

# 卷九 門

《盜墓筆記》（起源）

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## 南派三叔

《盜墓筆記》（風雨十年）  
初心不改，再書傳奇

# **Grave Robbers' Chronicles: The Mystic Nine**

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## **Summary:**

**During the Republic Era, the town of Changsha was guarded by nine families known as the “Old Nine Gates” (or the “Mystic Nine”). They were incredibly powerful families who wielded supreme power over everything in Changsha.**

**In 1933, a mysterious train pulled into Changsha station. The leader of the Nine Gates, Zhang Qishan, was also the army commander of Changsha station and started to investigate with Qi Tiezui. They discovered a highly suspicious mine just outside of Changsha.**

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# **The Mystic Nine Vol. 1**



# Introduction: About the Mystic Nine

The Mystic Nine refers to the nine tomb-robbing families in old Changsha, which are often mentioned in the tomb-robbing notes.

They consist of the upper three clans, middle three clans, and lower three clans respectively.

Upper Three Clans:

1. Zhang Da Fo Ye (Zhang Qishan)—unknown
2. Er Yuehong—has three sons and taught Chen Pi Ah Si and Xiao Hua
3. Banjie Li—Li Sidi (guess)

Middle Three Clans:

4. Chen Pi Ah Si—Chen Wen-Jin
5. Old Dog Wu, Fifth Master Dog—Wu Yiqiong, Wu Erbai, Wu Sanxing—Wu Xie
6. Black Back the Sixth—the only one in the Nine Gates without any offspring

Lower Three Clans:

7. Huo Xiang, Madam Seven—Huo Ling—Huo Xiuxiu
8. Qimen Fortune Teller Qi Tiezui the Eighth—Qi Yu (guess)
9. Xiao Xiejiu—Xie Lianhuan (Xiao Hua's uncle) and Xiao Hua's father—Xie Yuchen/Xie Yuhua (aka, Xiao Hua)

Those who participated in the archaeological activity in Xisha were Zhang Qiling, Li Sidi, Chen Wen-Jin, Wu Sanxing, Huo Ling, Qi Yu, and Xie Lianhuan, whose surnames are “Zhang, Li, Chen, Wu, Huo, Qi, and Xie”. These are completely consistent with the Mystic Nine's surnames, which shows this wasn't merely a coincidence...

# Chapter 1 Ghost Car

In 1903, a Japanese named Ōtani Kōzui<sup>1</sup> entered China's hinterland in the name of religious investigation to carry out intelligence work on geographical exploration. When he passed through Changsha, China, the expedition branch he led—under the leadership of Japanese businessman Miyuki Hatoyama—stayed in a mountain town 160 kilometers north of Changsha for nearly three months. When he left, there were only six people left in the expedition team. A week later, Miyuki Hatoyama submitted a sixteen-page report to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Nissin Trade Research Institute that became known as the "Hatoyama Report". The report stated that there were "things" buried under the mountain town.

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On August 4, 1949, Cheng Qian—director of the Kuomintang Changsha Appeasement Office and chairman of the Hunan provincial government—and Chen Mingren—commander of the First Corps—staged a revolt in Changsha and peacefully liberated it. The next day, the Fourth Field Army entered Changsha. As head of Changsha Department's Central Special Branch, I urgently summoned an old man that night and talked with him for three hours.

The old man's name was Gu Qingfeng, and he had been a watchman at Changsha's old railway station since he was twenty-three years old. I asked him about a strange thing that had happened at the railway station more than ten years ago. As I listened to the old man's account, I gradually saw the beginning of a strange and mysterious event that spread widely at the time.

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<sup>1</sup> He was the 22nd Abbot of the Nishi Honganji sub-sect of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism in Kyoto, Japan. He is known for expeditions to Buddhist sites in Central Asia. British and Russian intelligence both suspected that his archaeological expeditions were little more than covers for espionage activities. More info [here](#)

According to the old man's recollection, that was Changsha's first day of winter, and it was already very cold. The iron hoofs of the Japanese oppressors had already hit Changsha, and the city was very bleak. People with relatives in the southwest went there to seek shelter, but their transportation capacity was limited. After winter began, there were landslides in the southwest, and many people who had left were trapped there.

Gu Qingfeng was a middle-aged man at the time who was in charge of the ticket office. When the black 076 pulled into the station that night, he happened to be the one on duty. It should have been impossible for a train to be pulling into the station at that time, and he hadn't received any prior notice.

In that era, it was normal for many troops and supplies to arrive suddenly because of combat readiness, but prior notice was often given. Moreover, the troops were generally under the control of the army, so the whole platform should have already been full of alert soldiers ready to receive the goods.

But he saw that no one was on the platform even though the train had just pulled in. If it weren't for such a monstrosity making so much noise, he wouldn't have even noticed it.

Gu Qingfeng lit the lantern, put on his military coat, and walked onto the platform. Under the dim light, the black train was like a dragon lying on one side of the platform. It was covered in dry mud and rust spots and looked like rotting dragon scales that had been dug up. He pinched a handful of the dry mud, very confused.

"Where did this train come from?"

He wrapped his coat tightly around himself and walked closer to the train. He was surprised to find that all the train carriages— including the one up front—were all welded with iron sheets. The ugly welding gaps were thick and full of bubbles, indicating that the temperature of the welding process

had been very high. He wiped off the mud covering the car with his elbow, saw the painted 076 on the locomotive, and realized that this was a Japanese military train.

This kind of military train was built in the northeast during the Japanese invasion of China. It once drove to Northwest China and later seized a lot of it, but now it was under the jurisdiction of the National Government and had been repainted. This train, however, still had the faded Japanese military flag printed on both sides of the front of the car. There were a lot of rust and dry mud spots all over the body of each car, almost as if the train had been buried underground and only recently dug up.

The railway leading to the northeast had been blown up for a long time, so now there were only a few tracks southwest of Changsha that had been requisitioned by the army. But based on the direction the front car was facing, it really came from the northeast. How did this lump of iron get over the blown-up railway bridge?

“Damn son, what kind of bastards are in this car?” Gu Qingfeng knocked on the train and shouted: “Don’t just stop here, there’s another train coming. You’ll get hit. There’s a railroad track in front, so drive forward.”

There was no sound on the train, and he couldn’t see anyone getting on or off. He went to the locomotive and climbed up, surprised to find that the door had been welded shut, and the steam chimney was still hot. The temperature difference between this part of the train and the outside air meant that dew had formed. The body of the train car was very wet, and the red rust water looked like oozing blood.

Gu Qingfeng was a little scared. After working as a watchman for so many years, he had rarely seen such a strange thing. He had also recently heard from people in the northwest that some empty cars were coming into railway stations in the middle of the night. All the cars had been blown up by the Japanese, but no one was in them. It was said that the ghost cars were carrying people who had been killed and sending them back to their

hometown before driving to the underworld. In the morning, the cars had disappeared as if they were never there.

Many cars had been buried in the mountains because of landslides, so it was no wonder there was so much soil.

He yelled a few times to wake up the guard and suddenly heard a fluttering sound come from the locomotive. The window was covered in mud, so he scrubbed it hard and lifted the lantern. He immediately saw something covering the muddy glass that looked like a pale pigskin. It was pressed tightly against the glass and completely covered it.

There was a thin seam on the pigskin that was about as wide as a palm, so Gu Qingfeng tried to get close and peer through the gap to see what was inside.

The lantern kept hitting the glass and dry soil, and the rust and mud were making him sick. He noticed that there was something strange in the gap.

He narrowed his eyes and looked closely. The “skin” was probably loosened by the lantern hitting the glass and fell down. He immediately saw a person in the locomotive floating in the air. When he looked again, however, he realized that it was a hanged man. The man was wearing ordinary labor clothes and hanging from the top of the train. He was looking at Gu Qingfeng coldly, and in those two muddy eyes, the pupils were as tiny as soybeans, while the rest of the eyes were completely white.

The first thing Gu Qingfeng saw were those creepy eyes. He let out a cry, toppled off the train, and fell on the platform. He then rolled over, climbed up, and rushed to the guard room. He had only one thought on his mind: this was a ghost car, and it was coming to Changsha to drag people in.

## Chapter 2 Qi Tiezui

Qi Tiezui leaned against the window as the car arrived at Changsha Railway Station. He saw the military police circling round and round, and the watching people were dispersed before they could even gather. There was an apprehensive whisper in his heart. If Fo Ye had sent someone to pick him up from the shop right before dawn, it couldn't be good. Fo Ye was a man who had seen the world, so there wasn't anything that couldn't wait until after dawn. He didn't have a chance to wash his face or rinse his mouth out, and he had been summoned right after eating a radish, which indicated that Fo Ye was anxious to see him. If Fo Ye couldn't handle the situation, then even Qi Tiezui and his small incense burner couldn't do anything to help him.<sup>2</sup>

Qi Tiezui looked out of the car window and tried to think of an excuse to run away, but the car had already entered the controlled area. As soon as the door opened, Fo Ye's lieutenant was already greeting him.

This lieutenant—also surnamed Zhang— seldom spoke. He was said to have been with Fo Ye since he came from the northeast, so it wasn't easy to offend him. It was also rare for Fo Ye to send him to pick people up, so Qi Tiezui nodded when he got out of the car.

The lieutenant was very respectful as he said: "Ba Ye, Fo Ye asked you to come as soon as possible. I heard that you haven't had breakfast yet, so please bear with it for the time being. The house has already prepared some pig's feet and lotus root stew. When we go back, we'll serve you a solid meal."

"What's the situation? Having pig's feet and lotus root stew for breakfast? Is he out of his mind? Fo Ye seems to be very confused recently." Qi Tiezui complained, but he knew in his heart that Fo Ye was a very disciplined person. This pig's feet and lotus root stew wouldn't be breakfast at all. In

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<sup>2</sup> Tiffany says it's a play on words. There's an idiom, "Buddha turns his back even when you try to put incense sticks into the incense burner, begging Buddha to help you." In short, it means that the situation is helpless.

fact, he was afraid it would be dinner. Fo Ye had assumed that this thing would go on until the evening.

What exactly was it? He wiped the sweat from his forehead, followed the lieutenant all the way through the railway station's waiting room, and saw that there were more soldiers inside. Many of the kiosks were closed, and some of the businessmen were arguing, pushing, and screaming at the soldiers. When they came to the platform, Qi Tiezui looked up, felt his legs go soft, and almost fell down.

He saw that a black, old-fashioned train practically covered in rust and sludge was parked on the track. It looked as if it had just been dug out of the ground, much like those old coffins he usually saw that had been washed out of the earth by mudslides.

Qi Tiezui was the most famous fortune-teller in Changsha. He was proficient in feng shui and numerology, but there were three things he didn't look at: foreigners, people with Qilin tattoos, and strange marvels. The rest was fair game.

The logic behind this was very simple. Foreigners couldn't understand it and weren't under the control of Chinese gods, deities, or Buddha. Strange marvels were a kind of huge conspiracy, so it was easy to provoke fights. As for people with Qilin tattoos, it was an ancestral rule. It was said that his ancestors had encountered a marvel several generations ago, so they set down the iron-clad rule.

This iron car was considered a strange marvel, and the more Qi Tiezui looked at it, the more unlucky he felt. He hurriedly cried out: "I'm scared to death, I'm scared to death! Zhang Da Fo Ye, you know my rules. This car is too scary. I'm going back! I'm going back!"

"Going back? Where are you going back to?" Zhang Qishan's voice floated up from under the railroad track. "Lieutenant, if the fortune teller dares step out of this railway station, shoot him!"

Lieutenant looked at Qi Tiezui and Qi Tiezui looked at him. Lieutenant said, "Ba Ye, it's not good to die like this. Don't do it."

Qi Tiezui knew that Zhang Qishan never made jokes, especially in this case. He stamped his foot angrily and trotted to the platform, where he saw Zhang Qishan on the track under the platform, looking at the collision marks on the engine car.

"Fo Ye, what's going on?"

Zhang Qishan pointed to a spot on the car: "What do you think this is?"

Qi Tiezui turned his head and saw a mirror hanging on the engine car. It was an ancient bronze mirror, which was badly decayed. When Zhang Qishan spoke just now, he jabbed it with his sabre, and Qi Tiezui shouted, "Don't!"

Zhang Qishan was startled but quickly glared at him. Qi Tiezui was sweating profusely, and he suddenly remembered something he had forgotten for a long time. He asked Lieutenant, "Where did the train come from?"

When Lieutenant shook his head, Qi Tiezui looked at his pocket watch.

"What do you mean?" Zhang Qishan stretched out his hand and Lieutenant pulled him onto the platform. He took off his military gloves and looked at Qi Tiezui, who said, "There's an allusion to a bronze mirror hanging above someone's head. It's a report from a very reliable source."



## Chapter 3 Tomb A, Number Four, Eastern Room

Qi Tiezui told Zhang Qishan that in ancient times, the Qi family's school divided their practice into Yin and Yang so that they could maintain a balance between heaven and earth. During the day, it was to help people deal with their birthdate characters, choose tomb locations, search for dragon veins, and lock corpses' coffins. At night, it was to look at the mountains and stars and conduct the business of grave robbing.

Qi Tiezui's father was regarded as the least qualified in his generation and only had the most basic skills, while Qi Tiezui was even weaker. He only learned a little from his father, but he was already the eighth master of Changsha's nine families, which showed that the knowledge and ability of his ancestors were unfathomable.

There were many rules in this school, and it was said that they had seen too many mysteries known only to heaven, so they had to seal their mouths and shun the world. Many interesting things had become bedtime stories by the time it was Qi Tiezui's generation. When Qi Tiezui's father was dying, he was in a daze and said some obscure words to Qi Tiezui about one particular rule—if the master of the Qi family went into a very dangerous place and found himself unable to survive, then he would hang a bronze mirror over his horse's head and use a special diagram to let it escape so that later generations would know where and why he had died.

After listening to this, Zhang Qishan looked at the train behind him and uttered in the Changsha dialect: "Damn it, it's not a horse now, but a train. I don't know where this reliable source went to court death, but the movement is a bit big."

There weren't many stories from the Qi family, but Qi Tiezui was still a little uncomfortable at the thought that someone in his family had died an unnatural death. He was afraid that the family had set several other rules, but later generations would never know what they were. At the same time,

however, he also felt some curiosity. The train came from nowhere, so what happened to the man who hung the bronze mirror on the front of the train?

A military vehicle drove directly onto the nearby platform, and many engineers got out. Qi Tiezui counted more and more soldiers. Knowing that he couldn't leave, he decided he might as well offer a little help, so he asked Zhang Qishan about the ins and outs of the matter. Maybe he could give some advice first.

Lieutenant have him a rough summary about what happened last night and then said, "The driver hanged himself in the locomotive. He must have slowed down after entering Changsha's boundary and hanged himself after calculating the distance. No one added any coal, so when the water cooled down, the train kept moving forward. The nose of train slipped into the station, plowed through more than thirty sandbags, and then stopped."

All the doors in and out of the train had been welded shut with iron sheets, so when the engineers got out of the military vehicle, they began cutting the iron from both the engine car and carriages using a gas cutter.

"This driver was an old hand, otherwise his estimation wouldn't have been so accurate and the car wouldn't have stopped in the station so accurately." Zhang Qishan said. "This man was hanged, but the death is somewhat strange." Qi Tiezui climbed onto the engine car, looked into the cleaned window, and saw the body hanging there. The strange thing Zhang Qishan was talking about was the hanged man's eyes. His pupils were the size of soybeans and looked just like a weasel's. They definitely weren't human eyes.

The whole car was welded shut and sealed like an iron drum, so he didn't know how they had dealt with going to the bathroom. It was really strange.

He and Zhang Qishan were both intuitive people. After waiting for a short period of time, the iron sheet on the carriage was the first to be cut off. It fell off and slammed onto the platform with a loud bang, exposing a big

hole. Zhang Qishan waved slightly, and all the nearby guards raised their submachine guns.

The air was filled with smoke from the gas cutting, and the carriage was completely dark since all the windows and gaps had been sealed. Only a sliver of light from outside the hole was able to shine in.

As Qi Tiezui covered his mouth to block the smell from the gas cutting, Lieutenant took three lanterns and handed him one. Then, he jumped up and stretched out his hand to pull Qi Tiezui up.

Qi Tiezui shook his head and went to hand the lantern to a guard standing close to him. When the guard didn't take it, he hung the lantern on the guard's machine gun barrel, and then turned to Lieutenant and made a gesture as if to say: "I support you." That meant he wouldn't go up. He thought to himself, *it's all well and good to say I'm a trusted advisor, Zhang Qishan, but you've got to be crazy to think I'm a pioneer.*

Lieutenant sighed and turned to go into the carriage. Qi Tiezui had just breathed a sigh of relief when Zhang Qishan took the lantern from the guard's barrel with one hand and grabbed Qi Tiezui's hand with the other.

"What are you afraid of? When we're in Changsha, nothing is fiercer than me."

With that said, he pulled Qi Tiezui up. As soon as he entered, the contrast of the bright outside and dark inside made Qi Tiezui go blind, and he rubbed his eyes fiercely until they finally adjusted. When he opened his eyes, he froze.

The carriage was very dark, but it wasn't completely sealed. Light was penetrating everywhere through tiny gaps in the negligent welding, showing the gas-cutting exhaust particles in the air. As Lieutenant walked through the disturbed air, the particles surged violently, reminding Qi Tiezui of the attic in his old house. When he was a child, he used to go up there to find something to play with, and the dust particles floating in the tiny beams of sunlight would fall into the cracks of the attic tiles.

Those tiny spots of light leaking in made the places where the light couldn't reach even darker and harder to see clearly. Lieutenant looked around with his lantern, and the dim yellow light revealed huge shelves on both sides of the carriage. Qi Tiezui noticed that those shelves held one coffin after another, and they were all fixed by iron hoops.

Many of those coffins were covered in dry mud and had tree roots wrapped around them. Some were made of wood that had become white and swollen and rotted and cracked, while others were made of stone. The shelves were all deformed under the weight, and based on the surface and degree of decay on the coffins, they were all ancient. They had all been dug up and taken from an ancient tomb. For some reason, there were a lot of cobwebs between the coffins and shelves, like a layer of cotton wool sticking the shelves and coffins to the train car's wall. It made the atmosphere seem old and mysterious.

Chinese numbers were written in red paint on all the coffins. The numbers were arranged irregularly and written very casually as if someone was taking inventory of them. With just a cursory glance, the highest number was forty-seven. In other words, there were at least forty-seven coffins here. When he thought of this train having a total of seven cars, did that mean that all of them held these kinds of things? If so, he was afraid there were more than a hundred coffins in total. He looked beside one of the numbers, and saw that there was another casually written sign saying "Tomb A, Number Four, Eastern Room, Second Section".

"Mr. Qi, look." Zhang Qishan pointed to the words.

*Fellow grave-robbers, Qi Tiezui thought to himself. This is a big-ticket operation, and it's almost caught up with the Mystic Nine's whole harvest for the year. At first glance, these coffins had been dug up from the earth, and in order to record the rooms and areas that had already been robbed, they were labeled and annotated. Qi Tiezui had some doubts. Changsha's southern school of tomb-robbing was disorganized, and he wasn't even sure if some of them were literate. Even if the big players did participate in such a*

big job, they wouldn't record where they stole the items from. For them, the only difference between burial goods was price.

They moved slowly as they looked at each of the coffins, and found that they were all from different ancient tombs. Zhang Qishan showed a puzzled expression on his face but didn't speak.

## Chapter 4 The Last Car

“Sir.” Lieutenant was in front and pointed to the door leading to the next car. It was covered in cobwebs, and when they were removed, they could see a few strange words painted on the door. “It’s in Japanese.”

“Can you understand it?”

“Hook turn... hook point...” Lieutenant looked at the Japanese characters on the door. “Hook...hook something.”

“If you don’t understand, just say it.” Zhang Qishan scolded him. Lieutenant was embarrassed and pressed the brim of his hat down as he bowed his head. He then pulled out his pistol, loaded it, and went to open the door, only to find that it had been welded shut.

At that time, trains were connected to each other by huge iron brackets, so in order to get from one car to the next, it was necessary to cross an open area. The movie “Railway Guerrillas”<sup>3</sup> described the structure of trains very clearly, but in order to prevent the Japanese armored trains from being blown up, these parts were also wrapped in iron. Even the areas under the cars’ connecting cables had armor under them.

The three of them had to go back the same way they came. Qi Tiezui felt a chill when he got off the train, but seemed to be very hot. Just as he wiped the cold sweat from his head and breathed a sigh of relief, the iron sheet on the next car was cut off. This time, the iron sheet tipped over into the car and fell down with a muffled bang. Fo Ye went to check it out without any hesitation, while Qi Tiezui muttered darkly to himself but followed him anyways.

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<sup>3</sup> 2006 Anti-Japanese movie about coal miners and railway workers becoming guerilla fighters under the Communist Party’s lead to fight against the Japanese along the Lin-Zao railway line in Shandong province during the Anti-Japanese War. As you can imagine, they attempted to damage the Japanese’s transportation and hamper their troops.

A big hole in the next car had been opened, and it was also dark inside. Zhang Qishan also pulled out his pistol and slowly walked forward with the lantern in his hand. Qi Tiezui swallowed and said, "Fo Ye, you have so many men. Why do you want to be the vanguard yourself? Let's go for tea instead."

"Now that war is approaching, the city is full of Japanese spies. Morale is the most important, so the fewer people in the army that know about this strange and unknown thing, the better." Zhang Qishan said softly.

