench as if it were made from slick mud.

Dragon Fifth crouched next to him and stared, as if he were meditating.

The fragrance of wine drifted throughout the room, and outside it was very quiet.

After a very long time, Dragon Fifth suddenly said, “Ask.”

Lan Tianmeng immediately approached. Grabbing Liu Changjie by the hair, he poured half a pot of wine onto his face.

Sometimes wine makes drunk people sober.

“What is your surname?” said Lan Tianmeng. “What is your given name?”

“I’m surnamed Liu. Given name Changjie.” It seemed Liu Changjie’s tongue was swollen to twice its normal size.

“Where did you grow up?”

“Jinan Prefecture, Yang Liu Village.” [1]

“Who taught you martial arts?”

“I taught myself.” Liu Changjie giggled. “No one is good enough to be my master, and I have the Book of Heaven.”

This wasn’t all just drunk talk.

In the world, there were many secret martial arts manuals that had been lost for ages, then were suddenly discovered again.

Lan Tianmeng continued: “Have you mastered all the techniques of this martial art?”

“I’ve studied enough. I’m not stupid.”

“Who sent you here?”

“I sent myself. At first I was thinking of killing Dragon Fifth.” He suddenly smiled. “If I killed him, then I would be the most famous person under heaven.”

“It seems that you’re unable to kill him, after all.”

“I’m not stupid.” Liu Changjie continued. “Being the second most famous person under heaven is good too ... He asks me to sit, asks me to drink, he must also be able to see my ability.”

Lan Tianmeng wanted to continue questioning him, but Dragon Fifth waved his hand. “That’s enough.”

“What should I do with him?”

Dragon Fifth's face was once again filled with a weary expression. "He's completely drunk," he said coldly.

Lan Tianmeng nodded, and suddenly punched Liu Changjie in the ribs.

Part 2

Starlight glittered and the full moon was like a large block of ice.

Liu Changjie was suddenly woken by a sharp pain, to find himself hanging like a wind chime from the eaves of the Heavenly Fragrance pavilion.

The late night wind of July carried a sharp chill.

The cold wind cut across his body like a knife.

His clothes were ripped to shreds, so badly that it looked like his bones must be broken. His mouth dripped with blood and with bile, sour and bitter.

His body was the same, completely covered with blood and vomit. He looked like a stray dog that had just been severely beaten.

The Heavenly Fragrance Pavilion's lamps had long been extinguished, and the shop across the street had shuttered its front entrance..

And Dragon Fifth?

Who knew his whereabouts? No one ever knew.

There was no light. No people. No sound.

The long street was filled with trash, and in the darkness of the night it seemed ugly, stupid and broken, just like Liu Changjie as he hung from the eaves of the building.

If you put yourself up for sell, and receive a severe beating in return, what feeling would you have in your heart?

Liu Changjie suddenly summoned all the power in his body to shout out, "Dragon Fifth, you son of a b*tch! You ..."

He used every bad word he knew to curse Dragon Fifth as loudly as possible. On this late, silent night, anyone within ten streets could clearly hear his curses.

Suddenly, the sound of clapping could be heard from very far away, and a laughing voice: "Great cursing! Excellent cursing! Really f*cking excellent cursing!"

The sound of laughing was accompanied by the sound of galloping horses. Three horses dashed urgently down the long street, and came to a sudden stop under the eaves of the building.

The leader of the small group looked up at Liu Changjie and laughed. "It's been a long time since I've heard anyone willing to curse that son of b*tch. You simply must keep cursing him. You definitely can't stop!"

He had eyebrows as thick as a sword, and a beard like a dragon's. He had a wild appearance, but his eyes were the eyes of a very intelligent person.

Liu Changjie stared at him and said, "You like me cursing that son of a b*tch?"

The bearded fellow laughingly replied, "I love it!"

"Ok. Help me down, and I'll keep cursing him."

"I specifically came to help you down."

"Oh?"

"After hearing your cursing, I came immediately."

"Why?" asked Liu Changjie.

With an air of pride, the bearded man said, "Because other than me, there's no one willing to help someone who Dragon Fifth hangs from the eaves."

"You know me?"

"I didn't know you before, but as of now, you're my friend."

"Why?"

"Because as of now you are Dragon Fifth's enemy. Any enemy of Dragon Fifth is a friend of mine."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Meng Fei," responded the bearded man. [2]

"You're Iron Guts "Meng Chang," Meng Fei?"

The bearded man looked up at him. "Correct. I'm the Meng Fei who's not afraid to die."

Other than people who don't fear death, who would be willing to oppose Dragon Fifth?

**

Liu Changjie sat there, feeling like a sticky rice dumpling [3], wound up tight, unable to release his emotions.

Meng Fei sat across the table, looking at him. Suddenly he stuck out his hand, thumb raised up, and said, "Great! Really, a true man!"

Liu Changjie smiled bitterly. "Getting beaten up counts as being a true man?"

"Considering that you were almost beaten to death by that son of a b*tch and still had the guts to curse him. Well, yes you're definitely a true man!" Meng Fei slammed his fist onto the table. "I should crush those bastards to death one by one."

"Why don't you?" asked Liu Changjie.

Meng Fei sighed. "Because I'm not good enough."

Liu Changjie laughed. "You not only have guts, you're honest, too."

"I don't have any other good qualities, except that I have the guts to oppose Dragon Fifth."

"It's strange."

"What's strange?"

"Why hasn't he come to kill you?"

Meng Fei laughed. "Because he wants to display his tolerance and show his amazing benevolence. Let people know that he won't even deign to recognize a person like me. He's really just a son of a b*tch."

"Actually," said Liu Changjie, "he can't be a son of a b*tch, because he can't even compare to a dog."

Meng Fei laughed. "Right! Completely correct! I have to drink to that!"

Laughing, he called for wine and continued: "You can recover here from your injuries. I've already prepared two of the best types of medicine for you."

"One of them is wine?" asked Liu Changjie.

Meng Fei laughed loudly. "Absolutely! It doesn't matter who you are, it's always beneficial to have a cup of nice wine."

He looked at Liu Changjie and shook his head. "But under these circumstances, a cup of wine won't help. You need at least three hundred cups to have any positive effect."

Liu Changjie couldn't stop laughing. "Other than wine, what other good medicine is there?"

Meng Fei didn't respond. He didn't need to.

People had begun to bring wine into the room. Six women; six young, beautiful women.

Liu Changjie's eyes lit up.

He loved beautiful women, and there was no way to hide it.

Meng Fei let out a loud laugh. "I'm sure you understand. It doesn't matter who you are, it's always beneficial to have a good woman."

Liu Changjie laughed. "But under these circumstances, a good woman won't help. At the least, six are needed."

Meng Fei looked at him and then let out a sigh. "You're not only honest, you also have guts.

"Oh?"

"To deal with six beautiful women is probably harder than dealing with Dragon Fifth."

**

Meng Fei was completely correct.

Wine and women really were good for Liu Changjie. His injuries recovered even more rapidly than imagined.

Meng Fei was completely incorrect.

Liu Changjie might have problems dealing with Dragon Fifth, but he was definitely a master at dealing with women.

He wasn't just good at it, he was a professional.

At this point, Meng Fei and he were good friends. They were the happiest when they had women and wine at hand, and curses for Dragon Fifth on their lips.

And an audience.

All the people in this place were enemies of Dragon Fifth. Only people who had suffered losses at his hand, yet escaped death, would be invited by Meng Fei here, to be entertained with the finest wine and women, then sent away with travel expenses covered.

The two characters in the nickname "Meng Chang" came from this practice. As for the "Iron Guts" nickname, it simply meant that he didn't fear death. Only people who didn't fear death would dare to oppose Dragon Fifth.

Much wine was imbibed, and the cursing proceeded with vigor.

It was already late at night. [4] Those who were only listening were tired, but those who were cursing Dragon Fifth were filled with energy.

Eventually, there were only two people left in the room, and they had already drunk enough wine for ten people.

Liu Changjie suddenly asked Meng Fei, "Were you also beaten up by him?"

Meng Fei shook his head. "Never."

"Did he kill your son? Steal your wife?"

"No."

"So why do you hate him so much?"

"Because he's a son of a b*tch."

Liu Changjie was silent for a moment. "Actually, he isn't really a son of a b*tch."

Meng Fei laughed. "I know. He doesn't even compare to dogs."

Liu Changjie was silent again, but then laughed. "Actually, he is a little bit better than dogs."

Meng Fei stared at him for a long moment. Then he reluctantly agreed. "Maybe a little better. But at the most he's only a little better."

"At least he's a little smarter than a dog."

Meng Fei agreed reluctantly. "There are definitely some dogs in the world that are not as smart as him."

"After all," said Liu Changjie, "A person like 'Lion King' Lan Tianmeng is willing to be his lackey; it shows that even if he isn't a great person, he at least is willing to treat people well sometimes. Otherwise, no one would be willing to work so hard for him."

"He didn't treat you well," said Meng Fei coldly.

Liu Changjie sighed. "Actually, it's not a big surprise. I'm just a stranger, and he had no idea who I was. How could he know whether or not I could really help him with his task?"

Meng Fei suddenly slapped the table and jumped up. Staring at Liu Changjie, he shouted, "What's that supposed to mean!? He beat you half to death, and you're suddenly talking about going to work for him again!?"

"I'm just thinking," said Liu Changjie calmly. "Maybe there was a reason he treated me like that. He doesn't seem like a completely unreasonable person."

Meng Fei laughed coldly. "Don't tell me you want to go see him again, and ask him why he beat you?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

Meng Fei stared hatefully. "Leave!" he roared. "Get the hell out of here! Leave through the back door. The faster you get the hell out of here, the better!"

Liu Changjie stood up and headed toward the door in the back of the room.

The doorway was narrow, and the door had been closed this whole time. On the other side was not a courtyard as expected, but instead, an exquisitely decorated private room. There was no other door in the room, not even anything that looked like a door.

But, inside, there were two people.

**

Dragon Fifth reclined on a leopard skin couch, resting with eyes closed. The green-robed, middle-aged man with white stockings stood over a small, red clay oven, warming wine. Lan Tianmeng was nowhere to be seen.

As soon as Liu Changjie opened the door, he caught sight of them.

He was neither afraid nor startled. This astonishing turn of events seemed to come as no surprise to him.

Dragon Fifth opened his eyes and stared at him, and the corners of his mouth twisted into a smile. "Now I know why you're not the least bit famous," he said.

Liu Changjie stood there listening.

"Practicing martial art requires a lot of time and effort," Dragon Fifth continued with a smile. "And women are the same. You're good at both things. How could you have time and energy for anything else?"

Liu Changjie laughed. "There are even other things I can do well that you don't know about."

"Such as?"

"Drinking."

"You can definitely drink a lot."

"But, I don't get drunk very quickly."

"Oh?"

"Today I've had much more to drink than the day I met you. And today I'm not the least bit drunk."

Dragon Fifth suddenly stopped laughing. A look as sharp as a blade suddenly filled his eyes as he stared at Liu Changjie.

Liu Changjie stood there quietly, not avoiding his gaze.

"Sit," said Dragon Fifth. "Please, sit."

Liu Changjie sat.

"It seems I've underestimated you," said Dragon Fifth.

"It's not that you underestimated me. You didn't trust me, that's all."

"You're a stranger."

"So you needed to investigate my background. See if I was telling the truth."

"You really aren't stupid," said Dragon Fifth.

"If what I said was true, it's still not too late to use me. If what I said wasn't true, then it's still not too late to kill me. After all, I've been in your grasp this whole time."

"Oh?"

"Meng Fei saving me," said Liu Changjie, "was obviously arranged by you. His arrival was far too coincidental."

"What else do you know?"

"I know that a person like you would definitely need a few enemies like Meng Fei. Enemies can do things for you that friends can't do... At the least, they can hear about things your friends would never hear about."

Dragon Fifth sighed again. "It seems you are anything but stupid. You're actually quite intelligent."

Liu Changjie did not deny it.

Dragon Fifth continued, "If you knew about my relationship with Meng Fei all along, then you must have also decided a long time ago to come looking for me."

"If not, then why would I wait here for so long?"

"So you were pretending to be drunk that day?"

"As I said, my alcohol tolerance is really high."

"But," said Dragon Fifth icily, "you made one mistake."

"You think I shouldn't have admitted that just now?"

Dragon Fifth nodded his head. "A smart person would not only pretend to be drunk, they would also pretend to be confused. One person finding out the truth about your deception would be too much, and your life wouldn't continue for very long."

Liu Changjie laughed. "Of course I have some good reasons for telling you."

"Like what?"

"You coming back for me indicates that you investigated me, found out that what I said was true, and are prepared to use me."

"Keep going."

"The matter you wanted Du Qi and the others to handle, it was obviously something very important. You definitely would not want to use a confused drunkard to handle it."

"You're trying to convince me that you are capable of helping me accomplish this task, aren't you?"

Liu Changjie nodded. "When you reach thirty years of age, if you haven't accomplished something to shock the heavens and rock the earth, you might never be able to."

Dragon Fifth gazed at him, his pale white face covered with a smile. "Can you have a few more drinks with me?" he asked suddenly.

Part 3

The alcohol arrived, already heated.

Dragon Fifth lifted his cup slowly and said, "It's not often that I drink wine, and not often that I toast others. But today, I must toast you three times."

Liu Changjie forced himself not to let any sort of excited or thankful expression appear in his eyes. It was definitely not easy

for Dragon Fifth to toast him like this.

Dragon Fifth drank the first cup and smiled. "I drink to you because I'm very happy. I truly believe that you can accomplish this task."

"I'll devote myself to it entirely."

"This task... It's not only very important, it's also very dangerous, and extremely confidential." His expression once again was very serious. "The way I treated you that day ... it wasn't only because I didn't trust you."

Liu Changjie listened attentively.

Dragon Fifth continued, "I couldn't let anyone know that you are working for me. So I needed everyone to believe that we are enemies, that you hate me to the bones."

This was definitely mutual deception, the trick of self-inflicted injury. [5]

Liu Changjie understood, but was unsure about one thing: "So even Lan Tianmeng doesn't know all the details?"

Dragon Fifth nodded. "The fewer people who know the details, the less danger you will be in, and the greater your chances of success."

Liu Changjie suddenly realized that Dragon Fifth only truly trusted two people: the green-robed middle-aged man with white stockings, and Meng Fei.

"I said before," Dragon Fifth continued, "I don't have friends, and I don't have enemies."

"Yes, you said that before."

"Except, it's not true." Dragon Fifth had a very strange expression on his face. "I not only have a friend, I also have an enemy, and a wife."

Moved, Liu Changjie said, "Who are they?"

"Not they. Her."

Liu Changjie didn't understand.

Dragon Fifth went on, "My friend is also my enemy, and also my wife. They are all the same person."

Liu Changjie was even more confused, and couldn't help but ask, "Who is she?"

"Her name is Qiu Hengbo."

Liu Changjie was shocked. "You mean Madam Autumn?" [6]

"You've heard of her?"

"I'm afraid there isn't a person in Jianghu who doesn't know who she is."

"However," said Dragon Fifth coldly, "you definitely didn't know that she was my wife."

"Was?"

"Even though we aren't husband and wife any more, we are still friends."

"But ..."

Dragon Fifth's pale face had turned ashen. "Her hatred for me long ago seeped to the very marrow of her bones. In fact, the reason she married me was because she hated me."

Yet again, Liu Changjie was confused, but he wasn't willing to ask more questions. When dealing with people like Dragon Fifth, it was generally better not to understand too much about their secrets.

Dragon Fifth had closed his mouth, and his eyes as well. He did not seem willing move, let alone say anything further. After some time had passed, he asked, "Have you seen my martial arts?"

"No."

"Do you know how powerful they are?"

"I don't."

He closed his eyes again and then slowly stretched out a hand.

It was pale white and very delicate.

His hand made a slow clawing gesture in the air.

Suddenly, miraculously, from within the small red clay oven, a burning hot coal lifted up and flew into his hand.

His hand slowly closed over the red-hot coal.

Moments later, he spread his hand to reveal nothing but grey ash.

"I'm not just showing off my martial arts," Dragon Fifth said coldly. "I'm illustrating two important points."

Liu Changjie asked no questions. He knew Dragon Fifth would make his point.

As expected, he went on. "Even though I have mastered this type of martial art, I still can't handle this matter myself."

He gazed at the cold ash in his palm. "The feelings we had for each other, are like this dead ash, impossible to rekindle."

**

This was definitely a strange and interesting affair, and the two people involved completely without equal.

One was the greatest hero under heaven, the other was the most beautiful and mysterious woman in the world.

Even though Liu Changjie didn't know a lot about the world, he had long ago heard legends of Madam Autumn.

There were many legends.

And all the stories about her were just like she herself, mysterious and beautiful.

All the heroes in Jianghu wanted to lay eyes on her. But no one ever laid eyes on her.

Therefore, many people had taken to calling her "Madam Lovesickness," because of the countless men who pined after her.

Who would ever have imagined that "Madam Lovesickness" would turn out to be Dragon Fifth's wife?

And who could fathom the mystery and strangeness of their relationship?

She was not only his wife, but also his friend. But why was she his enemy?

They were the ideal couple, and one would think they would love each other dearly. How could they ever divorce?

There must be a complex and unusual story involved, and Liu Changjie was anxious to hear more.

But anyone who knew Dragon Fifth's method of communication knew that it was like he himself; as with a mystical dragon, if you caught sight of the head, the tail would be nowhere in sight.

Suddenly, he switched topics. "It happened a long time ago," he said indifferently. "Not very many people in the world know about it. In fact, almost no one. You don't really need to know the details."

Liu Changjie didn't let his disappointment show. After all, he was very good at controlling himself.

"You only need to know one thing," said Dragon Fifth.

Liu Changjie sat listening.

"The person I want you to go deal with is her. I need you to go to her, and retrieve an object for me."

"Retrieve?"

"If you want to use the word steal," said Dragon Fifth coolly, "I guess there's no harm."

Liu Changjie let out a breath. "Well, at the last, I need to know two more things."

“Yes?”

“Where am I going? And what am I stealing?”

Dragon Fifth answered the second question first. “You will be stealing a box.”

He motioned with his hand, and the green-robed man stepped forward.

He placed a box onto the table. It was made from gold, and the top was decorated with a delicate Dragon and Phoenix design, inlaid with jasper.

“It looks exactly like this,” said Dragon Fifth.

Liu Changjie couldn’t hold back. “What’s inside it?”

Dragon Fifth hesitated. “You don’t really need to know,” he said, “but I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to tell you. Inside the box is a bottle of medicine.”

Liu Changjie was surprised. “That’s it? Just a bottle of medicine?”

Dragon Fifth nodded. “Yes. But as far as I’m concerned, that bottle of medicine is more valuable than all the riches in the world.” He gazed sharply at Liu Changjie, and continued, “I’m sure you can tell that I’m sick.”

Of course Liu Changjie could tell. But, he also knew that this one sick person, by merely waving a hand, could have most of the healthy people in the world killed if he wished.

Seeing the expression on his face, Dragon Fifth laughed. “I know what you’re thinking. There are many sick people in the world, and among them, I am the most frightening. But when all is said and done, sick is still sick.”

Liu Changjie hesitated for a moment, then asked, “That one bottle of medicine can cure your illness?”

“Do you know the story of Hou Yi and Chang’e?” [7]

After shooting the nine suns, Hou Yi visited the Western Paradise and beseeched the Queen of Heaven to give him a bottle containing the elixir of immortality. Unfortunately, the elixir was stolen by Chang’e.

Even though Chang’e attained immortality, the price she paid was an eternity of loneliness.

“Chang’e regretted stealing the elixir, and only the deep green sea and blue heavens accompanied her in her loneliness.”

“Our story,” said Dragon Fifth, “is the same as theirs.”

He didn’t say anything more, but Liu Changjie understood.

Perhaps Dragon Fifth had some congenital condition, or perhaps he had performed fire deviation when practicing martial arts. In any case, he’d acquired some strange illness, and it tormented him like maggots gnawing on his bones.

Then finally, he had acquired some sort of mystical elixir that could cure his sickness, only to have it stolen away by his wife.

Therefore, he had sought out someone to help deal with her. And of course, he was also afraid of the information leaking out.

Dragon Fifth’s gaze was fixed on a faraway place, and the expression on his face was either pain or loneliness.

Could it be that in this story, the lonely one was not Chang’e but Hou Yi?

Dragon Fifth gradually said, “I know that after she stole the medicine, she had no regrets, and felt no loneliness. Actually, she used that bottle to force me to do many things I otherwise would never have done.”

The pain and loneliness in his eyes had transformed into a pernicious anger. “I must not hesitate any longer. I must retrieve that bottle of medicine!”

Liu Changjie couldn’t hold back any longer. “Where is it?” he asked.

“Getting it, taking something so valuable right out of her hands, is not a simple matter.”

Liu Changjie knew this already.

“She hid the box in a small cave in the Qixia Mountains. Then she found seven expert fighters, fugitives who had fled Jianghu and had no place to go, and hired them to guard the cave.”

Liu Changjie suddenly thought of the man who could kill others faster than lightning, “One Hand, Seven Assassins” Du Qi.

“Blocking the entrance of the secret room in the cave is an iron gate weighing about 1,000 pounds.”

Liu Changjie suddenly thought of the miraculous strength of Shi Zhong.

“Inside the secret room is a hidden door, and that is where the box is located. To open the door, you must first pick seven locks. The locks were crafted by the most skilled and famous craftsmen in the world.”

Liu Changjie suddenly thought of Gongsun Miao.

“The most important thing to remember, though, is that her residence is located very close to the cave. If the slightest alarm is raised, she will be there almost immediately. And once she arrives, no one in the world would be able to take the box away.”

Liu Changjie let out a breath. He suddenly understood something very important: Dragon Fifth wasn’t just afraid of Madam Autumn because of the bottle of medicine she held hostage. At least half his fear was because of her martial arts.

Her martial ability was clearly no less than that of Dragon Fifth’s.

“Luckily,” continued Dragon Fifth, “she has a very ridiculous habit: she sleeps every day from eleven in the morning until one in the afternoon, and before she sleeps she must cover every inch of her body with a special honey oil of her own manufacture.” The hateful expression once again returned to his face. “This practice takes at least one hour every day. During that time, she locks herself in her room. Even if the heavens collapsed, she wouldn’t know.”

Liu Changjie finally started to understand why they ended up divorcing.

If he had a wife who wife spent an hour every day on such a ridiculous practice, he wouldn’t be able to take it either.

Most men in the world probably wouldn’t be able to take this type of custom. Anyone would think that being forced to sleep with a wife covered in honey oil was a frightful thing.

Seeing the expression on Liu Changjie’s face, Dragon Fifth said, “It really is a disgusting thing. But that hour is the only chance you will have to make your move.”

“So,” said Liu Changjie, “I will have one hour to kill the seven fugitives, lift the iron gate, pick the seven locks, grab the box, and escape at least fifty miles away before she can start pursuing me.”

Dragon Fifth nodded. “As I said, this really is a job for three people.”

Liu Changjie sighed and laughed bitterly. “And it really does require Du Qi, Shi Zhong and Gongsun Miao, all three of them.”

“But you already destroyed them,” replied Dragon Fifth icily. “I won’t be able to find anyone like them ever again.”

Liu Changjie understood how he felt. “So I definitely must help you.”

“Are you certain you can handle it?”

“Not really.”

Dragon Fifth’s eyes narrowed.

Liu Changjie continued calmly, “It doesn’t matter what I do in my life, I never start out feeling confident.”

“But in the end, you always accomplish everything you set out to do.”

Liu Changjie laughed. “My lack of confidence is the reason I’m so cautious and careful.”

Dragon Fifth laughed. “Good. Very good. I love cautious and careful people.”

“Unfortunately, I’m not really sure what to do next.”

“Why?”

“Because I still don’t know where the cave is.”

Dragon Fifth laughed again. Smiling, he waved a hand.

The green-robed middle-aged man stepped forward and placed a bank note onto the table.

"This is worth fifty-thousand pieces of silver. Take it, and go have some fun for a few days."

Liu Changjie took it immediately.

"I only hope that you can spend all fifty-thousand within ten days."

"It won't be easy to spend it all," laughed Liu Changjie, "but I can find some women to buy houses for and the rest I can lose gambling."

"Those two plans are practically the same," said Dragon Fifth with an amused expression. "You should have no problem spending the money. Whoever takes this job, they need to relax a bit before setting out. Otherwise, they might not be able to handle the difficulties later."

"What difficulties?" said Liu Changjie indifferently. "I'm not old and useless like Lan Tianmeng."

Dragon Fifth laughed loudly.

The middle-aged man looked at him, shocked. No one had ever seen him laugh so loudly before.

But the laughing ended quickly, and once again his face was somber. "After the ten days are up, you won't have any more chances to sleep with women or drink even a drop of wine."

"I have the feeling that after ten days like this, I won't be interested in women at all for a while."

"Good. Very good. After the ten days, I'll send someone to find you and take you to the cave."

He suddenly appeared to be very weary again. He waved a hand and said, "You can go now."

Liu Changjie made to leave.

"What did you think of those six women outside?"

"They were great."

"If you feel like it, there's no harm in taking them with you."

"Are all the other women in the world dead or something?"

"No."

"If there are still other women in the world, what do I need those six for?"

Part 4

Liu Changjie left.

As Dragon Fifth watched him go, the sharp expression once again shone in his face.

"What do you think of him?" he asked suddenly.

The green-robed, middle-aged man with white stockings stood tall and straight next to the door. After a long time, he responded, "He's a very dangerous person."

He spoke every word very slowly, as if he had carefully deliberated before opening his mouth.

"A blade is also very dangerous," replied Dragon Fifth.

The green-robed man nodded. "A blade can be used to kill others, but it can also cut your own hand."

"And if the blade was in your hand?"

"I never cut myself."

Dragon Fifth laughed dully. "I like to make use of dangerous people, just as you like to make use of a swift blade."

"I understand."

"I knew you would..."

This time when he closed his eyes, he didn't open them again.

It seemed he had fallen asleep.

Liu Changjie was long gone from Meng Fei's residence.

**

He didn't see Meng Fei, and he didn't see the six women.

As he walked along, he didn't even see the shadow of another person. Meng Fei clearly didn't really like to see people off, and Liu Changjie didn't like to be seen off.

He walked slowly along the road, looking very calm and relaxed.

He looked exactly like a person should who has fifty-thousand pieces of silver to get rid of in ten days of fun.

His only problem was, what exactly was he going to do? How could he get rid of all the money?

Anyone who had this problem wouldn't feel annoyed.

Actually, everyone likes to think about what they would do if they had this problem. In fact, people who don't have fifty-thousand pieces of silver love to fantasize about the possibility.

Fifty thousand, and a ten crazy days of vacation.

Any person who thought of something like this would definitely laugh themselves awake.

