

7 Killers – Chapter 1

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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!”

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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. Clashed 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 stared 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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