Qi Tiezui immediately realized Zhang Qishan's concern. If rumors started spreading about a ghost car full of coffins coming to Changsha, who knew what kinds of stories would be made up. If this situation had occurred in normal times, it really wouldn't need to be handled with so much excitement. But now it was the eve of a great war, and there was no such thing as a trivial matter right before a war.

The three of them filed into the next car and found that it was also full of coffins and cobwebs, but the numbers on the coffins were getting lower and lower. As Zhang Qishan continued to look at them very carefully, his expression became more and more gloomy. They made their way through the rest of their inspection, but it wasn't until the iron sheet was cut from the second to last car that everyone covered their mouths.

There was a strange smell in the car.

After climbing up, they could see that the car was covered in cobwebs so thick, they blocked the passageway. There were also double-decker beds on both sides of the car, and something was lying on each of the upper and lower bunks, completely wrapped in cobwebs.

"Why was this spider so fierce?" Lieutenant wondered softly.

Qi Tiezui saw clothes hanging from the bedframes, along with many daily necessities, cups, and chopsticks that were all covered in cobwebs. Zhang Qishan used his pistol to peel off the cotton-like thread and gradually

approached the nearest bed. He held the lantern aloft so that it illuminated the bed and found that the outline looked like a person lying down.

The man was curled in on himself and motionless, and Zhang Qishan knew at a glance that he was dead. He handed the lantern to Lieutenant and drew his saber. It was clear the saber was too light for him, as if it weighed as much as a reed. He stabbed the corpse on the bed and peeled the cobwebs off its face. Even though the man was lying on his stomach, his distorted face was exposed, and Qi Tiezui could see that his mouth was wide open and his chin was resting on the pillow.

Qi Tiezui took a step back. He wasn't afraid of the corpse, but the corpse's "face"—if you could call it a face—was full of small holes like barnacles.

"Fo Ye. Is it rotting or still dry?"

"Something bore into it." Zhang Qishan said thoughtfully. Then he turned to Lieutenant and said, "Get someone to prepare a white cloth bag and a gas mask. The body has to be sealed and all these things have to be burned. It will be bad if it's an infectious disease."

Lieutenant nodded and walked back to tell the others outside. Qi Tiezui looked at Zhang Qishan anxiously: "Fo Ye, don't we need to wear gas masks too?"

Zhang Qishan looked at him and squeezed out a smile: "No, you and I are used to corpse poison. It's a small risk." With that said, he took Zhang Qishan's hand and walked forward.

Qi Tiezui smiled wryly and said to himself, *you're so carefree. You're used to it, but I'm not. Since I was a child, I've been the only heir of my family.* Just as he thought that, Zhang Qishan pulled him along and quickly checked the twelve remaining beds in the car. All of them had bodies in the same condition as the first corpse. What puzzled Qi Tiezui the most was that all these corpses were lying on their stomachs and their hands were tucked into their chests, as if something was on their backs, pressing them down onto the bed.



Not only was it not normal to sleep like this, but all twelve bodies were in the same position. There had to be a special reason. Was it possible someone placed them like this? The fear in his heart had gradually been replaced by curiosity, and he thought, *did a master do this? Is it a feng shui setting? But why would he put the bodies like this?*

Zhang Qishan pondered over it for a moment and then used his saber to pick the cobweb off of a nearby corpse's foot. He could see that the corpse's big toe was bent, which was common for those who wore clogs. This indicated that the person had worn clogs for a long time.

One of the most well-known ways to distinguish Japanese spies in this era was to look at their feet. Before Lugou Bridge, Japanese agents infiltrated a large number of Chinese introspection activities and collected intelligence. Some of them had been lurking for decades, and their dialect and behaviors were exactly the same as those of Chinese people, which made it difficult to distinguish them without these characteristics.

After leaving the train car, Zhang Qishan gave a few instructions to another lieutenant surnamed Wang, who immediately turned and left to report the information to headquarters. Zhang Qishan didn't say another word and merely turned to move on. At this time, however, a contemplative Qi Tiezui suddenly realized something and stopped in front of him.

"Fo Ye, look at this last car. What's the difference between it and the previous ones?"

## Chapter 5 Iron Coffin

Zhang Qishan looked at it and immediately stopped. His mind had been wandering and he was in a daze just now, but when Qi Tiezui reminded him, he also felt that there was something wrong.

The obvious difference was the heavily reinforced armor on the last car that was thicker and welded more tightly than all the others, but Zhang Qishan vaguely felt that there was another kind of difference. After thinking about it, however, he still couldn't figure out what was causing the uncomfortable feeling.

“Fortune teller, don't keep me in suspense and just tell me. If it makes sense, you won't have to go in the last car.”

“Fo Ye, you underestimate me.” Qi Tiezui glanced at Zhang Qishan, who had pulled him along twice just now. It was very humiliating, so he definitely had to get him back. He took Zhang Qishan's hand, led him a few steps to the platform, turned, pointed to the engine car, and explained it bit by bit.

“There are mostly disordered coffins in this first car. Some have stone outer coffins and some don't have outer coffins at all, but they all have numbers on them.” Qi Tiezui said. “Based on the markings, most of these coffins came from the same tomb. I don't know if you noticed, but these coffins are all generally the same size. So, that means they're probably the coffins of those who were buried with the main coffin. And all those people being transported in the other car were living there. The car next to the escorting car is the last car.”

“You mean that the first car is the burial chamber, and the last car all those people were guarding is the main tomb, which should be—” Zhang Qishan paused. “The tomb owner's main coffin?”

“Exactly, Fo Ye. The tombs around Changsha have coffins as big as houses. Ever since you came here, you must have at least gone into a few of them.

Take a look. Doesn't the last car look like a huge coffin with its shape and size?

Zhang Qishan turned to Lieutenant Zhang, "All those not surnamed Zhang need to leave the station."

Lieutenant Zhang nodded, stepped forward, and started shouting orders. Many soldiers "not surnamed Zhang" broke rank and trotted out of the station, looking relieved. The train was strange, after all, and no one wanted to get involved. A soldier wearing a gas mask ran past, and Zhang Qishan grabbed him, pulled the mask off, and handed it to Qi Tiezui.

Qi Tiezui fervently shook his head no. "Fo Ye, you're underestimating me again. I didn't wear one in the first few cars, so why would I in the last one?"

Zhang Qishan couldn't help but laugh as he put on the gas mask and walked away, leaving Qi Tiezui standing there confused and thinking to himself, *Zhang Qishan, you bastard. You don't play fair.* He immediately caught another soldier, took his mask, and put it on.

As he followed Fo Ye to the last car, Qi Tiezui looked at everything through the gas mask and couldn't help thinking over everything. At first, he thought that this was a Japanese armored train with important goods inside, and the people inside were afraid that the guerrillas would blow up the railroad tracks, so they sealed the cars with iron armor. But the sleeper car had also been completely welded shut with iron plates, and all the people inside had died. No matter how he looked at it, something evil was afoot.

The corpses they had seen just now had all suffered terrible deaths, and he was afraid it was either parasites or an infectious disease. Did the Japanese spies drive this kind of train to Changsha in order to cause a plague to break out and destroy the army's morale?

But why were there so many coffins on the train? Did infectious diseases even come from coffins? He was afraid Fo Ye had put on the gas mask for this very reason but wasn't it a little too late?

After the iron sheet on the last car had been welded open, Qi Tiezui found that it was just as he had expected—the car held a wooden outer coffin. The wooden outer coffin’s surface was rotten and soft, and the inside had become calcareous, so Zhang Qishan used the butt of his gun to smash a big hole in it. This time, Qi Tiezui climbed in first and found that the wooden outer coffin wasn’t very tall, the ground was covered in straw, and two or three bodies with guns were lying on the ground. Qi Tiezui looked down, saw that the bodies were in the exact same position as the ones that had been lying on the beds, and knew in his heart that he had been right. There was a huge sarcophagus behind the corpses that had been placed in the center of this outer coffin room. It was so heavy that the outer coffin was sagging a little at the bottom and there was nothing else in the whole car except for the sarcophagus.

When Zhang Qishan approached with a lantern, they could see patterns and some strange marks on the coffin, which were pieces of black iron that had been poured onto the coffin’s surface. They covered the gap between the coffin and the lid and were engraved with many Taoist-like symbols that were very complicated. Zhang Qishan and Qi Tiezui looked at each other.

“The coffin has leather and comes with iron. Iron contains gold.<sup>4</sup> It’s a whistle coffin.” Qi Tiezui, who said the mnemonic phrase handed down from older generations, was already starting to realize what had happened on this train. This last car was a complete outer coffin chamber, which the Japanese had dug out and then covered in iron armor to disguise it as a train car. The corpses with guns must’ve been the guards on duty and seemed to have died directly while on duty.

This behavior was really incredible. What did Japan need an entire tomb for? If they were robbing the tomb for goods, then it was fine to just open the outer coffin and take the gold and silver out. This tomb was just a pile of rotten wood, so if they really liked it, then it would have been more

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<sup>4</sup> “Iron contains gold” refers to how there might be treasures inside the whistle coffin.

convenient to dismantle it first and then transport it. Why dig out the whole outer coffin chamber and take it all away?

Qi Tiezui figured it had to be related to the sarcophagus in this outer coffin chamber, which had been sealed with molten iron. Such a sealing method was something ancient grave robbers used to do. Legend had it that in ancient times, when the landscape was fierce and the feng shui of many blessed places was destroyed, the corpses found in underground ancient tombs easily changed into zombies. If grave robbers were in a place that cultivated zombies or encountered an evil coffin, then they would dig a hole on the spot, melt their weapons, seal the coffin with the molten iron, and leave a hole at the top of the coffin big enough for only one hand to pass through. When the molten iron condensed, he would put his hand into the hole and explore the contents of the coffin. If there was any change in the coffin, he would cut off his arm to save his life.

Because there was a hole in the coffin like that of a whistle, it became known as a whistle coffin. There were actually two possibilities in which later generations could see this kind of coffin: one was when the whistle coffin had been emptied, so it was just an empty shell with no value; the other was when the corpse in the whistle coffin changed at that time and someone left without his hand. The contents were still in the coffin, so later generations who found the whistle coffin might not necessarily find an empty coffin, but one with the contents intact.

But if you wanted to reach your hand inside, what happened next depended entirely on whether you were lucky enough, which was where Qi Tiezui's mnemonic phrase stemmed from.

There was a number one painted on the sarcophagus, along with a phrase below it: "Main tomb chamber". The floor was about to collapse under the coffin's weight, which meant it had to be full of things.

"The coffin was sealed with molten iron, and there are words engraved on the iron sheet. They must have been carved by the master who hung the mirror on the train." Qi Tiezui wiped his glasses and put them back on,

revealing a kind of expression unique to feng shui masters: “If we take three steps at most, there must be iron nails placed on the floor. Lieutenant, have all the others at the scene who have the sign of the snake<sup>5</sup> stay back.”

With that said, Zhang Qishan bowed his head and took a few steps back. Sure enough, both men saw that the perimeter of the outer coffin chamber was surrounded by nails, completely enclosing the sarcophagus.

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<sup>5</sup> I believe he’s talking about the zodiac sign.

## Chapter 6 Hold the Gong

Zhang Qishan looked at Qi Tiezui. Everyone in the industry said that he was a coward, but there were some people in the world who usually looked stupid and cowardly, but became a whole other person when they were in a field they were familiar with and liked. Zhang Qishan smiled without saying a word. He wanted to see what Qi Tiezui had to say.

Lieutenant Zhang was a little uneasy at this time and looked to Zhang Qishan as if he wanted to say something, but stopped himself. Zhang Qishan was a little confused and asked him, “What are you nervous about?”

“Fo Ye, I’m a snake,” Lieutenant whispered. Zhang Qishan almost wanted to laugh, but he sneered instead: “All the Zhang family members whose birthdates weren’t auspicious died in the northeast. If you’ve stayed with me this long and I haven’t killed you, no one can.”

“Fo Ye!” Lieutenant immediately saluted, as if to say he was willing to die by Fo Ye’s hands. Qi Tiezui shook his head and squatted down, stroking the nails on the ground.

They weren’t ordinary nails. The heads were engraved with various complicated characters, and there were three layers of them nailed to the floor around the inner and outer coffin. The nails had been driven deeply into the wood. Qi Tiezui ran his hand across a circle of them and found that his hand was covered in toner. It appeared these nails had originally been stored in ink.

The ancients didn’t use nails for their burials but used leather straps to tie the coffins. Three long and two short leather straps tightly crisscrossed the coffin, which was why the phrase “unexpected misfortune” was used to describe others’ affairs.<sup>6</sup> After iron became popular in later periods, coffin

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<sup>6</sup> This is a play on words. The characters are 三长两短 which mean “three long, two short” by themselves. Stick them all together and you get one of these phrases “unexpected misfortune/unexpected accident/sudden death”

nails—known as zhen or zisun nails<sup>7</sup>— replaced leather straps, and a total of seven nails was considered auspicious.

There was an old custom in Guangxi, Guangdong where they would pick up the bones from the coffin ten or twenty years after the deceased's burial. They would pull out the coffin nails, open the coffin cover, and place the bones in another coffin to be re-buried. Those extracted coffin nails that were well preserved would be collected and made into bracelets.

This kind of bracelet made with the nails from their ancestors' coffins could ward off evil spirits. For feng shui masters in Guangdong, this kind of coffin nail was very useful. Collecting them could calm the wind and trap the water, and might even save their life in a critical moment.

There were three layers of these water trapping nails, which were used to seal the coffin's evil spirit inside the circle. The nails were of varying sizes, which showed that the master must have either been acquiring them for decades or received them from his ancestors. It must have truly been some hard-earned capital this time.

Qi Tiezui didn't know if the other party had done anything else to the nails, but ancient people would use one of the nails to kill and pin a rooster to the coffin's surroundings before using it on the coffin itself. He looked around but didn't see any roosters, nor could he tell if something else had been nailed to the wood instead.

A vague idea was taking shape in Qi Tiezui's mind: the dilapidated train entering Changsha Station at night, the cars sealed by iron sheets, the bronze mirror on the front of the train, the outer coffin chamber sealed in iron, and the outer coffin room full of nails.

Qi Tiezui turned to Zhang Qishan: "This master is coming for you and me, Fo Ye."

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<sup>7</sup> Zhen= to calm/to subdue/to suppress. Zisun=posterity



“Why do you say that?” Zhang Qishan asked as he also squatted down.

“The bronze mirror is a tradition of the Qi family, which is a family that’s traveled all over the world and is widely known. Everyone has also heard of Zhang Da Fo Ye in Changsha. There isn’t anyone who doesn’t know your reputation. The Zhang family’s two-fingered probing technique is a unique skill of the Northern School and the rules on how to deal with whistle coffins were also decided by the Zhang family’s ancestors. This whistle coffin was sealed in an outer coffin chamber that was sealed with iron sheets, and dozens of coffin nails were placed outside of it. It means the contents are to be taken very seriously. The master locked up the qi, sealed the coffin, and sent it to Changsha, knowing you were here. This bronze mirror was to get me, a descendant of the Qi family, to tell you how serious the matter is.”

Zhang Qishan looked at the huge coffin and asked, “Why didn’t the Qi family descendant come in person?”

Qi Tiezui felt aggrieved as he told himself that when he saw the train earlier, he should have thought of the Qi family’s motto—a feng shui master who possessed special skills was the same as a demigod. When they saw ferocious graves in the mountains in the old days, they had to seal the mountain and level the land in order to save the locals from suffering. Because they were sealing the mountain, the items in the graves were taken out. They often couldn’t bear to discard them, however, so they started exchanging them in the market for travel expenses, which was how they slowly entered the shady business of grave robbing. Many of the Qi family’s ancestors who died in the wilderness were regarded as grave robbers and didn’t have any bones left.

As a result of all of this, the Qi family was different from the rest of the nine families. Apart from Old Dog Wu, who was still young and didn’t know how big the world was, all the other families were bitter and full of hate. It was very stressful to chat and have dinner with them.

The Qi family was a family that had been handed down from generation to generation and was very happy to know its fate. The feng shui masters had

insights into the heavenly secrets, didn't suffer mortal exhaustion, knew their blessings, and weren't afraid of dying. Qi Tiezui only felt ashamed because his timid appearance made him feel as if he was letting the Qi family down.

He looked at Zhang Qishan and said, "This coffin is no small matter. The Qi family's descendant wouldn't dare not come here, but if I've guessed correctly, the one who died in the engine car is a descendant of the Qi family."

When Zhang Qishan looked up and frowned, Qi Tiezui continued: "Now that war is imminent and the military is keeping in close contact with each of its branches, this coffin can't remain in the station the whole time. But it can't be moved until we know there's nothing dangerous in there. Fo Ye, it's going to take your Zhang family's skills."

Zhang Qishan's childhood was different from most people's. He had seen too many deaths after joining the army, so now he was actually numb to life and death. If he had met a random grave robber, he would say that he didn't know what this coffin was, but throwing a grenade into it—whether there was a corpse or zombie inside—wouldn't make much of a difference. But Zhang Qishan knew that it wouldn't be so simple this time.

Lieutenant whispered in his ear, reminding him that this was a trap set up by the Japanese. They might have created a situation where the coffin was filled with explosives that would be triggered when someone reached in, and the whole railway station would blow up, just to kill him.

Zhang Qishan motioned with his hand. The so-called "two-fingered probing" skill was designed to break through all kinds of subtle mechanisms. Even if it was a bomb, the Zhang family's skills meant they could also directly dismantle it with their two fingers, and the explosives could be directly returned to the front line when the war started. Logically speaking, if the whistle coffin was really dangerous, they would simply roast it directly on the spot. The coffins were really only dangerous to those looking for

personal gain. The Qi family had specially sent this to him in Changsha and called him out, but it was a pity the strangeness wasn't that simple.

After leaving the iron coffin room, the three of them took off their gas masks. Zhang Qishan looked at the sun and saw that it was still early. He sighed and asked Lieutenant, "How long has it been since our family touched the shears?"

"Three years and four months, Fo Ye," Lieutenant answered. He then whispered: "There are four military trains passing through the station this afternoon. This train has to be moved."

"Then don't wait." Zhang Qishan glanced at Qi Tiezui. "Fortune teller, help me hold the gong."

## Chapter 7 Two-Finger Probing

When Zhang Qishan finished talking and started walking away from the station, Qi Tiezui had a sudden realization. Holding the gong was something used to scare the horse. Any changes in the coffin after the Zhang family's people put their fingers into the coffin hole were often accompanied by corpse poisoning, which would invade the whole body. So, before performing their special skill, the Zhang family's people often placed pipa shears right up against the coffin hole. These pipa shears were then attached to a horse's bridle, and a gong would be placed seven paces behind the horse's ears. If anything unusual happened in the coffin, someone would immediately hit the gong and the horse would leap forward, pulling the rope attached to the pipa shears. The shears would instantly cut off the person's arm, which could save their life.

Holding the gong was a very important task, and the consequences were huge if the sound was wrong or came too late. If Zhang Qishan was letting Qi Tiezui hold the gong, then this was a warning to him to think very carefully about whether his judgment was correct. This wasn't something that could be judged lightly. Qi Tiezui suddenly calmed down and understood that what he had said just now was the wrong thing.

"Fo Ye, Fo Ye," He chased after him. Once he caught up, he couldn't help feeling upset for a little while. He had been hoping to see the Zhang family use their two-finger probing skill, but many of the experienced people that the Zhang family had brought from the northeast had already died on the battlefield, and they were lacking manpower. The Zhang family was closely related by blood, and they were all brothers who had fought for their lives. It was really inappropriate for him to speak so frivolously while the Zhang family was at risk of losing their arms and their lives.

"Fo Ye, Old Ba said something wrong, and inconsiderately made light of the Zhang family in front of the brothers." Qi Tiezui said. Zhang Qishan turned and kept walking while waving his arm to his lieutenants several times to

make them move. He asked Qi Tiezui, “What’s the matter? Are you afraid to hold the gong?”

“Old Ba was just spouting nonsense. Fo Ye can rip my mouth off lest I say something wrong again.” Qi Tiezui was ashamed and knew he had to admit his mistake.

Zhang Qishan stopped to look at Qi Tiezui. His eyes were blazing, but there wasn’t any anger: “Old Ba, I want you to think about it very carefully. What you are talking about is a family matter. If you are even sixty percent sure, you will hold the gong. No matter what happens, no one in the Zhang family will blame you.”

Qi Tiezui nodded: “Fo Ye, I mean what I said. It’s really what I think. Every sentence has a basis.”

Zhang Qishan turned to move on and said to Lieutenant, “Did you hear what Ba Ye said? Let’s go back to the house.”

Qi Tiezui continued to trail after him: “But Fo Ye, I’m nervous. What if I’m so nervous that I break wind and scare the horse and it chops off the brother’s arm?”

Lieutenant Zhang was happily following after him: “Ba Ye, they’re all war horses. They won’t even be shocked by the sound of gunfire. They should only respond to the gong, so does that mean your farts are that loud? If that’s the case, you don’t have to hold the gong, just fart. I’ll go and prepare some sweet potatoes for you.”<sup>8</sup>

“What do you know? Maybe the horse will run away because my fart stinks.” Just as Qi Tiezui was feeling ridiculed and depressed, he saw a group of people running past with various crowbars, hemp ropes, and logs. He was very surprised. By this point, the three of them had already passed through the waiting room and reached the road, where they saw a military truck

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<sup>8</sup> Sweet potatoes apparently make you gassy lol.

waiting with its tailgate down. The railway station was surrounded by canvas curtains to prevent any onlookers from seeing anything.