**

Hangzhou was a bustling city.

And inside bustling cities, there naturally existed plenty of gambling and women. And these were two things one could definitely spend a lot of money on.

Especially gambling.

Liu Changjie first found several of the most expensive women, then got really drunk, and then went gambling.

Getting really drunk and then gambling is like hitting your head against a big rock; any winning that happens is extremely strange.

But, strange things happen all the time.

Liu Changjie unexpectedly won, earning another fifty thousand!

At first, he decided to spend the fifty thousand on five women. But the next day, he realized that each of the five women he'd found was more annoying than the next, more ugly than the next, so much so that they weren't even worth one thousand.

A lot of men are like this. Late at night, they get drunk and find a woman who is as beautiful as a goddess. Then, the next morning, they suddenly find that she's changed.

So he fled the brothel as if he was running for his life, and immediately found another. He got drunk, and then decided that he'd definitely found the right place.

The women here really were goddesses.

But the next morning, he suddenly realized that the women here were even more annoying than the women from the first place, even more ugly, so bad that he couldn't even look at them.

Later, the Madam of the brothel would tell people that from the time she started working at age 12, until the time she became the Madam, she had never encountered a more heartless customer as "that man surnamed Liu."

He really was a fickle person.

**

When Liu Changjie left the Heavenly Fragrance Pavilion, it was already afternoon time.

He had just spent eighty pieces of silver to order a table full of the restaurant's entire line of "Eight Treasures" dishes. Then he asked the waiter to place the dishes on the table and look at them. Afterwards, he paid one hundred and twenty silver and left.

He didn't eat one bite, he just glanced at the dishes. After all, it's said that rich people are often like this; they order dishes and just sit there watching others eat.

Thankfully, the previous night he lost a bit, but he still had more than seventy thousand silver left.

He suddenly thought to himself that to spend fifty thousand in ten days wasn't that easy a matter after all.

Right now spring was changing into summer, the weather was wonderful, and the sunshine was as fresh as the glance of a virgin.

He decided to head out of the city again. Maybe the cool breezes of the city outskirts would help him think of a way to spend the money.

He bought two fine horses and a new carriage, then hired a strong young driver.

He spent a very little bit of effort along with one thousand five hundred silver. Sometimes money really did help you to save time.

Outside the city, he caught sight of the distant, green mountains, their gentle curves just like the breasts of a virgin.

He told the driver to bring the carriage to a stop underneath a willow tree. He got out and started to walk along the lakeshore. A light breeze blew along the surface of the lake; the rippling water looked like the navel of a virgin.

It seemed that anything beautiful caused him to think of women. He laughed in his heart.

He thought to himself, "I really am a womanizer."

As he started to think along these lines, he suddenly caught sight of a woman ten times more beautiful than the sunlight, the distant mountains, or the rippling lake.

The woman was standing in a small courtyard, feeding chickens, wearing green robes. The front flap of her garment was folded up and full of rice; her plump, soft mouth pursed as she made clucking sounds at the chickens.

He had never seen a more exquisite and delicate mouth.

It was hot, and her garments were thin, the collar loosened to reveal a delicate white neck. It would cause anyone to think of other parts of her body. And that was not to mention her bare feet, which were adorned only with wooden clogs.

"Her clogged feet as white as hoarfrost, no need to wear tabi socks." [8]

Liu Changjie suddenly thought that whoever wrote these two lines of poetry really didn't understand women. Who would ever use the word "hoarfrost" to describe a woman's foot? Much better to describe them as milky, like white jade, or as bright as a freshly peeled boiled egg.

From within the house suddenly emerged a man. He was older, and his face seemed hateful, especially his eyes, which stared at the woman's plump, round posterior. He suddenly stepped forward and rubbed her rear end, then tried to pull her into the house.

The woman chuckled and shook her head, pointing to the sun in the sky. She clearly was saying that it was too early, there was no reason to be anxious.

The man was obviously her husband.

Thinking about how the man would drag her into bed once it was dark, Liu Changjie suddenly had an almost uncontrollable urge to strike him square on the nose.

Sadly for anyone who would like to see such a scene, Liu Changjie was not such an irrational person. Even if he wanted to strike someone in the face in such a way, he wouldn't use his fist.

He suddenly rushed back to the city, took all the bank notes and exchanged them for silver ingots. Then he returned to the lake.

The woman wasn't feeding the ducks any more. The couple were already sitting at the gate. He was drinking tea, she was mending clothes.

Her fingers were long and delicate, if she used them to stroke the body of a man, the feeling would definitely ...

Liu Changjie couldn't endure any longer. He knocked on the gate, and without waiting for a response, pushed it open and entered.

The man stood up, glaring. "Who are you? What are you doing her?"

Liu Changjie laughed. "I'm surnamed Liu, and I came here just to visit you two!"

"I don't know you!"

Liu Changjie smiled, and produced one of the silver ingots. "But you know these, don't you?"

Of course, everyone knew what they were. The man's eyes seemed to glaze over. "That's silver. A silver ingot."

"How many ingots like this do you have?"

The man was speechless. He obviously didn't have any silver ingots. The woman couldn't help but walk over to look; her feet couldn't stop.

Things like ingots have an innate attractiveness, and even if they don't suck people in physically, they can definitely dampen most peoples' conscience.

Liu Changjie laughed. He waved his hand, and the driver immediately produced four large boxes filled with silver ingots, placing them in the courtyard.

"This here is worth fifty silver, and these boxes altogether contain one thousand two hundred ingots."

The man's eyes bulged. The woman's face was crimson and she breathed raggedly, just like a young woman whose heart raced as she caught sight of her first lover.

"Do you want these ingots?"

The man nodded immediately.

"Okay," said Liu Changjie. "If you want them, I'll give them to you."

The man's eyes seemed about to pop out of his head.

"You can take two of the boxes and go now," said Liu Changjie. "Go anywhere you want. The carriage will take you there, as long as you return in seven days." Smiling, and looking at the woman out of the corner of his eye, he continued, "The other boxes, leave here with your wife. They will all be here for you when you return."

The man's face turned crimson, and sweat began dripping down his face. He looked back at his wife.

She wasn't looking at him. Her two beautiful eyes were staring at the boxes of silver.

The man stuck out his tongue and licked his ruddy lips. He stammered, "You ... you ... what do you think?"

She bit her lip, then suddenly turned her head and ran back into the house.

The man made to follow, then stopped.

He had already been sucked in by the silver.

"You just have to leave for seven days," said Liu Changjie suddenly. "Seven days aren't a very long time."

The man grabbed an ingot from one of the boxes and bit it, so hard that his teeth almost broke.

Of course the silver was real.

"You can come back in seven days, and your wife..."

The man didn't wait for him to finish speaking. Using all the strength he could muster, he dragged a box of silver into the carriage with him.

The driver helped him with the other box.

Panting, embracing the silver, the man said, "Go! Get out of here quickly! Go anywhere, as far as possible!"

Liu Changjie laughed again.

As the carriage sped away, he lifted up the remaining two boxes of silver and carried them slowly into the house. He closed the door and bolted it.

The door to the inner room was open, the door curtain half raised. The women sat on the bed inside, biting her lip, her face as flush as a peach blossom.

Liu Changjie entered smiling. "What are you thinking?" he asked softly.

"I'm thinking that you're really a f*cking bastard. Nobody would think of something like this except a person like you."

Liu Changjie sighed, and laughed bitterly. "I just made a bet with myself. If Hu Yue'er's first sentence didn't contain the word 'f*cking,' I wouldn't look at a woman for three months."

(1) Liu Changjie's home village is "Yang Liu," the same Yang Liu he used when describing his name, which means "Willow and Poplar trees" and contains the same "Liu" as his surname.

(2) Meng Fei's name is 孟飞, same pronunciation but different character as the famous host of 非诚勿扰, Meng Fei 孟非. As it explains, he has two nicknames. 孟尝 I'm transliterating as Meng Chang, because the meaning is based on the character 尝.

(3) Here, sticky rice dumpling refers to zongzi, which are traditionally eaten during Dragonboat Festival, and are wrapped in a bamboo leaf and tied up with string.

(4) The Chinese narrative is not very clear about how much time passes at Meng Fei's during this part, but from information gleaned later, it seems that it was several days. The night it describes here is after that.

(5) This part consists of two really cool Chinese phrases. The first is 周瑜打黄盖 zhōuyú dǎ huáng gài, a story from the Three Kingdoms period, where Huang Gai lets himself be beaten by General Zhou Yu, to trick Cao Cao. This is part of the Battle of Red Cliff section of the story. The other phrase is 苦肉计 kǔròujì, which is also part of the title of this chapter. It basically means to hurt yourself to win the confidence of the enemy.

(6) The word I'm translating as Autumn actually implies a little more than just Autumn. It's a word that means "limpid Autumn water," often used to describe a woman's eyes (according to the dictionary). But that's a little bit complicated so I'm sticking with Autumn.

(7) I'm sure most people familiar with Chinese culture will know something about the story of Hou Yi and Chang'e. Here's links to wikipedia articles on them in case you're interested in learning more about the background.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hou_Yi http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chang_E

(8) The word "tabi" is actually Japanese, referring to the type of socks that have a separation between the big toe and the other toes. These type of socks existed in China too, but I'm not sure of any other word for them in English other than the Japanese word.

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Chapter 3 – Yue'er shining on Changjie

Part 1

So the woman's name was Hu Yue'er, and it turned out she and Liu Changjie were friends!

What was going on?

Could it be that they had been putting on an act the whole time?

Why would they put on such an act? And who were they acting for?

Hu Yue'er had stood up and, hand on her waist, gazed at Liu Changjie. "Let me ask you, if there really was a husband and wife who met a person like you, what would happen?"

The question seemed to stump Liu Changjie. He stared blankly for a while before finally responding, "I'm not a good person, but I really wouldn't do something so unethical."

"I didn't say you," said Hu Yue'er. "I said a person like you."

Liu Changjie laughed bitterly. "Well then, I have no idea. I never thought about it."

"The plan was thought up by you, wasn't it?"

Liu Changjie's expression suddenly became very serious. "It was all to convince Dragon Fifth that I'm a bastard. We can't let him have any suspicions, so we have to be cautious at all times. He's too powerful, and has spies everywhere."

"But just now ..."

"Just now one of his spies was here. The driver is definitely one of his men."

"How do you know?"

"I could tellt." He offered further explanation: "If that fellow was a real driver, as soon as he caught sight of two boxes of pure white silver, he would have been tempted beyond control. But, it seems that he is used to such things, and was completely unfazed."

Hu Yue'er thought for a moment, and then laughed. "I've heard you had quite the enjoyable time recently.

With a bitter laugh, Liu Changjie said, "I got my nose broken, you think that was enjoyable?"

"As long as you can have the company of women every day, getting beaten up is worth it."

Liu Changjie sighed. "Unfortunately, none of those women could measure up to you!"

"Stop trying to butter me up," laughed Hu Yue'er. "You know you can't pull a fast one on me. Until the matter is settled, you can forget about laying your hands on me."

"Not even one hand?"

"No. Starting today, I sleep on the bed, you sleep on the floor. And if you even think about trying to secretly climb into the bed during the night, I'll go tell Dragon Fifth all the details of your past."

"You're simply not human. You're a demon!" [1]

"You're just as bad, you womanizer." [2] She laughed and gave him a wink. "Actually, you're just a street, and I'm the moonlight. Moonlight can shine on millions of streets, so I guess I'm just born to mess with you." [3]

He laughed. "I always thought it was strange that you were selected to be my assistant."

She tilted her head. "Because I'm the daughter of 'Power of Hu' Patriarch Hu. And because I'm capable, clever, I understand everything, I know everything..."

"Because," interrupted Liu Changjie, "you're not just a crafty girl, you're also sexy!" [4]

It was actually quite proper to call her crafty, considering her father was known as one of the craftiest people in Jianghu.

Just hearing the name "Power of Hu" would make most people tremble with consternation.

"I also think it's strange," she laughed coldly. "Why does my father always say that only you can take on Dragon Fifth? And why do I need to help you?"

"Because," laughed Liu Changjie, "my martial arts are very powerful, I'm intelligent and capable, and I never brag or show off. But, almost no one in Jianghu has ever seen me. Furthermore, I have very few weaknesses, and lots of strengths. Clearly the old man wants me to be his son-in-law."

Hu Yue'er glared at him. "Maybe it's because you know how to shoot your mouth, and you're also full of crap."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she couldn't help but laugh loudly. But only a moment later her face was like stone. "Have you already met with Dragon Fifth?"

"Twice."

"Then why didn't you capture him? Why let such a good opportunity slip past?"

"If I was as stupid as you, and actually tried to do that, you'd be looking at a dead Liu Changjie right now."

She laughed coldly. "Don't you have really good martial arts? Don't you count as one of the greatest masters under heaven? My father and his friends are constantly singing your praises. Patriarch Wang even treats you like his own son. What reason do you have to be afraid of other people?"

"I'm not afraid of other people," he said solemnly. "I'm afraid of Dragon Fifth!"

She blinked. "Are his martial arts really as frightening as the legends say?"

"Maybe more frightening. I can only say that even counting the grandmasters of the Seven Great Sword Schools, no one exists in Jianghu who could withstand his 200 stances."

"What about you?"

He didn't respond. Instead he said, "Not to mention that he has the assistance of someone who is extremely frightening."

"Lan Tianmeng?"

"That lion is already old," he laughed, "and he's been kept in a cage for too long. He can still bite, but his teeth aren't as sharp as they used to be, and his spirit has been worn down."

Hu Yue'er's eyes turned up in thought. "It's said that Dragon Fifth has a lion, a tiger, and a peacock working for him."

"The lion is old, the black tiger has gone into retirement, and the peacock is beautiful but doesn't bite."

"So you're not talking about them?"

"No."

"Well, who then?"

"It's a middle-aged man who wears a green robe and white stockings. He seems to follow rules like a flunky, but his martial arts are deep. Profoundly deep."

"How could you tell?"

"When the lion made his move against me, the power of his palm was shocking. It was so powerful that everything in the room was shaking. But the middle-aged man just stood calmly to the side. His clothes weren't even moving."

He continued to think. "When he poured wine for me, I looked at his hand. I don't think I've ever seen such a steady hand before. The wine pot he was holding was very heavy, and he seemed to be just randomly pouring, but he poured each cup perfectly, not spilling even a single drop."

Hu Yue'er listened carefully and then sat for a while in contemplation. "Were you able to tell what kind of weapon he uses from looking at his hand?"

"I couldn't. His hand didn't have even a single mark on it to indicate that he practices martial arts."

It doesn't matter what kind of weapon a person uses, their hands would definitely develop calluses. Which in turn is not something easily concealed from a perceptive person.

"Could it be that he uses the other hand?" she muttered.

"Possibly."

"Among the left-handed masters in the martial arts world, who is the best?"

Liu Changjie laughed. "That's a question for you. Aren't you the living record book of the masters of the martial arts world?"

**

It really was one of Hu Yue'er's best skills.

She not only had a highly retentive memory, she also was extremely knowledgeable. This was probably due to the fact that her father was one of the most intelligent and well-known persons in Jianghu.

Regarding the history and stories of Jianghu, there was very little she didn't know.

"As far as famous left-handed kung fu masters go, the most amazing is definitely Qin Huhua."

"The Flower Protecting blade?" said Liu Changjie, surprised.

Hu Yue'er nodded. "It's said that the first time he killed was when he was nine years old. It was the notorious Central Plains bandit, Tiger Peng."

"Yes, I've heard the story."

"He was already famous by the time he was thirteen years old. By seventeen, he'd already defeated everyone in the Central Plains, and was called the Central Plains Number One Blade. When he was thirty-one years of age, he took over leadership of the Kongtong Sect, and became the youngest grandmaster in the history of the Seven Great Sword Schools. By that time, it was said that he had defeated over 650 masters of the martial arts world."

"There can't be many people in Jianghu who have created more of a sensation than him," exclaimed Liu Changjie.

"He became famous when he was young, and showed off his talents to the extreme. His skills were incredible, people couldn't help but admire him." Her eyes shone as she continued, "If only I'd been born a dozen or so years sooner, I definitely would have figured out a way to marry him."

"Thankfully, you weren't born a dozen or so years sooner, otherwise I would have to find him and challenge him to a fight to the death!"

Hu Yue'er rolled her eyes. "Unfortunately, the person you mentioned is definitely not him."

"Oh."

"How could someone as proud as him become somebody else's lackey? In any case, he's been missing for years, his whereabouts are completely unknown. Some people say that he traveled across the sea and became an immortal. Others say he died. But regardless of whether he's living or dead, he definitely wouldn't be pouring someone else's wine for them."

Liu Changjie let out a breath. "I really hope it isn't him. I definitely don't want to have that kind of opponent."

His voice suddenly stopped.

In the same moment that his voice stopped, his body was pressed down onto Hu Yue'er.

**

It was impossible to see his movement; who would ever think that he had such ability?

Even Hu Yue'er would never have thought it possible.

Baring her teeth and struggling against him, she said, "You pervert, I'm telling you..."

Her voice suddenly stopped, as Liu Changjie's mouth covered hers.

She could only emit sound from her nose. An experienced man knew the type of sound a woman would make in this situation.

It was a sound that, if a man heard it, all the bones in his body would become weak.

She was pushing him back, struggling, clearly wanting to hit him.

But her hands were being held down.

Her face was burning red, and her whole body was as hot as if it were on fire.

What other reaction would one expect from a healthy, mature woman being held down by a man she has feelings for?

However, at that exact moment, a banging sound rang out, and the door crashed open as someone kicked their way in.

A person charged in, carrying a horse-cutter sword in hand. [5] Surprisingly, it was the young carriage driver.

Part 2

Liu Changjie was still pressed down on Hu Yue'er's body, although his lips had left hers.

The driver stood inside the bedroom door, staring at them icily.

His posture was stable, and he gripped his sword skillfully. Anyone could see that his sword skill was anything but weak.

In his callous eyes could be seen a mocking look. "I drove in a big circle outside," he laughed. "And after all that time you still haven't gotten her in bed? Seems like you really aren't very good at handling women."

Liu Changjie replied, "I've still got plenty of time left. I'm not a little boy like you, what's the hurry?" It seemed as if he suddenly realized that he didn't need to explain himself, and his face became very serious. "Why did you come back?"

The driver's face was also serious. "To kill you!" he said.

Liu Changjie seemed shocked. "Why do you want to kill me?"

The driver laughed coldly. "I've been working for him for eighteen years, and I've been destitute the entire time. I can only afford the dirtiest brothels and most disgusting whores. I finally have a chance to hit it big. You have a problem with that?"

Liu Changjie knew who he worked for, but he deliberately asked, "Don't tell me you're also one of Dragon Fifth's men?"

"If you were the least bit perceptive," he responded stonily, "you would know what kind of person Peng Gang is."

"You mean 'Whirlwind Blade' Peng Gang?"

"I never imagined you would know anything, let alone me."

"The Five-tiger Gate-breaking Sword School's highest ranking disciple relegated to driving others in a carriage! Isn't that just too insulting?"

Peng Gang gripped his sword so hard that the veins in his hand began to pop out. His forehead pulsed as he gritted his teeth and said, "I will never again allow others to treat me like bird shit."

"So, you plan to kill me, take the silver and the woman, and flee to some distant place?"

Peng Gang's eyes fell on Hu Yue'er's dainty, gasping mouth. His eyes seemed to shine with fire. "Any man would want to have a good time with a young widow like her."

As soon as she heard the words "young widow," Hu Yue'er called out, "You ... what did you do with the man of the house?"

Peng Gang laughed maliciously. "For the kind of man who is so willing to sell his wife, dying eight times wouldn't be enough. Don't tell me you miss him?"

Before he even finished speaking, Hu Yue'er started weeping. It looked completely realistic.

Liu Changjie let out a breath, apparently unwilling to move away from her body. "This woman isn't a goddess," he muttered. "Penniless, willing to sell herself for a little silver, she's really not worth it."

"If you had any skill at all," laughed Peng Gang, "you wouldn't have been beaten half to death like a dog and hung from the eaves."

"So you think you can beat me?"

"I know what's going on. You got beaten up, then suddenly show up with all that silver!"

Liu Changjie sighed. "You really are just an ignorant kid who doesn't know a damned thing. I really couldn't bear to kill you."

"Then you might as well let me kill you!" shouted Peng Gang.

His sword chopped forward, the first stance containing five movements. The Five-tiger Gate-breaking Sword was one of the martial world's most sinister and feared sword techniques, and "Whirlwind Blade" Peng Gang's speed was anything but slow.

Liu Changjie didn't counterattack.

It seemed like he did make any move at all to avoid the blow, and yet Peng Gang's sword somehow couldn't touch him.

Hu Yue'er appeared to be so frightened that she couldn't even cry, and had rolled into a ball in the corner of the bed.

Peng Gang's move was very quick, and Liu Changjie was forced to retreat backwards toward the corner of the room. Suddenly the sword chopped up from below, seeming to come from three different directions, slicing rapidly toward the left side of Liu Changjie's neck.

This was "Heaven and Earth Inverted," one of the Five-tiger Gate-breaking Sword's killing moves.

Liu Changjie could not retreat any further backwards. In an instant, his body had slid directly up the wall, all the way to the ceiling.

A dinging sound rang out, and sparks flew in all directions. Peng Gang had mistakenly assumed the move would result in a fatality. He had used all his strength, and could not pull back the sword, which embedded itself deeply into the wall.

He wrenched the sword free, but at that exact moment a hand crashed through the wall from outside and grabbed the blade of the sword.

The wall was made from bricks, but the hand moved through it as though it were soft clay. The fingers twisted gently, and sword, crafted from fine steel, snapped into two.

Peng Gang's face lost its color, his body stiffened.

He was a worldly-wise person, but this type of martial arts he'd simply never heard of.

A cold voice rang out from the other side of the wall. "You were with Dragon Fifth for eighteen years, and you earned about seventy or eighty silver per month. But this man suddenly gets tens of thousands, and you think you know what's going on. Is that right?"

Peng Gang's face was ashen as he nodded.

The person outside obviously couldn't see him nod, so Liu Changjie called out, "He says yes!"

"But, Mr. Liu was beaten up by Grandpa Lan and then made friends with Meng Fei. Anyone who calls Meng Fei a friend is an enemy of ours. How do you know where the silver came from?"

Peng Gang hesitated, and then finally responded, "I know that Meng Fei doesn't have those kind of resources. Also, that day I saw the young master in Meng Fei's village."

"I never imagined that you were so intelligent," responded the voice insipidly, "or that you paid such close attention to details." Only someone who paid attention to detail would notice things that were invisible to others. "Unfortunately, you have done something extremely stupid."

The source of the voice was outside, but it sounded as though it was directly next to Peng Gang's ear. It continued, "Even though you're perfectly aware that Liu Changjie is one of us, you still want to kill him?"

Peng Gang lowered his head. Sweat dripped down like rain. "I made a mistake."

"Do you know what your mistake was?"

"I ... I violated the family regulations!" As the words left his mouth, it seemed as though all the energy in his body had been depleted.

"Do you know what happens to people who violate the family regulations?"

Peng Gang's face was twisted with fear. It seemed like two invisible hands were gripping his throat.

He suddenly turned, apparently making an effort to flee.

He clearly thought that the person outside couldn't see.

But it was as if the hand itself had eyes.

The hand flicked, and the half-blade flew forward in a flash, embedding itself in Peng Gang's back.

At that exact instant, four muscular men flew into the room. One of them carried a large burlap sack, into which he began stuffing Peng Gang's body.

Another carried two boxes of silver, which he deposited onto the table.

The third carried an iron tool, which he immediately used to repair the door frame so recently destroyed by Peng Gang.

The fourth carried a batch of masonry clay. He immediately set to work patching the hole in the wall.

"I guarantee that you won't be bothered again in the next seven days," said the voice outside the wall. "But you had best remember, you aren't really one of us. You have no connection to the Dragon family."

The voice faded off into the distance.

The hole in the wall was patched, the door frame was repaired, the burlap sack was wrapped up. Not even a drop of blood could be seen on the ground.

During the entire time, the four large men hadn't even glanced at Liu Changjie. And by the time the voice disappeared, so had they.

The room was quite again, as if nothing had happened at all.

These people were precise and efficient, beyond the imagination of most. But at this point, what was not beyond imagination was the fate of anyone who violated the regulations of Dragon Fifth's family!

Part 3

Liu Changjie didn't move, didn't even open his mouth.

Neither did Hu Yue'er move, nor open her mouth.

The only sound that could be heard was that of rustling tree leaves, hens clucking, and dogs barking.

It was suddenly very hot inside the room. Liu Changjie slowly unclasped the front of his garment and then lay down on top of Hu Yue'er.

Surprisingly, she didn't kick him away, but instead just stared at him with her large eyes.

It seems she finally understood how frightening Dragon Fifth truly was.

"They're gone," said Liu Changjie. "All gone."

"These seven days, they really won't come back?"

"That man doesn't seem like the kind of person who speaks idly."

"Do you know who he is?" asked Hu Yue'er. "Did you recognize the hand?"

The hand was a right hand, and on it was no vestige to indicate the person had martial arts training. However, anyone could see that if the owner of that hand wanted to kill someone, very few people in the world could offer any resistance.

"I hope I didn't mistake what I saw."

"You hope it's the green-robed man?"

He nodded.

"Why?"

"Because if it is him, it means that sometimes he's not with Dragon Fifth. When I make my move, I really hope he's not there."

"When are you going to make your move?" asked Hu Yue'er.

"I'll wait until he completely trusts me," replied Liu Changjie. "I'll wait until he presents an opportunity."

"You believe that day will come?"

"It will," replied Liu Changjie resolutely.

Hu Yue'er sighed. "I'm afraid a lot of people will have died by the time that day comes."

"You're feeling bad about Stone?"

"Stone was an honest person," she said sadly. "This was supposed to be his last assignment. When it was over, he was going to return to his hometown and start farming. He even bought some land already."

Stone was the man who had been playing the role of her husband.

Liu Changjie listened quietly. "He shouldn't have bought a house and land," he said emotionlessly. "People like us are bound to meet death at some point along the road."

"Yes, but he died so unfairly." She closed her eyes. "His kung fu is just as good as that bastard Peng Gang's. But when Peng Gang attacked, he couldn't defend himself, otherwise he would have revealed our secret. Only ... only by dying could he keep the secret safe."

"He did what he had to do," said Liu Changjie calmly. "That was his duty."

Hu Yue'er's eyes opened. "Are you saying he was supposed to die?"

Liu Changjie said nothing.

"Are you human or not!" she cried. "Do you have any heart in you at all? You ... you"

As she spoke she seemed to get more and more mad, and then suddenly she kicked Liu Changjie off the bed and onto the floor.

Liu Changjie laughed. "If you think Stone was an honest person, then you're wrong. And if you think he died at the hands of that bastard, then you're even more wrong."