“Fo Ye, I told you this coffin can’t be moved. It has to stay on the train. But looking at this truck, do you mean to move it back to your house? The things inside can’t be moved.” Qi Tiezui was covered in a cold sweat.

Zhang Qishan walked up to the jeep, sighed, and patted Qi Tiezui: “Fortune teller, it’s already been on the train, so what’s wrong with a truck? Can you not be so superstitious?”

“Don’t be superstitious?! Don’t be superstitious?! Then what do you want me to do?!” Qi Tiezui was pushed into the vehicle, only to find that Lieutenant Zhang didn’t get in with him. Instead, Lieutenant turned around, took off his coat, and walked back into the railway station. Qi Tiezui looked out the window and saw that Lieutenant was untying the bandage from around his hand. But before he could see what Lieutenant wanted to do, the car had already started up and drove off.

They drove slowly through the throng of people preparing to leave and finally arrived at Zhang Qishan’s residence. The Zhang residence was where the defense headquarters was located, and Zhang Qishan had been living there since he became a defense officer in order to conserve their forces.

Qi Tiezui felt that he had already endured a lot considering he had gone from feeling extremely nervous to being absolutely terrified, so he ate some lunch and drank a little wine to calm down. It wasn’t until sunset that the coffin was finally transported to the yard.

They used wooden rollers to place the outer coffin in the courtyard, immediately drew a curtain around it, and closed the courtyard gate. Lieutenant Zhang’s head was covered in sweat and he was shouting at the guards to go to their posts and strengthen the guard.

Qi Tiezui saw several bloodstains on the outer coffin that were smeared along the cracks, but he didn’t know where they had come from. Before the

curtain was completely closed, he could see that the setting sun illuminated the outer coffin's mottled cast-iron surface, which was very ugly.

The pipa shears and gong had already been prepared, and Qi Tiezui very awkwardly approached the horse while holding the gong. This was the first time he had seen the pipa shears at such a close distance. He had initially thought that the horse would have to run for a long time to get the blades to cut, but it turned out that the blades would immediately move as long as the horse ran forward. It was a very clever setup.

"Horse, we'll be working closely together. Please cooperate." Qi Tiezui touched the horse's neck with a slightly trembling hand. The horse became restless and pulled the pipa shears behind him, causing them to shake.

Qi Tiezui immediately let go and looked around. All the Zhang family soldiers were looking at him coldly, and he finally started feeling nervous again. He noticed one of the Zhang family's soldiers was already shirtless and smearing his left hand with alcohol. Zhang Qishan walked around the outer coffin several times as if he were estimating the size of the sarcophagus inside.

After the Zhang soldier smeared the alcohol evenly, he jumped to the outer coffin, went up to the hole, and turned his head to look back at Qi Tiezui.

When Qi Tiezui turned his back to him, the soldier glanced at Zhang Qishan. Lieutenant Zhang stepped forward: "Ba Ye, you've got it wrong. You have to watch."

"Oh, I see, I see." Qi Tiezui turned around and looked at the soldier, a little awed. The child was very young— probably only sixteen or seventeen years old—and he couldn't help but think that the Zhang family was really dying out. *Fo Ye, if you don't give birth to twenty or thirty children, who will you pass your skills to in the future?*

Zhang Qishan went over and stretched his hand out, and the soldier leaned over and let Zhang Qishan stroke his head.

“Don’t be afraid. Be careful.” Zhang Qishan said. He then sat down where the child had just sat, took off his coat, exposed one arm, and poured the alcohol on it. Qi Tiezui knew that this was to tell everyone that if the child failed, Zhang Qishan would do it himself. His scalp tingled and the sweat on his hands dripped onto the gong.

The child looked at Zhang Qishan and his eyes became very firm. He took a deep breath and slowly put his hand into the hole above the coffin.



## Chapter 8 Ghost Coffin at Sunset

At this moment, Qi Tiezui was cold all over and felt as if time had stopped as he watched the child slowly put his hand into the whistle hole. Soon, the child's whole arm was inside, and an unexpected mist formed as the alcohol on his body quickly evaporated due to the rapid rise in body temperature.

Nobody was making a sound, and even Qi Tiezui didn't dare breathe as the sweat on his hands soaked into the hemp rope holding the gong.

He was just thinking that these few minutes had felt like hours when suddenly, the child's face changed.

He seemed to have touched something.

He immediately started trembling and looked to Zhang Qishan, who stood up and fixed his gaze on him. The child began to sign something with the fingers of his other hand, but Zhang Qishan immediately shook his head. Although the child turned pale and looked very scared, he never took his hand out.

Qi Tiezui's heart almost leaped out of his chest. He kept praying and hoping that it was a false alarm, but now it appeared that his theory was correct and there was actually something strange in the coffin. But he didn't understand the Zhang family's sign language, so he didn't know what exactly the child had touched.

He had heard Fo Ye say several times before that the training the Zhang children had undergone in the northeast was very strict, and most of the children's happiness, anger, sorrow, and joy had been trained out of them. Although the generation born in Changsha had received the same rigorous training, it was said that their temperament was much weaker.

Qi Tiezui could read people's faces and knew with a single glance that Fo Ye never spoke without holding something back. But he should still have some sort of feeling towards children. But Qi Tiezui thought that children ought to

be weak. If a child had to be calm from an early age, their life would truly be miserable and they wouldn't even know it.

He had heard that the Zhang family— even the so-called weak children— were fierce on the battlefield, so even though this child was young, he definitely wasn't a pushover.

As Zhang Qishan watched the child continue signaling with his fingers, his face darkened and he made a gesture that even Qi Tiezui could understand—take your hand out. The child trembled but showed a stubborn expression, seemingly wanting to continue.

Qi Tiezui's mind was spinning and he asked himself, *what in the world are you talking about? What creepy thing did you touch?* Whatever it was, it made this child extremely afraid, but when Zhang Qishan told him to pull his hand out so he could take his place, the child didn't want Fo Ye to take the risk.

Just as Qi Tiezui was thinking this, the child suddenly jerked and cried out. Then, his whole shoulder sank into the whistle hole as if he were being dragged in by a powerful force. He pressed the coffin with his other hand and tried to pull his hand out, but the thing in the coffin was so powerful that there wasn't anything he could do. In an instant, half his shoulder was dragged in, and the sound of bones and joints popping could be heard.

The severe pain made this soldier cry out, and Zhang Qishan quickly jumped to the outer coffin, gripped the child's neck, and pulled with all his strength, causing the veins in his arm to bulge. He managed to pull the child's arm half a foot out and saw that a red rash was crawling up towards the child's shoulder. Zhang Qishan shouted: "Fortune teller!"

Qi Tiezui, who had been completely frozen by this scene, was frightened by the loud shout. The gong in his hand fell to the ground with a loud crash, and the horse next to him lifted its feet and ran forward. For a short moment, Qi Tiezui's vision went white and all he could hear was the crisp

sound of the pipa shear's blades closing and the child's heart-wrenching screams.

The sound of the gong kept ringing in his ears, and after his vision cleared, he saw that there was blood all over the outer coffin and medics were rushing up. His eyes rolled into the back of his head and he almost fainted.

"Ba Ye!" Before he could fully recover, Lieutenant stuffed the gong back into his hand and brought the horse back over to be buckled to the contraption again. Zhang Qishan threw off his coat, crouched on the outer coffin where the child had just been, and put his left hand between the pipa shears.

*Again?* Qi Tiezui was trembling all over and felt as if his knees were about to collapse. Unlike the shouting from a moment ago, Zhang Qishan's voice was very calm as he said: "Old Ba, look at me."

Qi Tiezui looked up. Zhang Qishan had already taken out the severed arm, which was completely covered in blood. He threw the severed arm to the medic and then inserted his hand into the whistle hole again. Qi Tiezui's mind went blank, and the smell of blood in his nose immediately made him gag. He told himself he wouldn't collapse as he clung tightly to the gong, fearing that his hands would go slack and he would drop it on the ground again.

Zhang Qishan's body jerked violently and he seemed to have touched something, but he didn't show the slightest hint of fear. Instead, he looked expressionless. Qi Tiezui didn't know whether it was an illusion or not, but he saw a few dark red lines appear on Zhang Qishan's neck and chest that seemed to be the blood in his veins brought out by the alcohol. Then, Zhang Qishan twisted his arm sharply in the coffin. No one heard a sound, but they could feel the amount of strength that had been exerted. After that, Zhang Qishan slowly pulled his hand out and Qi Tiezui could see that he was holding something.

The thing in his hand was completely black and filthy, which either came from the blood or the filth inside the coffin. He held it up to the dying sunlight and got a good look at it.

## Chapter 9 Dragon Bone Burial

He didn't know how long he had been sleeping, but when Qi Tiezui woke up, he found himself in a guest room at the defense headquarters. There was a cup of water beside the bed, and other than the basic necessities, the room was completely bare and undecorated.

He remembered that someone named Tan Caifu had studied abroad before, and wrote a book mentioning that in order to maintain the spirit of a soldier, the Prussian emperor only kept an iron bed and basin in his bedroom. Qi Tiezui wondered if Fo Ye's bedroom was the same. If so, that would explain his single-minded focus in his everyday life.

The cup had been made many years ago by a customer who was a Jingdezhen<sup>9</sup> merchant in thanks for one of Qi Tiezui's divinations. The merchant had made a total of seventy-three colored porcelain cups, and Qi Tiezui had given them to Fo Ye when the Nine Gates had gathered. Since one of them was so casually placed in a guest room, he assumed Fo Ye had directly allocated the rest to headquarters as tableware. In light of this, sending Fo Ye things in the future would depend on whether they could be used on the frontlines.

After drinking the cool water, Qi Tiezui felt the pressure in his chest slightly ease. He knew that this depression didn't come from an illness, but from the tragic scene he had witnessed earlier. And it was all because of what he had said. The Qi family was happy with knowing their fates, but even though he knew he hadn't been in the wrong and Fo Ye's family didn't want or need his self-pity, he still blamed himself. When he thought of the child's eyes, his heart felt unbearably choked up. That arm... for such a young child to lose an arm... it was really....

He put on his clothes and walked out of the guest room, finding a guard waiting for him at the door: "Ba Ye, are you done resting?" Knowing that Fo

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<sup>9</sup> Prefecture-level city in Jiangxi province that's famous for porcelain

Ye definitely hadn't rested and was still working, Qi Tiezui wanted to help, so he nodded to the guard. "Lead the way, soldier."

As they reached Zhang Qishan's office, another soldier brushed past them on his way out of the room. Qi Tiezui noticed that the soldier's face looked very similar to the child who had been probing the coffin hole, and figured he must have been the child's older brother. Qi Tiezui felt a wave of sadness surge up in his heart. How many other children were out there in China now, unable to enjoy their youth? And war was fast approaching. Maybe the next time he saw this child would be on the battlefield.

Zhang Qishan's office used to be the residence of a local lord and was very spacious. Zhang Qishan had turned the desk lamp on, and there was a tray on the table that was holding the object he had taken from the coffin. Now that it had been cleaned, it was clear to see that it was a black animal claw with some strange patterns on it. It appeared to be a fragment of dragon bone.<sup>10</sup>

In the twenty-fifth year of Guangxu<sup>11</sup>, Wang Yirong was taking medicine for a disease when he accidentally discovered that there were ancient characters on the dragon bones used in Chinese medicine. Wang Yirong was an epigrapher<sup>12</sup>, antique dealer, and the director of the Chinese Imperial Academy, so this discovery was truly a stroke of luck. It was a common rule for pharmacists in the old days to sell dragon bones without any words on them, so after the medicine farmers collected the dragon bones, they would scrape the words off with a knife before selling them. The medicine that Wang Yirong took must have been comprised of inferior ingredients, which was something that people of his status shouldn't have encountered. But it was because of this coincidence that the study of oracle bone inscriptions came about. Otherwise, the practice of "dragon bones" in traditional

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<sup>10</sup> Dragon bone is a vital component of many traditional Chinese medical remedies. It's actually fossilized animal bone, which is high in calcium, potassium, sodium and other trace elements. The bones are cooked and ground into a powder before being used. They're usually combined with a number of herbs for different formulas. Seems like "dragon bones" are also called "oracle bones". More info [here](#)

<sup>11</sup> Qing emperor Guangxu or Guang-hsu (1875-1908). So this is like 1900.

<sup>12</sup> Someone who studies inscriptions

Chinese medicine would have resulted in the Shang Dynasty's history continuing to be eaten by people.

But why was an oracle bone fragment in this big coffin? Was the coffin owner preserved using traditional Chinese medicine? But in pharmacology, dragon bones were ground into a powder that was used to absorb the pus from open wounds. The whole dragon bone could even be directly boiled in medicine dregs to treat internal diseases, but it was very unsightly. If it wasn't for preserving the corpse, then were all the funerary objects in this coffin oracle bones? How interesting. If this person was buried with pieces of oracle bone, then did that mean there was hidden information recorded on them?

Qi Tiezui came up behind Zhang Qishan and looked down at the oracle bone, but he couldn't make anything out since it was only a fragment.

Before he had left the courtyard to go to the guest room to sleep, he asked Fo Ye what the child had felt in the coffin to make him so afraid. He remembered Zhang Qishan's answer, which was also concerning. Zhang Qishan was puzzled: "I can't figure it out. When my fingers first touched it, I found that the body was lying on its stomach."

There were many mysteries surrounding the Zhang family's double-fingered probing skill, of which Qi Tiezui only knew bits and pieces. Needless to say, the whistle hole opened above the corpse's face in the coffin, because jade and pearls—which were often the most precious items—were placed inside the corpse's mouth. The northern school of grave robbers inherited the Faqiu Zhonglang Jiang's<sup>13</sup> practice of not taking all the things from the coffin, so the double-fingered probing technique was the most economical way of

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<sup>13</sup> It's basically like an official tomb robbing position in the dynastic governments. I left the pinyin. Characters are 发丘中郎将. It's basically like an official tomb-robbing position in the dynastic governments. I think this is more along the lines of "Ghost Blows Out the Light" stuff because what I'm finding is that Chinese Warlord Cao Cao took his subordinates around looting graves. In order to raise the efficiency of the tomb robbery, two posts were specially set up: Faqiu Zhonglang Jiang and Mojin Xiaowei (none of this is actually proven. People just kind of believe it anyways lol). Fa means "excavation", Qiu means "mound" or "tomb" or "grave". Zhonglang Jiang and Xiaowei were the two military commander positions at the time. The position of Zhonglang Jiang is second only to the general, which is a bit similar to the reserve of high-level generals. [Here's](#) someone's essay (take it with a grain of salt).

dealing with a fierce coffin. After taking the treasure from the ancient corpse's mouth, they would immediately withdraw their hand. This was the earliest method used, but the Zhang family later developed their own finger technique. When they entered the coffin, the first thing they would do was break the corpse's jaw with their fingers so that the body couldn't bite.

If they were to reach down with one hand and find the body lying face down, however, it would really go against common sense. Qi Tiezui had recalled at that time that all the Japanese spies' bodies he had seen on the train were lying on their stomachs, and he couldn't help but wonder what it meant.



## Chapter 10 Black-Haired Lacquered Coffin

At the same time, Zhang Qishan was also thinking about the ins and outs of this matter, his mood even more complicated. His gut told him that there definitely wasn't anything simple about it, especially considering that the Japanese were fast approaching.

During the time that Qi Tiezui was resting, all the coffins and bodies on the train had been unloaded. The coffins were placed in the Zhang family's warehouse, while the bodies were sent to the military hospital. Lieutenant Zhang was the one who had arranged everything in the half-hour Qi Tiezui had been asleep. Now that things were running smoothly, Zhang Qishan couldn't help but feel at ease.

Since he had drifted all the way from the northeast, he was afraid things would have been more difficult to handle if he didn't have these people around to help him. Whether it was fortunate or not to be born into the Zhang family, it was all due to this surname.

When he had put his hand into the coffin at that time and found that the corpse was lying face down, he twisted its head and reached in. He found that thirty-seven fine steel needles had been placed inside the corpse's throat.

The two-fingered probing technique involved taking out the burial jewels from the corpse's mouth as quickly as possible so as to avoid being bitten in case the corpse changed into a zombie. The substance placed on these needles in the corpse's throat was generally highly toxic, which was why it was considered a special anti-theft measure.

This corpse may have shown signs of transforming in its early years, but now it had "dried up". After the young soldier touched the corpse, he must have hooked his finger into the corpse's mouth and felt something. He was so nervous that he mistook these steel needles as black hairs growing out of the corpse and got poisoned. But the soldier wouldn't admit it and said there was something moving in the corpse's throat that had bitten him.

Few tomb owners were so afraid of others stealing the ancient jade from their mouths that they would resort to setting up steel needles in their throats—it was too cruel and blasphemous to the corpse. If anything, it was more likely that the fine steel needles were to prevent something from crawling out of their esophagus, which was why the young soldier’s words had Zhang Qishan a little concerned.

Zhang Qishan pressed his three fingers against the steel needle, while the other two fingers went deep into the corpse’s throat. He felt the shell fragment, which was caught on one of the needles inside, but didn’t feel what the young soldier said had bitten him. He did feel that something was strange, however, so he broke the corpse’s jaw, snapped its neck, and waited for the coffin to be opened so he could see what had happened. The only clue now was this scale-shell fragment.

In ancient times, there was a difference between scales and shells. If one side was thin and the other was thick, then it was a scale. If the piece was the thickest in the middle, and the outer edges were slightly thin, then it was a shell. This particular fragment was slightly thicker in the middle and on one side, while the other side was slightly thinner. It also had a strange fishy odor. The fragment was black and white and had a pattern on it that looked like the inscriptions on oracle bones. The characters were so faded, however, that the meaning couldn’t be distinguished. The doubts in his heart kept increasing. What surprised him the most was that although this scale-shell had dried up, it seemed to be new and not like a fossil at all.

As he was pondering over it, Qi Tiezui came up and quietly stood behind him. He had been bothering this guy all day, but he had no other choice given the situation. There were only a handful of people in the Nine Gates who could help him, after all. Old Ba had a meek temperament and was quick-witted, so Zhang Qishan could only continue to bug him.

He asked: “Did you sleep well? If you’ve slept enough, then come help me take a look at this thing. What the hell is it?”

“I had a lot of nightmares.” Qi Tiezui said truthfully. “I’m afraid I’ll have even more for the rest of the month.” With that said, he picked up the fragment: “Fo Ye, out of all the Nine Gates, your eyesight is the best. Isn’t it a joke for me to help you take a look?”

“No matter how many beautiful words you spout, I can’t see it if I can’t see it. Now quit your useless chattering.” Zhang Qishan got up and went to the window, looking down at where the soldiers were opening the coffin behind the curtains in the courtyard. He could see the flame from the gas cutter flare up from time to time. The iron that had been melted onto the whistle coffin had fused into the coffin fiber, making it very strong. It appeared opening the coffin would take some time.

“It looks like an oracle bone, but also like a natural pattern? I’ve heard that some turtles have natural Luoshu<sup>14</sup> patterns on their backs, but their origins are unknown. This kind of scale-shell doesn’t belong to a tortoise, nor is it an animal bone.” Qi Tiezui took the fragment and looked at it for a long time, but ended up shaking his head: “The oldest qualified person in the oracle bone sciences is Luo Xuetang from Huai’an, Jiangsu Province. Old Luo is holding an honorary position in Manchuria now, but he’s following the Japanese. Luo Xuetang runs the East Literature Society, and one of his students, Wang Guowei, was also a master of oracle bones. In the sixteenth year of the Republic, however, he jumped into the lake at the Summer Palace and drowned himself. Old Luo held the funeral for him. If you are looking for someone now, there’s also Mr. Dong Zuobin, who’s now in Changsha. I had a batch of oracle bones that I sold to him not that long ago, but he’s leaving for Kunming soon. He doesn’t like soldiers, though, so I could pay him a visit in your stead.”

“With the Japanese?” Zhang Qishan hesitated for a moment. “You don’t know oracle bones, but you seem to be quite familiar with the experts.”

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<sup>14</sup> Also known as the “Nine Halls Diagram”. It played a role in ancient Chinese mathematical and divinatory traditions. It’s basically a three-by-three box which each box representing a direction. Inside the box there is a specific number which represents certain attributes. And there are also Elements (earth, fire, water, wood, metal). [Here’s](#) the Wikipedia article, but I felt like [this one](#) was easier to understand

Qi Tiezui stared at the oracle bone and murmured, "Fo Ye, stop joking. Oracle bone divination is part of what my family does. I receive no fewer oracle bones than you do Buddha statues. But Fo Ye, we can't get caught up with whatever is in this coffin right now. Based on the coffins on the train, do you think the Japanese are trying to steal treasure?"

Zhang Qishan frowned. This was also his concern. As he had made his way south and started robbing tombs, Zhang Da Fo Ye quickly became familiar with a lot of strange things. These coffins had all come from a big tomb, and if the Japanese were making a move on a problematic tomb, it would cause a big headache for him. With the Japanese at the gates, ready for war, it was obvious their purpose was to obtain the minerals here. That wouldn't stop their rampant plundering of cultural relics, but robbing tombs seemed like a very inconsistent thing to do at a time like this. It made him feel like there was something going on behind the scenes.

As the two of them sat on the sofa for a long time, Qi Tiezui advised him to rest several times. Suddenly, the report finally came from outside that the iron sheet on the outer coffin had finally been cut off. The two of them immediately went out to watch.

Several soldiers went up and placed crowbars into the gaps of the outer coffin before yanking hard. The huge outer coffin lid made a sound like wood cracking.

Both Qi Tiezui and Zhang Qishan had experienced this kind of scene many times before, but they still held their breath as the outer coffin lid was pried up, and pushed aside with difficulty. It took half an hour before the sarcophagus inside was revealed. Its lid had already rotted in a way that it was stuck to the outer coffin lid, so they were uncovered together. When the gap appeared, Qi Tiezui's heart began to beat violently.

The coffin was red and black, just like the skin of a poisonous snake, and had many human figures carved onto it. The outer coffin lid was pushed to the side and finally fell to the ground with a loud crash. Everyone covered their mouths and noses as all the dust in the coffin flew up into the air.

Lieutenant beckoned for those holding the gas lamps nearby to place them around the coffin so that the inside would be illuminated. As he looked at the lines on the old coffin, Qi Tiezui roughly determined that it must have come from the Northern and Southern Dynasties. There were two portraits of human figures on the coffin, and he could see that one had an animal face while the other had a human face. These vivid decorations were common to the Northern and Southern Dynasties.

Judging from the size of the outer coffin, this person must have been a high-ranking official or a noble. There had been ongoing years of war and chaos at that time, so this kind of extravagant burial system meant they must have had a high status. Since all the clothes were rotten, however, it was impossible to determine the details.

Since the whistle hole had been created, the inside of the coffin was very dry. Qi Tiezui leaned forward and noticed that the inside was full of the same kind of cobwebs they had seen on the train. They were covering the body and funerary objects in the coffin like a quilt.

Zhang Qishan and Qi Tiezui glanced at each other. Then, Zhang Qishan took one of the soldiers' rifles and picked up the cobwebs. There were black and dry asphalt-like stains hidden underneath all the cobwebs, which must have come from the mummified corpse, quilts, silks, and other decayed things. The mummy was wrapped in these stains and lying face down. The angle of its head was very unnatural, which must have occurred when Zhang Qishan forcibly twisted it and shattered its jaw. The corpse's expression looked very ferocious without its jaw. They could see that the corpse was tall and covered in a thin layer of black hair.

The soldiers were used to taking out the funerary objects, but Zhang Qishan looked at them coldly and said, "Don't move anything. Let's see what's in its throat first."

## Chapter 11 January Flowers Bloom February Red

The Zhang family obviously had some experience with things like this. As a soldier pried open the corpse's throat with a bayonet, Qi Tiezui came forward to observe. He saw that there really was a dense cluster of needles in the throat, and all the tips were pointing directly into the throat. If anything tried to come out of the corpse's throat, it would get stuck on these needles.

He adjusted his glasses, asked one of the soldiers to bring pliers, pulled out the outermost needle, and put it under the gas lamp to examine it carefully.

The needle was made of red iron, and although there were rust spots on it, the tip was still very sharp. The part of the needle that wasn't rusty was blue and should be highly toxic.

There wasn't a high degree of decay on the tail end of the needle. Qi Tiezui pondered over it for a moment and then bowed his head to get a closer look at the corpse's neck. Sure enough, there were many tiny needle marks, which showed that the needles had been stabbed into the corpse from the outside by someone later. The stab marks looked very rough, as if they hadn't been done during the burial process, but by a grave robber desecrating the corpse.

It was possible that the first grave robbers who made this whistle coffin were the ones who had done it. If so, it showed that they had found something inside the body at that time, but had no way to deal with it, so they had to trap it with needles.

This could also explain why there was nothing in the corpse's mouth even though it was such a large coffin. Whatever was inside the corpse's mouth had probably been taken at that time.

A soldier brought an iron grate from the kitchen, placed it over the corpse's head, and then repeatedly hit the corpse's chest, throat, and abdomen with the butt of his gun. They all stared at the corpse's throat, but nothing came out, nor were there any fluctuations in its chest or abdomen.

"Open it." Zhang Qishan glanced at Lieutenant Zhang, who nodded, jumped up, placed both feet on either side of the coffin, pulled out a short dagger, and started cutting the ancient corpse's back open. The corpse looked like it had dried up, but Lieutenant could feel that there was still some moisture in it when he dug further in with his dagger.

Lieutenant was very careful as he sliced the corpse open from shoulder to waist, and found that it was filled with asphalt-like things. There was only a little moisture, just like porridge that had partially dried. Zhang Qishan's brows furrowed when he found that all the body's organs were full of hollowed-out holes. Although the body appeared normal on the surface, it was as riddled with holes as the bodies of the Japanese agents they had seen on the train. It looked just like a piece of wood that had been eaten by termites.

"Fo Ye, there's nothing alive." Lieutenant used his dagger to explore the ancient corpse's innards.

Zhang Qishan and Qi Tiezui looked at each other. If there were no living creatures, then the soldier who had his arm amputated might have been too frightened and mistook the needles for an insect bite. But the existence of the iron needles showed that there must have been something inside the body. Plus, this ancient corpse was so similar to the bodies of those Japanese spies. Maybe the bumpy train ride forced the creature out of the coffin during transport and it killed all the people on the train, causing the train to lose control and crash into Changsha. Based on the ancient corpse's state and how the Japanese had died, the living creature may be a kind of insect that could spin silk.

There were many ancient parasites on the corpses in ancient tombs that had become extinct, and many grave robbers came to terrible ends because they

were infected with ancient diseases or parasites. These extinct things' natural enemies had also become extinct, so it would turn into an utter catastrophe if they saw the light of day again.

“Find someone to go over the inside of the train again with a flamethrower. Pay attention to the hospital near the train station and put up notices. If any deceased have this disease, report it immediately.” Zhang Qishan patted the coffin. “Clear the coffin for me. Everything—including the coffin—is to be buried in stone alkali. Fill the body with alkali, let it marinate for a while, and then examine it again.”

War was fast approaching, but there would be no need to fight a battle if a plague broke out in the city. It didn't take a genius to figure out why the Japanese had been moving around in an ancient tomb with strange insects.

“Fo Ye.” This time, Lieutenant didn't immediately come down to start handling things but squatted down as if he had found something. “Fo Ye, look at this.”

Just as he finished speaking, Lieutenant used his dagger to pick up something from the corpse that was covered in the black asphalt-like substance. A soldier standing nearby brought over a basin to wash the dirt from it and handed it to Zhang Qishan. Lieutenant got down from the coffin and came over to look at it carefully.

Qi Tiezui thought it was a blackened ring at first, but found that it actually wasn't a ring at all. Nor was it an ornament. It was something more practical—a “thimble”.

When needlework was done in ancient times, the thimble was put on the middle finger for protection so that the embroidery needle would pierce the thick cloth instead of the body when too much force was used. Wealthy families had silver thimbles, which would blacken with age. This thimble had a strange shape, which meant it had obviously not been made by an unskilled hand. The thick black spots on the silver formed a lot of pits, and they could see that a “rhododendron” had been engraved on it.



Qi Tiezui felt that this item wasn't very ancient. Although he couldn't tell the specific year based on the style and materials alone, he had a keen sense that this thing wasn't that old, maybe 50 years at most. Qi Tiezui compared the thimble with the iron needle he had taken out just now and knew that they went together. They both belonged to the grave robbers who had first melted the iron to make this whistle coffin.

The thing that really made him break out in a sweat was the engraved rhododendron. Thimbles were common, but rhododendrons had an unusual position in Changsha's Mystic Nine.

"January flowers bloom February red, February red blooms orphans. Rhododendrons are also called February red. This is something from Er Ye's family.<sup>15</sup> How could it be in an ancient corpse?" Qi Tiezui felt something in his chest tighten.

Er Yuehong was ranked second among the nine families. This ballad showed how fierce his family was in their early years when it came to killing people and destroying their homes. In recent generations, however, they had kept a low profile for a long time, so there wasn't any news about them. But it was because of this reputation that people in the industry were reluctant to offend them. If their thimble appeared in this coffin, then it meant that they were the first ones to seal the coffin with molten iron.

There were nine gates in nine directions in Changsha. The geographical positions were clearly divided and hadn't changed for decades. If they touched the coffin on Er Ye's turf, a small matter could turn into a big one.

"Fo Ye, Er Ye's family is well versed in the Northern and Southern Dynasties. Considering this coffin is from the Southern Dynasty and this thimble appeared in it, the iron needles in the corpse may be one of Er Ye's family's ancestral crafts. I think Er Ye would know a little bit about this."

The flowers that represented Er Yuehong's family were originally red daffodils but were later changed to rhododendrons because they were too

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<sup>15</sup> Er Yuehong translates to "February Red" so it's a play on Er Ye's name.

unusual and ostentatious. For hundreds of years, Er Yuehong's family had their inner courtyard planted with red daffodils, while the outer courtyard had rhododendron trees. They were very beautiful when they blossomed. Based on this custom, it was clear to see that the family's character was very sophisticated. The whistle coffin was a lost art, but Er Yuehong's family were real old-school grave robbers who had many ancestral crafts that were unknown to outsiders.

Zhang Qishan frowned. This whole situation was full of doubts and becoming more and more mysterious. He thought for a moment and then asked Qi Tiezui: "Where is Er Ye today? Do you know?"

## Chapter 12 Full Moon on the Xiangjiang River

Er Yuehong was walking in the opera house, which had been built by a patron from the northwest and given to him. He didn't know when this patron had heard him perform, but they had given the stage without any prior notice. Unfortunately, they didn't seem to know the rules and had built the stage facing west, which was called a White Tiger Stage. The show must not be performed until "open stage"<sup>16</sup> had been done properly, but at the same time, it had been a gift from someone. Moreover, the signed deed had been delivered three days ago and it would be inauspicious not to open tonight.

He was a little worried. After checking out a few dirty spots with one of the assistants, he decided to go backstage. The manager also looked concerned as he moved the costume box for that evening's performance. After setting up the weapon's rack on the wall, he eagerly went to light some incense and saw Er Yuehong approaching.

"Master, it's too late for open stage. Do you think Ba Ye could help us?" The manager asked as he wiped his sweat.

Er Yuehong took the incense, walked up to the shrine, inserted it respectfully into the burner, and then bowed three times before saying quietly, "He deals in yin and yang, do you think he can take care of a stage?"

"Everyone else said there was nothing they could do about it."

"Give more money, and everyone has a way." Er Yuehong sighed and looked out of the window. There was a courtyard behind the stage, behind which was the back door that led to the Xiangjiang riverbank. At this time, the

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<sup>16</sup> Tiffany says: "open stage" refers to old customs of theatrical troupes. At the end of the Qing Dynasty, they would perform some sort of ritual whenever the new theater was completed or there was a new leader of the theater troupe. The ritual included lighting incense in front of idols, placing banners and curtains, dancing, beheading a chicken on stage and spreading its blood all over the stage, lighting firecrackers on the stage and so on. Basically, there were lots of things that needed to be done. They thought it was unlucky if those things weren't done first.

moon had just risen and the pale light fell onto the river's surface, illuminating the fishing boats resting on the shore.

There was another wharf across the river that was still brightly lit and crowded. It belonged to the common people who had left their homes to go southwest

The area used to be bustling before. Everyone had thought that the Japanese couldn't reach this far, but in the blink of an eye, even the sound of gunfire was heard. Er Yuehong was one who thrived on stability, so any kind of change was torture for him.

He sat down in a chair by the window, lost in thought as he listened to the sound of the river. When he came to his senses, the gong set up on the stage had already sounded, indicating that guests had started to arrive. As a Changsha performer, he was familiar with many of the patrons, and they were also familiar with each other, so he cleared his mind and stopped thinking about the matter.

The manager at the front of the stage was surprised by the gong. Although his master's shows were famous, the gong had sounded so early and the White Tiger Stage hadn't been opened yet, which made him jumpy. When he pulled aside the curtain and went out, he saw four or five tables full of guests. There were regular customers at the other tables, but there was a line of people in the back row wearing northwest leather jackets, tartar hats with ethnic minority patterns, and horsetail whips at their waists. The one that had to be the leader was wearing a golden leopard vest with various big chains hanging from it. He didn't sit down but stood there with his hands behind his back and an interested expression on his face as he gave the stage a cursory once-over. He said to his men, "Although things in the south are good, they still look trashy. It's as if they turned the opera house I sent into a place that performs shadow puppetry. No wonder this Er Yuehong refused it several times when I first sent it. But once he did accept it, he didn't even come out to greet me personally when I came."

His men burst into laughter, causing the other tables to cast them annoyed looks.

When he heard this, the manager knew this was the patron who had sent the opera house. His master had refused several times when the patron had first sent it, for fear that this kind of person would be troublesome.

He immediately ordered a young man to take melons and other fruits to the patron. He wouldn't panic. If it was an ordinary opera house, he would always be afraid of encountering this kind of rich guest, but this was Er Yuehong's territory in Changsha. There were plenty of ways for him to deal with this.

He saw the boy go up with the fruit bowl and bow to the group of people. He didn't know what was said, but the rich guests quieted down once they were full. When he came back, the manager asked him how he had dealt with it. "Sir," the young man said, "I told them that Er Ye was making his preparations. After the performance, he invited them for a drink, and then he would sing a Flower Drum Opera song for them."

The manager frowned. "You stupid child, how could Er Ye do that? They'll cause trouble again after the performance is finished."

The young boy said, "Sir, please take Er Ye away after the show. I'll take them east along the moonlit river and handle them."

The manager sighed, "Don't hurt them this time. Er Ye doesn't like this kind of thing."

The young man glanced at the rich guests and said coldly, "Yes, I'll come back as soon as it's done. Just now, they said that this stage was facing west because they came from the west. It was to let Er Ye pay tribute to them. It was this sentence that really made me angry."

The manager's face sank. He didn't make the boy promise anything, but simply said: "This doesn't need to be reported to Er Ye." With that said, he went backstage

Er Yuehong had started putting on makeup and asked quietly, "What were you and Chen Pi whispering about outside?" The manager said it was nothing, but was secretly thinking that Er Ye was going to be hard-pressed performing on this White Tiger Stage. He had always felt that something was off about it, and now he had a clue. He was afraid that things would be tough later, so he hurriedly lit more incense.

When Er Yuehong went up to the stage to sing, even the corridor was full. Zhang Qishan arrived and found that there weren't any empty seats left, so he was stuck standing far in the back row. He could smell alcohol from a distance and saw a few other patrons in the back row cheering and getting rowdy. Once the performance was over, he listened as the guests said goodbye to each other and then watched the manager send them off one by one. Zhang Qishan approached the front of the stage and said to the manager, "Tell Er Ye I'm here."

When the manager saw Zhang Qishan, he was surprised and couldn't help but think that something really was going to happen. Before he could respond, however, a whip suddenly came up from behind Zhang Qishan, heading straight towards his face. Zhang Qishan stepped to the side a little, but the whip still managed to leave a painful mark.

"Idiot, don't you understand who was here first?" The golden leopard was standing there with a long whip in his hand. "Get out of my way—" With that said, he raised the whip again. Zhang Qishan turned around and looked at him coldly. The golden leopard became even more riled up and swung his whip as his men surrounded Zhang Qishan.

## Chapter 13 Mount Up

Unlike those wild stories from the old days, there were obviously fewer people using whips after the Qing Dynasty, with the exception of some horsemen from the north and southwest. It took a lot of training to utilize a whip as a weapon, and it was far less effective than a gun. Zhang Qishan's mind was already preoccupied with something, and he wasn't familiar with flying whips, so although he had dodged, his face still got scratched.

This whip actually had a bit of weight to it, so when Zhang Qishan dodged to the side, it ended up hitting a nearby seat and shattering it to pieces. The manager jumped up in shock and hurriedly shouted, "Sir, you broke it! You broke it!"

Golden leopard's men kicked over their seats and surrounded him as their leader seized his collar, "I could smash this stage I donated if I wanted to. I'm tired of listening to an annoying pig like you, you damn fool."

One of the nearby men immediately yelled at the manager, "Go and tell Er Yuehong to come out and sing a Flower Drum Opera song." But the manager immediately waved his hand: "Er Ye just got off the stage. He can't go on stage again."

The leopard had obviously drunk too much and the wine had gone to his head, for he pushed the manager to the ground. The manager stumbled and fell hard. Upon seeing Zhang Qishan glaring at him, the leopard swung his whip again, but Lieutenant appeared behind him in the blink of an eye and aimed his gun at his temple.

The leopard was a fighter, after all, so he immediately reacted by raising the whip up, but he didn't dare lash out. All of his men were frozen stiff. They had drunk too much just now and hadn't paid any attention to the gun at Lieutenant's waist.

Zhang Qishan touched his face and gave the leopard a cold look. He was annoyed, but not at himself. The Japanese were at the gates, yet the city

was still full of these kinds of characters. It was a chilling thought. The leopard's lips were trembling and he was clenching his teeth; it was obvious his inner rage hadn't disappeared, but the pistol had certainly sobered him up a little. It was only at this point that he noticed Zhang Qishan's uniform, which looked exactly like the ones those people in the barracks wore.

Zhang Qishan might have reprimanded him if he hadn't had so much on his mind, but he wasn't in the mood at the moment. He gave Lieutenant a look and started heading backstage. Lieutenant immediately understood and said to the leopard, "You're lucky. Get lost."

The leopard was mostly sober by this point and lowered the whip in his hand, but when Lieutenant also lowered his gun, the leopard didn't leave. Instead, he stepped on the seat, spit on the silk cushion, and then said, "So it turns out you're a military man. Hold up."

When Zhang Qishan ignored him, the leopard shouted at him, "I said I was here first, military man! Zhang Da Fo Ye of Changsha's Nine Gates is my sworn brother. Give me your name and rank. We may not settle this now, but the future is long. I don't start something I can't finish."

Zhang Qishan stopped and turned around, finding that the leopard was looking at him hungrily. He suddenly smiled: "I heard that Zhang Da Fo Ye's men only beat up the Japanese. This brother shows such high praise for Fo Ye. Do you want me to skin you for him and send you to the frontlines?"

The leopard's face suddenly changed. One of his men still hadn't sobered up yet and scolded Zhang Qishan, "Just you wait and see. Our boss donated a lot of money to the army, so Zhang Da Fo Ye owes him a favor. He'll put you in your place." Just as Lieutenant raised the gun again, the leopard grunted out with a sullen look on his face, "You'll see." With that said, he finally turned to go.

Seeing that Zhang Qishan didn't go backstage and stopped in the front row, the manager knew that Zhang Qishan understood the proper etiquette. He bowed to Lieutenant: "Sir, if you'll wait on your master, I'm sure my boss



will be out soon. There was so much noise outside, I'm sure he must have heard it. He'll be out once he's done taking his makeup and costume off. I'll see those unlucky guests out. We can't afford to offend the landlord, so please don't take offense." With that said, he went to see the group of guests off.

They swore and spit as they left the stage area, and one said, "Boss, this fucking Er Yuehong... you gave him a stage, but he didn't even come see us. And he found a soldier to run us off. This fucker isn't taking us seriously at all. He's treating us like losers."

The leopard's face was black and livid, but he didn't know what to say. At this moment, he saw a long-haired beggar sitting at the entrance to the opera house, completely covered in dirt and grime. The manager— who had followed them out—turned around and gave the beggar the same fruit plate the leopard had used just now. The beggar hardly spared it a glance before he picked it up and started eating.

The manager came over and nodded at them, "I'm sorry, forgive me, but this...this...this isn't a good place to talk. Please go quickly, you're blocking him from viewing the lanterns." He said, pointing to the beggar.

The leopard looked back and saw a flower house behind them. He didn't know if it was open for business, but there were many colorful lanterns hanging on it, which the beggar was looking at as he ate.

"This beggar is being treated better than us." One of his men said.

"You fucking bastard!" The more the leopard thought about it, the angrier he got. He felt as if he was purposefully being humiliated and turned his whip towards the beggar. His heart was full of hatred as he lashed out with the intent to kill. If this whip hit someone, it would open a wound so deep it wouldn't heal for half a year.

The bowing manager on the side reached out as quick as lightning and seized the whip in mid-air. The leopard immediately yanked it back but found that he couldn't move it at all.

When his men saw that their boss was at a disadvantage, they were just about to go up when the manager said with a smile, "Esteemed sirs, you'd better go quickly. If you don't, you'll offend the one member of the Nine Gates you shouldn't. It would be like serving yourself up to the King of Hell on a silver platter. You thirteen gentlemen really have bad luck. I urge you to go all the way to Dongcheng District's gate and don't look back. This leniency can be regarded as Er Ye's thanks for the opera house."

## Chapter 14 Three Drumbeats

The leopard tugged at the whip the manager still held in his hand, but he couldn't move it even after half a minute had passed. If it was ordinary times, he would have realized the manager had some skills and wasn't a pushover. But after drinking a few glasses of wine and having people insult him again, the evil fire in his heart suddenly flared up.

In such troubled times, it wouldn't do to offend a military man, especially now that they were at war. And even if he knew a lot of higher-ups, he wasn't as valuable as a gun in a soldier's hand. But Er Yuehong's manager was so deceptive that he couldn't swallow his pride and walk away. The leopard held the whip with one hand and reached for the knife in his jacket with the other. "I've been offended enough," he said viciously. "Since you're the manager of the Hong estate, you might as well escort us a little further. We're too drunk to find our way."

The leopard's men watched their boss's movements and knew that he was set on killing the manager. Their faces darkened and they also put their hands into their jackets one after another. When the manager saw this, he immediately dropped the whip with a smile and started making apologies: "I'm afraid I have to go back and wait on my master, but I'll have this young servant send you on your way. Please don't take offense."

As soon as he spoke, Chen Pi came out and bowed. The manager ordered him, "Show these masters out of the city. There's no rush. Let them walk along the river and sober up. Remember, this gentleman was the one who sent us the opera house, so don't neglect him." After he was done speaking, he quickly turned and walked back into the opera house. The leopard wasn't willing to let him go and went to step forward, but the young man named Chen Pi stepped up and blocked his path: "Sir, let's go quickly while the night is still cool." The manager didn't hear the next sentence as he had already returned to the hall.