He laid on the ground, looking just as comfortable as he had been on the bed. "Maybe he just let Peng Gang land a couple blows to make him think he was dead. If he really let himself get killed by that runt bastard in just one blow, then he shouldn't be called Stone, he should be called Tofu."

Hu Yue'er seemed suspicious. "You really think he's alive?"

"Do you know how important this assignment is? Do you know how much time we spent planning it? If Stone was as honest as you imagine, how could he participate?"

Hu Yue'er laughed. "I don't know about other people, I just know that you are definitely not an honest person."

"Uh..."

Hu Yue'er bit down on her lip. "You know, even if you heard someone outside earlier, you didn't need to do what you did. You were just taking advantage of the situation."

Liu Changjie laughed. "You're half right."

"You mean you had other intentions?"

After a while, he said, "I just wanted you to understand that if I really wanted to force myself on you, there's really nothing you could do about it."

Hu Yue'er rolled her eyes. "Don't tell me ... you don't want to?"

"Don't tell me you want me to try again?"

She started to blush, and began gnawing on her lip again. "You wouldn't dare!"

Liu Changjie laughed again.

Suddenly, he flew onto the bed, pressing down onto Hu Yue'er.

She gasped. "You really are a pervert!"

"But this time you intentionally seduced me. I know that you..."

Before he could finish, he suddenly flew out of the bed, slammed into the wall, and fell onto the floor, clutching his stomach. His face was pale white.

Hu Yue'er looked at him. "Yes, I was seducing you on purpose. Because I wanted you to understand that if I'm not willing, there's really nothing you could do about it."

Liu Changjie twisted his waist. It looked like he was hurt so bad that he couldn't even speak. Sweat dripped down his forehead.

Regret suddenly flashed in Hu Yue'er's eyes. "But," she said softly, "it's like you already said before. Until this assignment is finished, I ... I ..."

She said nothing more, and she didn't need to. Even an idiot should be able to understand what she was getting at.

And yet it seemed that Liu Changjie didn't understand.

He slowly reclined, lying down on the floor. Whereas before his face had been friendly and happy, now it was filled with sorrow and misery.

He said nothing. He just lay there silently for a very long time.

Hu Yue'er's heart was soft. With a calm face, she said, "I know I kicked you, but you don't have to lie on the floor like a child and refuse to get up."

He kept his silence.

"Are you really mad at me?" she asked. "Or are you just thinking?"

He sighed softly. "I was just thinking that you're father will definitely find a great man for you. Someone who doesn't do what we do, someone who isn't constantly courting death. We ..."

Hu Yue'er's expression suddenly changed. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Liu Changjie laughed emptily. "It doesn't mean anything. I just hope that you can grow old together happily, and eventually forget about me."

Hu Yue'er's face was white as a ghost. "Why are you talking like this? Didn't you understand what I was talking about just now?"

"I understood," he said with a sigh. "It's just, I don't think I can wait until that day."

"Why?" she asked.

"The day I accepted this assignment," he said dully, "I also accepted that I would die. Even if I have the chance to kill Dragon Fifth, I ... I will never have a chance to see you again."

His eyes stared at nothing, and a mournful expression filled his face.

Hu Yue'er looked at him, and from the expression on her face, it seemed that there must be needles stabbing through her heart.

Liu Changjie couldn't help but laugh again. "Regardless of anything else, if I'm able to exchange my life for Dragon Fifth's, it will be worth it. I'm a nobody, really. No family. No ..."

Hu Yue'er didn't let him finish.

She threw herself onto him, her soft, tender lips covering his....

The wind blew harder outside. [6]

**

The moon was out, and the moonlight shown in through the window onto Hu Yue'er's face. Her face was slightly flushed.

Liu Changjie glanced at her furtively, his eyes filled with joy.

Hu Yue'er gazed at the moon. Suddenly, she spoke. "I know you tricked me."

"I tricked you?"

Once again, she bit down on her lip. "You deliberately said all that stuff to soften me up. You ... you just took the opportunity to bully me. I obviously know you're not a good person, and yet somehow I let myself be fooled by you."

As she spoke, tears rolled out out. It was at this time in a girl's life when she was the weakest, and the most likely to weep.

Liu Changjie let her cry, waiting for her calm down before sighing and saying, "Now I know why you're sad. You're sad because my death is not certain."

Hu Yue'er didn't want to defend herself, but couldn't help it. "You know full well that's not what I meant."

"If you knew I was going to die, wouldn't you feel a little better?"

"But you're not going to die," she replied immediately. "You already said that you would wait until you are sure you can succeed before making your move. If you know you can succeed, who could possibly stop you?"

"If I'm not going to die, and the assignment will be completed, and you'll marry me in the end, then why are you so upset?"

Hu Yue'er seemed stumped.

She suddenly realized that Liu Changjie's laugh was repulsive—but not completely repulsively. It was a little bit cute as well.

She looked at him and sighed softly. "I know that you're feeling pretty pleased with yourself right now. Because you know that I'm going to be much more obedient from now on, since we have no choice but to get married. But if you're not obedient, then I'll make you sleep on the ground instead of with me."

Her lips were next to his ears. "Now do you understand?" she said softly.

"I understand. But," he laughed, "there's another thing I'm not clear about."

"What's that?"

He laughed bitterly. "At this point I'm not sure if it's me who fooled you, or you who fooled me."

Regardless of who fooled who, this kind of trickery would be welcomed by most people.

The days passed happily. The only sad thing was how quickly the days went by.

Seven days seemed to pass like the blink of an eye, and suddenly they had arrived at the last night.

It was the last night, and you would think it would be the sweetest.

Hu Yue'er was dressed up nicely, sitting in the living room. Normally, they would be laying in bed at this time.

Liu Changjie was looking at her. It seemed that he had been studying her for quite some while. Finally, he said, "Okay, what did I do to offend you?"

"Nothing."

"Are you sick?"

"No."

"Then what's wrong?"

"I just don't want to become a widow before I'm even married, that's all."

"There is no one who wants you to be a widow."

"Yes there is."

"Who."

"You." Her face was blank as she continued coldly, "These seven days, any time I want to talk about serious issues, you just talk nonsense. If things continue on like this, I will definitely be a widow very soon."

Liu Changjie sighed. "Serious issues don't need to be discussed with your mouth. You solve them with your hands."

"And what are you planning to do to solve them?"

"So you're acting like this tonight because you want to have a discussion?"

"If we don't discuss it tonight, I'm afraid we won't ever have another chance."

Liu Changjie let out a sigh. "Alright. If you want to talk, let's talk."

"Dragon Fifth wants you to steal a box from Madam Lovesickness?"

"Yes."

"And did you agree?"

"Yes."

"Because you want to have a chance to get close to Dragon Fifth. In order to get that chance, you need to earn his trust. And to earn his trust, you have to do this important thing for him."

"Do you have a better plan?"

"I don't." She sighed. "These past few years, we know that a lot of crimes have been perpetrated by Dragon Fifth, but we haven't been able to find a scrap of evidence."

"Even if you got your hands on some evidence, you might not be able to get your hands on him."

"So, we needed to call in the cavalry."

"And your cavalry is me."

"Therefore, if you want to get your hands on him, you first need to get your hands on evidence of his crimes."

"Therefore, I definitely have to help him."

"Are you confident you can do it?" she asked.

"A little," he replied.

"In one hour, you can kill the seven guards outside, then lift the 1,000 pound iron gate, open the three secret doors, and flee to a place where Madam Lovesickness can't find you?"

"I said that I'm a little bit confident, not that I'm completely confident."

"Do you know what kind of people those seven guards are?"

"I don't."

"What do you know about their martial arts?"

"Nothing."

"You don't know anything, and you say you're only a little bit confident. Isn't this deliberately setting me up to be a widow?"

Liu Changjie laughed. "Even though I don't know about their martial arts, I do know that you're going to tell me."

Hu Yue'er didn't seem to be amused. "Why the hell do you think I would know anything about their martial arts?"

Liu Changjie smiled. "Because you're smart and capable, and know pretty much everything that goes on in Jianghu. Also, these past several days, you haven't slept very well. You've definitely been putting a lot of thought into it."

Her face was blank, but in her eyes could be seen a little bit of warmth. "So," she said softly, "you do have a bit of a conscience after all. You finally realize how hard I've been working."

Liu Changjie walked forward and seized her waist. "I know that you treat me well," he said gently. "And so..."

Before he could finish, Hu Yue'er shoved him away. "So, you should sit down like a good boy," she said coldly. "Listen carefully while I tell you about the martial arts of those seven men. Think of a good way to deal with them, come back to me alive and don't turn me into a widow!"

Liu Changjie had no choice but to sit down. "You really know who the seven people are?" he asked with a bitter laugh.

"In recent years, the number of people in Jianghu who have been forced into fugitive status could number one or two hundred. But among them, many are either too weak in martial arts or too old for Madam Lovesickness to even glance at."

"And certainly a lot in that group have died."

Hu Yue'er nodded. "So, I've thought about it a lot, and I've come to the conclusion that the number of people Madam Lovesickness could have taken in numbers about thirteen at the most. Among those, there are seven who are the most likely candidates."

"How the hell did you figure that out?"

"Because these seven not only covet riches, they also fear death. Only men who fear death would be willing to be a woman's lackey."

Liu Changjie laughed bitterly. "I don't fear death, and yet I've already become your lackey."

She stared at him. "Do you want to know about the seven men, or not?"

"Yes, I do."

Hu Yue'er continued, "Have you ever heard of someone called 'Little Fifth Omniscient'?"

"You mean the Deflowering Bandit?"

"Fifth Omniscient" was one of the demons of the Jiangnan Temple of Licentiousness. So it made sense that "Little Fifth Omniscient" and the Deflowering Bandit were one and the same.

"Even though he is not one of the Five Gates' worst sexual predators, his Qing Gong [7] and Palm techniques are not bad. The most dangerous thing about him are his three concealed poison weapons, especially his Barkcloth Tree poison, it's extremely potent." [8]

"I heard he's a member of the Tang Family from Sichuan. Their poisoned weapon kung fu is definitely the real deal."

The Tang clan from Sichuan and their concealed poison weapons were well known in Jianghu. In their three hundred year history, few people in Jianghu had been willing to provoke them, and they were also not reluctant to offend others. The Tang Clan family regulations were very strict and well known.

"Little Fifth Omniscient" Tang Qing was definitely a member of the Tang Clan, but perhaps the worst representative of the family. If he was really relying on help from Madam Lovesickness, it must be because he was worried that the Tang Clan would try to apprehend him and punish him according to their family regulations.

"Among those seven men, you especially need to be careful of his concealed poisoned weapons. I think that before facing him, you should go to Sichuan and get the antidote to their poison."

"Sadly," said Liu Changjie with a bitter laugh, "I'm afraid even if I want it, I can't have it. It's not like they sell it."

"Then you have to take care of him first; don't give him a chance to use his poison on you."

Liu Changjie nodded. "Don't worry. I know that getting Tang Clan poison powder on your skin is extremely painful."

"For safety's sake, you should wear very thick clothes. I know you don't like the heat, but heat never killed anyone."

"I'll definitely wear a thick, cotton jacket."

Hu Yue'er finally seemed satisfied. She continued, "Among the seven, his kung fu is not the best."

"Whose is?"

"Three of them have very powerful kung fu. One is 'Ghost Meteor' Shan Yifei, another is 'Soul Seducing' Zhao, and another is 'Iron Monk.'"

Liu Changjie's brow furrowed. He had clearly heard all three of these names before.

"Iron Monk is especially dangerous," continued Hu Yue'er. "He used to be one of the Eight Great Shaolin disciples, and it's said that he practices Virgin Kung Fu. [9] He's not obsessed with money or with sex, but with killing people. The methods he uses are so inhuman that he ended up being expelled by Shaolin."

"Maybe he developed mental problems from practicing Virgin Kung Fu, and that's why he developed a taste for indiscriminate killing."

"Even if he does have mental problems, he doesn't have any problems with his kung fu. Reportedly, his Thirteen Heroes Skill has reached the level that his body is impervious to blades." [10]

Liu Changjie laughed. "Maybe because he's killed so many people, he himself has started to fear death. And because he fears dying, he decided to practice this kind of blade-resisting kung fu."

"There have been a lot of supposedly invincible people that have died under your hand, so you're not concerned about him at all, are you?"

"Precisely correct," laughed Liu Changjie.

Hu Yue'er stared at him and then sighed. "Actually, what I'm really worried about is not them."

"Who, then?"

"It's a woman."

Women are always worried about other women.

"You mean one of the seven is actually a woman?" asked Liu Changjie.

"Yes, one is a woman."

"What kind of woman is she?"

"She's a fake woman."

"Real women can't entice me," laughed Liu Changjie, "and you're worried about fake women?"

"It's because she's fake that I'm worried."

"Why?"

"You've seen lots of normal women, but as for this type of fake woman, I guarantee you've never seen the likes of her before."

Liu Changjie's eyes narrowed. He was interested in women in general, whether real or fake.

Hu Yue'er stared at him obliquely. "I know you," she said coldly. "As long as there is a pretty woman, no matter real or not, you couldn't help but be tempted."

"Ah."

"And if you get tempted, you'll be dead."

"So you want me to not look at her?"

"I want you to kill her the instant you see her."

"It seemed like just now you wanted me to go after Tang Qing first."

"Correct."

"You want me to kill two people at the same time?"

"Two won't be enough."

Liu Changjie laughed again, but this time it was devoid of mirth.

Hu Yue'er continued, "There's one more among the seven who doesn't count as human."

"If he's not human, what is he?" he laughed bitterly.

"A wild dog."

He frowned. "Invincible Li the Mastiff?"

Hu Yue'er nodded. "Because he's a wild dog, he's very hard to kill. Even if you chop a sword right into his head, you couldn't say for sure that he still wouldn't be able to turn around and bite you."

"Getting bitten by a wild dog hurts just as much as poison."

"So when you attack, you have chop his head clean off, that way he won't have any chance to counterattack."

"So it seems I need to kill three people at once."

"Three isn't too many."

"It's a pity I only have two hands," he sighed.

"You have feet too."

He laughed. "You want me to use my left hand to kill Tang Qing, my right hand to kill the wild dog, and a foot to kill the woman?"

"Like I said, you can't give them any openings. I know it won't be easy to kill three people in one shot, unless you get extremely lucky."

"You just wait and see how lucky I can be."

"Okay," she said. "Great!"

Liu Chagjie closed his eyes. "How did I ever become so lucky?"

Hu Yue'er smiled sweetly. "Your luck started improving the day you met me." She suddenly changed the subject. "Have you ever heard of a type of hidden weapon that can be shot out from your shoes?"

"I believe I have," he replied.

"And, do you wear shoes?"

"I believe I do."

"Good, then you're set."

"I'm set?"

"I just happen to own that type of weapon, and you just happen to wear shoes."

Few people have the skill to evade hidden weapons shot from shoes.

Hu Yue'er continued, "You move very quickly; if you have a weapon concealed in your shoe, killing three people at the same time won't be too difficult."

"Unfortunately, I've only ever heard of that weapon. And only one time."

"You'll be able to see it almost immediately."

"Oh? Where is it?"

"It should be on the way here already."

"You sent for someone to bring it?"

"As soon as I realized those three people were involved, I sent for it."

"You left the house?"

"I didn't leave, but a message sent by me left."

Liu Changjie stared at her.

He wasn't stupid, but he couldn't for the life of him think how Hu Yue'er had been able to send out a message.

Hu Yue'er said, "I know this place is under surveillance by Dragon Fifth. But, no matter how powerful he is, he won't prevent people from eating.

Liu Changjie still didn't understand. What did eating have to do with it?

Hu Yue'er continued. "In order to eat, you have to cook. And in order to cook, you need to light a fire..."

Finally Liu Changjie understood. "If you light a fire, there will be smoke."

"You aren't so stupid after all," she said sweetly.

Using smoke to send messages was an ancient method, and a reliable one.

Hu Yue'er fixed her eyes on Liu Changjie. Her gaze was as steady as granite, her voice as tender as the spring rain: "As long as you have a plan, and understand the method, any object will obey your commands, and do things for you. Even smoke leaving through the chimney can speak for you."

Part 4

The night was dark and quiet. From far away could be heard the yipping of dogs.

Hu Yue'er said, "Other than the hidden weapon, you will also need a sword capable of cutting off a person's head in one blow."

"Is the sword on its way?"

"For the sword, just ask Dragon Fifth. Of the thirteen most famous blades in Jianghu, he has at least seven of them."

Liu Changjie stared at her, at her chest, and said, "Do you have any other orders for me?"

"No"

"Then can we get in bed and go to sleep?"

"You can."

"And you?"

She sighed. "I should start preparing to die."

Shocked, Liu Changjie replied, "Prepare to die?"

"After you leave, Dragon Fifth definitely won't let me go free. Even if he trusts you not to divulge any secrets, he still won't leave any witnesses behind."

Liu Changjie finally understood. "Whoever he sends here to kill you, you can't offer any resistance, because you're supposed to be the wife of a farmer."

Hu Yue'er nodded and she laughed. "I might as well die by your hand."

"Die by my hand? You want me to kill you?"

"You couldn't bring yourself to do it?"

He laughed bitterly. "Do you think I'm also a wild dog who bites people?"

"I know you aren't," she responded sweetly. "And I also know you couldn't bring yourself to kill me. But..." She laughed mysteriously. "There are many ways to kill people, and many ways to be killed."

Liu Changjie didn't press further.

He didn't completely understand what she was getting at. Furthermore, he heard the sound of approaching footfalls.

The footsteps had reached the outer courtyard, and moments later, there was a knocking at the door.

“Who is it?”

“It’s me.” It was the voice of a woman, young and pleasing to the ear. “I’m here to deliver eggs.”

“Oh, it’s Ah De,” said Hu Yue’er. “You’re so anxious just to deliver a few eggs?”

“I was passing by,” she replied. “Tonight I have to go into the village to get someone.”

“Get someone? Who?”

“The old devil left yesterday morning for the village and never came back. I heard that he’s been whoring it up the whole time. This time I really...”

She stopped talking.

After she entered the room, she caught sight of Liu Changjie. She seemed surprised.

Liu Changjie was looking at her.

She was young, firm, and plump, like a ripe persimmon, fragrant and soft.

Hu Yue’er had already closed the door. She looked back at Liu Changjie and laughed. “What do you think of her?”

“Very good.”

“You want to sleep with her tonight?”

“Yes.”

He really did.

The clothes the woman wore were very thin, so much so that you could see her nipples beneath the cloth, hardening.

Did she want the same thing?

Hu Yue’er smiled. “You can take off your clothes now.

Ah De bit her lip, and then without hesitation slipped out of her clothes.

She did it very quickly.

Hu Yue’er also stripped off her clothes, just as fast.

They were both beautiful women, both young, with long, straight legs.

Liu Changjie looked at them both, and his heart sank.

He suddenly understood what Hu Yue’er had said moments ago.

“There are many ways to kill people, and many ways to be killed.”

As it turns out, she had already prepared to have this woman substitute for her in death.

Their physiques were similar, their faces as well. With a little bit of makeup, Dragon Fifth’s subordinates would never be able to tell the difference.

In truth, they wouldn’t pay very close attention to the wife of a farmer. They would only know that they were being sent to kill a woman. If this woman looked the same as the first one, they wouldn’t be able to tell.

Hu Yue’er had already begun to put on Ah De’s garments. Looking at Liu Changjie out of the corner of her eye, she said, “What are you looking at her for? Aren’t you going to carry her to the bed?”

Ah De’s face was flushed.

She clearly didn’t know the true role she was to play; she only knew that she was supposed to switch places with a woman, and accompany a man.

The man wasn’t the scary type. She clearly wanted Hu Yue’er to leave as quickly as possible.

Hu Yue'er was ready to leave. Giggling, she suddenly spun around and struck Ah De in the chest with her palm.

Ah De's mouth opened, but nothing came out. Not sound, not blood. Because Hu Yue'er had already stuffed one of the eggs she had just delivered into her mouth...

Liu Changjie watched her fall to the ground, feeling as though someone had stuffed an egg into his mouth as well. His tongue had a bitter and fishy taste on it.

Hu Yue'er sighed. "The original plan was to leave her here with you for a while, then have you kill her."

He was quiet for a long time. After a while, he quietly said, "Why did you suddenly change your mind?"

"Because I couldn't stand the expression on your face just now when you were looking at her."

"Ah."

Hu Yue'er bit her lip. "One look at her, it seemed like you couldn't wait to get your hand up her skirt."

He let out a breath. "It doesn't really matter. She was going to die sooner or later. When there is a matter as important as what we are doing, there will always be people who die along the way."

"I just hope that whoever Dragon Fifth sends to get you isn't a woman."

"If it's a woman, are you going to kill her?"

Hu Yue'er slowly put all of the eggs onto the table, emptying the basket.

On her face was a strange expression. After a while she said, "I know I'm not the first woman you've been with, but I really hope that I'm the last."

**

Some of the eggs were empty, and inside were hidden several pieces of copper machinery. When assembled together, they formed a very delicate hidden weapon, the type that could be concealed inside one's shoe.

If one exerted the right amount of pressure with the toe, poisoned needles would fly out. The poison was like that from the fangs of a green bamboo snake, the needles as sharp as a bee's stinger.

And like the heart of a woman!

"I won't sit," said Hu Yue'er. "I need to get back to the town." Carrying the empty basket, she left, smiling proudly, and then laughing happily.

The darkness outside was very deep.

(1) In Chinese when you say that someone "isn't human" or isn't a person, it's pretty insulting.

(2) He literally says that she is a "living ghost" 活鬼. After that she calls him a womanizer, using the word 色鬼, which literally translated is "colored ghost," but means lecher, womanizer, pervert. This little banter using the character for "ghost" is pretty clever.

(3) This part is funny because her name Yue'er 月儿 contains the character for moon. And don't forget that his name Changjie 长街 literally means "long street."

(4) The direct translation would be: ("Because," interrupted Liu Changjie, "you're not just a little fox, you're also a fox spirit." It was actually quite proper to call her a little fox, considering her father was the oldest old fox in Jianghu.) Calling a person a fox in this way implies that they are crafty, thus I translated it as crafty. Also, I'm sure most people are familiar with fox spirits in Chinese mythology. In this case, he's not calling her a literal fox spirit, he's just saying that she is pretty, because fox spirits tend to be super hot. Another reason why this whole passage is funny, is because she makes a big deal about her father's nickname "Power of Hu." In Chinese it's "hu li." The word for fox is also "hu li" so it's a cute play on words.

(5) Here is the type of sword that the driver is wielding: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pudao>

(6) I omitted a which to me really didn't make sense, and sort of took away from the flow of the story in English. Right after it says "the wind outside blew harder" there is an additional line in Chinese that says "the mother hen just laid a nest full of eggs..." In Chinese it implies that they are sleeping together I think, but in English it just seems silly.

(7) Qing Gong is the martial arts ability to make your body light, move very quickly, and also fly

(8) The name of the poison in Chinese is 见血封喉. This is a type of tree that is actually poisonous, and was used in ancient China to coat poisoned arrows. As for the English translation, there are a handful of names for this tree, but I picked the most simple and descriptive.

(9) Virgin Kung Fu is a real Shaolin art. Here is an excerpt from an article about it: Tongzigong, or Virgin Kung Fu, is one of the most spectacular forms of Shaolin kung fu, and yet it has no direct fighting applications. It is a fundamental building block of Shaolin practice, and yet it is too extreme for most practitioners to even begin to attempt. It is one of Shaolin's deepest meditation techniques, and yet it is the centerpiece act in almost every Shaolin theatrical show that toured the globe over the last two decades. To achieve its highest levels, tongzigong must be practiced rigorously before the body is fully matured. Once the bones are set, mastery of this discipline is unattainable. The body must be molded as it grows. Tongzi means child, boy or virgin. Gong means work. It's actually the same character as kung in kung fu (功夫), which literally means skill, art, labor or effort. To the untrained eye, tongzigong is a spectacle of contortionism, a real show-stopper on stage. But for Shaolin practitioners, tongzigong is far more than just a circus act. Within tongzigong lies an internal cultivation that is key to the very essence of all Shaolin kung fu.

(10) What I translated as "Thirteen Heroes Skill" is 十三太保横练, or literally Thirteen High Officials Cross-training? Like Virgin Kung Fu, it is a real Shaolin art. Here is an article in Chinese about it <http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=Tc13...thMAwDYUyx1VPa>

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Chapter 4 – Inhuman people

Part 1

It was very late at night.

Liu Changjie sat in the simple living room. A very long time had passed already, and not a sound could be heard in the night.

He had taken the body of the woman and put it on the bed. Then he had taken all the quilts in the house and placed them on top of her, as if she was afraid of catching cold.

After that, he went around and lit all the lamps in the house, even the lamps in the kitchen.

He wasn't afraid of death, and he wasn't afraid of the dark. But in his heart he carried an indescribable hatred for both of them, and always wished to push them as far away as possible.

Now he sat thinking, trying to wrap his mind around the whole matter, from head to tail.

He was a quiet person, not very well known, to the point that even he was unsure of the extent of his own strength and ability.

He had never tested himself, had never even thought to.

But "Power of Hu" Patriarch Hu had discovered him, the same way one might discover a pearl inside of a clam.

Patriarch Hu not only had sharp eyes, he had a mind with no equal.

He never misjudged people, never misjudged anything—in fact he had never made a single error in judgment.

Even though he had never worn the official headdress of a government official, had never eaten a meal provided by the government, he was without a doubt the most famous investigator alive. The chief constables of every administrative district and every prefecture virtually worshipped him.

There was not a case in the world that he couldn't crack; as long as he was alive, there was not a single underworld criminal who could evade justice.

But sadly, even the fastest sword will eventually become dull; no matter how powerful the person, they will eventually become sick and old.

He had finally grown old and contracted rheumatism, could barely walk without the support of others.

In the two or three years after becoming ill, he had stayed in Beijing. In that time, several hundred serious crimes had been committed—three hundred thirty-two to be exact.

Among those over three hundred serious cases, not one had been solved.

But leaving these cases unsolved was unacceptable. Among the victims were members of the nobility and high government officials, famous figures of the martial world, well-known and aristocratic families, and even the royal family itself.

Patriarch Hu's legs were crippled, but he was not blind.

He knew that all of these crimes were committed by one person, and he also knew that only one person could solve them.

The criminal was none other than Dragon Fifth, and the hero could be none other than Liu Changjie.

Everyone trusted his judgment in this matter.

And it was in this way that the quiet and unassuming Liu Changjie suddenly became a legend.

**

Currently, Liu Changjie wasn't sure if he had gotten lucky, or extremely unlucky.

Even now, he still didn't completely understand what Patriarch Hu really thought of him.

It seemed that he would never be able to understand that crafty old fox, and he would never understand his daughter, either.

He thought back to a year or so before, when he'd become friends with a man named Wang Nan. One day, Wang Nan had suddenly suggested that they go visit Patriarch Hu. Three months later, Patriarch Hu gave him this task, this burden. It wasn't until this very night that he realized how heavy the burden really was.

So what now?

Was it really possible for him, in only one hour, to kill Tang Qing, Shan Yifei, Soul Enticing Lao Zhao, Iron Monk, Li the Mastiff and the woman? Could he really reach the mysterious wooden box? Could he really get his hands on Dragon Fifth?

Only if he knew the answers to these questions, could he be truly confident.

But lately, what really caused him anxiety was Hu Yue'er.

What kind of woman was she? How did she actually treat him?

Only he knew the answer to that question. After all, he was just a person, made of flesh and blood like everyone else. He wasn't an emotionless rock.

It was very, very late, but sunrise was still a long way off.

What would tomorrow bring? What type of person would Dragon Fifth send to accompany him?

He sighed, wishing that he could just sit in the chair for the rest of the night and forget about all these troublesome thoughts.

But at that moment, he suddenly heard a strange sound, like a light rain hitting the roof.

Then there was a boom, and the entire house burst into flames. It was as if house were made of paper; it was clearly impossible to extinguish the fire.

There was no way Liu Changjie would be killed by a fire.

If you put him in an actual furnace, he still might be able to get out.

Even though the house was not a furnace, it burned like one. Everything was on fire, and nothing was visible other than the flames.

And yet, Liu Changjie was able to escape.

He dashed into the kitchen, grabbed an enormous jar of water, and poured it over his body. Almost before the water could soak his clothes, he was outside.

His reaction time was faster than most people could fathom, and fewer people could imagine how fast his body moved.

Other than the burning building, the night was peaceful.

In the courtyard grew several patches of yellow-flowering plants. In the flickering light of the flames, the flowers seemed especially tender and beautiful.

Standing there was a young woman in yellow clothing, holding a yellow flower in her hand. She looked at Liu Changjie and chuckled.

Outside the courtyard was a horse and carriage. The horse's eyes were covered, so it was unaffected by the frightening inferno.

The yellow-robed girl flew like a swallow to the carriage and opened the door. She looked back at him and smiled.

She didn't say a single word.

Liu Changjie also said nothing.

He entered the carriage and sat.

**

The flames burned unceasingly, but Liu Changjie was further and further away from them.

The carriage sped along urgently, having long disappeared into the deep night.

It was a dark night.

Liu Changjie wasn't afraid of the dark, but in his heart he carried an indescribable hatred and disgust for it...

Part 2

New. From socks to inner garment to outer robe, everything was brand new.

Even the bathtub was brand new.

The carriage had just stopped inside the courtyard of a house, and Liu Changjie had followed the young woman inside. Waiting inside a room was a bathtub.

The water was neither cold nor hot.

The young woman pointed at the basin; Liu Changjie stripped off his clothes and climbed in.

She didn't say a single word.

Neither did he ask a single question.

After he was finished washing, scrubbed dry, and ready to don fresh clothes, the young woman suddenly returned. She was followed by two people carrying another brand new wooden wash basin. It was full of water, the temperature of which was neither hot nor cold.

The young woman pointed at it, and Liu Changjie looked into her eyes. After a moment, he climbed in, and began washing himself thoroughly, as if he hadn't bathed in the past three months.

He was not the type of man who believed that water would sap his vitality. In actuality, he really enjoyed bathing.

He also wasn't the type of man who spoke out of turn. If others weren't willing to talk, he usually didn't ask questions.

But after the woman for a fourth time called in attendants with new water to bathe in, he couldn't suppress his frustration any longer.

His body had been scrubbed until it was as bright as a freshly peeled carrot.

The young woman once again pointed at the water, indicating for him to wash again.

He looked at her and then suddenly laughed.

She laughed with him for a while.

"Is there dog shit on my body?" asked Liu Changjie.

She laughed loudly. "No."

"Is there cat shit?"

"Not that either."

"Then what is there?"

She rolled her eyes, her round face reddening.

There was absolutely nothing on his body.

"I've already bathed three times," said Liu Changjie. "Even if there was dog shit on my body, it's long gone."

The young woman nodded, her face red. She was old enough to be embarrassed by a naked man.

"Why do I have to bathe again?"

"I don't know."

Shocked, he replied, "You don't know?"

"All I know," she responded, "Is that whoever meets the lady of this house, they must thoroughly wash from head to toe. Five times."

**

So, Liu Changjie bathed five times.

He donned a fresh set of clothes, and as he followed the young woman to meet “the lady,” he suddenly realized that bathing five times in a row wasn’t that bad after all.

His whole body felt relaxed, and walking down the long, glass-like corridor, it felt like he was gliding through the clouds.

At the end of the corridor was a doorway, over which hung a curtain fashioned from pearls.

The narrow door itself was unlocked, and on the other side was a spacious room with white walls and glossy wooden floors. The only decorations were a table, a chair, and a bronze mirror.

Standing in front of the mirror admiring herself was a tall, slender woman wearing apricot-colored robes.

Liu Changjie could see the reflection of her face in the mirror.

It was impossible to deny that her face was beautiful, so beautiful that it could only be described as perfect.

This level of beauty was otherworldly, like that of a celestial being in a painting.

It was a level of beauty that most people would not be willing to approach, only admire from afar.

So Liu Changjie stood as far away as possible.

She looked at him in the mirror, but she didn’t turn her head. She just coldly asked, “You are Liu Changjie?”

“I am.”

“I am Kong. Kong Lanjun.” [1]

Her voice was beautiful, but carried a feeling of indescribable indifference and conceit. It was as if she had long decided that whoever heard her voice would be unable to hold back their shock upon hearing her name.

Liu Changjie did not appear to be the least bit shocked.

Kong Lanjun laughed coldly. “I’ve never laid eyes on you before, but I already know what kind of person you are.”

“Oh?”

“Dragon Fifth said that you are very interesting, as are your money-spending methods.”

“He spoke correctly.”

“Lan Tianmeng said your bones are strong, that you can take a beating.”

“He also spoke correctly.”

“But all the women who’ve met you used the same word to describe you.”

“Oh? What word?”

“Inhuman.”

“They also spoke correctly.”

“An inhuman man who lays eyes on me should die!”

“I didn’t ask to come see you,” replied Liu Changjie. “You sent for me!”

Kong Lanjun’s face whitened. “I sent for you only because I made a promise to Dragon Fifth. Otherwise you would already be dead.”

“What was your promise to Dragon Fifth?”

“I promised him to take you to see someone. Other than that, you and I have absolutely no relationship. So, you had better behave yourself. I know your reputation with women. If you treat me the way you treat other women, you’ll meet a quick end.”

"I understand."

She laughed coldly. "You'd better understand."

"But there are two things I hope you understand."

"What?"

"First, I have no desire at all to have any sort of relationship with you."

Kong Lanjun's face was as white as death.

"Second," he continued, "even though I've never laid eyes on you before, I already know what kind of person you are."

"What kind of person am I?" she asked, unable to hold back her words.

"You think you are a beautiful peacock, and that everyone in the world should admire you; but the only person you admire is yourself."

Kong Lanjun's face couldn't become any whiter. She spun around and stared at him, her eyes flaming.

Liu Changjie calmly went on, "You sent for me because of Dragon Fifth. I was willing to come because of Dragon Fifth. There is absolutely no other relationship between us. Except ..."

"Except what?"

"You really shouldn't have started that fire!"

"I shouldn't have?"

"If the fire had killed me, how could you take me to meet who I'm supposed to meet?"

She laughed. "If the fire had killed you, then you clearly wouldn't have deserved to meet her."

"Who is this person?"

"Qiu Hengbo."

"Madam Autumn?"

She nodded. "Autumn Lovesickness."

"You're going to take me to see her?"

"I'm her friend. And only I can enter the Autumn Mansion." [2]

"You're her friend, and she is yours, but you're helping Dragon Fifth?"

"Among women," she said coldly, "there is no such thing as true friendship."

"Actually, considering the type of person you are, you only have one real friend; yourself."

This time Kong Lanjun didn't appear to be angry. "In any case, I'm better than her," she said calmly.

"Oh?"

"She even views herself as an enemy."

"And yet, she allows you to visit the Autumn Mansion?"

A venomous look suddenly sprang into her eyes. "She lets me visit because she enjoys watching me suffer. She loves to torment me."

Words like hatred or enmity could not begin to describe the look on her face.

Between these two mysterious, beautiful and callous women, there appeared to be some unimaginable relationship.

Liu Changjie looked at her, and suddenly laughed. "Ok, you go, then."

"You..."

"I don't feel like accompanying you, and I don't really need to see her, anyway."

"Unfortunately, you must."

"Why?"

"Because I don't know the location of her secret cave. I can only get you into the Autumn Mansion. The cave, you'll have to find yourself."

Liu Changjie's heart sank.

Hearing this news, he suddenly realized that the whole matter was going to be even more difficult and complicated than he thought.

Kong Lanjun's eyes lit up.

Only when seeing people suffer would her eyes light up. She loved seeing people suffer.

Liu Changjie finally let out a long breath. "Madam Autumn allows you to visit, but only because she likes to torment you. How do you know that she'll allow me to be there?"

"Because she understands me, and she knows what I like. She knows that I especially like to be waited upon by men. So every time I go, I bring a manservant with me."

"I'm not your servant."

"Yes, you are."

She stared at him, a strange expression filling her eyes.

Liu Changjie stared back at her.

They stared at each other for a long time, until finally Liu Changjie let out a long breath and said, "Yes, I am."

"You are my servant?"

"Yes."

"From today on, you will follow me like a dog. If I call you, you will come."

"Yes."

"If I want you to do something, you will do it."

"Yes."

"Whatever you do for me, you must be very careful. Don't let your dirty hands touch me. If your right hand touches me, I'll cut it off. If your arm brushes against me, I'll cut the whole arm off."

"Yes." His face was expressionless, devoid of anger or pain.

Kong Lanjun stared at him for a long time. Then she sighed lightly. "It seems you really aren't human."

Part 3

Qixia Mountain. [3]

The mountain was beautiful. The mountain's name was also beautiful.

After passing the stately Wind Forest Temple, and crossing the Rainbow Spanning Bridge, under which floated a host of lotus plants, one could catch sight of the beauty of Qixia Mountain.

In the evening wind, the faint sound of singing could be heard:

"Those evading the heat of summer return from the cool spring,

"The cool evening sky is filled with boundless brocaded clouds,

"A fragrant breeze blows through the amorous canal,

"They stroll across the soaring bridge, on their way to purchase a boat."

The voice was mysterious and beautiful, and the lotuses were even more beautiful, but neither could compare to the beauty of the sun as it slowly sank over the mountains.

On the other side of the mountain, about halfway up, past the languid nests of clouds, the mountain topography became treacherous. Travelers rarely came to this area, and yet there could be seen a magnificent, newly-constructed inn.

The inn was not very large, but was splendidly constructed. The paint had just dried, and two carpenters were just now hanging a sign above the main entrance, the name of the inn written in golden characters. Opposite of the inn were two peaks that towered up at opposing angles like crossed swords, the most dangerous area on the mountain.

Standing beneath an ancient cypress tree on the mountain peak, wearing a thin, long-sleeved silk garment, was Kong Lanjun. She stood there for a long time and then pointed at the inn. "What do you think of it?" she asked.

"The building was built wrong," said Liu Changjie. "The location is wrong."

"Oh?"

"How can an inn in this area attract customers? It will probably go out of business within three months."

"Your worry is unnecessary. I guarantee you that by daybreak tomorrow, the inn won't be here."

"Can it fly?"

"No."

"If it can't fly, how can it disappear?"

"If people build an inn, people can tear it down."

"Don't tell me that someone is going to tear down the inn by tomorrow morning..."

"That's correct."

Liu Changjie was mystified. "Why tear down a brand new inn?"

"Because this inn was especially built just to be torn down."

Liu Changjie was even more confused.

People buy property to construct buildings. They construct buildings to live in, to do business, to keep mistresses. All these things were normal.

But he had never heard of someone constructing a building specifically to be torn down.

"You don't understand?" asked Kong Lanjun.

"I definitely don't understand."

She laughed coldly. "So it turns out there are things you don't understand."

She obviously didn't want to explain the mystery, so Liu Changjie refrained from asking further questions.

He only knew that Kong Lanjun had brought him here for a reason other than irritating him.

She definitely had a purpose.

So there was little point in asking questions, sooner or later she would tell him.

Liu Changjie had faith in his own judgement.

As the sun set in the west, the dim light of night slowly enveloped the mountains.

The brilliant lights in the inn had long since been lit. On the rugged mountain road, there suddenly could be seen a group of people.

The group contained both men and women. The men were dressed as waiters or kitchen staff; the women were young and pretty, wearing seductive garments.

Kong Lanjun said, "Do you know what these people are here for?"

"To tear down the building?"

"These kind of people couldn't tear down a building if they had three days and three nights."

Liu Changjie had to admit that even though tearing down a building was easier than building one, it did require a certain level of skill.

"Can you tell what these women do?" asked Kong Lanjun.

Liu Changjie could obviously tell. "What they do is not very noble, but has a very long history."

It was definitely an ancient profession, one of womankind's earliest methods of earning money.

Kong Lanjun laughed coldly. "I know you like to look at these type of women, so you'd better take a look now."

"Are you saying that by tomorrow morning, these people will all disappear?"

"A building is constructed to be torn down. People live in preparation to die."

"You brought me here to see this building destroyed, and these people die?"

"I brought you here to see the people who will tear down the building."

"Who are they?"

"Seven people who will die by your hand."

Liu Changjie finally understood. "They're all coming here tonight?"

"Yes."

"So the building was constructed by Madam Autumn, specifically for them to destroy?"

"Yes."

Even though he now understood, he couldn't help but ask, "Why?"

"Because Qiu Hengbo understands men, and especially these type of men. If you lock men like this up in a cave for a long time, they'll eventually lose it and go crazy. So every once in a while, she lets them go out to blow off some steam."

Liu Changjie couldn't help but let out a sigh.

He could imagine what things would look like after they came. He didn't even need to see it with his own eyes.

He felt sorry for the women. He would rather face seven ravenous wild beasts than have dealings with those seven people.

Kong Lanjun looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "Don't feel compassion for them," she said coldly. "One bit of carelessness, you will die much more miserably than them."

Liu Changjie was quiet for a long time. Finally, he asked, "If they are coming here, who is protecting the cave?"

"Qiu Hengbo herself."

"Qiu Hengbo by herself is more frightening than the seven of them all together?"

"I really don't know exactly what her martial arts are like. I just know that I don't ever want to find out. So I can only watch from here, not take any action to alert them. Even if I killed them all right now, it would be useless."

Kong Lanjun nodded. "You need to watch very carefully. When people are blowing off steam, especially when tearing down a building, they will definitely use all of their most powerful kung fu."

"And afterwards?"

"Afterwards we go back and wait."

"Wait for what?"

"Wait until tomorrow afternoon. Then we head towards the Autumn Mansion."

"And after we get to the Autumn Mansion, I have to think of a way to find the secret room."

"Yes. And you must do it within half a day."

"Can't we just follow the seven when they go back?"

"No."

Liu Changjie didn't say anything more.

He was the type of person who never said something that didn't need to be said.

The mountains were illuminated with bright lamplight, but where Liu Changjie and Kong Lanjun stood it was dark. Above them in the darkness of the heavens, a few stars had begun to peek out.

The dim starlight shone on Kong Lanjun's face.

She really was a beautiful woman.

The color of the night was also beautiful.

Liu Changjie found a rock and sat down, then gazed at her, seemingly entranced.

"Did I tell you to sit down?" said Kong Lanjun.

"No."

"If I didn't tell you to sit, then you should be standing."

He stood up again.

"The food box I told you to bring. Do you have it?" [4]

"Yes."

"Bring it out."

The box was square, and built from fine lacquered wood from Fuzhou. It was extremely delicate.

"Open it for me," said Kong Lanjun.

The interior of the box was decorated with white silk padding. Inside were four appetizer dishes, a tray of bamboo shoot mantou, and a pot of wine. [5]

The wine was the famous Hang Zhou "Virtuous Distillery" wine, and the four dishes were fish with vinegar, pickled chicken, Wuxi duck with soy sauce, and pork on the bone.

"Pour me some wine," said Kong Lanjun.

Liu Changjie lifted the wine pot with both hands and poured a cup. He suddenly realized that he himself was quite hungry.

Unfortunately, there was only one cup and one set of chopsticks. He could only stand by her side and watch her eat.

Kong Lanjun drank two cups of wine, and took a bite from each dish. Then she frowned and put down the chopsticks. "Throw it out."

"Throw it out? Throw what out?"

"All of it."

"But, why?"

"Because I'm done eating."

"I'm still hungry."

"Someone like you, you can go three or four days without eating. You won't die."

"If there are still things to eat, why go hungry?"

"Because you're not allowed to touch things that have been eaten by me," she responded coldly.

He looked at her for a long time. "I can't touch your body either, correct?"

"Correct."

"Has anyone ever touched your body?"

Her face darkened. "That's my business. You have no right to ask."

"But you have the right to ask about my business?"

"Correct."

"You tell me to stand, I stand. You tell me to look, I look."

"Correct."

"You tell me not to follow someone, I don't follow them. You tell me not to touch you, I don't touch you."

"Correct."

Liu Changjie looked at her for a while. Then he laughed.

"When I tell you not to laugh," said Kong Lanjun coldly, "You don't laugh."

"Because I'm your servant?"

"It seems you finally understand."

"Unfortunately, there's something I still don't understand."

"What's that?"

"I'm also a person. And when I do things, I like to do it my way. For example..."

"For example, what?"

"If I feel like drinking wine, I drink wine."

He suddenly grabbed the pot of wine, tilted his head back and drank.

Kong Lanjun's face was pale, and she laughed harshly. "It seems you really do want to die."

Liu Changjie laughed. "I definitely don't want to die. What I do want to do is touch you."

"You wouldn't dare!" she cried furiously.

"I wouldn't?"

His hand suddenly shot out toward her body.

Kong Lanjun's reaction wasn't slow. After all, the "Peacock Immortal" was one of the most famous female masters in the martial world.

She certainly had justification to be so arrogant.

As soon as Liu Changjie's hands moved, her own arms tilted up, ten fingers extended like razor-sharp swords. They shot like lightning toward Liu Changjie's wrists.

Her movement was quick, and the stance flexible. Hidden within the move were countless variations.

Sadly, she didn't have the chance to use even one variation.

In a single moment, Liu Changjie's movement seemed to change countless times. His hands twisted and turned from unimaginable directions, and suddenly Kong Lanjun's wrists were pinned down.

Kong Lanjun had never imagined that someone's hands could move in this way. Increasingly alarmed, she tried to think of a

way out. Suddenly, she felt her body being flipped into the air, and the next thing she knew, she was being pressed down onto the rock by Liu Changjie.

With a leisurely tone in his voice, he said, "Can you guess what I'm thinking of doing right now?"

She couldn't guess.

In her wildest dreams she couldn't guess.

"Right now," he said, "I really want to pull your pants down and spank your ass."

Her voice was hoarse and filled with fear. "You ... you wouldn't dare."

She really didn't think he would dare do such a thing. She never dreamed that a man would really dare to treat her in such a way."

But unfortunately, she had forgotten the words she herself had uttered: "This man is really inhuman."

Three slapping sounds rang out as Liu Changjie spanked her butt three times.

He didn't strike hard, but Kong Lanjun felt like she couldn't move.

He laughed. "Actually, there's a few other things I could do right now, but I've already lost interest."

He raised his head to the heavens and laughed heartily, then swaggered off, not even giving her a second glance.

Kong Lanjun ground her teeth. Tears streaming down her face, she suddenly jumped to her feet and cried, "Liu Changjie, you beast, I will kill you one day! You ... you are simply inhuman."

He didn't turn his head. "I really am inhuman," he said calmly.

(1) The character Kong 孔 in Kong Lanjun 孔兰君 is the same character as from the word peacock 孔雀, so Liu Changjie's peacock metaphor is very apt.

(2) What I'm translating as Autumn Mansion implies a building located in the mountains.

(3) The Chinese name of the mountains is 栖霞山. 栖 qi means to perch or sit on something. 霞 xia means red evening clouds. So the literal translation would be something like Perching Red Evening Clouds Mountains. In any case, the name sounds nice in Chinese. And it seems to be a real place. <http://goo.gl/bQVPpx>

(4) This type of box has multiple tiers to contain different foods. Here's some pictures of the type of box: <http://goo.gl/AOZLYL>

(5) The word I'm translating as appetizer is 下酒菜 xia jiu cai. It literally means "dishes that go with alcohol." I think appetizer is an appropriate translation.

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Chapter 5 – Lovesickness will make you grow old

Part 1

The lamps in the inn shone brilliantly.

Two of the waiters who had just arrived were arranging chopsticks at one of the tables, and the seven finely dressed young women were sitting in a row of chairs. Some were whispering amongst themselves, others were sitting quietly, thinking.

The men who were coming to tear down the building had not yet arrived, but Liu Changjie had.

Kong Lanjun had told him not to act rashly, and not to come to this place.

Yet he came anyway.

He was the type of person who did things his own way.

As he entered the inn, everyone seemed to be frozen in shock—this was not who they were waiting for.

Other than those people, no one else should have arrived.

Liu Changjie seemed not to notice. He swaggered in and sat at the table the waiters had just set. “Bring me three cold appetizers, four hot dishes, and five bottles of ‘Jia Fan.’”

“Jia Fan” was a famous brand of wine in Hangzhou. Experienced drinkers said that the flavor was even more satisfying than “Ku Niang” wine. [1]

The waiters stood by, panic-stricken, unsure whether or not to pour wine.

This was not an ordinary inn, but Liu Changjie treated it as if it were. With a smile, he beckoned at the seven young women and said, “Come over here, all of you. A man drinking without a woman to accompany him is like a plate of food with no salt.”

The young women looked at him, and he looked at them. They seemed too terrified to even move.

“I’m not a man-eating tiger,” said Liu Changjie. “What are you afraid of? Come on over.”

Just then, laughter rang out, delicate, like the sound of silver bells. And then a charming voice could be heard, “I’m here!”

When the laughter started, it appeared to be coming from very far away. But by the time the voice had finished speaking, its owner had already arrived. She flew in like a gust of wind, and sat down next to Liu Changjie.

She was a woman, and a very beautiful woman at that. Not just beautiful, but entrancing, especially her two eyes, which had the ability to charm a person to their bones.

If you looked at this person from all sides, you would say that from head to toe she was a woman, every inch.

Liu Changjie looked at her and laughed. “I want to drink with women!” he said.

She laughed charmingly. “Cant’ you see that I’m a woman?”

“You don’t look like one.”

“How could I convince you I’m a woman?”

“Take off all your clothes, then we’ll see.”

Her expression changed and she giggled.

Suddenly, someone outside spoke. “It looks like our friend here has a lot of experience with women. He can’t be fooled by a fake woman.”

By the time these two sentences were uttered, there were five more people in the room.

One of them had a pale white face, and was dressed in expensive garments. Clean shaven, with wrinkles in the corners of his eyes, it was a middle aged man who obviously was “Little Fifth Omniscient” Tang Qing.

The huge, towering monk was clearly Iron Monk.

“Ghost Meteor” Shan Yifei and “Soul Enticing” Lao Zhao were both sickly and old in appearance, looking like thirty percent ghost and seventy percent killers.

What Liu Changjie could never have anticipated was that Li the Mastiff was actually a refined, gentle-looking young man. Except that his face was covered in scars, and he was missing half an ear.

Hu Yue’er had guessed correctly on all counts.

But Liu Changjie suddenly thought of something—she had only described six people, not seven.

And right now, there were only six.

Who was the other person?

Why hadn’t Hu Yue’er mentioned him?

And why wasn’t he here?

Five of the people wore no smile on their face. Only Tang Qing was smiling, and he was clearly the person who had just spoken.

Liu Changjie laughed. “Your Excellency’s experience with women clearly is not any less than mine.”

“You know me?” asked Tang Qing.

“If I didn’t know your Excellency, how else could I know that you have a lot of experience with women?”

Tang Qing’s expression changed. With a stern voice, he said, “You came here looking for me?”

“I came here to drink,” replied Liu Changjie.

“You specifically came here to drink?”

“That’s right.”

“There are thousands of places to drink in the world, why would you pick this place?”

“Because I like this place. It’s new, and I’m a fickle person.” [2]

Suddenly, the Iron Monk spoke out: “It just so happens that I really don’t like fickle people.”

“What do you like?” asked Liu Changjie.

“I like killing people. And I especially like killing fickle people such as yourself.”

The Iron Monk had ferocious looking eyebrows and fierce eyes. His face was filled with hatred, and his eyes seethed with murderous intent. They were extremely frightening in appearance.

Liu Changjie just laughed. “So you definitely want to kill me.”

“You guessed correctly.”

“Then why haven’t you come over here to try?”

The Iron Monk was already moving forward.

His whole body appeared to be sculpted from steel, and his carriage as he walked was like that of a gorilla.

His footsteps were heavy and stable, and every step he took left footprints behind in the floor.

The Iron Monk’s external power was clearly exceptional. As for his Thirteen Heroes Skill, who could say whether or not it had reached the level that his body was impervious to blades?

Liu Changjie had nothing in his hands, not even a kitchen knife.

Tang Qing watched him the same way he might look at a corpse.

The gorgeously dressed young women were shaking in terror.

The joints in Iron Monk's body made cracking sounds as he took four steps forward.

It appeared as if he was preparing all his kung fu to attack, and that this attack could clearly not be defended against.

But before he could attack, the refined and gentle-looking young man suddenly lunged toward Liu Changjie.

His eyes were blood red, and he opened his mouth to reveal a set of ghastly white teeth. He really did appear to be a wild dog, unable to refrain from ripping out Liu Changjie's throat.

It seemed like Liu Changjie didn't even notice him.

In a flash, he was looming over Liu Changjie's body, his two hands grasping toward Liu Changjie's throat.

And then strange snapping sound could be heard.

Liu Changjie was still sitting there motionless.

Li the Mastiff was also motionless. His two hands gripped Liu Changjie's neck. Except, his own head was twisted at a strange angle, and his eyes bulged from their sockets. A strange expression covered his face.

Moments later, blood exploded from his mouth.

The blood didn't splash onto Liu Changjie

Liu Changjie's body suddenly slid away like a fish, away from the woman and Li the Mastiff.

Li the Mastiff toppled over onto the woman.

The woman didn't move out of the way. Instead, she fell with him to the ground. She also had a bizarre expression on her face. Her eyes bulged from her face like those of a dead fish.