Zhang Qishan was standing in front of the stage, thinking about what had happened just now. Er Yuehong's family was full of old people who had been with them for several generations. All of them were as close as relatives and extremely loyal to Er Yuehong's family, but they were inevitably long-winded. When he heard the manager return, Zhang Qishan wanted to ask him to see if Er Yuehong would hurry up, but he suddenly heard the sound of a chain come from onstage. Er Yuehong came out wearing casual clothes, but he still had on the makeup from the performance.

"What a surprise. Is this the same Fo Ye who doesn't like listening to opera? What brings you to my pear garden?" Er Yuehong made a gesture to the manager, who quickly withdrew. As he sized Zhang Qishan up with clear eyes, he had a strong and majestic aura about him. Anyone who still had clear eyes after working in this business made Zhang Qishan feel deeply moved.

"There's something I need to ask you." Zhang Qishan truthfully told him. Any sign of hesitation in front of a wise man would instantly put them on guard.

When Er Yuehong smiled, Zhang Qishan secretly laughed. If he was asking for help, the other person wouldn't dare agree so casually. Changsha's Nine Gates were so powerful that they would definitely get involved when the Japanese came, whether they wanted to or not. If Zhang Qishan was looking for him during this time, it definitely had something to do with these things, which meant it wasn't a trivial matter.

Without waiting for him to ask, Zhang Qishan told him all about what happened at the railway station earlier that morning. After he was done, he said, "In Changsha, Er Ye is an expert when it comes to the Northern and Southern Dynasties. That's why I'm here to ask you for advice."

After listening, Er Yuehong looked at him and quietly asked, "That's it? Fo Ye, our friendship isn't so shallow that you have to beat around the bush."

Zhang Qishan remembered Er Yuehong telling him something when they had first met after he came down south. Er Yuehong quickly became friends with him because he knew that Zhang Qishan had too many stories to tell. He made a remark about people with stories being more interesting and never bad people, which touched Zhang Qishan very deeply. That was why he didn't mention everything when he recounted the morning's events, because the story behind the thimble may not be what the other party wanted to hear. Since Er Yuehong was asking, however, he gave it some serious thought before throwing the thimble at him.

Er Yuehong looked up and frowned. He drew his sleeve across the back of his hand and bounced the thimble back towards Zhang Qishan accurately. When Zhang Qishan raised his hand and caught it, Er Yuehong said, "Fo Ye, you know I haven't touched anything underground for a long time. I can't help you with this."

"This thing was found in the coffin. It belongs to the Hong family. Considering the Japanese had it, it's probably related to the Hong family." Zhang Qishan said. "Aren't you interested? As far as I can tell, the Hong family rarely makes mistakes. If this thing was in the coffin, that means someone went to rob the tomb in modern times. Er Ye, as a second-generation master, you can't be that ignorant. As long as there are one or two clues, I won't have nothing to go off of. Now that the Japanese are approaching, this kind of thing may hinder the overall situation. So, I'd like your advice."

Er Yuehong looked at the thimble in Zhang Qishan's hand and fell silent. "I'm afraid I can't help you with my family's affairs, Fo Ye. If I could, I would definitely tell you everything."

At this time, the sound of the manager beating a drum three times came from backstage, urging Er Yuehong to step down from the stage. Er Yuehong said quietly: "Fo Ye, my performance is over. Please go back."

With that said, his dignified eyes unexpectedly softened, as if he were pleading for Fo Ye to drop the matter.

Zhang Qishan inwardly sighed. He had long heard that Er Yuehong wouldn't go down into the tombs for his wife's sake, but he didn't expect that he would actually be rejected. At this time, he felt a little remorseful. It was very difficult for those in the Nine Gates to make such a decision, so maybe he had gone too far.

He put the thimble on a nearby table and said, "This thing belongs to the Hong Family. I'll figure it out myself. If you change your mind, you can—"

"I'm afraid I won't change my mind about going underground." Er Yuehong interrupted him.

At this point, Zhang Qishan had no other choice but to salute and turn to leave. After two or three steps, however, Er Yuehong suddenly said, "Fo Ye, a word of advice. This is dangerous, don't act rashly."

Zhang Qishan looked back into Er Yuehong's eyes, but Er Yuehong was looking down at the thimble on the table.

Lieutenant wanted to press him for more, but Zhang Qishan stopped him. He pressed the brim of his military cap and walked out of the pear garden. When Chen Pi came back, he glanced at Zhang Qishan but walked right on by without greeting him. The manager could be heard yelling in the background: "Why did you come back so quickly? Did you send those people off?"

Back in the street, Zhang Qishan decided to have the car follow him as he walked by himself. He drew up short and tossed a silver coin to the beggar outside as Lieutenant Zhang said, "Er Ye must know something."

"If it was a small matter, he would have already told us. What Er Yuehong doesn't want to say... tsk. Whatever's behind that train appears to be a big deal. I'll have to think it over carefully."

## Chapter 15 Corpse Moth

Zhang Qishan meditated in the car. When he had first arrived in Changsha, he visited various leaders. Er Yuehong's father had just died, and the two of them had met and drank in front of a coffin. After that, the Zhang family established itself in Changsha, with the Hong family's indispensable help.

The Hong family had also contributed the most when the revolutionary government revolted and started incorporating Changsha's local armed forces. Er Yuehong wasn't someone who couldn't distinguish between right and wrong, so he must have kept quiet today because it had something to do with his family.

Zhang Qishan couldn't help but think of Er Yuehong back in the old days. At that time, neither of them had any serious family obligations. They could play a game of chess for three days and three nights, and no one would bother them. But those days were long gone.

At this time, Changsha City looked cold and desolate since many shop lights were out along the street. But there were many stalls that had coal lanterns hanging up, displaying mostly warm food such as spicy rice noodles, Dutch noodles, sweet wine, and eggs. There were even snacks such as beef sangza, tofu triangles, brain rolls, and sesame oil pig blood soup. When Zhang Qishan first joined the army in his early years, he was also an acting adjutant for the first three months. When he got off work late at night, he would stop and eat some of this roadside cuisine.

Lieutenant was watching him carefully and asked, "Fo Ye, do you want me to bring some back?"

Zhang Qishan shook his head, waved for the car to stop, and lowered the window.

The car stopped in front of a stall, whose owner he was familiar with. After looking in the window and seeing that it was Fo Ye wearing the military uniform, the surprised stall owner suddenly laughed: "Oh, hey, Fo Ye. Long

time no see. The cat got the fish today (there's no fermented bean curd today), so will it be the usual?"

Zhang Qishan nodded and pulled off his gloves. The stall owner's daughter soon brought over a bowl of steaming beef sangza and put it in the car. He hadn't seen her for several years—the girl was already twelve or thirteen by now— but they weren't strangers either. She leaned on the car window and asked him, "Fo Ye, Fo Ye, did you beat the Japanese?"

Zhang Qishan nodded, handed over the money, and then reached out and touched the little girl's head. The little girl asked, "Will the Japanese really come? My dad said Changsha can't hold, so we're going northwest. Come with us."

The stall owner was very embarrassed, but Zhang Qishan couldn't help but laugh: "Little Sprout, follow your daddy. I should also follow, but I have to beat the Japanese first. Be good and don't cause any trouble. When I'm done, I'll go northwest to find your stall."

The little girl nodded and waved to Zhang Qishan, who smiled. As soon as the car started and the window was rolled up, his smile disappeared and his eyes became as firm as stone.

When he got back home, he drank a cup of bitter tea and felt wide awake, so he asked for a status update. When he learned that Old Ba had gone to the morgue, Zhang Qishan's heart warmed and his pent-up frustrations eased just a little.

The files from the train were sorted out, soaked in chemicals, and then air-dried. There were more than ten people coming and going in the room at one time, but he ignored them as he stood and stared at the files one by one. Unfortunately, they were all in Japanese. He asked Lieutenant which secretaries in the unit knew Japanese and if they were trustworthy, and then picked one to handle the case. With that done, he went to the morgue.

As soon as he arrived at the door, he saw a huge platform with a lot of charcoal ash in the braziers on both sides. He pushed the door open and



went in, finding a bunch of military doctors huddled in the corner. All the bodies on the train had been moved here in the exact same position they had been found in—face down. The fortune teller was dressed in robes and drawing white-lined spells on the ground that encompassed the whole room.

“Drag him out.” Zhang Qishan’s piercing gaze could start a fire. A few soldiers went up and grabbed Qi Tiezui, kicking away the stones placed outside of the array. Qi Tiezui shouted: “Fo Ye, if you don’t believe me today, then you don’t have to believe me in the future.”

Zhang Qishan listened to his serious words and felt his heart sink. He waved his hand to the soldiers, and once they released their grip, Qi Tiezui patted his mussed clothes with the air of a feng shui master: “Fo Ye, you must believe me this time. No, not only believe me. You should also thank me, praise me, and award me.”

Lieutenant smiled and said, “Ba Ye, if you really make a big discovery, you can even ask Fo Ye to kiss you.”

“What have you found?” When Zhang Qishan approached him, he saw that a Japanese corpse had been placed under two lights. Its back had been cut open, and the internal organs were covered in a layer of hot wax. The hot wax had seeped into all the gaps and pores, and it was clear to see that all the organs were full of holes.

“These Japanese are like the corpses we discovered in the coffins. There should be corpse moths in that tomb. All those cobwebs on the train are the silk from these corpse moths. The people who came in contact with the train—yes, everyone—needs to use my prescription. They need to soak in it for three hours and then drink some corpse wine.” Qi Tiezui whispered. “Otherwise, within six or seven days, we’ll be peeing out silk every time we go to the bathroom.”

The corpse moth was a kind of moth peculiar to ancient tombs. He had heard someone sing an old local song from Longmen, Huizhou more than

ten years ago that was called “The Classic of Three Corpses”.<sup>17</sup> It told the story of a local barefoot doctor who treated the emperor and even mentioned an ancient insect disease. After being buried with the corpse, the adult bug hatched in the coffin, crawled out from the corpse’s throat, and started spinning silk and building a cocoon when it found itself trapped in the coffin.

It wasn’t unusual to see corpses’ upper bodies covered in insects whenever coffins were opened. Some people in the business said this corpse moth carried bacteria on its wings. Once the eggs were ingested, the moths would hatch in their body, infect them, and cause them to get sick. After death, the insects would continue to grow inside the corpse.

“But the corpse moth isn’t immediately fatal. If that’s all it is, Er Ye wouldn’t be so alarmed.” Zhang Qishan looked at Qi Tiezui. If it was a mere corpse moth, then he shouldn’t let him take credit for it.

Qi Tiezui threw back his Taoist hat. “Fo Ye, most of the dead bodies on this train appear to have died from moth disease. One person, however, did not. Come with me. The key to this ghost train is on this person.”

They passed by several corpses and walked to the center of the morgue, where another corpse was draped in a white cloth. From the outline, it was the only corpse that was facing up. Qi Tiezui took a deep breath, bowed to the body, and then said: “I’ve been in this business for so many years, and have yet to see such an incredible sight.”

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<sup>17</sup> “Three Corpses” or “Three Bugs” is a Daoist physiological belief that demonic creatures live inside the human body, and seek to hasten their host’s death. These 3 supernatural parasites allegedly enter the body at birth, and reside in the three “energy centers” of the head, chest, and abdomen. After their human host dies, they are freed from the body and become malevolent ghosts. More info [here](#)

## Chapter 16 The Expert Who Nailed the Weasel Spirit

Qi Tiezui carefully rolled the cloth down to reveal the body underneath. As soon as the face appeared, Zhang Qishan realized that this was the man who had hanged himself on the train. At this time, all of his clothes had been stripped off, his eyes were still open, and the two small, weasel-like eyes looked especially muddy as they stared straight up at the ceiling.

At the moment Qi Tiezui lifted the cloth and exposed the face, the eyes suddenly turned and looked at the approaching Zhang Qishan.

Lieutenant Zhang was shocked and immediately stepped back and pulled out his gun: “Not dead.”

“He’s dead.” Qi Tiezui sighed. “Lieutenant, you should know better.”

Lieutenant looked into the corpse’s eyes coldly as Qi Tiezui removed the rest of the cloth from the body. There were dozens of places up and down the corpse’s body that had coffin nails sticking out of them, and a lot of symbols had been drawn around the wounds.

Zhang Qishan looked at the corpse without a hint of fear and then walked around to its other side. The eyes hesitated for a moment before immediately moving to follow him.

“This is the Qi family’s expert. I guess you can say he sacrificed his life to send the train here.” Qi Tiezui sighed. “He’s got a total of twenty-seven nails in his body.”

“For what purpose?”

“I really don’t know. I’ve only heard that there are immortals in the Northeast who invite the four sacred spirits—fox, weasel, snake, and hedgehog—into their bodies. They’re commonly called ‘old immortals’. When they arrived in the Central Plains later and started doing bad deeds,

feng shui masters placed coffin nails in their bodies to seal them. When these old immortals from the Northeast possess someone, they can only stay in the body for an hour at most. Once the expert figured out how long it would take to drive the train back, he must have asked the weasel spirit to help him. Once it entered his body, he used the coffin nails to seal it. This expert must have also suffered from moth disease and placed the spell while he was dying.”

“Is there really a spell?” Zhang Qishan was skeptical.

“I’ll know when I take the nails out. But Fo Ye, you have to help me with something. If there really is a weasel spirit sealed in the body, then there’s actually another possibility.” Qi Tiezui swallowed. “The weasel spirit is very evil and won’t listen to reason. The expert might have sealed it because he was afraid it would harm others once it was released.”

Zhang Qishan came from the northeast, so he had more or less heard of these kinds of things, but he still wasn’t interested. He was actually more intrigued by the Taoist symbols on the edge of the wounds. The strokes were connected with each other, and there were many dark red lines interwoven on the corpse’s skin.

It didn’t seem as simple as what Qi Tiezui had said.

“I’ve drawn three spells around the corpse. Since the Zhang family has a special constitution, I figure nothing will happen to you. If anything, the weasel spirit will likely enter my body. At that time, you can ask everything you want to know. If it doesn’t leave after you’re done asking, I’ll have to trouble you to pierce my throat with a coffin nail.”

Zhang Qishan took one of the coffin nails and handed it to Lieutenant, who weighed it. Qi Tiezui was a little scared: “Fo Ye, your subordinates don’t know how to control their strength. You can’t ask them to pierce my throat.”

“You don’t have to pull it out.” Zhang Qishan glanced at Lieutenant, who stepped forward, walked around the corpse, stretched out his fingers, and

carefully grasped the end of one of the nails, pulling it out bit by bit without any tools. As soon as the nail was pulled from the wound, a gust of air came out that sounded like a fart.

There was a strange stench in the air and the body got paler and paler, making Zhang Qishan think that there really was a weasel spirit sealed in the corpse. After all the nails were pulled out, the body looked completely withered. Lieutenant looked back at Zhang Qishan and then at the pale Qi Tiezui, who was covering his mouth and looking around very nervously.

The room was silent for a long time, but there was no movement from Qi Tiezui. Blue veins jumped out on Zhang Qishan's forehead as he looked down at the corpse's eyes. They didn't move.

"Where's the weasel spirit?" Lieutenant asked as he jumped down. "Ba Ye, were you rejected? It didn't want to go to your body at all, so I guess your feelings are unrequited."

Qi Tiezui blushed and looked around, not knowing what to say. Suddenly, a corpse three beds over gave a jerk and Qi Tiezui immediately jumped up and shouted: "Over there!"

Zhang Qishan leaped up, stepped on two corpses, and then jumped to the edge of the moving corpse's bed. When he pulled the cloth from the corpse, he saw that the eyes were muddy and lifeless, but the mouth was open.

Zhang Qishan went up and grabbed its chin, squeezing it until something hidden under its tongue was revealed. He took it out and found that it was a rotten piece of oracle bone.

As the corpse's mouth quickly collapsed, Zhang Qishan coldly looked at the oracle bone in his hand. He remembered the other fragment he had found in the coffin before and suddenly understood something.

He grabbed Qi Tiezui—who kept bowing all around and thanking the weasel spirit for leaving a message— by the back of the neck and shouted to Lieutenant Zhang, "Pull up all the maps of the whole province and all the

townships. Especially those marked with geological and mineral resources. Don't miss a single one."

Lieutenant immediately got to work and started barking out orders. It was almost midnight by this point, yet everyone at headquarters was called up.

Not long after, Er Yuehong was passing by outside the defense headquarters when he saw the bright lights inside and became thoughtful.

He continued walking all the way through the old part of the city until he was back at his old mansion. The manager had prepared some tofu and mung bean noodles, so he hurriedly took a few mouthfuls before heading to his training room. When he got there, he stepped on a few boxes, quickly jumped up to the beams overhead, and pushed up one of the tiles above the beams.

It wasn't a roof above the tiles, but a hidden room. Even though it was only as tall as a person, it was filled with various boxes and ancient books that were buried in dust. Since he stopped going underground, he hadn't come up here for a long time. He took out the thimble that Zhang Qishan had given him, went up to a three-meter-long box, and opened it. There were hundreds of identical thimbles inside, which had all been neatly placed in the dusty insert. The insert had several grids, many of which were empty.

Er Yuehong blew off the dust and saw that the bottom of each grid had been painted with a flower pattern. He compared the flower pattern on the thimble to the patterns on the bottom of the grids and found a blank space that had the same pattern.

## Chapter 17 The Nineteen Spices of Xiangxi

Since Er Yuehong's family was established, there were a total of 1,027 thimbles, each with its own carving. The base of this thousand-grid box had a soft varnish, and those in the family who had completed their apprenticeship would receive a thimble and press the side of the pattern deep into the varnish, leaving a mark. After death, the thimble would be returned to the box and placed in the spot that had been previously marked.

They had this rule because they were worried that any missing thimbles would be used by outsiders to pretend to be part of the Hong family, which would have serious implications.

Even so, there were many people outside carving fake thimbles to cause trouble, but these incidents had decreased in recent years due to Zhang Qishan presiding over the Nine Gates. Now that this particular thimble was matched with the pattern in the box, it was clear to see that it was really a relic of the Hong family.

The Hong family had a unique set of skills passed down through the generations, so there had been few violent deaths in recent years. The few empty grids in the box belonged to the only people who didn't return when they went underground several decades ago. The whereabouts of these people were still unknown, but this thimble's sudden reappearance indicated that they must have died in the tomb at that time.

They had gone to look for ancient tombs deep in the mountains, and he remembered that they had entered the mountains from Dalongling, an old forest near Xiangxi. There weren't any railways or roads from Changsha, and it would take two weeks by mule to reach the mouth of the valley.

Dalongling stretched on for more than a hundred kilometers, and there were vast mountains behind it on the border of Hunan and Hubei, which also had deep mountains and old forests. After this incident, Er Yuehong's father tried to rescue them many times, but the ancient tomb was extremely dangerous, and he had no choice but to quit after several

attempts. He didn't know what his father had experienced there, but when he came out, he actually burned all the data on this ancient tomb and ordered the descendants of the Hong family not to get involved again. Now that so many years had passed, the vegetation had regrown and the mountains had changed. Even if someone led the way, they wouldn't be able to find the specific location overnight.

Er Yuehong's own thimble had a daffodil on it and had been placed inside the box as a symbol of his determination not to go down into the tombs again. He touched it, stirring up the dust with his fingers before turning to light a shadow lamp. The lamp was made from the skin of a small otter, and when he hung it up on the top beam, the shadow mackerels rotated and lit up the corner of the room where a three-dimensional model had been built with rice stalks. It was an internal model of an ancient tomb.

He took a deep breath and silently looked at the three-dimensional model. Every time his father came back from Dalongling, he would build a model with rice stalks in this secret room, as if he was trying to reconstruct the ancient tomb. It showed that his father had a strong desire to conquer the ancient tomb at that time, but he ended up burning all the data after coming back the last time. According to the old man who went with him at that time, his father went deep into the depths of the ancient tomb alone and must have seen something.

Er Yuehong almost stayed in the secret room until the second watch<sup>18</sup>, mind full of thoughts of the past. When he returned to the courtyard, he couldn't help but feel a sense of regret upon seeing that the light in the bedroom was still on. He hastily composed himself and entered the room, finding his wife sitting up in bed, reading Su Manshu's "The Lone Swan".<sup>19</sup> She was so engrossed that she almost didn't hear him come in.

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<sup>18</sup> Old-timey way of saying 21:00-23:00

<sup>19</sup> Published in 1912. Autobiographical novel tells the story of Saburo, a young man who is unsure of whether he want to be a Buddhist monk or get married. Full summary [here](#)



This petite girl—nicknamed Ya Tou—may be the most envied and hated girl in Changsha. Even her health was weak all year round.

Ya Tou was startled when Er Yuehong quietly lay down, and she quickly put the book down, blew out the light, and snuggled up to him.

“Is the Mandarin duck and butterfly<sup>20</sup> book good?” Er Yuehong asked softly in her ear. Ya Tou shook her head and closed her eyes.

As the moonlight streamed in from outside, Er Yuehong lay there with his eyes open, listening to Ya Tou’s quiet breathing. The curtains seemed to shimmer strangely in the moonlight, appearing slightly fractured. He raised his hand to try and pull the curtains close, and suddenly found that he had a thimble on his finger.

He froze for a moment before realizing that when he had been in a daze earlier, he had unwittingly put his thimble back on his finger out of habit.