Two faces looked at each other, two sets of eyes stared at each other. They fell to the ground, motionless.

Two bodies, already growing cold and stiff.

Tang Qing's face was ashen. He knew they were dead.

And yet, he had never seen Liu Changjie move a finger.

No one had seen Liu Changjie move.

It was as if he didn't need to move a muscle to kill people.

The Iron Monk had stopped walking. Blue veins pulsed in his forehead, and cold sweat dripped down his face.

He liked to kill people, so he understood killing.

And because of that, he was even more frightened than the others.

Liu Changjie let out a long sigh. "I said I don't like to kill people. I just want to drink."

Tang Qing said, "But you just did kill people, two of them."

"That's because they wanted to kill me. And I didn't want to die, because dead people can't drink."

"Soul Enticing" Lao Zhao suddenly said, "Okay! Let's drink. I'll drink with you."

He placed a pot of wine down onto the table.

He first poured himself a cup, and then poured one for Liu Changjie. "To you!" he said.

He downed it in one gulp.

The two cups had been poured from one pot.

Liu Changjie looked at the cup in front of him and laughed. "I didn't come here to drink just one cup."

Soul Enticing Lao Zhao responded, "After you drink this cup, you can have another."

"If I drink this cup, I'll never have a chance to drink a second."

Soul Enticing Lao Zhao laughed coldly. "Don't tell me you think the wine is poisoned?"

"Originally there was no poison in the wine. But there was poison on your pinky fingernail."

Soul Enticing Lao Zhao's face twisted.

When he had poured the cup of wine for Liu Changjie, he had dipped his pinky fingernail in just a bit. His movement was nimble and dexterous, and impossible for others to see.

And yet Liu Changjie knew.

Liu Changjie looked at him and smiled. "The wine you drank originally didn't have poison in it either."

"And now?" he asked.

"You should be able to tell whether or not there's poison in it."

Soul Enticing Lao Zhao's face suddenly darkened. He jumped up. "When did you make your move?" he shouted hoarsely. "When did you put the poison in?"

"I knew you would want to drink from these cups, so when you went to get the wine, I put the poison in the cups. How I did it was very simple, even you could pull it off."

Soul Enticing Lao Zhao didn't open his mouth again. It seemed as if an invisible rope was tightening around his neck.

His breathing stopped, and he fell to the ground, his body convulsing.

Liu Changjie sighed. "I don't like killing people, but I was willing to kill three people just now. And yet the people who do like killing are just standing there motionless."

The Iron Monk said nothing. He just turned and dashed out of the room.

Hu Yue'er had been correct.

People who like killing are the ones who are most afraid of death.

Liu Changjie had also been correct.

Because the monk was afraid to die, he had practiced a type of kung fu that could make his body impervious to blades.

But as soon as he met someone who didn't need blades to take the lives of others, he fled faster than anyone.

Ghost Meteor fled just as quickly.

Actually, the speed of his retreat really was like that of a meteor.

Tang Qing didn't leave.

Liu Changjie looked at him and laughed. "Does your Excellency also want to come have a try?"

Tang Qing laughed. "Like you, I hate killing people. And like you, I came here to drink."

"Good."

"Like you, I have a lot of experience with women, and like you I am a fickle person."

"Great!"

"So, we're birds of a feather! Let's have some drinks and chat. We can be friends." Smiling, he walked over and sat down. "After all, there are wine and women here."

"There's definitely sufficient wine for us two."

Tang Qing laughed. "And there are sufficient women, as well."

"The women aren't sufficient," replied Liu Changjie.

"Not sufficient?"

"Even though there are enough women, they just aren't pretty enough."

Tang Qing laughed loudly. "So, it turns out your Excellency's way of looking at things is a bit more refined than mine."

"Actually, these women aren't really ugly, it's just that they can't really make you sick with love." [3]

The smile on Tang Qing's face suddenly froze. He looked at Liu Changjie in amazement. He appeared even more shocked than when he had just observed Liu Changjie kill the others.

He finally understood Liu Changjie's purpose, but he still could not believe any person would have this amount of guts.

Liu Changjie began tapping a cup with a chopstick, and slowly sang: "It's said that you should never be sick with love, because lovesickness will make you grow old

"But after you consider it over and over again, you realize that lovesickness really is better, lovesickness really is better..."

Tang Qing took in a deep breath, and then forced out a laugh. "So, your Excellency specifically came to this place to look for lovesickness?"

Liu Changjie sighed. "What in the world is better than lovesickness?"

"Nothing," replied Tang Qing.

"Definitely nothing."

Tang Qing's eyes turned up in thought, and then he smiled eerily. "Your humble self also knows a song. I'd like to sing it for your Excellency."

Liu Changjie let out a breath. "Listening to men sing is boring, unless it's your own singing. But, if you really want to sing, go ahead."

Tang Qing began singing, "It's said that you should never be sick with love, because lovesickness will make you grow old,

"If you grow old, you will eventually die, and dying is never good."

Liu Changjie shook his head firmly. "Not very good."

Tang Qing said, "Maybe my singing voice isn't very good, but the words are true."

Liu Changjie had to agree. "Correct. The truth never sounds good."

"If your Excellency wants to find lovesickness, you'll not only grow old, you'll grow old exceptionally quick. Which means you will die sooner."

"Are you afraid of death?"

"Who in the world isn't afraid of death?"

"Me." He stared at Tang Qing, and continued coldly, "Because you are afraid of death, and I am not, you will take me there."

Tang Qing continued to play dumb. "Take you where?"

"To find lovesickness."

Tang Qing forced himself to smile. "And what if I can't find it?"

"Then you will never grow old," replied Liu Changjie evenly.

Tang Qing couldn't force himself to smile any more.

He understood Liu Changjie's meaning—only dead people don't grow old.

Liu Changjie continued to stare at him. "They say that you guard a mountain cave for her. Since you're here, then she's definitely guarding the cave herself. So, you'll definitely be able to find her."

Tang Qing wanted to deny that he understood what Liu Changjie was saying, but couldn't.

"Do you want to die?" asked Liu Changjie.

Tang Qing shook his head.

Liu Changjie drank a glass of wine. "Then what do you want?"

"I want you to die!"

He suddenly flew up into the air, spinning; at the same time a vortex of sand shot toward Liu Changjie. [4]

This was the Tang Clan "Bark Cloth Tree" poison sand.

Surprisingly, Liu Changjie made no move to evade. Instead, he opened his mouth, out of which shot a shining spray; it was the wine he had just gulped down.

In an instant, every single granule of sand, each smaller than a sesame seed, was blown back and embedded into the freshly painted wall. [5]

Tang Qing's face fell. He never imagined that someone could have this shocking ability.

Liu Changjie smiled. "This wine is called Fishing Hook Wine, but sometimes it's also called 'Worry-sweeping Broom.' And sometimes it can be used to sweep away poison sand."

Tang Qing laughed bitterly. "I never imagined that drinking wine could have so many benefits."

"Yes. You really should drink more."

"I'll drink."

"Dead people can't drink."

"I know."

"So, now what are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking I should take you there immediately."

Liu Changjie laughed. "I picked you because I could tell you are an intelligent person. I only have dealings with intelligent people."

Tang Qing sighed. "And because of you, intelligent people are often faced with vexation." [6]

"Having vexation is better than not having vexation."

"Why is that?"

"Because in this world, the only people who don't experience vexation are the dead."

**

Lovesickness is a vexation, and so it makes people old.

But if you think about it for a moment, really think about it, you will understand that if a person can experience lovesickness, it's better than not being able to experience lovesickness...

Part 2

Where there are mountains, there are mountain caves.

Some mountain caves are large, some mountain caves are small; some mountain caves are beautiful, some mountain caves are treacherous; some mountain caves are like a nostril that everyone can see, some mountain caves are like the navel of a fair maiden, which even though everyone knows exists, has never been seen.

This mountain cave was more mysterious than the navel of a virgin.

After traveling through seven mountain passes, and climbing six treacherous slopes, they arrived at a cliff.

The cliff was immense, so much so that the bottom could not be seen.

Across from them was another precipice, about fifteen or twenty feet away. The two cliffs faced each other, and far above, only a sliver of sky could be seen.

Tang Qing at long last let out a long breath. "We're here," he said.

"Where are we?" asked Liu Changjie.

Tang Qing pointed at the cliff on the opposite side. "You should be able to see it."

Liu Changjie obviously had already caught sight of it. The opposing cliff face was as bare as if it had been carved out with a sword. There, amidst a wild growth of wisteria, was the black mouth of a cave.

White clouds wafted to and fro, and eagles could be seen soaring about.

Even though Liu Changjie could see the cave, he wasn't sure how to get there.

Tang Qing suddenly asked, "Have you read the poem 'Call of the Waterfowl' from the Book of Odes?" [7]

"No, I haven't."

"The idea behind the poem is that there is a fair maiden standing at an estuary. On the other side is a horny prince. Even though he can see her, he has no way to reach her, no matter how hard he wants to. This cave is like that fair maiden." [8]

"And I'm the prince?"

"You only asked me to bring you here, and so I have."

"I never imagined that you were an educated man."

Tang Qing laughed. "I wouldn't dare claim to be."

Liu Changjie glanced at the treacherous cliff face. "If an educated man fell down this cliff," he said coolly, "I wonder if he would die the same as an uneducated man?"

Tang Qing tried to laugh, but couldn't. He couldn't even speak. Suddenly, he squatted down and twisted a piece of nearby rock. A wire cable shot forth, at the head of which was a steel awl.

A dinging sound rang out as the awl imbedded itself into the opposite cliff face, just below the cave mouth, forming an extremely narrow bridge.

Tang Qing bowed and said, "Please, after you."

"I would rather the educated man go first."

Tang Qing's face lost its color. "You want me to go with you?"

"Yes, and I want you in front. If we fall to our deaths, you can fall first."

With a long face, Tang Qing replied, "If Madam Lovesickness finds out that I brought you here, I'm dead."

"That's better than falling to your death right now. Life is a treasure. Being able to live even one moment longer is good. And who knows, maybe I can think of a way to keep you alive."

"Really?" asked Tang Qing.

"I'm an uneducated person. The word of an uneducated person is generally dependable."

Tang Qing let out a long sigh, and then laughed. "As it turns out, reading a lot of books isn't such a good thing after all."

Part 3

The wire was slippery, and the mountain wind blew violently. They walked across, knowing that with one slight misstep they would plummet down.

And if they fell, they would become flat meatcakes.

Luckily, the distance between the two cliffs was not great. As soon as they stepped forth onto the cable, they heard a friendly

voice from inside: "Close your eyes as you enter. I'm bathing!"

**

The entrance to the cave was deep. From the outside it appeared pitch black, but as they walked in, they could see that it was illuminated by lamps.

The pink-colored lamplight was soft and entrancing.

The voice was even more soft and entrancing than the lamplight.

Liu Changjie didn't close his eyes. In fact, it would have been strange if he had.

As he walked forward, his eyes widened, as if he had just entered a fairyland. Except, this cave was more beautiful than a fairyland.

In the middle of cave was a cistern formed by a hot spring, encircled by a balustrade of white wood.

There was a woman in the cistern, only her head visible above the surface of the water.

Black hair floated like storm clouds, further drawing attention to the woman's face. It was like a spring flower, and her skin was extremely smooth.

Sadly, the water was not clear.

Liu Changjie let out a breath. He knew that what was beneath the water was even more amazing.

Madam Lovesickness's radiant, enchanting eyes really were like undulating ripples on the limpid waters of an autumn pond. [9] She was staring at him with those eyes, seeming to be smiling without smiling, both happy and angry. Her voice was as beautiful as the call of a mountain oriole.

"Didn't I tell you to close your eyes?" she asked.

"You did," replied Liu Changjie.

"Your eyes don't appear to be closed."

Liu Changjie sighed. "I've braved countless dangers, narrowly escaped from death, all just to be able to lay eyes on you. At long last, I'm finally here, how could I possibly close my eyes?"

"But I'm taking a bath at the moment."

He laughed. "After I heard you were taking a bath, I was even less willing to close my eyes."

Madam Lovesickness let out another breath. "It seems you are not only disobedient, you're also dishonest."

"Everything I said was completely honest."

"Aren't you afraid that I might dig out your eyes?"

"I'm not afraid of you chopping off my head, much less digging out my eyes."

"You're not afraid of death?"

"Fear death? Why fear death? The world is like an inn, and people are like customers. What happiness is there in life, what fear is there in death?"

"So, it turns out you're an educated man," she said in her beautiful voice.

He smiled. "The ancients said, 'if a man in the morning hears the right way, he can die in the evening without regret.' As long as I am able to see the Madam, I'm just as willing to die." [10]

She looked at him seductively. "Haven't you already seen me?"

"I yearned for day and night, and finally my desire is fulfilled."

"So that means you're ready to die now."

"Not yet."

"You haven't seen enough yet?"

He laughed. "I haven't. In fact there are quite a few places I still haven't seen at all yet."

Madam Lovesickness stared at him, a look on her face that made it seem she didn't understand.

He stared at her, looking as if he wished his eyesight could penetrate the water. "What I can see now is only a small part. The most important part, I can't see."

"How much do you want to see?"

"All of it."

It seemed as if Madam Lovesickness's face was reddening. "You're quite ambitious!"

"Men who aren't ambitious don't count as true men."

She bit her lip. "If I really let you see, who's to say you wouldn't have further ambitions?"

He laughed. "Who says I don't already?"

Her two captivating [11] eyes stared at him, unblinking. "You don't really count as a good-looking man."

"Of course I'm not."

"But, you're different from most other men."

He laughed again. "Maybe in more way than one."

"I like men who are out of the ordinary," she said softly.

"Every woman under heaven likes men who are out of the ordinary."

"Leave," she said, suddenly.

Liu Changjie didn't move.

He knew that she wasn't talking to him, she was talking to Tang Qing.

Tang Qing left immediately, his eyes still closed. He had never opened them.

Liu Changjie laughed. "It looks like he's an obedient man."

"He doesn't dare to be disobedient."

"So, if he leaves, I definitely have to stay."

"Women don't like men who are too obedient, but you..."

She looked at Liu Changjie out of the corner of her eye, her look as smooth as silk. "You're just standing there like a simpleton, are you willing to do anything else?"

He didn't say anything in response.

He used actions as a response.

Women also don't like men who don't take action.

He suddenly walked to the edge the cistern, throwing off his shoes.

Madam Lovesickness's eyes widened, as in shock. "You dare come in?"

Liu Changjie had already begun throwing off other items of clothing

"You obviously know who I am, aren't you afraid I'll kill you?"

He didn't say anything; he was in too much of a hurry.

"Can't you tell there is a special quality to this water?" she asked.

Apparently, he didn't.

After all, he wasn't looking at the water. His gaze was fixed on Madam Lovesickness's eyes.

"There's a special drug dissolved into the water," she said. "Other than me, anyone who enters will die."

He had already jumped in."

There was a splash, and water flew everywhere.

"It seems you really aren't afraid of death." She sighed again. "Many men have said they were willing to die for me, but the men who were really ready to do so, other than you, you ..."

She didn't say anything more; she couldn't.

Because she couldn't exhale.

**

There is only one method to defeat a woman.

And Liu Changjie used the correct method.

People don't necessarily smile when they are most happy, and they don't necessarily moan only when they are pain.

At this point, the moaning had ceased, and all that remained was panting; rapturous panting.

Surging ripples of water finally subsided into calmness.

"People talk about 'heaven-like libido,'" panted Madam Lovesickness, "but your libido is larger than the heavens." [12]

Liu Changjie closed his eyes, lacking the energy to speak.

"Actually," continued Madam Lovesickness, "I know that you didn't just come here for me. You have some other goal."

Women usually like to talk, and at this time they usually have more energy than the man.

So, she continued. "But for some reason, I decided not to kill you."

Liu Changjie suddenly laughed. "I know why. Because I am not an ordinary man."

She sighed, unwilling to argue.

"So, the water wasn't poisoned," said Liu Changjie.

Madam Lovesickness didn't deny it. "There are plenty of ways to kill you if I want to."

"If a woman wants a man dead, there definitely are lots of ways to do it."

"Therefore, you'd best tell me why you really came here. Immediately."

"You mean you're already thinking of killing me?"

"Only new men can be considered out of the ordinary," she said levelly.

"So I'm already not new?"

"Women are the same as men," she said in a sweet voice. "We also are fickle."

Liu Changjie sighed lightly. "But you forgot something."

"Oh?"

"Some men are like women, in that, if they want a woman to die, they can find lots of ways to do it."

"Well, it depends," she said ingratiatingly, "on what type of woman the man was dealing with."

"Any kind of woman."

She laughed even more haughtily. "Even a woman like me?"

"As for you, I probably would only use one method. If it was effective, then I wouldn't need to think about other ways."

"Then why don't you give it a shot?"

"I already did," he replied.

She laughed even harder. "And was it effective?"

"Of course!"

"What method was it?"

"The water didn't have poison in it before," he said in a relaxed tone. "But now it does."

Her voice suddenly became stiff. "You..." she whispered.

"I already took the antidote, of course."

"When did you put the poison in?" she asked, seeming unconvinced.

"The poison was hidden under my fingernail. When I jumped in, it dissolved into the water."

"And the antidote..."

"I took it when I was taking my clothes off. I know that a man taking his clothes off is not a pretty sight, and that women generally don't want to watch."

Emotions flickered across her face. Suddenly, she slid toward Liu Changjie like a fish, her ten fingers extended, clawing toward his larynx.

And that was when she found out that Liu Changjie wasn't lying—she suddenly felt her body grow soft, her hands weak. All her energy seemed to have disappeared without a trace.

Liu Changjie grabbed her hand gently. "Men are also fickle," he said softly. "You're already not so new, so you'd better be a good girl."

Her face was draining of color. "You ... you really want to kill me?"

He sighed. "I don't want to ..." [13]

Even before he finished speaking, he had sealed three of the acupuncture points on her large, firm chest.

**

Everything else was relatively simple.

The hidden door was located behind a large Persian felt that hung on the cave wall. The thousand-pound door wasn't actually one thousand pounds, and wasn't that difficult to open.

Liu Changjie's hands really were incredibly dexterous. [14]

Tang Qing had disappeared without a trace, but the cable bridge was still there.

Another person might think that they had struck it very lucky, but Liu Changjie was not that type of person.

"If a person's method is correct, things will go smoothly, no matter what difficulty they encounter."

His methods definitely were out of the ordinary.

The inn that had been built to be destroyed was still there. Of the people sent to destroy it, three were dead and three had fled.

There are many such situations under heaven; foolproof plans that go awry and impossible tasks that are unexpectedly accomplished.

There really is no distinct line between success and failure, so one should not take matters too seriously.

The lamps in the inn were still lit, and the people inside were still waiting.

The sky was still dark, and until it was light, they dared not leave.

Carrying a small sandalwood box wrapped up in cloth, Liu Changjie strolled in.

"So it turns he didn't die after all; he actually returned."

The girls' eyes were wide as they looked at him; they could see that he was clearly a very capable person.

There was wine on the table.

Liu Changjie sat down and made himself comfortable. Now really was an appropriate time to be comfortable and have a drink.

He was thinking of pouring himself a drink, but before he could, the girl with the largest eyes of them all approached. She seemed to be the most intelligent of them all as well. Her hips swayed as she walked over, smiling sweetly. "How is lovesickness?"

"Good. Very good"

She smiled enchantingly and took in a deep breath, causing her chest to stick out. "My name is Satisfy. I'm also good." [15]

He laughed. "You do look good. But sadly, although you might be able to satisfy me, I wouldn't be able to satisfy you."

"Why?" she asked, with a seductive glance.

"Because what I have wrapped up in this bundle is neither gold nor jewels."

Satisfy didn't seem to be disappointed. She continued to smile bewitchingly. "What I want isn't gold or jewels. What I want is you."

"Unfortunately," said another voice, "he has already been bought by another." [16]

The voice came from outside. Satisfy turned her head and saw a beautiful woman, as ethereal as an orchid, as proud as a peacock. She walked in from the darkness.

Kong Lanjun had also come.

In her presence, Satisfy suddenly felt like she looked like a chicken. She let out a soft breath and quietly said, "Who would have that that there were men in our line of work, and that they could be bought."

Liu Changjie also sighed. "I do a pretty good job, although maybe not as good as you."

She smiled sweetly. "But, I really like you. One day when you're free, I'll buy you for a few days." She chuckled and pinched Liu Changjie's cheek. Then she gathered the other girls together to leave. "It looks like there's no business here. Let's go back and get some rest."

Liu Changjie's eyes followed them as they left, looking a little disappointed.

Kong Lanjun had already sat down and was staring at him. "You can't bear to part with them?" she asked coldly.

He let out a breath. "I'm a very sentimental person."

She ground her teeth. "You really are inhuman," she said venomously.

"Luckily, a lot of women actually like inhuman men."

"Those women are also inhuman."

"What about you?"

She let out a light breath. "It seems I'm quickly becoming inhuman," she said softly.

In a moment, her entire countenance changed, from that of a proud peacock, to that of a gentle dove.

It seemed Liu Changjie had used the correct method to deal with her as well.

Some women are like hard-shelled nuts. You need to use a hammer to break them open.

Right now she looked like a hart nut that had been cracked open to reveal a tender and supple heart.

Looking at her, Liu Changjie felt like he had won a great conquest, and there is nothing that can make a person happier than this type of feeling.

And then, he suddenly seemed to soften.

After you have conquered a woman, there's no need for the hammer any more. He reached out his hand and took hold of hers. "Actually," he said, "I know that you that you treated me well."

She lowered her head. "You ... you really believe that?"

"I also know that you had a good plan."

"But ... but you didn't do anything according to my plan."

"Because I'm an impetuous person. I usually like to use a more direct method."

She lifted her head and stared at him, her beautiful eyes swirling with concern.

"But, I really think your way was just too dangerous."

He laughed. "It doesn't matter now, the matter is handled already."

Her eyes shone. "Really?"

"Yes."

"You have the item already?"

He pointed at the bundle on the table.

Kong Lanjun looked at him, exuding both affection and admiration. Seemingly unable to hold back her emotions, she grasped his two hands and placed them on her face. "Now I know, you're not just a real man, you're an amazing man."

Liu Changjie was even more happy than before. Upon hearing words like this, any man would be just as happy.

He couldn't help but smile. "Actually, I'm not that amazing, it's just..."

He didn't complete the sentence, and he probably never would.

Because at that moment, Kong Lanjun suddenly grabbed him with both hands, digging her fingertips into his wrists. She flipped him up and tossed him, using an advanced Mongolian wrestling technique.

She flipped his body over like a dead fish and slammed him face-first onto the table.

Her hand sped down his spine, sealing all of the acupuncture points. She laughed coldly. "You obviously aren't amazing at all, you're just a cocky rabid dog!"

Liu Changjie was speechless.

"Do you really think I would be won over by that kind of method?" She was still laughing coldly. "Mark my words, you screwed up! It doesn't matter who strikes me, I will pay them back tenfold."

Her hand laid hold of a wooden plank and she began slamming it down onto his butt. Over and over she hit him, not holding back in the least bit, thirty times in total.

He could do nothing but wait, wait until she finished the beating.

"This time I'm just teaching you a lesson," she said. "From now on, don't underestimate women!" She grabbed the bundle from the table. "I'll take this. I just hope that your luck isn't too bad, and that Qiu Hengbo, Tang Qing and the others don't come back looking for you."

How bitter to see the meal you so carefully prepared suddenly being eaten by the mouth of another.

Who could imagine the feeling in Liu Changjie's heart as her voice faded into the distance?

It's not that he was incapable of speaking, but what was there that he could say?

Women ... Ai ...

Liu Changjie sighed, suddenly coming to the realization that one should not offend a woman.

Unfortunately, he had offended a lot of women.

He couldn't even bear to think about what would happen if Madam Lovesick really did come looking for him.

Let alone Shan Yifei, Iron Monk, Tang Qing ...

Each and every one of them would certainly have plenty of ways to torment him.

He could only lay there on the table waiting. At this point he didn't look like a rabid dog, he looked like a dead dog.

It was hard to say how much time passed. It seemed like millions of years.

The sun had long since risen.

Luckily, the waiters and the girls had left, otherwise he would have to stand up and beat his head against the wall until he died.

(1) The characters for Jia Fan are 加饭 which literally means "add rice." And Ku Niang is 苦酿. The first character "ku" means bitter, and the second "niang" is a verb meaning to brew, ferment, or make alcohol.

(2) What I'm translating as "fickle" is actually a pretty cool Chinese expression 喜新厌旧 which means "to like the new and hate the old."

(3) At this point in the story, there is a lot of wordplay revolving around the use of the Chinese word 相思 which can be translated as "languish with lovesickness, pin with love, yearn for someone's love, to yearn, to pine for, to be lovesick, lovesickness." These same two characters make up the name of Madam Lovesickness 相思夫人. In order to make the English sound right, I'll adjust how I translate it, but the original Chinese is all the same word.

(4) Sometimes the action doesn't translate well into English. Here is the literal translation: "He suddenly flew into the air, his body spinning, and a sheet of flying sand, carrying a gust of wind, shot spinning toward Liu Changjie." I left out the "gust of wind" part because I couldn't think of a way to make it flow well in English.

(5) Here again I sacrifice some of the Chinese to make a better (in my opinion) English translation. Here is the literal translation: "In an instant, the sand which blotted out the heavens was spun away, and was sprinkled onto the freshly painted wall, a thousand granules of sand smaller than sesame seeds, were all embedded into the wall." The Chinese is pretty cool, but the literal translation sounds weird in English so ... I did my best.

(6) In the Chinese, I think he's actually implying that because Liu Changjie only deals with intelligent people, intelligent people therefore face vexation. But, I couldn't think of how to express this implication using English, thus my translation.

(7) The Book of Odes is one of the five classics of the Confucian canon. Here is more information: <http://goo.gl/C2ld5>

(8) The poem is relatively famous, and is about a fair maiden and a virtuous young man. In his explanation, Tang Qing changes the meaning of the poem. He adds the word 好色 to describe the man, which makes him sound perverted. For a deviant like Tang Qing, it seems really appropriate for him to do this. Here is a link to a (pretty bad) English translation of the poem that I found: <http://goo.gl/zcSHVx>. Thanks to LuDongBin for a link to another translation of the poem: <http://goo.gl/aULYZ4>. If anybody knows of a link to a better translation of the title, or a better translation of the poem itself, please let me know.

(9) This part contains a sort of play on words of Madam Lovesickness's different names and nicknames. It describes her eyes as 明媚如秋水横波的眼睛. I'm translating 明媚 ming mei as "radiant, enchanting." After that is a four-character adjective phrase. The first part of the phrase is 秋水 qiu shui, which means "limpid autumn waters." This is what I earlier shortened into "Autumn" in her nickname "Madam Autumn." The next two characters are 横波 heng bo which the dictionary says is "transverse wave" and I'm translating as "undulating ripples," which I think imparts the meaning and flavor better. These two characters are also her given name, Hengbo. So, he uses the different parts of her name and nickname to describe her eyes. It's pretty cool.