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In another part of Changsha, Zhang Qishan was back in his office, surrounded by various maps of Hunan. He was looking at more than a dozen pieces of oracle bone and would pick one up from time to time to smell it. These oracle bone fragments had been found in the Japanese corpses’ stomachs, and they were all as big as fingernails.

After the fright from earlier—coupled with the fact that it was already midnight— Qi Tiezui was so sleepy that he made himself a pot of strong tea, but ended up pouring it on the carpet. Once he saw that Lieutenant wasn’t paying attention, he immediately moved the nearby coffee table over to hide it. On one side, a staff officer named Lieutenant Shi was holding the translated materials, waiting nervously for Zhang Qishan to summon him. Qi Tiezui called him over and looked at the documents in his hand.

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<sup>20</sup> “Mandarin ducks and butterfly” (i.e., love birds) is a derogatory reference to populist and romantic writing around 1900.

Most of the documents seized from the train were related to the places these coffins had been unearthed from and the first preliminary identification. The materials were very detailed, and almost every coffin could be traced back to the place where it had been found and the time it had been unearthed.

“Fortune teller, fortune teller.” When Zhang Qishan suddenly called him, Qi Tiezui quickly ran over. As he approached the edge of the desk, he couldn’t help yawning and Zhang Qishan put one of the oracle bone pieces in his mouth.

Qi Tiezui was startled and quickly spit it out. He pointed at Zhang Qishan, too disgusted to speak.

“What’s your emperor’s tongue taste?” Zhang Qishan asked.

Qi Tiezui spit wildly, blinked, and then said, “Nineteen dried spices, and distilled mint oil. Did this seasoning come from that Xiangxi cave?” As he spoke, his face turned purple and he had the urge to vomit.

“The dragon bones were buried with them. The bones must have been boiled in traditional Chinese medicine and used to prevent the diseased corpses from infecting those burying the bodies. After these Japanese got sick, they also hoped that the medicine in the dragon bones could cure them. But what idiot put in mint oil and nineteen spices when concocting the medicine? It must have been a deliberate act by your family’s expert to tell us where the train came from.” Zhang Qishan said coldly. “This expert tricked the Japanese and managed to lead them around in circles. He’s just like you, pretending to be a pig to eat the tiger.”

Qi Tiezui continued pointing at Zhang Qishan as he looked around the room for some tea to rinse his mouth out and boldly shouted: “Who’s pretending to be a pig?!”

When Lieutenant Shi got a whiff of Qi Tiezui’s spit, his face turned purple. Zhang Qishan walked up to the big map and looked north of Xiangxi: “The train came from this direction. The railway to Hubei has been blown up, so

the train must have come from this mountainous area. There could be hidden railroad tracks there related to the mines. The whole area is full of mines, but only the Tujia people in a few areas use the nineteen spices. Here, here, and here.” Zhang Qishan pointed to several places. “The train must have come from one of these places. Find detailed maps of them. We’ll search them inch by inch and leave tomorrow.”

Qi Tiezui looked at Zhang Qishan as he gargled tea and shook his head: “Fo Ye, I’m traumatized. I won’t go.”

Zhang Qishan didn’t look back as he quietly said, “Changsha’s defense is the key. Your family’s expert reported to you so that you would inform me. He even lost his life. It’s possible there’s still a lot of information about the Qi family on the road. You need to go even if you’ll die a hundred times.”

## Chapter 18 Into the Mountains

It was a well-known fact in the army that Zhang Qishan acted quickly.

They went to sleep after midnight, but it was still dark the next morning when Lieutenant was done sorting out the accompanying soldiers in the yard. They were all wearing casual clothes, their pistols were hidden under the water bags on their saddles, and their bayonets were placed on their hips.

As the sun rose, Zhang Qishan checked his Colt and asked the groom to take his horse to the outskirts of the city first. Then, he and several soldiers got in the car and drove away. It was past eight o'clock when their group gathered on the slope near the railway on the outskirts of the city. With a total of fourteen people, they decided to split up. A group of six disguised themselves as a caravan and went twenty miles ahead, while the second group of four disguised themselves as traveling tea merchants so they could go around and investigate. Zhang Qishan, Lieutenant, and two mess cooks brought up the rear. They would gather intelligence along the way and double-check to ensure they were going in the right direction.

After the first two teams left, it took a long time for Qi Tiezui to arrive. Zhang Qishan and Lieutenant were dressed like betel nut vendors with tobacco boxes on their backs. Qi Tiezui arrived dressed like a fortune-teller and riding a donkey.

Fortunately, Changsha had been a major transportation and trade hub for generations, so it wasn't uncommon for strange people and businessmen to travel from south to north.

But the donkey walked too slowly and often fell two or three miles behind, so Zhang Qishan and the others ended up having to wait half an hour for it to catch up. Zhang Qishan endured it halfway and then sighed: "Fortune teller, I asked you to disguise yourself. What are you doing riding a donkey?"

“Fo Ye, if a fortune-teller didn’t ride a donkey, but a tall horse, wouldn’t that be like telling the world I have business here? Don’t look down on my getup. Once we get further into the mountains, you’ll see how useful it is.”

After they entered the mountain, Lieutenant constantly remained vigilant. Whenever a bird flew up, he would stop his horse and look at it for a long time. He had rarely looked back, but after listening to Qi Tiezui’s words, he said, “The Taoist priests in this mountain are already poor and extinct. Most of the so-called Taoist priests are lone mountain bandits who hide in abandoned temples deep in the mountains and scam people. They steal children from the village, bring them back, and raise them to be violent bandits. If you’re seen looking like this, someone may beat you to death.”

“Those violent bandits you’re talking about only use brute force. I’m from the Qi family, who learned their skills from the masters who studied ‘The Yellow Court Classic’,”<sup>21</sup> Qi Tiezui said as he patted his bag full of treasures. “I have a hundred and eighty remarkable abilities. I’m just like a walking immortal wherever I go. Otherwise, I would have died of poisoning when Fo Ye fed me that oracle bone fragment.”

“Those fragments were already boiled in my blood. Why else would we dare touch them barehanded and not be afraid of infection?” Lieutenant said quietly.

There was a legend that the Zhang family’s blood was different from ordinary people’s, and could even cure diseases. Qi Tiezui often asked Zhang Qishan for evidence of it while they were chatting over tea, but he was always laughed at. Now that Lieutenant had said it so bluntly, he couldn’t help but feel skeptical. He was just about to ask more, when he saw Lieutenant’s bandaged hand. The bleeding wound still hadn’t healed, and he couldn’t help but think, *if the blood was boiled, did it become blood tofu?*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> A Chinese Taoist meditation text. Wiki link [here](#)

<sup>22</sup> Pig blood curd, also known as “blood tofu” or “blood pudding”, is a popular Cantonese delicacy. It’s basically solidified blood. More info [here](#)

Off to the side, Zhang Qishan stopped his horse, glanced at Qi Tiezui, and seemed to be laughing at him. Qi Tiezui quickly swallowed his questions back down.

As they headed towards Xiangxi, it was impossible to follow the tracks the whole time. After entering the mountain, they could only follow the tracks distantly from their location on the ridge. They encountered several mudslides along the way, which caused Qi Tiezui to become dirty and disheveled, and made him look like a wild vagabond roaming the area.

Three days later, they arrived at the first mining area delineated on the map.

Xiangxi was rich in mercury, so there were eleven or twelve mines here, along with various other mines. The miners ate and lived deep in the mountains and only came out once every two months. There were even special horsemen to transport ore back and forth every day. Most of them were Miao and Dong people who came from villages distributed throughout the mountains. They were basically autonomous, and the Miao border was considered a wild frontier.

In addition to the mining bureau, there were some Germans and Japanese who were cooperating with the authorities. Now that the Japanese had all withdrawn, however, the miners were mostly local Han Chinese, which made the ethnic situation very complicated.

The railroad tracks were two miles away, so there was no way back for the time being. Their group went into a Dong village on the mountainside and then looked for the old relay station that was said to be on this part of the Southern Silk Road. It had been run by locals to supplement their income since hundreds of businessmen and other travelers could gather in one place. All those people came from various ethnic groups and had different characters.

The Dong village was built on the mountainside, but the relay station was set up along the mountain road on the edge of the cliff. The long straw eaves stretched along the road for half a mile, just like some sort of dragon.

The hundreds of people sleeping in the long station ignored the abyss waiting under their pillows, which was a very scary thought.

Qi Tiezui's pale face was covered in dirt, and he shook his head. "Fo Ye, if you go pee in the middle of the night and make a wrong step, you'll suffer a terrible death."

Zhang Qishan patted the dust from his body, walked up to the relay station's railing, and looked out at the vast valley.

## Chapter 19 Nine Ghosts Stepping on a Lotus

It was when Zhang Qishan had just arrived in Hunan that he first traveled to Xiangxi. The mountains and rivers here were endless, and even on the cliffs in the middle of the mountain, one could still hear the sound of the flowing river in the dense forest below. Even after sunset, the mountains wouldn't be completely dark, for a thin layer of cold light could be seen illuminating everything. A dense white mist formed in the middle, making everything indistinguishable.

He figured the first ones to arrive in this area must have already gone scouting in several directions and were now distributed in various corners of the valley. The train must have left from a mine in this area.

Since the Zhangs had first entered Hunan, they followed the family's traditions and put a lot of eyes and ears among the common folk. These Zhang family members would mingle with people from various local professions, so whenever the Zhangs went out into the fields, they would have people who were very familiar with the local customs and conditions.

In the evening, vendors from all walks of life set up stoves in the relay station. They baked and roasted naan bread on the stone steps by the cliff's edge, and even cooked various kinds of hot pepper soup. The wild game that had been hunted was roasted with all kinds of chili powder, and the aroma spread throughout the valley. There were various lanterns hanging from the roof of this long, dragon-like shop, and from a distance, they looked just like the immortal fox spirit ghost market from the novel "Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio".

Zhang Qishan had already changed his clothes and was resting as the cold wind rose up from the cliff below and made its way through the wooden frame. Lieutenant had blown a bat whistle nearby and was waiting for the local Zhang family to respond. Qi Tiezui was fascinated by the various aromas coming at him from all directions and took his coin purse to buy some. Soon, he came back holding various piping hot skewers.



When Zhang Qishan opened one eye and gave him a look, he said, “Fo Ye, Fo Ye, it was really a good thing to come with you. I didn’t expect such a remote area to be so prosperous. Why don’t you try some?”

Zhang Qishan said quietly, “Going out in the field and eating so indiscriminately... Old Ba, you’re a brave person. But you won’t live long like that. I’ve been to Old Dog Wu’s shop and even his dogs won’t eat these kinds of things. You should go to the Wu family for further study.”

Qi Tiezui looked at the food in his hand, and then at the merchants who came from the north and south, and said softly, “No way, Fo Ye. I think the folk customs here are very simple and honest, and the fellow villagers are so lovely. I know the underground is dangerous. It’s not like I haven’t experienced it before. Those of you in the Zhang family are too cautious. No wonder you can’t get a wife.”

At that moment, Lieutenant came back with a middle-aged man who looked like a porter. Zhang Qishan’s eyes immediately lit up and he sat up. “Old man, how is it?”

“This area is the Huo family’s territory. The Huo’s Xiangxi wine is good, so there have recently been several big deals here. There are also other goods in the Huo family’s territory, so Banjie Li’s people have always wanted to find excuses to take them. All the masters of the Huo family are here, so you need to be careful, Qishan. Everyone is familiar with your face, so it’s easy to be spotted as soon as you enter the village.” As Old Man Zhang went to light a cigarette, it was clear to see his fingers were yellow. He didn’t even speak Mandarin, which made it hard to believe he was actually a part of the Zhang family.

Qi Tiezui paused, wiped the hot pepper soup from his lips, and said, “Wow, Fo Ye. I really didn’t expect this to be the Huo family’s territory. They used to be in charge of Nine Gates back in the old days, but a northerner like you came and basically overthrew them. Huo Sanniang won’t give in easily. You are now relying on Changsha—” Before he finished speaking, Lieutenant patted him on the chin, causing him to stutter.

Qi Tiezui immediately reacted, looked around, and whispered, “You rely on firearms, while Er Ye’s family and the Huo family have their children learn the necessary skills to go underground. The Huo family doesn’t believe in your three hundred years of feng shui. If we appear here, will Sanniang think that we’re helping Banjie Li deal with her?”

Zhang Qishan leaned against the railing and looked up at the moon shining bright in the sky. He wasn’t thinking about the Huo family at all. In fact, once the battle in Changsha started, there would be no difference between the Nine Gates. The only ones in the city would be Chinese and Japanese.

He looked at Old Man Zhang: “What else do you have?”

Old Man Zhang said, “The thing with the train isn’t that simple. The mountains here are complex, so if any mines and railways were built secretly in the woods, it would take them at least a few years. Plus, the vegetation here is dense. Once one side was completed, the other side would still be covered in shrubs and vines. They would need a month or two to rest, which means it can’t be done so quickly. I asked the night watchmen in every village around here, but they all said they had never heard a train moving. But several people did say that they had heard another strange sound that shouldn’t appear in this place.”

“What was it?” Qi Tiezui impatiently asked.

Old Man Zhang said, “One night this month, during the night watch, they all heard the sound of hundreds of people striking iron in the valley. They only heard the echoes. They didn’t know which village had so many people striking iron, but the whole valley could hear them. It was also said that there was a piece of heavenly bronze hidden in the mountains, and an immortal was forging a sword there.”

As Zhang Qishan looked out at the valley, Qi Tiezui was just about to continue asking questions, but he waved his hand: “The railway tracks are underground. Some sections of these mountains may be hollow and there aren’t any trees in the dry underground river. Many of the miners here are

Japanese and have been operating here for many years. It shouldn't be difficult to hide a railway track in the underground riverbed. The sound of iron being struck was the train passing by, which caused the railroad tracks to press down on the riverbed."

"Yes, that's it." Old Man Zhang said. "Qishan, based on the feng shui, the echo is related to the mountain. There are only a few places where you can hear the underground sound. If you find a good feng shui master, you should be able to figure out where the railroad tracks are underground."

Zhang Qishan turned his head and looked at Qi Tiezui, who had already turned his back to them, "Ba Ye."

Qi Tiezui waved his hand: "You know my rule, Fo Ye—don't look into strange things. You also know feng shui, so can't you do it? This mountain is called 'Ghost Stepping on a Lotus'.<sup>23</sup> There are nine mountains in front, so that makes nine ghosts stepping on a lotus. They're the gates of hell to our Nine Gates."

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<sup>23</sup> Not sure if this has something to do with Buddhism, but the lotus represents purity of body, speech, and mind in Buddhism, as if floating above the murky waters of material attachment and physical desire. According to legend, Gautama Buddha's first steps made lotus flowers appear everywhere he stepped. And he's sometimes depicted sitting on a lotus flower, symbolizing the one who overcame the pain that prevails in the material world and became enlightened, just like the lotus flower which starts to grow in the dirty and muddy water but manages to surpass the water and produce a perfect flower.

## Chapter 20 Upside Down Immortal

Indeed, in the twilight, there were nine mountains stacked on top of each other. Zhang Qishan quirked his brow, smiled, and remained silent, so Qi Tiezui continued: “Although it was my family member who reported the news, everyone’s dead. The Qi family has done their part. Although your Zhang family is also sparse, it’s better than a bachelor like me. I can’t do it. Before I get married, I must follow the ancestral teachings.”

Zhang Qishan looked around but didn’t force him. Instead, he said, “Look at this place, Old Ba. Why do you think your senior was involved in transporting these ancient coffins by train? If he was truly a member of the Qi family, shouldn’t he also follow the principle of cherishing his life?”

“Could it be that different people have different backbones?” Even though Lieutenant was mocking him, Qi Tiezui wasn’t angry. He did his calculations and said, “This is a gathering place of the Miao and Tu people. Even if some of them know about feng shui, it’s not as well-developed as the Central Plains. Most of them are witch doctors, so if my ancestor came here, he was either living in seclusion or traveled here. Or he was invited by someone.”

That someone Qi Tiezui mentioned was the Japanese. If they wanted to break ground here, they had to take over the mine as cover. It was possible that there was something in the mine that the Japanese couldn’t solve, so they brought in a talented master from another place.

Based on the oracle bone fragments found in the corpses’ stomachs, this master did think of some methods, but these people were still born to die in the end.

If the Japanese involved were dead, then that meant someone hadn’t removed the cover that hid the forked tracks extending from the mine after the train had gotten onto the main railway. Otherwise, the team that had gone on ahead would have already found them.

So, the Japanese were nearby. If this relay station had been created by them, then they had definitely placed some people here, which meant there were Japanese around them.

As Zhang Qishan looked around silently, Lieutenant got the message and made a few gestures. He and several others got up and left to go check people's feet. Old Man Zhang knocked his cigarette ash off and looked at Qi Tiezui as he whispered some more news to Zhang Qishan.

Half a cup of tea later, the bat whistle sounded nearby, indicating that Lieutenant had some news. He had found some strange-looking feet that must have been a result of someone wearing clogs. Zhang Qishan also had a bat whistle and blew it: start at midnight.

By the time midnight came, the long line of lights became sparse and Qi Tiezui was sleeping like the dead. Zhang Qishan turned over, got up, and met Lieutenant's eyes. They all crouched down and quickly moved forward. Their group found a gap, climbed down the cliff, and clung to the cliff wall below the station as they followed Zhang Qishan's shadow. They soon approached the people they were eyeing, and Lieutenant made three gestures to indicate the positions of their sleeping targets. There was a total of three of them. Zhang Qishan held up his fingers and made a countdown of three, two, one.

At the moment when Zhang Qishan's final finger fell, he, Lieutenant, and Old Man Zhang jumped up fiercely. They stepped on the people sleeping in the station as they rushed towards their three targets. The three men had quickly opened their eyes when everyone else was jolted awake, but it was too late. Even if they had been extremely alert, they couldn't follow Zhang Qishan's movements. In a quarter of a second, he had already grabbed a person's neck, bear-hugged him, and jumped off the railing.

The man became fully awake as they fell through the air and was just about to scream, but Zhang Qishan covered his mouth. At almost the same time, the soldier that had been lying in wait on the horizontal column below the station reached out and grabbed Zhang Qishan's foot.

On the other side, Old Man Zhang and Lieutenant were in the exact same position. With their legs held by the soldiers above, the three men hung upside down over the abyss like bats.

The area above had descended into utter chaos, but even when the lights were turned on and everyone looked around, no one had noticed that three people were missing. The captured men below looked at the abyss beneath their heads and didn't dare put up a struggle. Zhang Qishan whispered coldly to the man he held, "I ask, you answer. As long as I'm not satisfied, I'll throw you down. First question. Where's the hidden section of railroad track here?"

When he loosened fingers a bit from the man's mouth, the man took a deep breath. He was trembling in fear, but he closed his eyes and remained silent. Zhang Qishan was just about to ask again, when the man suddenly slammed his head back and started struggling hard. His flailing caused the soldier's hands above to slip, and he almost dropped the both of them. The struggling man was about to shout, but Zhang Qishan broke his neck with a muffled crack before any sound could escape. The body was then dropped into the abyss.

When the person above managed to pull him up, Zhang Qishan rolled over and grabbed one side of the rock wall. He then looked at the other two people. One of them was basically petrified and didn't dare move at all, while the other one in Lieutenant's hand was scared half to death and wanted to struggle. Lieutenant held him tightly to constrain his movements. They were moving so much that the people above couldn't support them, and those who had just grabbed Zhang Qishan went over to help hold Lieutenant's other foot.

Zhang Qishan whispered, "One is enough. Throw them down if they're not willing to cooperate."

Lieutenant Zhang replied, "Fo Ye, this one is a woman."

Zhang Qishan lit a match and leaned forward to get a look at the face of the person Lieutenant was holding onto. It really was a woman. He said coldly, "So what?"

"Didn't Ba Ye say he doesn't have a wife yet?" Lieutenant whispered. "Besides, I found something wrong with her." With that said, Lieutenant lifted the woman's chin and showed Zhang Qishan her neck. There were many tiny holes in the woman's neck as if she had been eaten by insects. It was exactly the same as the bodies on the train.

## Chapter 21 Leishan Xiaoguo

Zhang Qishan looked at the holes in the woman's neck and felt his heart clench. He didn't intend to leave any alive, but the woman's appearance made him more alert. He glanced at the other Japanese, and Old Man Zhang also lifted the man's chin up. He had the exact same symptoms.

Zhang Qishan gave Lieutenant a nod. Lieutenant exerted a lot of force to dislocate the woman's lower jaw and then struck her throat, rendering her speechless for the time being. He then lifted one of his arms and untied the bandage on his hand with his mouth. When he squeezed his hand and blood came out of the wound, he smeared it on the woman's neck.

The woman immediately started convulsing. She couldn't make a sound, but her whole body arched up. Lieutenant was very strong and managed to hold onto her as her legs started kicking wildly and the veins on her neck bulged. Then, all the blood on her neck was sucked into the holes. The woman's eyes immediately rolled into the back of her head and she started to vomit. The smell of cumin and hot pepper soup filled the air, and a lot of white worms began to crawl out of the small holes in her neck.

Zhang Qishan watched it all coldly, knowing that something big was going to happen. He thought it over and decided that these two people couldn't be killed. He could only find a place to interrogate them.

There were many pedestrians on the plank road even in the middle of the night, so it would be easy for people to see them escorting these two. But there was also the deep abyss down below. Although it wasn't impossible to get down, it would take some time and accidents might occur.