(10) This is a quote from the Analects of Confucius. The original Chinese is really hard to understand, unless you have studied that stuff. The English translation is actually much more clear than the original. Here are two external links: <http://goo.gl/iffPXq> and <http://goo.gl/y6HC9h>

(11) The expression is 勾魂摄魄. The literal translation would be "soul-captivating, spirit-assimilating." He uses a common and clever way of splitting up one word 魂魄 which means soul, and then adding two other characters which basically have the same meaning, to create a cool expression.

(12) This is a pretty literal translation. She uses an idiom 色胆包天 which means that one's sexual desire encompasses the heavens.

(13) This is a place where my translation differs a bit from the literal Chinese. Here, she says 你真的忍心杀我 and he replies 我实在不忍心. The word they both use 忍心 means to have the heart to do something, or to be hardhearted enough to do something. But to me it wouldn't flow well to have her, with her (potentially) dying breath say, "are you really so hard-hearted as to kill me," or "do you really have the heart to kill me," and then he replies "I am not that hardhearted." Thus, my

translation choice.

(14) The adjective he uses to describe Liu Changjie's hands is the same one used to describe Gongsun Miao's.

(15) Her name is 如意 which basically means "to fulfill one's wishes or desires." A good name for a prostitute I guess...

(16) What I'm translated as "bought" is 包下来, which is the situation where a rich guy basically pays for a prostitute to be his permanent mistress for a period of time.

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Chapter 6 – A dragon amongst men

Part 1

A long time passed. His whole body had begun to grow numb, and his hands were ice cold. It was at that time that he suddenly heard the sound of footsteps.

The footsteps were very light, and the person seemed to be walking very slowly. He could feel their every step in his tingling muscles.

Who was this person?

Was it Madam Lovesickness, or Tang Qing?

Whoever it was, they certainly would not be bringing good times with them.

The sky was bright.

The early morning sun shone in through the door, casting the shadow of the person into the restaurant. It was very long, and it seemed to be in the shape of a woman.

After a while, he was able to see the person's feet.

The shoes were soft and decorated with green flowers. The feet were dainty and delicate.

Liu Changjie sighed. He knew who the person was.

"Since when did you start lying on tables this way?" Her voice was general quite pleasant, but now it carried a mocking tone, as acidic as an unripe plum. "Is it because your ass is swollen from being spanked?"

Liu Changjie could only laugh bitterly.

The voice continued, "I remember you were always the type to brag until you're blue in the face. But how come it's your ass that's black and blue instead of your face?" [1]

He laughed. "Even if my ass was twice as swollen as it is now, it still wouldn't be as big as yours."

"Look, pal," she laughed, "at a time like this you still dare to be obstinate? Aren't you worried I'll punch your face until it's black and blue?" [2]

"I know you couldn't bear to," he smiled. "Don't forget that I'm your husband."

As it turns out, the woman was Hu Yue'er.

She crouched down, took hold of his chin, and stared into his eyes.

"My poor little husband, who was it that beat you up this way? Tell me."

"You're getting ready to go vent your anger on her for me?"

"I'm getting ready to go thank her." Hu Yue'er suddenly twisted his nose. "Thank her for teaching you a lesson, you disobedient bastard."

He laughed. "When a wife wants to curse her husband, she can say anything she wants, but she shouldn't use the word bastard. After all, it implies bad things about the wife."

She bit her lip. "If I really was mad," she said hatefully, "I could turn you into a cuckold if I wanted to." [3]

She seemed to be getting angrier and angrier. She twisted his ear violently. "When you left, did you wear extra thick clothes? Answer me!"

"I didn't."

"Did you go ask for the super sharp sword?"

"I didn't."

"Did you take care of Tang Qing first?"

"I didn't."

"Did you do anything according to plan?"

"I didn't."

She bared her teeth. "Other people thought things through so carefully for you, why do you always ignore everyone?"

"Because ever since I was young, I've never been an obedient kid. When people tell me I can't do something, that's exactly what I want to do."

She laughed coldly. "You think you're so amazing, don't you? That nobody else can compare to you."

"It doesn't matter," he smiled. "What you wanted me to do here, I did."

"You still dare to talk this way?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Why don't you go find a mirror and have a look at your ass?"

"Somebody spanking your ass is one thing," he said steadily. "Accomplishing a mission is something else."

"Correct. You had the duck in your hand ready to eat, but sadly it flew away." [4]

"It didn't fly away."

"It didn't?"

"The only thing that flew away were some feathers. I still have the skin and bones."

Hu Yue'er seemed shocked. "Are you saying that woman took away an empty box?"

He smiled. "The only thing inside was a pair of old, stinky socks."

She seemed thoroughly surprised. She couldn't help but chuckle, and then lightly kiss Liu Changjie's face. "I knew you were an amazing man," she said sweetly. "I knew I wouldn't pick my husband incorrectly."

He sighed. "It seems like a man does need to live up to expectations," he said quietly, "otherwise he might really become a cuckold." [5]

Part 2

Sunlight shone in through the small window, onto Liu Changjie's chest. Hu Yue'er's face also lay on his chest.

A bare chest might not seem like much, but it carried a certain kind of charm.

Just like his personality.

He carried a strange type of charm that made it difficult for people to judge how powerful he truly was.

Hu Yue'er gently stroked his chest, and in a voice as low as a dream said, "Do you want more?"

He didn't shake his head; he simply lacked the energy to move.

Hu Yue'er bit down on her lip. "In these few days away from me, you definitely were with other women."

"No, I wasn't." Liu Changjie really didn't feel like speaking, but this kind of accusation couldn't go unanswered.

She wasn't convinced. "If you weren't, then how come someone wanted to spank your ass?"

He sighed. "If I was, how could she possibly be willing to spank me?"

She still wasn't convinced. "You didn't make any moves on Madam Lovesickness?"

"No."

She laughed. "Only a ghost would believe you."

"Why don't you believe me?"

"If you really weren't with any women," she said regretfully, "then how come right now you're like a rooster that just got beat in a cockfight, completely useless?"

He laughed. "Who do you think I am, some kind of superman?" [6] He let out a sigh. "I also get tired sometimes and need sleep."

It looked like she was finally somewhat convinced. "Why aren't you sleeping, then?"

"With you here at my side, how could I sleep?"

She sat up, her eyes widening. "Are you trying to make me leave?"

"That's not what I meant," he replied. "Although, you really should go." In a soft voice, he continued, "When he finds out that the box Kong Lanjun took back is empty, Dragon Fifth will definitely come looking for me."

"He can find this place?"

"He can find any place."

She seemed to hesitate, starting to get the feeling that this small tavern wasn't a safe place after all.

"Okay, I'll go back," she said, finally agreeing with him. "But you..."

"I'll just wait here obediently," he said, "and bring back good news as soon as I can."

"Are you confident you can handle Dragon Fifth?"

"I'm not." He laughed. "But, I also wasn't confident that I could handle Madam Lovesickness."

**

Hu Yue'er finally left.

Before departing, she had twisted his ear and warned him three times in a row: "If I hear anything about you messing around with other women, I will beat your ass until you have eight butt-cheeks."

When a woman falls in love with a man, she can't help but turn herself into a rope, fastened around the man's ankle.

Now, Liu Changjie could finally breathe easily. He really wasn't a superman, and he definitely needed some sleep.

And finally, he did.

When he awoke, it was dark outside the small window. Evening had arrived.

A breeze blew in through the window, carrying the fragrance of wine.

The fragrance was that of authentic Red Daughter wine. This type of small tavern wouldn't carry this type of wine. [7]

Liu Changjie's eyes flickered. "Whoever is outside drinking, I don't care who you are, come on in! And don't forget to bring that wine in with you." [8]

And suddenly someone was knocking on the door.

"The door is unlocked. Just push it open."

The door slowly opened and a person entered, carrying a copper pot in one hand and two drinking bowls in another. It was the man who had gone looking for Duqi and the others.

"I am Wu Bu'ke," he said humbly. He smiled. "I came especially to pay a visit. I knew your Excellency was resting, so I could only wait outside warming the wine."

Liu Changjie looked at him. "Did Dragon Fifth send you?" he said coolly.

Wu Bu'ke smiled and nodded. "The Young Master is respectfully waiting for Mister Liu's arrival."

"Sadly I can't even stand up right now, let alone go meet him."

Wu Bu'ke smiled. "The young master is aware that Mister Liu was offended by someone. Therefore he sent along something special so your majesty could vent his anger."

"Oh? What is it? Where is it?"

Wu Bu'ke turned his head and made a beckoning motion toward the door. A woman slowly walked in, as beautiful as a peacock, carrying a wooden plank in her hand.

It was Kong Lanjun.

Her peacock-like arrogance was gone, and now she looked like a defeated chicken.

She walked in with head lowered, handed the wooden plank to Liu Changjie, and quietly said, "I used this plank to beat you, thirty times. Now you ... you might as well return the favor."

He looked at her, and let out a long sigh. "Young Master Dragon Fifth really deserves to be called a dragon among men," he said quietly. "Otherwise, he wouldn't have so many people willing to devote their lives to him."

Part 3

Soft lamplight filled the elegant room. On top of the small red-brick oven was a copper pot, from which emanated the fragrance of wine.

Standing there heating the wine was the green-robed middle-aged man with white stockings.

Dragon Fifth lay on a leopard skin blanket, which was spread on a short, narrow bed. His eyes were closed peacefully.

The weather was warm, and the small oven burned brightly, but as for these two people, there was not an ounce of warmth to be felt between the two of them.

It was only the two of them in the room, waiting for Liu Changjie.

On the table were spread out several delicate appetizers [9], and there was a chair for Liu Changjie.

Was there anyone else under heaven who could sit down to eat and drink with Dragon Fifth?

There was a knock at the door, and then Meng Fei entered. The elegant room was obviously located within his manor.

"He's here."

"Ask him in." Dragon Fifth's eyes were still shut. "Alone."

**

As soon as Liu Changjie entered, Meng Fei shut the door.

The green-robed man, middle-aged man was so focused on heating the wine that he didn't even spare a glance for Liu Changjie.

But Dragon Fifth had already sat up, a strange expression on his pale-white face.

"You didn't do any more work than necessary." He smiled. "In martial arts and in women both, you didn't do any more work than necessary."

He obviously hadn't finished his thought, so Liu Changjie waited for him to continue.

"In fact, you were able to handle a woman that I was incapable of handling."

Liu Changjie maintained his silence.

He wasn't sure what Dragon Fifth was getting at. And when it came to this aspect of dealing with women, a man normally wouldn't be quick to reveal the details.

Dragon Fifth continued, "To trick Qiu Hengbo and Kong Lanjun is not easy, but you did it."

Liu Changjie finally laughed. "I did it for you."

Dragon Fifth looked at him, and then finally smiled broadly. "It seems you're not only intelligent, you're also very cautious."

Liu Changjie let out a breath. "I must be cautious."

"The hare is in hand, you're worried I'm going to throw you in the cooking pot?"

Liu Changjie replied, "'Put away the bow once the birds are all killed, kill the hounds for food once all the hares are bagged.' I understand the meaning of the saying."

"But you're not just a hound for hunting rabbits, you're a person who can accomplish things. I often have use for people like you." [10]

Liu Changjie let out a soft breath. "Thank you very much."

"Sit."

"I'd rather stay standing."

Dragon Fifth laughed again. "It seems Kong Lanjun didn't hold anything back."

Liu Changjie laughed bitterly.

"Do you want the hands she used to deliver the beating?" asked Dragon Fifth.

"I do."

"It's an easy matter," he replied coolly. "I can have her two hands put in a box and delivered immediately."

"But, I'd rather have her hands attached to her body."

He smiled. "That's also easy. When you leave, you can take her with you."

Liu Changjie shook his head. "I like to eat eggs, but it doesn't mean I want to carry a hen around with me."

Dragon Fifth laughed for the second time. "Well then I'll tell you where the chicken coop is. If you want to eat an egg, you can go there any time."

Liu Changjie laughed bitterly. "Sadly, this particular egg is not only picky, it's also sitting on a wooden plank." [11]

Dragon Fifth laughed for the third time, heartily.

It seemed he was in a very good mood this day; he had laughed more times than any other day before.

When Dragon Fifth finished laughing, Liu Changjie slowly said, "I think you forgot to ask me about something."

"There's no need to ask. I know you succeeded in your task."

"That was the correct box?"

Dragon Fifth stared at him. "It was."

"Are you sure?"

"Very sure."

They both had strange expressions in their eyes. It seemed as if the question Liu Changjie had asked was superfluous.

Dragon Fifth generally did not like people who spoke superfluously, and yet he didn't seem to be annoyed.

Liu Changjie laughed. "If it was the correct box, then what was inside the box must also be correct."

From within his robe he pulled out a bundle, wrapped in purple satin. The bundle was tied up and sealed with an ingenious knot. "This is what I took from the box. The original seal hasn't been touched."

"I can tell that she personally tied this Lovesick knot."

A Lovesick knot that has been tied well is not easy to untie.

Dragon Fifth extended two fingers, and with a light twisting motion, untied the knot.

He smiled. "If you want to untie a Lovesick knot, this is the only method you can use."

"I have another method," said Liu Changjie.

"Oh, what?"

"A blade."

No matter how tangled the Lovesick not, one slice of a blade would definitely open it.

Dragon Fifth laughed for the fourth time. "Your method is definitely the most direct and thorough."

"That is the only type I use."

Dragon Fifth smiled. "If the method is effective, then one type is enough."

**

Inside the bundle was a small pile of silk cotton. Wrapped inside the silk cotton was an emerald-green bottle made from jasper.

Dragon Fifth's eyes shone, and a strange flush filled his pale, white face.

Obtaining this bottle had not been easy.

The price he had paid to get it was extremely high.

His hand trembled involuntarily as he stretched it out.

Who would ever have imagined that Liu Changjie's hand would shoot out like lightning and grab the bottle, then throw it as hard as he could toward the ground. There was a "peng" sound as the bottle smashed into countless pieces. Scarlett-colored medicine oozed out onto the ground like fresh blood.

Meng Fei's face went yellow in fear. [12]

Dragon Fifth's face was filled with shock. "What is the meaning of this?" he shouted.

"Nothing special," said Liu Changjie calmly. "It's just that, finding an employer as good as you isn't easy, so I don't want you to die."

"What are you talking about?" Dragon Fifth said furiously. "I don't understand."

"You should be able to figure it out."

"I can see that the medicine is real. I can smell it too."

The liquid medicine was scarlet and diaphanous, and as soon as the bottle shattered, its fragrant odor had filled the air.

"It might not be fake, but there is definitely poison mixed in."

"How the hell could you tell that?"

"Based on two things."

"Tell me."

"Everything went much too smoothly. It was too easy."

"That's not enough of a reason."

"The Madam Lovesickness that I met, she was an imposter."

"You've never seen her before, how could you know whether she is real or not?"

"Because her skin was too rough. A woman who rubs honey oil over her body every day could not possibly have skin that rough."

“So these are your two reasons?”

“A reasonable deduction could be made from one point, let alone two.”

Dragon Fifth suddenly closed his eyes, unable to make any more refutations. Because at this exact moment, the diaphanous medicine suddenly began changing color from scarlet into sickening, deathly black.

Some poisons only take effect when exposed to the air.

At this point, anyone could see that the medicine in the bottle had been mixed with poison, deadly poison.

Dragon Fifth's face was ashen. He stared at Liu Changjie for a long time, before finally saying, “In my entire life, I've never said ‘thank you.’”

“I believe you.”

“But right now, I have no choice but to thank you.”

“And I have no choice but to accept.”

“But I still don't fully understand...”

Liu Changjie interrupted him, “You should be able to understand. Qiu Hengbo knew that you were sending me, so she set you up. She let me succeed on purpose, in order to deliver the bottle of poisoned medicine to kill you.”

Dragon Fifth's expression changed. “She ... she wants to kill me? But why?”

Liu Changjie sighed. “Who can possibly understand the thinking of a woman?”

Dragon Fifth closed his eyes, appearing to be exhausted. Sorrow can be very exhausting.

“You forgot to ask me something else,” said Liu Changjie.

Dragon Fifth laughed bitterly. “My thoughts are troubled. Just say what you want to say.”

“The fact that you sent me on this mission... Is it true that only the four of us in this room knew about it?”

“That's correct.”

“Then how did Madam Lovesickness find out?”

Dragon Fifth's eyes shot open, filled with an expression as sharp as a sword. And the tip of that sword pointed at Meng Fei's face.

Meng Fei looked sick to his stomach.

“When you beat me up,” said Liu Changjie, “everyone thought that I hated your guts. Only Meng Fei knew what was going on behind the scenes.”

“It wasn't Meng Fei,” said Dragon Fifth suddenly.

“How do you know?”

“If there is Dragon Fifth, there is Meng Fei. He is alive today only because of me. My death wouldn't benefit him in any way.

Liu Changjie was lost in thought for a while. Finally he nodded. “I can believe that. He should know that this world will never have another Dragon Fifth in it.

Meng Fei knelt, tears streaming down his face.

They were tears of gratitude, gratitude for Dragon Fifth's faith in him.

Liu Changjie slowly continued. “If it wasn't Meng Fei, then who was it?”

Dragon Fifth, didn't respond, nor did he ask any further questions.

The two men's gazes were already fixed on the face of the green-robed man with white stockings.

The fire in the stove was weakening. The wine was already warm.

The green-robed man with white stockings was taking the wine from the large copper pot and slowly pouring it into a wine jug.

His hand was stable, not even a drop spilled out.

His face was completely devoid of emotion.

Liu Changjie had never in his life seen someone as calm and collected.

He couldn't help but admire him.

Dragon Fifth looked at him, an expression of sorrow on his face. It appeared to be for the man.

Liu Changjie let out a long sigh. "At first I wasn't willing to suspect you, but now I have no choice.

The green-robed man put the wine jug onto the table, not even glancing at Liu Changjie. [13]

"But other than Dragon Fifth, Meng Fei and myself, no one know the secret but you."

It seemed as if the green-robed man didn't hear a word. He tested the temperature of the wine and then began pouring it into wine cups.

Not a drop of wine spilled out.

Liu Changjie continued, "The carriage driver knew I was working for Dragon Fifth because he was your man. Perhaps he learned the secret while passing your message to Madam Lovesickness. You couldn't deliver the message yourself because you're always with Dragon Fifth, and could never find an opportunity."

The two wine cups were full.

The green robed man put down the wine jug, his face still completely devoid of expression.

"That day you suddenly appeared at the farm house was because you wanted all along to silence the witness, so you were keeping an eye on him. His sudden greediness just gave you a good opportunity to kill him."

The green-robed man didn't say a word, as if he felt it was beneath him to offer any explanation.

"I thought about it a lot," continued Liu Changjie. "And there really is no one other than you who could have revealed the secret."

He let out another long sigh. "But I never imagined that someone like you would betray a friend."

"He's not a friend," said Dragon Fifth suddenly.

"He's not?"

"No."

"Is he a benefactor?"

"Not that either."

Liu Changjie didn't understand. "If he's neither, then why is he following you around like a slave?"

"Do you know who he is?"

"I can't say for sure."

"Well, there's no harm in taking a guess."

"In the past, there was an amazing young hero. He made his first kill at the age of nine. At seventeen he was already making a name for himself in the martial world. By twenty he was famous. He was the leader of the Seven Sword Schools' Kongtong Sect, his sword skill was very high, and he was unequalled in his time. He was called 'Best Blade under Heaven.'"

"You're right. He is Qin Huhua."

Liu Changjie let out a breath. "But it seems he's changed."

"You don't understand why one of the most talented and popular heroes of the past would now be following me around like a slave?"

"I don't. I don't see how anyone could understand."

"In the world, there is only one type of person that could make him change in this way."

"What type of person."

"An enemy."

Shocked, Liu Changjie said, "He is your enemy?"

Dragon Fifth nodded.

Liu Changjie was even more confused.

"In his entire life, he was only defeated three times, and those three times were all by my hand. He swore an oath to kill me, but he knew that there was no way that he would ever be able to defeat me."

"Because you are still young, whereas his martial arts have already passed their peak."

"And also because each time I defeated him, I used a completely different technique, so there was no way for him to figure out my martial arts."

"Therefore, the only way for him to figure out a way to defeat you would be to follow you around constantly and study you, hope to discover a weakness."

"That's correct."

"So you allowed him to follow you!"

Dragon Fifth laughed. "There really is nothing more exciting or delightful than this kind of thing."

Other than a threat to his life, there really were very few things in the world that Dragon Fifth found exciting.

"Of course, there was a condition," said Dragon Fifth.

"That he be your slave?"

Dragon Fifth nodded. With a smile, he said, "Getting Qin Huhua to be your slave is something no one could imagine possible, don't you think?"

"And so you think the arrangement is delightful."

"Not to mention that until he's confident enough to make another move, he will do everything he can to protect me. He doesn't want me to die under anyone's hands but his own."

Liu Changjie sighed. "You really shouldn't have let him in on the secret about Madam Lovesickness."

"I don't have any secrets from him, because I trust him. He isn't the kind of villain who reveals confidential matters."

Not many people completely trust their friends. To find someone who will completely trust an enemy is even more inconceivable.

"Dragon Fifth is worthy of his name," said Liu Changjie, "but this sadly, this time he really made a mistake in judging character."

Dragon Fifth sighed and then laughed bitterly. "Everyone makes mistakes. Perhaps I overestimated him, and underestimated you."

Liu Changjie laughed coolly. "It seems he also underestimated me."

"He thinks that the only person in the world worth paying attention to is me."

Qin Huhua raised his head and stared at Dragon Fifth. Even though there was no expression on his face, within his eyes shone forth a fearful, cutting look. Speaking very slowly, he said, "Do you believe him?"

"I have no choice."

“Very well.”

“Are you ready to make your move?”

“I’ve been studying you carefully for four years, your every act and every move. I haven’t let anything slip.”

“I know.”

“You’re a difficult person to understand. You rarely give people opportunities to see you, and rarely take action.”

“If you usually don’t take action, people will be shocked when you do. When you don’t take action, you are as quiet as a lone mountain. When you do take action, it is fast as a meteor.” [14]

Qin Huhua stood there quietly, himself looking as unshakable as a mountain. Slowly, he said, “When I was young, I revealed too much about my abilities. And yes, my martial arts really are past their peak. If I can’t defeat you right now, there will be fewer and fewer opportunities later.”

“So you were already prepared to make your move?”

“Correct.”

“Good. Very good.”

Qin Huhua continued, “This is my fourth battle with you, and it will be the last. Having been able to fight with you four times, regardless of who wins or who loses, I am able to die without regret.”

Dragon Fifth sighed again. “I originally had no intention of killing you, but this time ...”

“If I’m defeated this time, I have no intention of going on living.”

“Very well. Go get your sword.”

“My technique has changed. You already know me so well, there’s no way I could defeat you with a sword.”

“What will you use?”

“In my hands, anything under heaven can be turned into a deadly weapon.”

Laughing heartily, Dragon Fifth said, “Being able to fight with you these four times has really been one of the greatest pleasures in my life.”

His laughter suddenly ceased.

The room was filled with a deathly silence. Even the sound of breathing could not be heard.

The wind blew on the chrysanthemums and ginkgo plants outside the window. The chrysanthemums were silent, but it seemed like the ginkgo plants were sighing.

The clear autumn weather suddenly seemed to be filled with the harsh cold of winter.

Qin Huhua stared at Dragon Fifth. His pupils constricted, and the veins on his forehead bulged. It seemed he was gathering all the power in his body, in preparation for an all-out attack. [15]

Anyone could see that when he made his move, it would be heaven-shaking.

But no one would have expected that he would use two fingers to pick up a chopstick, which he casually stabbed toward Dragon Fifth.

He had filled himself with the power to fight a tiger, but this move looked like it wasn’t strong enough to poke through a piece of paper.

Dragon Fifth’s expression was grim. The chopstick was light, but he knew that in reality it was heavier than Mount Tai.

He, too, picked up a chopstick, and pointed it out at a slanting angle.

There was a table between the two of them, so Dragon Fifth didn’t stand up.

The chopsticks in their hands danced back and forth, faster and faster. It looked almost like some type of child’s game.

But Liu Changjie could see that this was no game.

The variations in the movements of the chopsticks were ingenious, almost impossible to describe. It was as if an entire ocean had been placed into a millet seed. The tangible became intangible; within every variation there were countless more variations. Every stab seemed to contain the power to crack gold and stone.

In the eyes of others, this battle might not seem very dangerous, but as he watched, Liu Changjie felt shaken to the core.

Qin Huhua really did deserve the title “Best Blade under Heaven.”

And Dragon Fifth really was an extraordinary talent, the type of person the martial world might not see again in a hundred years. His ability was shocking, and he clearly was unparalleled.

Suddenly, the two swiftly moving chopsticks connected and stopped moving.

The expressions on their faces grew more and more grim. A short time passed. Sweat beaded on their foreheads.

Liu Changjie noticed that the small bed Dragon Fifth was sitting on had begun to sink down, and Qin Huhua’s two feet were slowly being embedded into the stone floor.

The two men were clearly using all the power in their bodies. The fearful level of this power was beyond imagination.

Yet the chopsticks in their hands did not snap.

Ivory chopsticks like this should snap, but instead, they appeared to be softening.

The chopstick in Qin Huhua’s hand suddenly began to bend like a noodle. Sweat dripped off his face. Suddenly, he let go of the chopstick, and his entire body flew backward into the wall with a bang.

His body knocked a huge hole into the brick wall, after which he fell to the ground, blood oozing from his mouth. His breathing had stopped.

Dragon Fifth immediately laid back down in the bed, closing his eyes. His pale face exuded exhaustion and weakness.

At this exact moment, Liu Changjie made his move.

His empty palm suddenly dropped down like lightning, seizing Dragon Fifth’s wrist.

Dragon Fifth’s expression changed, but he didn’t open his eyes.

Meng Fei’s face paled, and he tried to leap out through the hole in the wall. But there was someone outside. A fist smashed into Meng Fei’s face, knocking him to the ground.

The fist was quick and fierce. Not many people could knock down Meng Fei with a single fist.

It was “Mighty Lion” Lan Tianmeng. [16, 17]

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Dragon Fifth’s pale face was completely devoid of color.

Liu Changjie grasped his wrist, and as fast as lightning sealed thirteen of his acupuncture points.

Dragon Fifth’s eyes were still closed. He sighed lightly. “So, it turns out I not only underestimated you, I also misjudged your character.”

“Everyone makes mistakes. You are just a person.”

“Did I make a mistake in laying the blame on Qin Huhua?”

“That was probably your biggest mistake.”

“You knew who he was, and you knew he wouldn’t let me fall into anyone else’s hands. So to take action against me, you first needed to borrow my hands to get rid of him.”

“I was a little worried about how to deal with him, but what I was worried about most was you.”

“So you wanted to borrow his hands to make me use up my power.”

"When the sandpiper and the clam fight each other, it's the fisherman who benefits. I just used the old 'kill two birds with one stone' method.

"The poison in the bottle, was that also you?"

"Actually, no."

"You've been plotting against me. Why would you save me?"

"Because I don't like being used by other people. And even more than that, I don't like being Qiu Hengbo's tool. I wanted to use my own two hands to capture the divine dragon."

"Are you one of Qiu Hengbo's subordinates?"

"No."

"You seek revenge?"

"No."

"Then what do you want?"

"I was sent by 'Power of Hu' Patriarch Hu. To bring you to justice."

"What crime did I commit?"

"Don't you know?"

Dragon Fifth sighed. His eyes were closed, and he also closed his mouth.

Liu Changjie said, "The chief constables in the southern seven provinces and the northern six all want to make a move against you. But they know that dealing with you is not an easy matter. Even I wasn't very confident. I had to get you to trust me, so that's why I saved you."

"You've said enough," said Dragon Fifth coldly.

"You don't want to hear any more?"

Dragon Fifth laughed.

"It seems," said Liu Changjie, "you're not inclined to even look at me right now."

Lan Tianmeng suddenly spoke up. "Actually, the person he doesn't want to look at is me, not you."

"Correct," said Dragon Fifth. "Villains like you who forget what is right at the sight of profit... I'm afraid one more glance will pollute my eyes."

Lan Tianmeng sighed. "You're wrong. I'm not going against you for money. I'm going against you for the sake of justice." [18]

"You're also one of Power of Hu's men?"

Lan Tianmeng nodded. Turning to face Liu Changjie, he said, "You didn't know either, did you?"

Liu Changjie didn't

"But," continued Lan Tianmeng, "I knew about you a long time ago."

"From the very beginning?"

"Before you came, Power of Hu had already instructed me to take care of you."

Liu Changjie laughed bitterly. "You took care of me very well."

Lan Tianmeng sighed. "When I beat you up that night, I was a little too hard on you. But, I was acting against my emotions, because I definitely couldn't let him suspect you. I think you can understand my predicament."

"Of course I understand."

Lan Tianmeng's face widened with a smile. "I knew you wouldn't blame me."

"I don't blame you." He smiled and stretched out a hand. "We're family, and all of this is part of our duty. Even if you beat me harder, it wouldn't matter. We're still friends."

Lan Tianmeng laughed heartily. "Ok. Let's be friends."

Laughing, he extended his hand and gripped Liu Changjie's.

And then his laughter died. His face distorted. He could hear the sound of bones being shattered.

At this exact moment, Liu Changjie twisted his wrist, breaking it, and then smashed a fist into bridge of his nose.

It wasn't that Lan Tianmeng didn't see the fist coming, it was that Liu Changjie's technique was too ingenious, and his speed incredible.

After receiving Liu Changjie's iron-fisted strike, the lion-like old man fell down onto his back.

Liu Changjie didn't stop. Fists descended like rain onto his chest and sides. He smiled. "You hit me, I didn't blame you. If I hit you, you shouldn't blame me. If I beat you a little harder than you beat me, I know you won't take it to heart."

Lan Tianmeng couldn't open his mouth.

He bit his teeth together, unwilling to call out. When he had beaten Liu Changjie, Liu Changjie had also been unwilling to call out for mercy.

Even though Dragon Fifth's eyes were still closed, a small smile crept onto his face.

He was not only Lan Tianmeng's friend, but also his benefactor. And yet Lan Tianmeng had betrayed him.

Forgetting what is right at the sight of profit, biting the hand that feeds you. People who do these things deserve punishment.

And Lan Tianmeng was receiving his.

Though the fists beating Lan Tianmeng were Liu Changjie's, they might as well have been Dragon Fifth's.

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The only thing to be heard in the room was the sound wheezing.

By the time Liu Changjie finished, Lan Tianmeng was no longer a mighty lion, but a beaten stray dog.

"What you owe me, I've taken back." Liu Changjie stroked his fist, a strange expression flickering in his eyes. "What I owe, it's time to give back."

"What do you owe?" asked Dragon Fifth.

"No one can live alone in the world," said Liu Changjie coolly. "If you want to live, you have to accept the good grace of others."

"Oh?"

"It's the same with even you. If you want to eat, you need others to plant crops. When you are born, the hands of others than deliver you. Without the good grace of others, you wouldn't be alive, not even for a day."

"So, everyone owes a debt to someone."

Liu Changjie nodded.

"And can you repay your debt?"

"This debt is not easy to pay back. But as long as you're alive, if you can do something to help the world, then the debt can be considered paid."

Dragon Fifth laughed coldly.

"Did you know," asked Liu Changjie suddenly, "Power of Hu has wanted to meet you for a very long time?"

"I've wanted to meet him, too," laughed Dragon Fifth. "For a long time."

Liu Changjie sighed. "You both are not easy people to meet. To arrange a meeting has been difficult."

He sighed again. He sighed because his heart was filled with complicated emotions.

Dragon Fifth closed his eyes again. "I knew for a long time that we would meet eventually, but I never imagined it would be like this."

"There are many things in the world that we can't imagine."

He suddenly lifted up Dragon Fifth. "Even you can't imagine them. Because, you're not a divine dragon, you're just a person, that's all."

(1) Okay, this is one of those clever Chinese plays on words that can't be translated into English. She uses an expression in Chinese, 打肿脸充胖子, that means to go beyond your means to try to impress others. However, the characters that make up the expression literally translate as "to hit your own face until it is swollen," the idea meaning to make your face puffy so that you look more imposing to others. Then she asks him why his butt is swollen and not his face. It's pretty clever, but doesn't translate well. If you translate the actual meaning of the phrase, then the joke doesn't make sense. If you translate the phrase literally, it also doesn't make sense. I tried to translate it in a similarly idiomatic and sarcastic way.

(2) The clever wordplay continues here, because the word in Chinese for obstinate literally means "to have a hard mouth." Then she threatens to beat another part of his body until it's swollen, and it just so happens to use the same character for mouth. In an attempt to have a similar continuity of wordplay, I'm adjusting the translation a little bit.

(3) Okay, I tried to keep the feeling of the original, but it's literally impossible to translate the wordplay here. She starts by calling him 王八蛋 wang ba dan, which is a pretty common epithet usually translated as bastard. Then he responds by saying, "you shouldn't use the characters 王八 wang ba when cursing your husband." This is clever because 王八 carries the meaning of a man whose wife is cheating on him (a cuckold.) Then she responds by saying, "if I was really mad, I really could give you a green hat to wear." As I'm sure most of you know, in Chinese culture, if a man wears a green hat it implies that his wife is cheating on him.

(4) The literal expression is to have a cooked duck in hand, and then it flies away. It implies that you seem to have an assured victory, and then suddenly and unexpectedly you lose.

(5) Here again he uses the phrase "wear a green hat."

(6) The literal word he uses is "iron man," but in this context I think superman is a better choice.

(7) This is a real type of rice wine called 女儿红 nu'er hong. According to Wikipedia it "originates from Shaoxing, in the eastern coastal province of Zhejiang. It is made of glutinous rice and wheat. This wine evolved from the Shaoxing tradition of burying nu'er hong underground when a daughter was born, and digging it up for the wedding banquet when the daughter was to be married." Here's the link to the Wikipedia article: <http://goo.gl/5gsU7W>

(8) He actually addresses the person as "friend," but I couldn't figure a good way to squeeze that word in as well and have it flow well. The literal translation is, "friend who is outside drinking wine, no matter who you are, please come in all of you, and don't forget to bring in the wine."

(9) Here again is the word 下酒菜, which literally means dishes to be eaten when drinking alcohol. I'm translating it as appetizers.

(10) I think the meaning comes across pretty easily here, even though it's wordplay based on Chinese expressions. It starts out with Dragon Fifth saying something based on the expression 狡兔死，走狗烹 jiao tu si, zou gou peng. It translates literally as "the crafty rabbit is dead, boil the running dog." The idea is that after your hunting dog has captured the rabbit, you can cook it for food. Then Liu Changjie responds with the full expression 飞鸟尽，良弓藏；狡兔死，走狗烹. Apparently this expression comes from Records of the Grand Historian by Sima Qian. They two halves can stand alone: <http://goo.gl/tvnkex> and <http://goo.gl/suWeJB>. The whole exchange is even more clever because 走狗 zou gou is also a common expression to mean flunky or lackey, and has been used repeatedly throughout the story to describe Dragon Fifth's followers.

(11) Clever wordplay based on the expression "to pick a bone out of an egg," which means to find fault in others. What Liu Changjie literally says is, "this egg not only has a bone in it, it also has a wooden plank." I changed it a bit so that it (hopefully) makes sense in English.

(12) I left out a small detail, that Meng Fei is standing by the door. But I couldn't figure out a good way to include it without breaking the flow. As some of you might know, it's easy to change almost anything into an adjective in Chinese, but it doesn't work that way in English. The original actually says, "Standing-by-the-door Meng Fei, suddenly looked sick."

(13) In the original Chinese, he is referred to as the "green-robed, white-stockinged man" or the "green-robed, white-stockinged, middle-aged man." But, repeatedly using so many adjectives sounds kind of silly in English so I'm omitting some of them.

(14) The Chinese contains two cool expressions back to back. My version is a relatively direct translation of the meaning of the phrases. A more literal translation would be, "if one wishes to act, the action will shock people, quietness is like a lofty mountain, action is like a meteor." The first expression is a twist on a set phrase in Chinese with basically the same meaning, except instead of talking about taking action, it's talking about singing.

(15) The original uses an expression that basically means to put all your eggs in one basket.

(16) His nickname here is indeed different from his first introduction, in which he was called "Lion King." This new nickname literally just means "male lion," but that sounds kind of lame in English so I'm taking an alternate meaning of the first

character for this version.

(17) There's an additional line of text I'm leaving out. After introducing Lan Tianmeng, he repeats himself by saying, "this person who knocked down Meng Fei with one punch, is Lan Tianmeng."

(18) Here, he uses an expression that literally means, to place loyalty or righteousness above family.

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Chapter 7 – Capturing the dragon empty handed

Part 1

Power of Hu was obviously just a person too.

But he was a very extraordinary person. In his life, he had accomplished many extraordinary things.

When he first started to roam Jianghu, people were already calling him “the Fox.”

Of course, other than his fox-like craftiness, he was also as patient as a camel, as hardworking as a farm ox, as vicious as a bird of prey, as nimble as a pigeon, and as sharp as a sword.

Sadly, he had already grown old.

His vision had grown dim, his muscles slack, his reflexes slow. He also had contracted a serious case of rheumatism, and had spent years bed-ridden, to the point where he could no longer even stand up.

Luckily, his intelligence had not grown dim, and was in fact sharper than ever. His method of handling affairs was also more prudent and careful than ever.

So down to this day, he still commanded much respect.

**

It was an ancient hall, spacious and tall, yet filled with an unspeakable gloominess.

The tables and chairs were also archaic, the color of the paint fading away. When wind blew into the hall, it carried along dust, which settled onto everything, including guests.

The wind blew.

Liu Changjie helped Dragon Fifth brush the dust off of his body, then muttered, “They really should clean this place up.”

Dragon Fifth looked at him. “You have dust all over yourself, too.”

Liu Changjie laughed. “I don’t care. Some people are destined to roll around in mud and dust.”

“And you’re one of those people?”

Liu Changjie nodded. “But you aren’t. Patriarch Hu isn’t either.”

“Do you really need to compare me to him?” asked Dragon Fifth coolly.

“You two are basically the same type of person,” said Liu Changjie. “Inherently superior.”

Dragon Fifth said nothing.

The large hall was once again silent. The wind blew the paper windows, which sounded like the falling of leaves.

Autumn was dying, and soon it would snow.

“Is the master here?” called out Liu Changjie.

“Yes.” The doorman was old. “Wait in the hall, I’ll notify him you’re here.”

The old man had a full head of white hair, and his face was covered with scars. It was safe to assume this man was Power of Hu’s partner, and that they been through hell and high water together.

As such, he wasn’t very polite. But, Liu Changjie was willing to forgive him, and waited in the main hall. He waited for a very long time.

And Hu Yue’er?

She should know that Liu Changjie was here. Why didn't she appear?

Liu Changjie didn't ask. Actually, there was no one to ask even if he wanted to.

He had been to this place twice, and had only ever seen three people here. Power of Hu, Hu Yue'er, and the old doorman.

But, if you think you could come and go as you please in this place, you would be wrong, and you would pay dearly.

And the meaning of "pay dearly" is, you would pay with your life!

Patriarch Hu's career had spanned decades, and it was hard to say how many criminals he had apprehended.

It was even harder to say how many people sought revenge against him. Many of those people had come to this place to try.

And of the people who had come, not one had ever left alive.

**

The moonlight was beginning to fade, and the hall grew gloomier and gloomier.

Patriarch Hu still hadn't appeared.

Dragon Fifth could not help but laugh coldly. "It seems he really is arrogant."

"You're not the only arrogant person in the world," replied Liu Changjie coolly. "In any case, if I were you, I wouldn't be anxious to see him."

"Isn't he anxious to see me?"

"He doesn't need to be anxious."

"Because I'm like a fish in a net?"

"In his eyes, you're a poisonous dragon."

"Oh?"

"He is a very cautious person. Without checking everything thoroughly, he would never come to see you."

"Check what?"

"Check to see if the poisoned dragon really has become a fish, and then check to see if the fish is useful."

"Check with who?"

"Who understands you the best? Who knows the most about this whole matter?"

"Lan Tianmeng?"

Liu Changjie smiled.

"He's here too?" said Dragon Fifth.

"I think he just arrived."

Dragon Fifth was again silent.

And at that moment could be heard the hoarse, smiling voice of an old man. "My apologies for keeping you waiting so long."

Part 2

In the long, wide hall were several arched doors covered with screens, separating the hall into five areas.

Liu Changjie and Dragon Fifth were in the first area, and the voice emanated from the last.

They could see a pale, emaciated old man, wrapped in a fox-fur robe, sitting in a large wheelchair.

Behind the chair, pushing it forward, was the old doorman, and Lan Tianmeng.

Suddenly, a clanging sound rang out, and four sets of iron bars fell down, covering the arching doorways, completely cutting

off Liu Changjie from Patriarch Hu.

The bars were as thick as a child's arm. Even a thousand men and horses together would have a hard time getting past them.

Liu Changjie didn't care. The first time he was here, he had seen the same thing. The one who cared was Dragon Fifth.

It wasn't until this moment that he truly understood how cautious and careful Power of Hu was. There really was no one who could compare.

Liu Changjie had already stood up, and bowed, smiling.

"Master, are you well?"

Power of Hu's eyes narrowed into lines as he laughed. "I'm very well. You are well. We're all well."

Liu Changjie smiled. "There's only one person who isn't well."

Power of Hu said, "Heaven's net is wide meshed, nothing escapes it. The way of Heaven is fair, but the guilty will not escape. [1] I always knew that eventually he would end up like this." Smiling, he continued, "And I didn't misjudge you, either. I knew you wouldn't disappoint me."

Liu Changjie glanced at Lan Tianmeng and laughed. "Everything that happened, you already told the master?"

Lan Tianmeng rubbed the scabs on his face and laughed bitterly. "If you had hit any harder, I'm afraid I wouldn't have been able to tell him anything." [2]

Power of Hu laughed loudly. "As of now, you two can finally call it even. Don't put these things to heart."

He suddenly waved a hand and turned his head. "Remove these things."

"These things" were the four sets of iron bars.

When the scar-faced old doorman hesitated, Power of Hu's eyebrows furrowed. "Don't forget, Master Liu is our brother. There should be no obstacles between brothers."

"What a good set of brothers," said Dragon Fifth with a dark smile. "One is a lucky, the other is a fox."

Power of Hu's facial expression didn't change. With a smile, he said, "Don't forget, only brothers like us continue to live. People like you will be sent to death without a proper burial, one by one."

**

The iron bars were gone.

Power of Hu said, "Give the package to Master Liu. And bring the poisonous dragon to me. I want to have a look."

The old man immediately brought forth a package wrapped in brocade cloth. Inside the package was a set of green clothing.

It was the same set of clothing Liu Changjie and Hu Yue'er had worn the night they professed their love for each other. It still smelled like her.

Power of Hu said, "Before she left, she especially requested to leave these for you."

Liu Changjie's heart skipped a beat. "She ... where did she go?"

A sad expression fell onto Power of Hu's sallow, hoary face. "A place where everyone goes to."

"A place that you can never return from?"

"The moon has phases of darkness and light," said Power of Hu. "And people have partings and reunions. [3] You're still young, you should be able to accept this."

Liu Changjie grew stiff.

Could Hu Yue'er really be dead?

She was constantly giving him instructions, telling him to be safe and stay alive, how could she be the one to die?

How could she have died so suddenly, so early?

Liu Changjie didn't dare believe it, didn't want to believe it.

And yet, he couldn't deny it.

Power of Hu sighed again, looked more aged and haggard than before. "From the time she was small she had a foul disease, difficult to treat. She knew that she could pass at any time. She hid the truth from you all this time, and the reason she would never marry you was because she didn't want to break your heart."

Liu Changjie didn't move, didn't say anything.

After all, he was not a passionate and impulsive youth, ready to burst out with emotion. He stood there stupidly, as if he had turned into stone.

Lan Tianmeng also sighed. "I always tell people not to drink, but right now ..." A wine jug appeared in his hands, and he walked forward. "You really should have a drink or two..."

The wine was already warmed.

It seemed he had prepared it especially for Liu Changjie.

For someone whose heart has already been broken, what other comfort in the world is there than drinking?

But why drink?

When wine penetrates the restless heart, will it not turn into tears of lovesickness?

And yet, why not drink?

The happiness that comes with being drunk is always a good thing.

Liu Changjie suddenly grabbed the wine jug. Laughing reluctantly, he said, "Have a drink with me."

"I don't drink," said Lan Tianmeng. He gave a forced laugh. "The blood in my mouth still isn't dry, I shouldn't drink even a drop."

"Even if you don't want to drink, you still have to drink."

Lan Tianmeng stared, shocked.

"Even if you don't want to drink, you still have to drink." What did this mean? Who would have thought that Liu Changjie had even more shocking plans in mind?

He suddenly tilted up the wine jug, aiming to pour the wine into Lan Tianmeng's mouth.

Lan Tianmeng's face twisted.

The scar-faced old man's face also twisted.

Only Power of Hu remained expressionless. He waved his hand, and three dots of light shot forth like cold stars, toward Dragon Fifth.

Dragon Fifth's acupuncture points had been sealed, and he had just been dragged over by the old man like a dead fish.

But, as soon as the three dots shot forth, his body flew into the air.

He looked like a divine dragon soaring in the heavens.

Power of Hu, normally as cold as deadwood and as solid as a rock, looked shocked.

There was a tinkling sound, and sparks showered across the room as his hidden weapons weapons embedded themselves into limestone floor.

And then, there was another tinkling sound. Lan Tianmeng's fist shot out, not to strike Liu Changjie's face, but to shatter the jug of wine.

The wine in the pot splashed out, flying like sparks, splattering all over his face and into his eyes.

It was as if he had been struck by the most dreadful hidden weapon in the world. He cried out hoarsely and, rubbing his eyes with his hands, charged wildly away.

Could it be that the wine in the jug was poisoned?

Liu Changjie had already completed the task assigned by Power of Hu. Why would he order someone to poison him to death?

And how could the prisoner captured by Liu Changjie, the completely immobilized Dragon Fifth, suddenly fly into the air like a divine dragon?

Part 3

There was no wind.

Outside the window, leaden clouds filled the skies like a huge ink painting. [4]

The sad and shrill shrieking had ceased.

As soon as Lan Tianmeng charged forth, he had reached the stone steps leading outside. And then he fell, and his powerful, stalwart body shriveling and drying up.

As soon as Liu Changjie saw him fall, he turned his head. Dragon Fifth had floated back to the ground.

Power of Hu sat there, unmoving. His expression had returned to normal, and he was muttering under his breath.

"Seven steps. He only made it seven steps."

Liu Changjie let out a soft sigh. "The poison was very powerful."

"I mixed it myself," said Power of Hu.

"For me?"

Power of Hu nodded. "You're going to be sorry."

"Sorry?"

"The flavor of the wine was very good." His eyes seemed to carry a look of sorrow. "It was too good for Lan Tianmeng."

"Oh."

"He was not a good person, his death was also too good."

"Death is death..."

"There are many types of death," interrupted Power of Hu.

"And his death, what type was it?"

"His death was happy."

"Because it was quick?"

Power of Hu nodded "The faster you die, the less pain there is. Only good people deserve this kind of death."

He lifted his head and stared at Liu Changjie. A strange smile appeared on his face, and after a while he said, "I always thought you were a good person, so I mixed the poisoned wine especially for you."

Liu Changjie laughed. "Hearing this, it seems I should havefer thanks."

"You definitely should thank me."

"But, you forgot about something."

"Oh, what?"

"You forgot to ask me whether or not I wanted to die."

"When I want to kill people," said Power of Hu coolly, "I never ask whether or not they want to die. I only ask whether or not they deserve to die."

Liu Changjie sighed. "It makes sense."

"And so, you should be dead now."

"But I'm not. Is it because I'm not a good person?"

Power of Hu laughed. "You definitely aren't."

"If I was a good person, I would never have realized that you wanted to kill me."

"How did you figure it out?"

"I knew from the very beginning."

"Oh."

"From the very beginning I suspected that the true criminal was not Dragon Fifth, but you."

"Oh."

"Mainly because all these cases cropped up after you retired. Dragon Fifth isn't scared of you at all. If he was really the perpetrator, he wouldn't need to wait for your retirement."

"This line of reasoning isn't enough."

"Among these cases, every single one was carried off perfectly. Not one clue was left behind. Only a true expert on crime could be so efficient."

"Dragon Fifth isn't a true expert?"

"He isn't."

"How can you tell?"

"Because I am an expert. I can tell."

"You were sure about this?"

"No, so I had to get some evidence."

"And so you went after Dragon Fifth."

Liu Changjie nodded. "That also made you trust me, and let your guard down. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to get close to you." He laughed. "If I didn't bring Dragon Fifth here with me, would you have called for the bars to be removed?"

Power of Hu sighed. "I really did misjudge you. You really aren't a good person."

"And I didn't misjudge you at all."

Power of Hu laughed again, but the laughter didn't reach his eyes.

"What kind of person am I, then?" he said with a smile. "Can you really tell?"

"No one can match your caution and intelligence," said Liu Changjie. "But sadly, you are too ambitious for your own good."

Power of Hu sat listening.

"When you started your crime spree, maybe you intended to stop. But after you started, you couldn't. You just couldn't be content with what you had."

Power of Hu looked at him, his pupils two tiny dots of ice.

"And so your crimes grew greater and greater, more and more. You knew that it was dangerous, but you also knew that even though you were retired, they would eventually come to you for help."

He seemed to be somewhat caught up with emotion. "Once a person receives a free meal from the government, they will never be able to get the taste out of their mouth." [5]

"And so," said Power of Hu, "I definitely needed to find some to be a scapegoat, and take the blame for all the cases."

"Because if you cleared all the cases, then you would be able to get away scot free."

Power of Hu smiled. "It seems you really are an expert."

"But there was still something I couldn't figure out. Why did you pick Dragon Fifth?"

"You couldn't figure it out?"

"Anyone else you picked as a scapegoat would have been easier to handle than Dragon Fifth."

Power of Hu glanced at Dragon Fifth. He had sat down in the most comfortable seat he could find.

He seemed very calm and relaxed, as if this matter had nothing to do with him.

Power of Hu sighed. "I shouldn't have picked him. He really is too difficult to deal with."

"But you had no choice."

"Oh? Why?"

"Because you weren't the only person to make the decision."

"Oh."

"You have a partner, a person who had long ago decided that Dragon Fifth needed to die."

"When did you figure that out?"

"When I arrived at Madam Lovesickness's place."

"Don't tell me my partner is Qiu Hengbo?"

Liu Changjie nodded. "She shouldn't have known that I would go after for her. And yet she was prepared all along, waiting for me."

"And you suspect that I told her?"

"The only people who knew about it, other than me, were Dragon Fifth, Qiu Huhua and Hu Yue'er."

"And, of course, you wouldn't tell her."

"Neither would Dragon Fifth or Qin Huhua."

Power of Hu couldn't deny this.

"So I thought about it a lot, and decided that there was only one way for Qiu Hengbo to find out—if you two had been collaborating all along." He laughed again. "Furthermore, I might not be a good judge of people, but six plus one is seven. Even I could calculate this debt."

Power of Hu frowned. He didn't understand.

"I already knew that Qiu Hengbo's secret cave was guarded by seven people. But Hu Yue'er only told me the names of six people. That day at the inn in the Qixia Mountains, I only saw six people."

"You saw Tang Qing, Shan Yifei, Soul Enticing Lao Zhao, Iron Monk, Li the Mastiff, and the hermaphrodite?"

Liu Changjie nodded. "So I thought it was very strange. Where was the other person?"

"And now you figured it out?"

"After thinking about it, there's only one explanation."

"Which is?"

"She never talked about the seventh person, because I know that person."

"And who is it?"

"If it isn't Wang Nan, then it must be Hu Yue'er."

Wang Nan was the man at the farmhouse, pretending to be Hu Yue'er's greedy husband.

"I obviously knew that Wang Nan isn't a real country bumpkin, and he's also not a real constable."

"You knew all about him?"

"It's because I didn't know that I was suspicious."

Power of Hu sighed. "You thought things through very thoroughly. Even more thoroughly than me."

"There's also some things you haven't figured out."

"Many things."

"Such as?"

"You didn't really capture Dragon Fifth?"

"You yourself said he is not an easy person to deal with."

"He didn't really kill Qin Huhua?"

"Qin Huhua is his very good friend, in fact, his only true friend. He wouldn't kill this type of friend."

"So everything was just an act, played out for Lan Tianmeng?"

"I realized early on that you definitely would have an undercover agent next to Dragon Fifth."

"So you intentionally allowed Lan Tianmeng to return first and tell me everything he saw."

"I beat him up a bit, not to vent my anger, but to get you to trust me."

Power of Hu laughed bitterly. "I really never imagined that you and Dragon Fifth would work together to put on such a show."

"Now can you imagine it?"

"After you saw Qiu Hengbo, you never met with him, did you?"

"No."

"Then, how did you plan everything out?"

Liu Changjie laughed suddenly. "Do you know why I purposely pissed off Kong Lanjun?"

Power of Hu shook his head.