He went back up, secretly pulled down some hemp blankets and damaged rugs, and knocked the two Japanese people unconscious against the cliff wall. He then wrapped them in the blankets, slung them over the horses' backs, and quietly headed up the mountain road. He had stolen Qi Tiezui's fortune teller banner to open the way, pretending to be a Xiangxi corpse collector.



Qi Tiezui was sleeping without a care in the world. He was also a master who was long used to working in the field, so he was able to sleep soundly in this kind of place. Zhang Qishan squatted down and looked at him. He must have felt Zhang Qishan's presence, for he opened his mouth and rolled over. Zhang Qishan was afraid waking him up would startle the others, so he wrapped him in the blanket and threw him on the donkey's back.

As their group led their horses down the mountain in the dark, Zhang Qishan ordered: "Mobilize all the Zhang family members nearby to find out if there have been frequent funerals and epidemics in the Miao villages recently. See if all the sick people have the same holes. Get someone to go back and inform Changsha to strictly check any merchants from Xiangxi. And have two companies form a perimeter around these mountains for me. No living creatures go in or out."

Qi Tiezui didn't know when he woke up on the donkey's back or what had happened, but he didn't dare speak up for fear he had been captured by someone. When he heard Fo Ye's voice, however, he immediately shouted: "Fo Ye, you can't send troops to surround this place. If the others in the Nine Gates think you're abusing your military power to take the goods here, Changsha would descend into chaos."

"It doesn't matter. Something like that is a mere trifle in front of state affairs. We'll blow up all the mountains here and trap this bug in the tomb." Zhang Qishan glanced at the caterpillar-like Qi Tiezui, "Do you want to get down and walk yourself?"

"No, no, my ass hurts after riding all day." Qi Tiezui could only move his neck since his hands and feet were wrapped tightly in the blanket. He tried to poke his head out, only to find that they were on the edge of the abyss. He immediately shrank back in fear and said, "Fo Ye, don't worry about it. I made a divination before going to bed. You won't believe me, but I might as well tell you anyways. The divination showed Leishan Xiaoguo.<sup>24</sup> The birds aren't singing loud, rain isn't falling from the dense clouds, and the thunder

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<sup>24</sup> It's the 62<sup>nd</sup> of the 64 hexagrams in the "Book of Changes". See end of chapter for full note.

is diminished because it's blocked by the mountains. It's inauspicious to let this matter become a big event. This hexagram is also obscure and difficult to understand, which means that what we see now isn't necessarily the truth. Fo Ye, my family's expert didn't send that kind of message just because of a disease. You have to send people into the mine to check. We can't miss anything."

Zhang Qishan quietly responded with, "What you said is reasonable, but the war is more urgent. You're unwilling to help me, so what's the use in believing whether your divination is accurate or not? You can only watch me ignore the divination for now, so all those 'merits' will fall on your head."

Qi Tiezui was rendered speechless and his face turned red. After a long time, he finally managed to get out, "Ok, Fo Ye, I'll help you. But if I reveal any heavenly secrets and lose a few years of my life, you have to give me a few years of yours."

Zhang Qishan looked back at him: "If I can really do that, then you're actually doing me a favor."

Qi Tiezui reared back indignantly, fell off the donkey, and was immediately caught by Lieutenant. He broke free from his blanket, flung his jacket back dramatically, and put on a very serious face, which meant he was in his feng shui master mode.

He took out his compass and said to Lieutenant, "Take a hundred steps towards Sirius. It's very close to the tail of the Big Dipper. The feng shui master didn't have a proper burial, and the fortune teller is going to die by the side of the road. Since ancient times, geomancers have lived in poverty. Your family's ruler only needs me because I know the secrets of heaven. Your sign is a snake, so you'll do the work and lead the way—ah!"

Before he had finished speaking, he looked up, slipped, and fell off the nearby cliff. When Lieutenant grabbed him and placed him back on his feet, the terrified Qi Tiezui patted his chest.

Zhang Qishan completely ignored them and got lost in thought as he looked at the other two “corpses” on horseback. Qi Tiezui’s words already had his mind wandering back to the scene when they had fled the northeast before coming to Changsha. He had lived like an ordinary person, and managed to make a lot of friends after so many years. He had really forgotten who he was and the suffocating past he had experienced before.

Leishan Xiaoguo... birds not singing loud... dense clouds without rain...

Was Qi Tiezui really talking about what was in front of them? Or was there another power behind this matter that he was more reluctant to touch?

“Old man, find a place to interrogate these two people. Rishan, you guard Ba Ye and try to find where the underground railroad track is. I have other things to check. I’ll come back as soon as I’m done.” Zhang Qishan turned his horse and headed back the way they had come, soon disappearing into the darkness.

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Continuation of TN Note 1: It’s the 62<sup>nd</sup> of the 64 hexagrams in the “Book of Changes”. I think it’s all about finding balance? Like making small mistakes is ok but you don’t want to make too many or even make any big mistakes? There’s a comparison about how a bird doesn’t want to fly too high or too low if that helps. Lei (雷) means thunder, Shan (山) means mountain, Xiaoguo (小过) means little mistake, minor offense, or slightly too much. The upper part of the hexagram is the Lei hexagram representing thunder and the lower hexagram is the Shan hexagram representing the mountain.

## Chapter 22 Everlasting Tower

No one slept soundly that night. Since the Dong village was very small, Old Man Zhang didn't dare enter the village, and so the group stayed on the outskirts. When they got close to the entrance of the village, the rest of the group split from Qi Tiezui and Lieutenant and went into the terraced fields. The ten thousand acres of terraced fields in Xiangxi were endless, and there were some barren forests and graves in the middle that were suitable for hiding.

Qi Tiezui and Lieutenant casually entered the village, borrowed a gourd ladle from a woman, drew water from the well beside the village's ancestral temple, and washed up. Once they were done, they felt more refreshed. The sun was shining overhead as Qi Tiezui looked at the surrounding mountains, did some calculations, picked a direction, and then set off.

As soon as Zhang Qishan had left, Lieutenant found that the look in Qi Tiezui's eyes was heavy, and he spoke less. When he looked at people, he gave off a natural feeling of being detached from the world. Lieutenant couldn't help but wonder: "Ba Ye, you look like you've been possessed by your ancestors. It's like you've got the aura of a true immortal. If you always act like this, how could you still be single?"

Qi Tiezui ignored him and said quietly, "Fo Ye was here. He was in charge of the scene, so all I had to do was beat on the drums. Now that Fo Ye isn't here, someone has to support the scene." He finished the sentence with a smile as if to say, "Should we rely on you?" Lieutenant also smiled, knowing deep in his heart that Qi Tiezui definitely wasn't a simple fortune teller among those in the Nine Gates. He pressed the brim of his hat, bowed his head, and said, "Yes, Ba Ye, it's as you say."

The two of them followed the ridge by the village entrance until they reached a high slope that overlooked the canyon and the cliff where the opposite relay station was located. Qi Tiezui seemed to be carelessly

checking the whole way, but he had already scanned all the places they could see.

As he stood there on the slope, his expression seemed somewhat displeased. When Lieutenant asked him what was wrong, he hesitated for a moment before saying, "This is a small Dong village with only one or two hundred people, but six or seven houses have white window grilles. Fo Ye's worries are probably justified. Some of the grilles have been there for a while and based on the faded color, I'd say it's been at least half a year. If the villagers started dying that early, the disease should have spread long ago."

He then pointed to the terraced fields in the distance, where a spire poked out of the treetops of the barren forest about a mile away. "Do you see something strange over there?"

Lieutenant squinted and immediately realized that it was the spire of an ancient pagoda. He took a deep breath. How could there be a pagoda in this kind of place?

"Why don't I ask what's going on? There are Han people nearby, after all, and it's also possible that monks entered the mountain to build a temple." Lieutenant offered.

Qi Tiezui shook his head. "There was some Taoist activity here in the early years. It's not a pagoda, but an everlasting tower. There's a Taoist temple in this forest. You see, the spire of this tower is similar to male yang, which is very different from the pagodas we've seen before."

Everlasting towers were rare, so Lieutenant was skeptical. Qi Tiezui hesitated for a moment, sighed, and then said, "I'm not good at explaining it. If I rush your fate later, Lieutenant, don't blame me. The position of this Taoist temple is very, very wrong. Something may happen later."

Lieutenant laughed and said: "Ba Ye, worry about yourself. Sooner or later, I will die on the battlefield with Fo Ye." The two men tied their donkey and horse off to the side and then walked across the fields. After a short period

of time, they gradually went into the deserted forest. When they looked closely, they saw that there were ruins in the depths of the forest, which were from an abandoned Taoist temple. There were three tiled roof halls inside, and half of the tiles had fallen from the eaves and were stepped on. The gate walls had practically collapsed, leaving only the foundation.

Before Qi Tiezui entered the main hall, he noticed that the plaque that should normally be there was gone, and figured it had rotted away after nearly a hundred years. There weren't any shrines or Buddha statues inside, leaving only some rubble and fallen leaves on the ground. Lieutenant wanted to go in, but Qi Tiezui shook his head and pointed to the overgrown courtyard behind the main hall where the everlasting tower was. He took out his compass and told Lieutenant, "There must be a Bixie<sup>25</sup> within nine steps of us."

Bixies were an ancient mythological animal that some people thought were a variant of Qiongqi.<sup>26</sup> Lieutenant bypassed the main hall and went into the courtyard to find it. Sure enough, he found the Bixie carving on a bluestone slab beside the stone tower.

"Take five steps and follow the Bixie's front paws. There should be a hidden well." Qi Tiezui continued. Lieutenant complied and found that there was a bluestone slab at the end of those five steps. The two men went over, lifted it up, and found that there really was a hidden wellhead.

"Ba Ye's reputation is well-deserved," Lieutenant murmured as he looked down the well shaft and saw that there was no discernible bottom. Qi Tiezui's expression suddenly became very ugly.

"What's the matter?" Lieutenant asked.

"Why is the wellhead round? Qiongqi...Qiongqi should be square. This isn't right. I... I can't explain it." With that said, he pinched his fingers and

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<sup>25</sup> Mythical lion-like animal that wards off evil

<sup>26</sup> A powerful creature of chaos, known to punish the good and encourage the wicked, to devour the loyal and righteous, and to award the malicious. It looks like a winged tiger.

immediately started calculating. Lieutenant was puzzled. He turned back and took out a flare, but as soon as he turned his head, he suddenly felt a gust of cool wind come up from the wellhead.

He felt his heart thump and thought to himself, *are the railway tracks below?* Just as he was about to probe further, however, a yellow-haired claw stretched out from the wellhead and latched onto his collar.

Qi Tiezui took a step back in horror and dropped his compass as he watched Lieutenant get dragged down in an instant. He obviously didn't expect this to happen and didn't even have time to yell.

He immediately heard the sound of gunfire coming from underground. Qi Tiezui took a deep breath, pinched his fingers to finish the calculation, cursed, and then jumped in.

The well was about fifty feet deep and he fell very fast, eventually landing in water. The stench of rotting leaves in the water assaulted his nose as he struggled to get out. He noticed stone steps under the water on one side, so he quickly made his way over and climbed up. Once he was out, he saw that Lieutenant was missing his shirt and was covered in blood. He didn't know if he had been injured or if the blood belonged to the thing that had just attacked him.

"What about that thing?" Qi Tiezui asked. He breathed a sigh of relief once he saw that Lieutenant was alright.

Lieutenant lit a flare, which bathed his body in a red glow. He pushed Qi Tiezui behind him as the area all around them lit up and they both froze. In front of them was an abandoned stone room, inside of which were countless intersecting strands of insect silk that covered the walls and floors. Amidst the silk screen, they could see one earthen jar after another, which were all covered in Taoist talismans. The talismans were pasted on as thick as a quilt, and even though the innermost ones had rotted to dust, they could still make out what was written on the outer ones.

Qi Tiezui looked around but didn't see the owner of that claw. Lieutenant asked him, "What does it mean if the wellhead is round?"

"A square one means a corpse is sealed below. A round one means a demon." Qi Tiezui answered. "That hand just now had yellow hair. Was it the weasel spirit from before?"

"Since the weasel spirit helped us back then, why would it attack me?" Lieutenant asked. Qi Tiezui shook his head, unable to answer. He looked at all the earthen jars and talismans, squatted down to look more carefully, and took a deep breath before saying, "I see."

"What's the matter?"

"These bugs aren't the key to what's harming people. They were raised here to seal something else underground."



## Chapter 23 Yushui Hehuan

As he spoke, Qi Tiezui took out a small peach wood sword from his sleeves, parted the insect silk in front of him, and plucked away the yellow and black rotted talismans: “See, what’s wrong with it?”

Lieutenant shook the water from his hands and hair and leaned forward with the flare. There were countless pupae on the surface of all the earthen jars that had dried up long ago. The insects inside had hatched and flown away, leaving countless hollow pupae shells. He started to break out in goosebumps once he saw those things under the flare’s light. He could see that the talismans were placed over the pupae, and many of them looked as if they had been covered in cotton wool before. The cotton wool and talismans had both rotted in one spot.

“These bugs were intentionally stuck to the outside of the earthen jars, wrapped in quilts, and then had talismans affixed to them,” Lieutenant murmured. “Why?”

Qi Tiezui nodded and said that these bugs were probably the natural enemies of whatever was in the jars. They were stuck to the jars in hopes that they would wrap the jars in silk after hatching from their cocoons. It seems they got their wish.

The jar mouths were sealed with mud and then wrapped in iron sheets, so although they were rotten, they were still well sealed. Lieutenant turned and looked around, and found that something appeared to be engraved on the jars under the pupae, so he asked Qi Tiezui for the little peach wood sword. Qi Tiezui’s sword was an antique, so he couldn’t help but secretly think that Lieutenant was trying to take advantage of him. *You can’t just use it willy-nilly. It’s not something you use to shovel shit.* He shook his head and quickly said, “This is a family heirloom. Don’t you have a knife on your belt?”

Lieutenant reluctantly pulled out his knife and peeled off the insect pupae on the nearest jar bit by bit. The pupae stuck firmly, and the blade made a cracking sound as it slid between the jar and the pupae, just like prying

oysters open. He held the flare closer and found that there were several words on the jar. They were no longer very clear, but it was easy to see that it was someone's name.

"This is a jar burial. The name on this one is for a Taoist priest who was buried here." Lieutenant frowned. "That means there should be corpses in all of these jars. Do you mean to say that these bugs are the natural enemies of the corpses inside? Why? Why would the Taoist priests' corpses need to be sealed with so many talismans and have bugs stuck on the outside of their jars? And—" He looked up and said, "Based on our positioning, the everlasting tower is right above us. Out in the wilderness, this three-fold method to driving away evil spirits seems like overkill. Did all the Taoist priests in this temple turn into demons?"

In fact, Qi Tiezui had already thought the same thing. His head was covered in sweat as he also looked up and saw that the tower's foundation had been constructed in a very simple manner. The bottom of the tower was supposed to be carved with three clear figures, but now it only seemed to be carved with a few lines, which were also covered by the insect silk. He looked at it carefully and suddenly saw a bronze mirror hanging in the center of the whole room, just like the one that had been hanging on the train.

Lieutenant saw it at the same time and the two men glanced at each other. Qi Tiezui suddenly became calm. The expert had been here and died on the train, so that at least showed this place wasn't dangerous. He said, "This is a message from that expert. Don't touch these earthen jars."

"What kind of message is it? Is it on that mirror that's hanging so high up?" Lieutenant asked.

Qi Tiezui said, "What do you see when you look in the mirror?"

The two of them looked in the direction of the mirror and saw that it was pointing towards a section of the stone room. The room was very big and it was dark in that direction, so they couldn't see what was over there clearly.

Qi Tiezui wanted to go forward but saw that all those earthen jars were standing between him and the corner. If he wanted to get over there, he had to walk through the middle, which was full of rotten quilts, talismans, and what appeared to be black water.

“Lieutenant, it’s your turn.” Qi Tiezui said. He had seen Lieutenant vault over eaves and climb up walls before, so this was clearly his territory.

Lieutenant’s attention turned to the periphery of the stone room. The stone was very rough and crude and hadn’t been polished, and there weren’t any relief murals. There were only countless strands of insect silk. He couldn’t help shaking his head. “I can’t jump that far.”

Qi Tiezui also observed the room and thought that if he couldn’t jump over, then he would have to wade in bit by bit. But he didn’t know if the black water inside was poisonous or full of those insects. It appeared the risk was too high. The room was rather cold, and his wet clothes made him shiver. As he mulled it over, he couldn’t help but think that they were too ill-prepared this time. He would have to wait for Fo Ye’s big troops before they could move forward.

He turned around and suddenly saw Lieutenant stretching. He thought maybe Lieutenant was willing to try and was just about to stop him, when Lieutenant grabbed his collar, hoisted him up with a loud shout, spun him around three times, and threw him towards the corner where the mirror was facing.

Qi Tiezui flew directly over those earthen jars, fell to the ground, rolled, and then came to a stop in the corner, all sprawled out. He got up with a curse, used a flare to light up the corner, and suddenly saw that a stone turtle had been placed in the space in front of him. The stone turtle was very big and tall and had an intricately carved black stone pillar on its back. Based on how the stone pillar was connected, it appeared to be a load-bearing pillar.

“What’s over there?” Lieutenant shouted from behind him.

Qi Tiezui was puzzled. He saw that a feng shui compass had been placed in the turtle's mouth, and the coating on the compass looked decades old. A red thread had been tied to the compass's needle. It was straight and taut and led right into the darkness in front of the stone turtle where the flare's light couldn't reach. Qi Tiezui took a few steps forward and saw that some things had been strung up on the red line, hanging one by one like bells. He looked at them very carefully and found that they were all women's fingernails. They were very long and very old.

"The expert set up an array here." Qi Tiezui said. "This is a yushui hehuan."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> They'll explain it more next chapter but it's feng shui stuff as far as I could tell so I stuck with the pinyin again. Here's a breakdown of the characters. Yushui (鱼水)= fish and water (metaphor for an intimate relationship or inseparability). He (合)= to close/to join/to fit/to be equal to/ whole/together. Huan (欢)= joyous/happy/pleased

## Chapter 24 Black Water Corpse Jar

Yushui hehuan was an array that was used in special circumstances, and it was recorded in Zeng Gong's book "Shui Duan Ba Tong"<sup>28</sup> during the Song Dynasty. Many people thought that this feng shui array was to promote the harmony between husband and wife, but it wasn't. It was actually much scarier than that. It was used to catch things, and they weren't ordinary things either. It was often used to find bodies that were buried in the mud after earthquakes or to find people who had drowned in deep pools of water.

There had to be something related to the dead at the other end of this red thread.

If the expert set up this array here, was he looking for corpses in this group of earthen jars? Was there a corpse in these earthen jars that was an acquaintance of his? Or was it something else? Qi Tiezui's thoughts were complicated. Although he couldn't figure out what this had to do with the train, he kept feeling like this array was the key to the whole thing.

This subsequent development proved that Qi Tiezui's intuition had been correct, but at this time, he couldn't see what lay in the darkness at the other end of this red thread.

The method for setting up this array involved throwing the red thread into a deep pool of water or mud. After the red thread fell, it would quickly tighten as it rolled along the terrain, and the body would be found beneath the place it stopped. In deep pools, the red thread would often become entangled with the drowned bodies at the bottom. If the expert threw the red thread into the corpse jar, then he should have found the body he was looking for.

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<sup>28</sup> It's something like "Water breaking in 8 directions" I think. Tiffany couldn't find anything either, so we think the author made it up. But Zeng Gong is a real historical figure.

Qi Tiezui flicked the red thread and scratched his head. He didn't want to walk between the black water and the corpse jars, and he obviously couldn't force Lieutenant to do it, but he really wanted to know if there was a corpse in the jar at the other end of this thread.

When Lieutenant shouted and asked him what was going on, Qi Tiezui told him about the problem. Lieutenant said, "Based on your judgment, how did your family's expert do it? Does it mean that although the black water is disgusting, it's not poisonous?"

Qi Tiezui remembered how the expert had put so many nails in his body before returning to Changsha, and thought that maybe he had been careless here. He couldn't help but wish that Er Yuehong was here. Er Ye was the only one who could come and go freely in this kind of place.

While he was lost in thought, he suddenly saw Lieutenant Zhang take off his boots and then carefully jump onto a corpse jar.

The jar shook, but Lieutenant had such good balance that it quickly stopped. Qi Tiezui covered his mouth and hunched his shoulders up, feeling like the goosebumps on his back were going to erupt. "Are you crazy?!" He cried out. "Get down quickly!!"

Lieutenant didn't bother responding but began carefully walking on the lids of the corpse jars. Since stepping on the middle of the lids would crack them, he made sure to step on the edges every time, which caused the whole jar to wobble. The old rotten iron sheets were already covered in layers of rust, and the dry mud beneath could be seen in the damaged places. They had been moldy for who knew how long and started to crack when they were stepped on.

After watching him step on sixteen corpse jars, Qi Tiezui couldn't look anymore and closed his eyes. When Lieutenant finally landed in front of him, he felt like he was about to collapse. He watched Lieutenant pat his boots and then hit him on the head with the peach wood sword. "Bastard, I have

to return you to Fo Ye in one piece. All you Zhang family members think you're made of steel."

"I had to come over, Ba Ye. Who else is going to throw you back over?" Lieutenant said while looking at the red thread and poking it.

"Don't mess around." Qi Tiezui warned him.

Lieutenant tilted his head and smiled a little: "Ba Ye, the Zhang family have their own way of dealing with evil bugs and ants. We have to conduct a general investigation today, so there's no time to hesitate. Get on my back, and I'll carry you over to have a look. If something happens, I'll carry you out even if I have to give up this life."