"Because I wanted her to take the empty box back."

"What secret was in the box?"

"Nothing special, just a script."

"The script to your little act."

"I knew Kong Lanjun would take the box back to Dragon Fifth, and that he would look at the script and be willing to play along." He continued, laughing, "You clearly didn't misjudge him, and neither did I. However, it seems he is much more intelligent than either of us imagined. His acting was much better than mine."

"You forgot one of the roles," said Dragon Fifth, suddenly.

"Qin Huhua," said Liu Changjie with a smile. "He acted very well too."

"But he was worried," replied Dragon Fifth.

"Worried that my plan wouldn't work?"

Dragon Fifth nodded.

"But you went through with it," said Liu Changjie.

"That's because he was the only one who was worried."

"You weren't worried?"

Dragon Fifth laughed. "I don't have very many friends, and there aren't very many people who I've misjudged."

"What kind of person do you think Power of Hu is?"

"His greatest weakness isn't a greedy heart."

"What is it?"

"An evil heart."

"Your perception is more accurate than mine." He sighed, and turned toward Power of Hu. "If you hadn't been so eager to kill us, we might still not be sure of your guilt!"

"You're sure now?"

"Without a doubt."

"But it seems you've forgotten something," said Power of Hu.

"What's that?"

"The thief used flying skills to enter the Prince's private compound. I'm a paralyzed cripple."

Liu Changjie laughed.

"You don't believe me?" asked Power of Hu.

"If you were me, would you believe?"

Power of Hu looked at him, looked at Dragon Fifth, and then laughed. "If I were you, I wouldn't believe."

This time when he laughed, the laughter reached his eyes. The laughter in his eyes was like that of a crafty fox, or a poisonous scorpion. He turned his head toward the old man and said, "Do you believe?"

"I believe."

"You believe that my two legs are completely numb?"

"Yes."

"Where are your blades?"

"Here."

The old man's face was expressionless as he slowly stretched out his hands. He flipped his hands over and two blades appeared. They were not long, but appeared to be extremely sharp.

With a smile, Power of Hu asked, "Are your blades sharp?"

"Very sharp."

"If sharp blades like yours stab someone's legs, would it hurt?"

"It would hurt very much."

"And if they stabbed my legs?"

"It wouldn't hurt."

"Why not?"

"Because your legs are crippled."

"Are you sure?"

The old man said, "Let's try."

His face was still expressionless. His hands shot forth and the blades flashed, stabbing directly into Power of Hu's legs. The foot long blades were embedded all the way to the hilt.

Crimson blood flowed down. Power of Hu continued to smile. "If it's true, then I have no pain."

The old man lowered his head. The wrinkles on his face distorted. He sighed and slowly said, "It's true. I always believed."

Power of Hu lifted his head, smiling, and looked at Liu Changjie and Dragon Fifth. "What about you two? Now do you believe?"

There was no response. And no need for a response.

The wind outside blew, bringing with it the faint scent of osmanthus flowers.

Dragon Fifth sighed lightly. "It seems like it might rain tonight," he said lightly.

He stood up slowly and, flicking the dust off his garments, turned his head and left. Liu Changjie watched him go, and sighed. "It will definitely rain tonight," he murmured.

He also walked away. When he reached the door, he turned his head and said, "I don't want to get wet, but I should go."

Power of Hu smiled. "I don't want you to get wet either. You're not a good person, but you're not that bad either."

"There's one more thing I want to ask you."

"Go ahead."

"You have a good reputation, a good position. Many people look up to you, and you have lived a comfortable life."

"That's the result of my years of hard work."

"I know." He sighed. "And it's because I know that I don't understand."

"What don't you understand?"

"You struggled hard all those years to reach this day. You have everything, and you've already grown old. Why would you do this thing?"

Power of Hu was silent for a while. Finally, he said, "At first, I didn't understand either. Why would a person who grows older become more greedy? It's not like you can take the money with you to the coffin."

"And do you understand now?"

Power of Hu nodded slowly. "I now realize that the reason old people become greedy is that they see things more clearly, and they realize that nothing in the world is more real than money."

"I still don't understand."

Power of Hu laughed. "When you live to be my age, you will understand."

Liu Changjie hesitated. He was outside the door now, but he couldn't help from looking back again. "What about Yu'er?"

"You want to see her?"

He nodded. "Whether she is dead or alive, I want to see her again."

Power of Hu closed his eyes. "Sadly," he said, "whether she is dead or alive, you can't see her."

**

The wind blew in again, bringing with it a fine mist of rain.

Power of Hu opened his eyes, and looked at the blades embedded in his legs. Suddenly his whole body writhed in pain.

The rain was cold, very cold.

"Autumn is deep. It's only going to get more and more cold," Power of Hu muttered to himself. Suddenly, he grabbed the blades in his legs and pulled them out.

-
- (1) These two lines are quotes from Laozi.
- (2) The word used in Chinese is actually “scar.” But sometimes this word is also used to describe scabs. The narrative isn’t very clear about how much time has passed, but I don’t think it has been long enough for scars to for, so I’m translating it as scab.
- (3) In Chinese it’s pretty clear that he’s offering words of comfort regarding someone who has died. But I think it’s doubly meaningful because her surname is the character for moon.
- (4) The specific kind of painting that is referred to here is this type: <http://goo.gl/J1X3uV>
- (5) There’s a play on words here that doesn’t translate well. The word for “free meal from the government” would be translated character-by-character as “public door meal.” So the full literal translation is, “once a person eats a public door meal, they will forever imagine going out through that door.”

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Chapter 8 – Heaven's net is wide meshed, nothing escapes it

Part 1

The rain was cold, light and thin.

Long thin strands of rain fluttered amongst the parasol trees in the courtyard. The rain entangled parasol leaves and gloomy hearts alike. [1]

Dragon Fifth had reached the end of the long outer corridor, but he didn't walk out. He, too, was reluctant to get wet.

Liu Changjie walked up and stood behind him.

Dragon Fifth knew Liu Changjie was there, but he said nothing. Neither did Liu Changjie.

They stood there quietly at the end of the corridor, watching the rain fall on the parasol trees in. They stood there for a long time.

"Power of Hu really is cruel." Dragon Fifth let out a long sigh. "He is not only cruel to others, he is cruel to himself."

"Perhaps because he is at the end of his road," said Liu Changjie indifferently.

"And because he is at the end of the road, you're going to let him go?"

"I'm also a cruel person."

"No you're not."

Liu Changjie laughed, but it wasn't a happy laugh.

Dragon Fifth looked back at him. "At the least, you will let him maintain his reputation."

"Because his reputation wasn't stolen. He earned it through suffering and hard work."

"I can see that."

"I don't have any personal animosity toward him. I don't want to see his reputation ruined."

"But you're not bringing him to justice. You're not making him return the things he stole."

"No. I don't need to."

"Don't need to?"

"He is a very intelligent person. I don't need to make him. He should come to me himself to resolve the issue."

"And so you're waiting here for him to come."

Liu Changjie nodded.

"And the case is still not closed."

"Not yet."

Dragon Fifth muttered to himself for a moment, then said, "If he's willing to return the stolen property, willing to solve all the problems himself, then the case will be closed."

"No."

"Why?"

"You should know why."

Dragon Fifth turned his head and gazed at the distant, dark clouds. After a long time he quietly said, "You can't let Qiu

Hengbo go.”

“I can’t.” His face suddenly was filled with a very solemn look. “No one can violate the law, or universal truths. Anyone who breaks the law must be punished.”

Dragon Fifth looked back and stared at him. “Who are you, really? Why are you investigating this matter?”

Liu Changjie didn’t reply.

“You obviously are not who you say you are,” said Dragon Fifth. “But you also don’t want to sell yourself out.”

Liu Changjie said nothing.

“Both Power of Hu and I investigated your background, yet neither of us found anything to indicate you were lying.”

“You really don’t understand?”

“I really don’t.”

Liu Changjie laughed. “When I encounter something I don’t understand, I use a special method to deal with it.”

“What method?”

“When I don’t understand something, I don’t think about it. At least temporarily.”

“And afterwards?”

“Whatever the secret it is, it will be revealed eventually. You just have to wait patiently, and eventually you will figure it out.”

Dragon Fifth said nothing.

Maybe he couldn’t stop thinking about it, but he could stop asking.

The rain fell in sheets, twilight grew deeper and deeper.

Light footsteps could be heard.

Then a hand was visible, carrying a lantern, walking slowly down the gloomy corridor.

The lamplight revealed a head of white hair, and the face of Power of Hu’s faithful follower, the old doorman.

His face was expressionless.

He had long ago mastered the ability to conceal sorrow within his heart.

“The two guests have not left yet?”

“We haven’t.”

The old man nodded his head. “Of course the two guests aren’t gone. However, the master is gone.”

“He’s gone?”

The old man stared at the curtains of falling rain. “A storm may arise from a clear sky. People have mornings and evenings, disaster and happiness. I never thought that the master’s sickness would flare up again so suddenly.”

“He died of sickness?”

The old man nodded his head. “His rheumatism had long since seeped into his marrow. He’s been a cripple for a long time, and to keep living down to this day hasn’t been easy.”

His face was completely expressionless, but within his eyes could be seen a strange expression. It was hard to say if he was grieving for Power of Hu, or begging Liu Changjie not to reveal his master’s secret.

Liu Changjie looked at him, and finally nodded his head. “Very well. So he died of sickness. I saw long ago that the disease was getting very serious.”

An expression of gratitude filled his eyes, and he sighed. “Thank you. You really are a good person. The master did not misjudge you.”

Sighing again, he slowly turned and walked away down the corridor.

"Where are you going?" asked Liu Changjie.

"To announce the master's death."

"Where will you make the announcement?"

"At Madam Autumn's." The man's voice was filled with resentment. "If it wasn't for her, the master's illness might not have been so bad. Now that the master is gone, I will definitely make sure she knows."

Liu Changjie's eyes shone. "Don't tell me she will come here to pay her respects?"

"She will come." He spoke one word at a time. "She must come."

The rain outside the corridor grew thicker and thicker.

The old man walked out of the corridor, and the lantern in his hand was instantly extinguished by the rain.

It seemed he didn't notice. Carrying the extinguished lantern, he slowly walked off into the darkness.

Night had fallen, enveloping everything in blackness.

After his crooked, emaciated frame disappeared into the night, Dragon Fifth let out a sigh. "It seems you were correct. Power of Hu didn't disappoint."

Liu Changjie also sighed.

"But," Dragon Fifth said, "I still don't understand why Qiu Hengbo 'must' come."

"I don't know either."

"So you're not going to think about it?"

Liu Changjie laughed. "Because I believe that in the end, all secrets will be revealed."

He turned and stared at Dragon Fifth. "There's an expression I think you should never forget."

"What expression?"

"Heaven's net is wide meshed, nothing escapes it. The way of Heaven is fair, but the guilty will not escape." His eyes shone in the darkness. "Whoever commits crimes, they should each and every one forget about escaping justice."

Part 2

Dusk.

There is dusk every day, but every dusk is different.

Similarly, every person dies, and yet there are many types of death. Some people die bravely and with honor, others die in an ordinary and humble way.

Power of Hu's death was neither ordinary nor humble.

Many had come to his mourning hall to pay respects. [2] Some were his disciples and friends, others merely came to because of his reputation. There was one person missing.

Madam Lovesickness had not arrived.

Liu Changjie wasn't anxious. He hadn't even asked about her.

And he hadn't stopped Dragon Fifth from leaving. He'd known all along that Dragon Fifth would leave, the same as he knew Qiu Hengbo would arrive.

Dragon Fifth seeing her would only complicate matters. [3]

Qiu Hengbo would come, so Dragon Fifth had no choice but to leave.

When seeing Dragon Fifth off, he'd taken him to the end of the corridor and said, "I'll definitely come looking for you."

“When? When will you come?”

Liu Changjie laughed. “When it’s time to drink, of course.”

Dragon Fifth laughed. “I always drink at Heavenly Fragrance.”

**

The mourning hall had been set up in the spacious, ancient main hall.

Liu Changjie was nowhere to be seen, only the white-haired old servant, along with effigies of a virgin boy and a virgin girl, keeping vigil over the coffin.

The night was deep.

Eerie lamplight shone onto the exhausted face of the old servant. He himself looked like an effigy.

Mourning couplets, written on strips of white cloth, were hung all about, and there were piles of paper effigies of houses, horses, ships, and other lucky objects.

These things had been gathered in preparation to be burned on the nights of “Receiving the Third” and “Accompanying Night.” [4]

The effigy of the horse cart was remarkably true to life. It had a man leading the horses, a man driving the cart, even extra helpers, horse tackle and whips. Their livery and their faces were all extremely lifelike. It was unfortunate that Power of Hu couldn’t see them.

The night wind was dull and desolate, the lamplight flickered, and then the shadow of a visitor floated into the room.

The visitor was wearing mourning clothes on top, and underneath, the dark clothes of someone who wishes to remain hidden at night.

The old servant raised his head and glanced at him. The man knelt down, and the old servant knelt alongside. He kowtowed, and the old servant kowtowed with him.

When a famous hero of the martial world like Power of Hu passes away, it’s relatively common for unknown figures of the Jianghu world to come in the dead of night to pay respects.

It wasn’t an unusual thing, and was nothing to be shocked about or to even ask questions about.

And yet, this night visitor asked, “Master Hu is really dead?”

The old servant nodded his head.

“But the old man was fine just a few days ago. How could he suddenly pass away?”

“A storm may arise from a clear sky,” said the old servant gloomily. “People have mornings and evenings, disaster and happiness. These matters, no one can predict.”

“How did the old man pass?” It seemed this passing visitor was very interested in Power of Hu’s death.

“He died of sickness. He had a very serious disease.”

The visitor let out a long sigh. “I didn’t see the old man for such a long time. I had no idea I would never see him again.”

“Sadly, you were just a bit too late.”

“Would it be possible for me to pay homage to his remains?” It seemed this visitor couldn’t let go of the idea of seeing Power of Hu.

“No.” The old servant’s response was very direct. “Others can. You can’t.”

The visitor seemed shocked. “Why not?”

The old servant lowered his head. “Because he didn’t know you.”

The visitor seemed more shocked. “How do you know that he didn’t know me?”

“Because I don’t know you,” replied the servant coldly.

"So you know everyone he knew?"

The old servant nodded.

The visitor also lowered his head. "And if I'm set on seeing him?"

"I know that you don't want to see him," was the cold response. "The person who wants to see him is someone else."

The visitor frowned. "Do you know who does want to see him?"

The old servant nodded again. With a cold laugh, he said, "I'm only confused about one thing."

"What's that?"

"Madam Autumn doesn't think the master is dead, so she wants to see his corpse. Why didn't she come herself, instead of sending a Five Gates thief like you to harass his spirit?"

The visitor's face changed. His hands flipped out to reveal a pair of poison-coated deerskin gloves.

The old servant refused to look at him.

The visitor laughed. "Even if I'm just a Five Gates thief, I can still take your life."

It seemed he really was ready to spring to action, but at that exact moment, a cold laugh could be heard. "Shut your mouth and get out of here. Get the hell out!"

**

The voice was mesmerizing, as mesmerizing as if it had emanated from heaven.

A third person could not be seen in the mourning hall, and it was impossible to tell where the voice came from.

The old servant did not seem shocked at all. His face was completely expressionless. "So you finally came," he said coldly. "I knew you would come."

Part 3

The visitor backed up step by step, until he was gone from the mourning hall.

Left behind was only the white-haired, haggard old servant, illuminated by the desolate, eerie lamp.

And then, the entire mourning hall was filled with a voice.

"Justice of Hu." She was addressing the old servant by name. "Since you knew I sent him here, why wouldn't you let him see the master's remains?"

Justice of Hu's reply was just as clear-cut. "Because he's not worthy."

"And me? Am I worthy?"

"The master predicted that you wouldn't believe he was really dead."

"Oh?"

"Therefore, he instructed me to wait for your arrival before sealing the coffin."

"Don't tell me he wants to see me one more time, too?" She was laughing.

Her laughter was both beautiful and sinister.

As the laughter was ringing out, the paper effigies suddenly shattered into millions of pieces. [5]

Countless shreds of paper flitted about the mourning hall like colorful butterflies.

And within the flying butterflies, a person floated down, looking like a beautiful white flower that had just bloomed.

She wore a long, snow-white robe, and her face was covered with a white gauze veil. Her body looked like a white cloud that in an instant alighted in front of Justice of Hu.

His face was still completely expressionless—he'd known Madam Lovesickness would arrive.

He'd known long ago, and had been waiting for her for a long time.

"Can I look at the master's remains now?"

"Of course you can," said Justice of Hu calmly. "Who knows, perhaps the master really did want to see you one more time."

**

The coffin was not sealed.

Power of Hu lay quietly within, seeming more serene and peaceful than he had in life.

Perhaps it was because he knew that no one in the world would ever again be able to force him to do things against his will.

Madam Lovesickness finally let out a soft sigh. "It seems he really is gone."

"It seems you're happy he went first."

"Because I know that dead people can't take anything with them when they go."

"He's definitely not taking anything with him."

"If he's not taking anything with him, then he should leave those things for me."

"What should be given to you has already been given."

"Where?"

"Right here."

"And why don't I see anything?"

"Because what you promised to bring to him, is not here."

"Even if I brought it, he couldn't see it."

"I could see it."

"Unfortunately, I didn't promise you. Hu Yue'er isn't your daughter!"

Justice of Hu said nothing.

"Where are the items?"

"Right here."

"I still don't see anything."

"Because I don't see Hu Yue'er."

Madam Lovesickness laughed coldly. "I'm afraid you'll never see her again."

Justice of Hu also laughed coldly. "In that case, you'll never see the things you want."

"At the least, I can see one more thing."

"Oh?"

"At the least," she said coldly, "I can see your head fall to the ground."

"Sadly, my head isn't worth even one coin."

"Worthless things are sometimes very desirable."

"In that case, come get it whenever you want."

Madam Lovesickness laughed. "You know very well that I'm not going to kill you."

“Oh?”

“As long as you have at least one breath left, there’s still a way for me to get you to tell the truth.”

Her hand suddenly flicked out like an orchid.

Justice of Hu didn’t move.

Another hand suddenly shot out like lightning to meet hers.

There was no third person in the hall, so where did the hand come from. Could it be that it came from within the coffin?

The hand did not shoot out from the coffin.

It was neither a dead hand, nor a hand made from paper.

The effigies were already shattered into the countless shreds that still fluttered about like butterflies.

“I was also waiting for your arrival.” From within the fluttering butterflies appeared a smiling face.

Liu Changjie laughed.

But within his laughter could be heard an unspeakable pain.

Because, the energy of his palm strike had already lifted up Madam Lovesickness’s gauze veil. He could finally lay eyes on her face.

From the very beginning, he would never have been able to guess that this gloomy, mysterious woman, was actually Hu Yue’er.

Part 4

Dragon Fifth was wrapped up in a marten coat, reclining on the long, narrow couch. He stared at the deadwoods outside the window and muttered, “How come it hasn’t snowed at all this year?”

No one responded to him, and he didn’t expect anyone to.

Qin Huhua didn’t speak very often.

When a person begins to talk to oneself, it indicates that they are beginning to grow old.

Dragon Fifth had heard this saying before, but forgot who said it.

“Don’t tell me I really am growing old?”

He felt at the wrinkles in the corners of his eyes, and suddenly an indescribable feeling of loneliness welled up from his heart.

Qin Huhua was warming wine for him.

He seldom drank wine, but lately he had been drinking two cups every day.

—When will you come?

—When it’s time to drink, of course.

Suddenly, the light sound of footfalls could be heard from outside. A waiter appeared, wearing dark green clothes and a small cap. He carried a small platter, upon which was a soup bowl, covered.

Dragon Fifth turned his head and suddenly laughed. “Are there three hands in the soup bowl this time?”

**

It was Liu Changjie.

Smiling, he lifted the lid of the soup bowl and said, “There’s only one hand in here, a left hand.”

Inside the soup bowl was the paw of a bear, which Dragon Fifth had ordered earlier, and had been slowly cooked for an entire day.

The wine was warmed.

"I knew you would come," laughed Dragon Fifth. "You came just at the right time."

Qin Huhua had already filled two cups.

"You're not drinking?" Liu Changjie asked him.

Qin Huhua shook his head.

He glanced at Liu Changjie and then turned his head, his face expressionless.

Liu Changjie gazed at him and suddenly thought of the white-haired, haggard old servant, the man with a face like a dead tree, Justice of Hu.

Every time he looked at Justice of Hu, he couldn't help but think of Qin Huhua.

Could it be because they were the same type of person? Anyone who tried to guess their thoughts from the expressions on their faces, would never succeed.

What was Liu Changjie thinking now?

He was smiling, but the smile was dim, just like the overcast weather outside.

"This really is good weather for drinking."

Dragon Fifth looked back at him, smiling. "So I prepared a pot of wine, especially for you."

Liu Changjie drank a cup. "And it's good wine."

He sat down, and his smile brightened a bit. A cup of quality wine will always brighten the spirits.

Dragon Fifth stared at him. "You just arrived?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I thought you would arrive a few days ago."

"I ... I arrived late."

Dragon Fifth laughed. "Arriving late is better than not arriving at all."

Liu Changjie sat silently for a long time, thinking.

"You're wrong," he said suddenly. "Sometimes not arriving at all is actually better."

He obviously was not talking about himself.

"Who are you talking about?" asked Dragon Fifth.

Liu Changjie drank another cup. "You should know who I'm talking about."

"She really appeared?"

"Yes."

"You saw her?"

"Yes."

"And you recognized her?"

"Yes."

"Don't tell me she really was Hu Yue'er?"

Liu Changjie downed his fifth cup. "She obviously wasn't the real Hu Yue'er."

"You've never seen the real Hu Yue'er, have you?"

Liu Changjie nodded, and finished his sixth cup.

Dragon Fifth continued, "She abducted the real Hu Yue'er and used her to blackmail Power of Hu, then impersonated her to meet with you."

Liu Changjie downed the seventh cup. "Do you want to know what happened to her in the end?" he asked suddenly.

"Not really." He was smiling, but the smile was even more gloomy than the weather outside. "I knew a long time ago what kind of person she is."

"But you don't know what happened to her in the end."

"I don't need to know. A person's nature will dictate their end." He forced out a laugh. "Heaven's net is wide meshed, nothing escapes it. The way of Heaven is fair, but the guilty will not escape. I haven't forgotten this."

Liu Changjie wanted to laugh, but couldn't. He had drunk all the wine in the jug.

Dragon Fifth drank a cup. "I never could figure out what kind of person that old man was."

"You mean Justice of Hu?"

Dragon Fifth nodded. "I actually suspected that he was the real Power of Hu."

"Ah?"

"In fact, I even suspected that they were the same person."

"I don't understand."

"Did you ever hear the story of a person in Jianghu called 'the Ouyang Brothers?'"

"I have heard."

"The Ouyang brothers weren't actually two people. He was a man whose name was 'the Ouyang Brothers.'"

"Yes, I remember."

"The Ouyang Brothers was actually one person. Couldn't it be possible that Power of Hu was actually two people?"

Liu Changjie finally caught on.

"Did you ever think of that possibility?" asked Dragon Fifth.

"Never. The relationship between two people can rarely be understood by a third party."

He couldn't help but glance once more at Qin Huhua. What exactly was the relationship between him and Dragon Fifth? Was there something more than met the eye?

He sighed. "In any case, we will never know the answer to the mystery."

"Why?"

"Because Justice of Hu also didn't leave the mourning hall alive."

Justice of Hu "also" was gone.

Did the word "also" contain another meaning? Were there other people who "also" died in the mourning hall?

Dragon Fifth didn't ask.

He didn't want to ask, and couldn't bear to ask.

"In any case, the case is finally closed," he said. He extended the wine jug, which had just been replenished, and refilled Liu Changjie's cup.

Liu Changjie downed another. "I never could have imagined that the case would be closed in this way."

"How did you think it would end? Did you really suspect me from the beginning?"

Liu Changjie didn't answer his question. Instead, he said, "You're fundamentally a very suspicious person."

"Why?"

"Because down to this very moment, I can't see through you."

"And what about you? Who can see through you?" Dragon Fifth laughed. "I always thought it was strange. Why could Power of Hu and all his people not learn the truth about you?"

Liu Changjie laughed. "Because there's no truth to learn."

Dragon Fifth stared at him. One word at a time, he said, "Can you finally tell me... Who are you?"

"You and Power of Hu both went to that little town," said Liu Changjie coolly. "You both investigated me."

"And we both found out nothing."

"Of course you didn't." He smiled. "It's because I was born in that little town, and I lived a very normal life."

"And now?"

"Now I'm just a local constable there."

A look of shock covered Dragon Fifth's face.

"A person like you, just a local constable from a small town?"

Liu Changjie nodded. "You couldn't learn anything about my history because you never imagined that I really was just a small-town constable."

Dragon Fifth let out a long sigh, and then laughed bitterly. "I definitely never imagined."

"You both only met me because my superiors ordered me to get involved with the case. Otherwise you would never have known that there was a person like me in the world."

"Are you telling the truth?"

"You don't believe me?"

"I believe you. But there's still something I don't understand."

"What's that?"

"A person like you, why would you choose to be a local constable?"

"I've always done whatever I feel like doing."

"You always wanted to be a constable?"

Liu Changjie nodded.

Dragon Fifth laughed bitterly. "Some people want to be famous heroes. Some people want to have a high position and a handsome salary. Some people seek fame and some people seek riches. I've seen all these types of people before."

"But you've never seen a person who wanted to be a constable?"

"There are definitely not very many people like you."

"There are plenty of famous heroes in the world, so there should definitely be some people like me, people who are willing to do that which other's won't do, or aren't willing to do." He smiled, and this time it was a happy smile. "In the end, there have to be constables. And if a person can do what they want to do in life, shouldn't they be happy?" [6]

(1) This is a type of tree you see mentioned in literature a lot apparently. <http://goo.gl/7Cc8PJ>

(2) What I'm translating as "paying respects" literally means to offer sacrifices to the dead. I'm sure most of you know that in Chinese culture this involves kowtowing, burning incense or money, etc.

(3) The Chinese here is (in my opinion) really vague (a key characteristic of Chinese sometimes). The direct translation would be "to see something bothersome, is not as good as not seeing it." The underlying meaning is my translation...

(4) These are names of different days associated with traditional funeral customs. I couldn't find any information about official English translations, so these are my personal translations.

(5) There is an additional line that I'm leaving out. It describes the paper effigies shattering, "as if there were an invisible fire that just exploded." It just sounds weird in English...

(6) The literal translation of his final line of dialogue is: "No matter what, being a constable is a job that people do, if a person lives in this world, and they do what they want to do, shouldn't they be content?" It seems pretty eloquent in Chinese, and I wanted the English to carry that same flavor.

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