Qi Tiezui looked at Lieutenant's back and said to himself, *if something happens to you, there's no fucking way you can escape with me on your back. If you stumble, I'll fall into the corpse jars.* But he looked into Lieutenant's eyes, thought about everything the expert had done, and felt his heart itch unbearably. He gave a grunt and climbed up.

With Qi Tiezui on his back holding his boots, Lieutenant stepped on the corpse jar and carefully walked forward step by step. They soon arrived at the place where the red thread was leading to and were surprised to find that it really was a corpse jar. But the lid on the jar was nowhere to be found. They squatted down and lit a flare in the jar to see what the situation was. The bottom of the jar was empty, and there was a seemingly endless grave robbers' tunnel going all the way down. The red thread stretched deep into the dark tunnel.

*Interesting,* Qi Tiezui thought. He couldn't see clearly, so he told Lieutenant to put him down. He placed his feet on the edges of the empty corpse jar and threw the flare down the hole. The small light quickly fell, and only landed and bounced when it had turned into a tiny spark. Qi Tiezui grabbed a handful of flares, lit them all, and threw them down. They only managed to illuminate a tiny corner, but he could see that something strange was lying down there.

“What is that?” Lieutenant asked.

Qi Tiezui showed a smug smile, “The crossties of a railroad track. We found it, let’s go down!”



## Chapter 25 Taut Thread Splitting the Jar

Qi Tiezui was standing on the lip of the jar with both feet, but the jar had an awkward width, so when he squatted down, his knees came together. It was really uncomfortable, but his limbs weren't loose enough for him to try to open his knees in that position.

He looked at the lights below and made a rough estimate of how deep the hole at the bottom of the jar was. If he were to fall and land on the tracks, he was convinced he would break his legs. He glanced at Lieutenant, who showed a happy expression as he gave him a look that said he should squat on the nearby corpse jar.

Qi Tiezui carefully moved to obey, telling himself that he shouldn't have any accidents as long as he stood still.

Although the jar was crude, it had been well preserved for years. And even though he looked a little fatter than Lieutenant, Lieutenant was full of muscle, so he was sure to be heavier than Qi Tiezui.

With that thought, he stepped on the first corpse jar. But as soon as he put his weight down, he clearly felt that the lid was loose. He immediately gathered his strength, put more weight on his foot, and then brought his other foot over.

The jar shook as he steadied himself, but ultimately held. He moved the flare close to his feet and found that the lid had cracked in several places, but hadn't completely broken.

Like a monkey, Lieutenant jumped head-first into the jar, hooked his foot on the lip to prevent himself from falling directly, pressed both hands against the sides of the jar, and then moved down little by little. It looked like the jar was swallowing him up.

Qi Tiezui didn't dare lean too far towards Lieutenant for fear that he wouldn't be able to control his balance. After quite a bit of time had passed,

he faintly heard Lieutenant's voice come from below, "Ba Ye, jump down. I'll catch you."

Qi Tiezui climbed over, propped both hands on the opposite side of the jar mouth, and then brought his feet over to the edge of the jar as if he were doing push-ups. He could only faintly see Lieutenant illuminated by a single flare, and felt his heart clench, "Lieutenant... Brother... It's too high. You won't be able to catch me when I jump down."

"Ba Ye, why are you suddenly being polite?" Qi Tiezui could hear Lieutenant laughing and gave a wry chuckle himself. He couldn't help thinking that this habit of working underground really couldn't be changed and said, "I see you carrying out your duties so conscientiously, and it really makes me admire how Fo Ye teaches his soldiers."

"In that case Ba Ye, you wait here and I'll go check it out. We'll meet back up with Fo Ye afterwards." Lieutenant continued, "And Ba Ye? Be careful. I just put a few handprints on you, so don't wipe them off."

Qi Tiezui paused, handprints?

He looked down at his legs and found that Lieutenant had placed bloody handprints on his pants, waist, and shoulders at some point. He couldn't help but shout, "Oh my god! This outfit was made by Dachangsheng. These fabrics are of the best tribute cloth from the biggest weavers to come out of the Qing Dynasty. Why did you wipe your hands on them?"

Lieutenant's faint voice came from below: "Fo Ye has plenty of these kinds of things, so I'll ask him to send you some when we get out. But Ba Ye, I felt like something was really wrong up there, so you should pay more attention to your surroundings." With that said, Lieutenant walked away.

Qi Tiezui looked around. All he had in this huge stone room was a small flare, and he immediately broke out in goosebumps when he realized how dark it was without Lieutenant around.

Maintaining this position was very demanding on his body, so Qi Tiezui took a deep breath and tried to stand up again. At this moment, however, he suddenly saw the taut red thread shake in the air.

“Lieutenant!” Qi Tiezui immediately shouted. “Don’t touch the red thread. We don’t know what this array is looking for. If you do find something, don’t touch it. It might cause problems.”

Lieutenant had already taken several steps, so his response was even fainter than before, “I didn’t touch it.” He had just finished speaking when the red thread shook again and the sound of an earthen jar breaking could be heard coming from the darkness at the other end of the thread.

There was a “clang”, followed by a crunchy sound, as if two jars had been smashed together by some external force.

Qi Tiezui’s hair stood on end and he managed to stammer out, “Lieutenant... Brother... I changed my mind! You should come back and catch me!”

But after calling, he didn’t hear a response. Instead, all he heard was the sound of a jar breaking, which was especially crisp in the empty stone room. Qi Tiezui took a deep breath, opened his bag, took out a stack of talismans, and threw them all forward. Then, he pulled a pistol from the depths of his bag, which Fo Ye had given him many years ago.

The pistol felt especially heavy in his hand as he checked the trigger. He then took out a handful of rice grains from his bag and threw them forward. When the rice fell, it came in contact with the talismans he had thrown out just now and immediately reacted and burned. Dozens of small flames instantly lit up in front of him, revealing a huge thing hanging upside down at the zenith of the stone room, just like a giant hanging beast.

The firelight wasn’t that bright, but it was obvious that the thing was a huge living creature.

Qi Tiezui rubbed his eyes. He couldn’t get a clear look at what it was, but its shape was constantly changing, as if it was wrapped in countless writhing

snakes. It moved forward slowly and leaned towards him as if it was also observing him.

“This is my first time in the treasured land. I, I, I’m sorry if I offended you.” As Qi Tiezui stood there completely stunned, he suddenly felt his foothold disappear and his whole body sank. While he had been distracted, he accidentally put all his weight on his feet, which caused the lid on the corpse jar to be completely crushed.

He quickly moved to pull his legs out, only to find that they were covered in black coffin fluid.

Something was squirming in the fluid in the jar, just like how that huge shadow was squirming in front of him.

## Chapter 26 Underground Corpse River

Qi Tiezui had always been skeptical of the saying that people's legs would go soft whenever they were extremely afraid. But at this moment—even though his mind was extremely clear and he could feel a tingling in his legs—he really had no strength. He kept trying to pull himself up, but it was useless—his hands and feet kept getting caught in the rotten cotton wool that had been soaking in the black water for so long.

It was so nauseating he felt his scalp go numb.

He stiffly held himself up with his hands as the faint flames illuminated a minuscule area. The upside-down shadow was three steps in front of him and slowly leaning its head over bit by bit, causing his mind to race. If his legs went soft now, he would be finished...

But just as soon as he had that thought, his mind immediately went blank.

At the same time, he noticed a strong, sour smell permeating the cold air. When he had first come in, there weren't any peculiar smells besides the mustiness that was common in places like this, so it had to be coming from the shadow in front of him.

It wasn't until later that Qi Tiezui thought he had been caught up in a nightmare at this moment.

As the shadow approached little by little, its face was gradually revealed in the light of his flare, but Qi Tiezui's eyes couldn't seem to focus and he couldn't get a good look at it. It became more and more difficult to breathe, and he felt as if he was going to suffocate.

At that moment, something suddenly fell out of the darkness and hit him on the forehead, knocking him out of his confused state.

He immediately came to his senses and turned his head to find that it was the expert's bronze mirror that had hit him. He had no idea why it had fallen, but now it was innocently laying off to the side.

He felt the tension in his heart loosen, and wondered if the expert had set this up. Just as he started to relax, however, the sputtering flare went out and plunged the whole space into complete darkness.

He immediately broke out in a cold sweat. Although he couldn't see anything now, he instinctively rushed to the corpse jar with the hole at the bottom and jumped in.

He slid down like a cannonball, free-fell for half a second, and then fell heavily on the crossties below. As expected, he twisted his ankle, but he didn't have the time to worry about it now.

All the flares below had also gone out, but there was a small light in the distance that had to belong to Lieutenant. Qi Tiezui quickly picked himself up and limped forward, tripping over the railroad tracks more than a dozen times since he couldn't see anything. He called out as he approached, but he found that Lieutenant was standing there without looking back at him.

Qi Tiezui couldn't help getting angry and hurried over to show Lieutenant his wounded leg: "Lieutenant, what are you staring at? Look at my leg! If things go wrong, there will be no more Ba Ye!"

Lieutenant didn't look back but continued to stare straight ahead as if he were fascinated by something. Qi Tiezui also followed his line of sight and found that there was a huge underground river in front of them that was six or seven people deep. Wooden beams had been placed on all sides of the tunnel to reinforce it, and many of the beams had also been placed above the river.

There were countless people hanging from the beams, all of whom had wires wrapped around their necks. It was clear to see that their cervical vertebra had been broken.

The beams and corpses extended all the way down the tunnel in a seemingly endless row, just like restless souls suspended in the air.

Lieutenant's flare couldn't reach that far, so they could only see the vague outlines of the shadows.

"These are the local miners. They've all been hanged." Lieutenant said coldly. "The bodies have dried up, so they must have been here for some time."

Qi Tiezui was stunned, but at that moment, he noticed that the other end of the red thread had already appeared.

It was tied around Lieutenant's neck.

Qi Tiezui frowned. He didn't see any women's fingernails on it, which was odd. He tried to move forward and get a good look at it but ended up tripping again. He looked down at the rusty railroad tracks under his feet and noticed that they had been built very neat and didn't look like a temporary track at all.

He immediately remembered his own feet and started panicking again, "I'm not dead yet! My feet! Take care of my feet first!"

As soon as Lieutenant turned to look at him, Qi Tiezui looked up as well. At that moment, all the hair on Qi Tiezui's body stood on end and he almost cried out. He found that it wasn't Lieutenant's face he was looking at, but a weasel's face.

Qi Tiezui immediately turned and ran, regardless of the direction. He ran until he was out of breath, and only stopped when he couldn't run anymore.

He was cold, his wet clothes were practically frozen to his body, and it was dark all around. He felt around a bit and found that the railroad track was still under his feet.

He immediately lit a flare and looked down at his own feet, gasping for breath and wondering what was going on. He turned back to see if he could find Lieutenant's light again but realized that there wasn't any light in either direction. He didn't know where he was.

After carefully trying to recall the whole incident, he found that his memory was kind of hazy. He had been distracted at that moment, so he wasn't sure if what he had seen was real. He walked forward with the flare and called softly, "Lieutenant?"

He hadn't even taken a few steps before a man came up behind him, blew out the flare, covered his mouth, and dragged him into the corner. As he was rendered motionless and dragged away like a dead fish, he heard Lieutenant say in his ear: "Sorry, Ba Ye."

Qi Tiezui was relieved when he heard Lieutenant's voice, but just as he was about to speak, he suddenly felt a blow to the back of his head. His vision went dark and he quickly lost consciousness.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed, but when Qi Tiezui woke up in a daze, he could smell the rich aroma of hot pepper soup mixing with the fragrance of chili peppers. He opened his eyes and found that the sun was shining outside and there was a roof overhead. He raised his head up and saw Zhang Qishan sitting nearby. They appeared to be in a tall Miao building, where Lieutenant and Old Man Zhang were cooking.

He sluggishly tried to sit up, only to find that he had been tied up and couldn't move.

"Fo Ye, Fo Ye, are you going to cook and eat me? Why did you tie me up? How did I get out? What about Lieutenant?" As Qi Tiezui asked all these questions, Zhang Qishan turned his head and looked at him coldly without saying a word. Lieutenant silently grabbed a chicken from outside and put it in front of him.

Qi Tiezui and the chicken stared at each other, both feeling baffled.



## Chapter 27 Hot Pepper Ba Ye Chicken Soup

Lieutenant had a very solemn look on his face as he brought the chicken in from outside, which gave Qi Tiezui a bad feeling. It made him feel as if he was going to be stewed alongside the chicken.

He looked at the chicken, and the chicken looked back at him. After a few minutes of this, he finally managed to get out, "Fo Ye, if you have something to say to me, just say it directly. I can't guess this charade."

Lieutenant looked at Zhang Qishan, who squatted down and stared at Qi Tiezui for a while before nodding to him. As Lieutenant came over to untie Qi Tiezui, Zhang Qishan said, "Do you know what you did before?"

There was still a trace of doubt in Zhang Qishan's eyes, which made Qi Tiezui feel a little uncomfortable. He recalled everything that had happened before and looked down at his legs, only to find that there was nothing on them. His ankle was fine, his legs were as white as a lotus root, and there weren't any problems at all. He opened his mouth and told them everything he could remember.

When he was done speaking, everyone looked puzzled and Lieutenant said, "Ba Ye, I didn't see any of that when I brought you back."

"You might as well tell me how you carried me back, and why I came out so muddled." Qi Tiezui replied.

"Ba Ye, I was scouting along the railroad tracks when I heard you call me," Lieutenant said. "When I came back to find you, I saw you crawling on the railroad tracks. Your movements were very strange. You were walking on your hands and feet on the same railroad tie like an animal, but you didn't seem to have trouble walking. You ignored me when I called you, but you kept talking to yourself the entire time."

"I was crawling?" Qi Tiezui asked surprised. When Lieutenant pointed to his hands, he raised them to get a look and found that his palms were full of

wounds. “I thought you had been possessed by something evil, so I could only knock you out and bring you back. The whole way back, I didn’t see that upside-down thing you mentioned. Is it like you said and you were—”

Qi Tiezui took a deep breath. He really wasn’t very adept at this kind of skill, but after moving his body, he suddenly thought of a possibility, “Fo Ye, do you remember when we were at the morgue, I told you that your Zhang family has a special constitution, and if the weasel spirit wanted to enter someone’s body, it would have to be mine?”

Zhang Qishan nodded and gave Lieutenant a look. Lieutenant picked up the chicken and threw it to Old Man Zhang, who caught it effortlessly.

Qi Tiezui continued: “I think I was right, and the weasel spirit has been with me the whole time. I have to send it back.”

“Is there really such a thing as a weasel spirit?” Zhang Qishan asked skeptically.

In fact, Qi Tiezui was also skeptical of such things. As someone who made his living in the underworld, he mostly relied on his own intelligence. He had thoroughly learned everything from his family, but he often didn’t believe it. In his words, he believed in fate, but he didn’t believe that people couldn’t change their fate.

With the present situation, he had to start thinking about it from that aspect.

“Fo Ye, I think what I saw just now should be what the weasel spirit wanted me to see. This... this... this is an omen of great evil. What I saw... it’s probably what we’ll have to face later—” He thought of the endless bodies hanging on the beams, and the huge shadow hanging upside down, and asked himself, *what the hell did the Japanese encounter in that ancient tomb? Why is it like this?*

Zhang Qishan stood up and paced back and forth for a while as he thought things over. He eventually shook his head: “It’s not that simple. Since the

entrance has been found, our destination is the end of the railroad tracks. I just got urgent news from Changsha and need to go back as soon as possible, so we'll do an in-depth investigation tomorrow. With our current manpower, we can get away with it."

Qi Tiezui was deeply moved as he listened. He had seen Zhang Qishan's true abilities before and was relieved that he was handling things now, so he quickly nodded: "If that's the case, Fo Ye, I'll wait for your good news."

Zhang Qishan patted him on the shoulder: "Old Ba, don't think you can take it easy. The feng shui array here is complicated, so you have to lead the way. Be sure to eat a lot at dinner."

As soon as he heard this, Qi Tiezui jumped up: "Fo Fo Fo Ye, I almost lost my fucking life. If Lieutenant didn't carry me back, I would have definitely died down there. I can't, I can't go. I made a great contribution in finding the railroad tracks, so now I'm retiring. I won't charge you for this, Fo Ye, just give me back my donkey."

Lieutenant said, "Don't worry, Fo Ye will be the one to carry you this time."

Zhang Qishan patted Qi Tiezui on the shoulder, unwilling to discuss the matter further. He then pointed to the rope, and Lieutenant went up as if he was going to tie Qi Tiezui up again. Qi Tiezui hid by the foot of the bed and muttered to himself that Zhang Qishan was really being unreasonable. He shouldn't have been greedy for the pigs' feet and lotus root stew back then.

He waved his hands frantically, "Ok, I'll go!"

As they ate the hot pepper chicken soup that evening, Qi Tiezui's sensitive palate found that it tasted very similar to the oracle bone fragment. He felt sick and didn't eat much, but he knew that all the clues and traces aligned with where they were.

Their group returned to the Taoist temple the next day. While the Zhang family was sorting out their equipment, Qi Tiezui continued his previous exploration, which had been disrupted by Lieutenant's sudden disaster at

that time. He looked up at the everlasting tower and started awkwardly climbing it like a bear climbing a tree. He went all the way up until he could see the whole canyon in the distance.

“What do you see?” Zhang Qishan asked him when he still hadn’t come back down almost half an hour later. Qi Tiezui looked into the distance and murmured, “Fo Ye, I missed a step before. This major event is far from good.”

## Chapter 28 Two-Faced Ancients

Qi Tiezui looked at the valley in the distance. After examining the rolling land, he found that the valley had very good feng shui. There was a stream at the bottom of the valley, terraced fields on the mountains near the Dong village, and virgin forests far off in the distance.

To his surprise, there were irregular dirt mounds every ten miles in the flat parts of the valley. Although they weren't very high, they looked very unnatural. People familiar with this kind of thing would immediately know that these mounds were used to cover up graves.

And if there really was an ancient tomb under these protruding mounds, then that meant there had to be a cluster of graves here.

There had been a lot of ethnic minority kingdoms here in Xiangxi in the past, and it had been said that the ancient kingdom of Yelang in the Han Dynasty was also nearby. The funeral habits of these minorities weren't like the Hans in the Central Plains. In fact, it was illogical to have such a large-scale dense entombment.

If it really was a tomb, then who was buried under it? Most large-scale joint burials were usually found in the tombs of Han kings, or the family tombs of important imperial officials. Here, all the previous dynasties were led by a chief who ruled over the Western Yi lands. No matter how good the feng shui was, no one should have dared set up a graveyard here.

There was only one possibility—this cluster of earth mounds was a group of empty graves meant to hide a really big tomb.

It was no wonder the Huo family held onto this territory with an iron fist. They had been operating here for a long time and may have discovered these empty graves early on. They had probably been looking for the real location of the big tomb that these fake mounds were protecting.

He climbed back down the tower and talked it over with Zhang Qishan, who nodded and said: "Leaving aside this matter for the time being, what's going on with this 'major event that's not good'? Don't mince your words, fortune teller. I'll really use my family's methods to get it out of you."

Qi Tiezui grimly replied: "It's not bad, it's just that this major event isn't good." With that said, he picked up a small stone from the ground and started drawing the shape of the whole valley, along with the location of each dirt mound. He usually had an average memory, but when it came to feng shui, his memory was excellent. As a result, he was able to make an accurate depiction of the whole valley, and Zhang Qishan could already figure out what it was when he was only halfway through. This whole valley was shaped like a person.

"You see, Fo Ye? Every dirt mound in this human-shaped valley is very consistent with the positioning of the coffin nails on the expert's body that we saw during the autopsy."

As Zhang Qishan carefully recalled the details, he felt his heart move. Sure enough, this cautious and cunning Qi Tiezui was famous for a reason. It only took him a glance to figure out the connection between these things. He was truly a talented person.

Qi Tiezui continued, "My family's expert made all the preparations before leaving, but unfortunately, I can't remember the lines in front of the coffin nails. Those are probably the secret passages connecting these empty graves." He looked down at his feet. "We have one right below us, too."

When he finished speaking, all the pieces finally connected together. There were a lot of mechanisms in the empty graves. For some reason, the locals might have been excavating the empty grave beneath their feet and touched the mechanism that was inside it. They thought there was something evil there, which was why the Taoist temple was built on top of it.

After living here for a long time, the Taoist priests probably encountered the mechanisms under the temple and died violent deaths, which was how the strange corpse jars and talismans under the everlasting tower came about.

Did the Japanese hide the train by using these huge tunnels between the empty graves?

It was possible.

Zhang Qishan realized that Qi Tiezui was thinking the exact same thing as him, so he patted him on the shoulder and said: "If there are empty graves, then it must be—"

"A big tomb in the mountains. The empty graves are mostly set on the periphery of the big tomb, so the location is hard to determine. But it's definitely hundreds of feet deeper than the empty graves." As Qi Tiezui spoke, he looked at the vast mountains around them. "Fo Ye, whether it's three hundred years in the past or future, do you really think you can find this hidden dragon cave? Did you go into the mountains alone before to check? Did you see any obvious feng shui indicators?"

Zhang Qishan was silent. He had gone into the mountains alone to verify something that was related to his own origins.

There were many things that would happen only when he was alone, but he had gone all that way for nothing.

That didn't prove anything, though. Maybe it just wasn't time for them to show up yet.

The group was full of doubts as they descended into the underground tomb at the bottom of the everlasting tower. This time, everyone took a torch to illuminate the whole tomb and Lieutenant commanded his men to hang lanterns everywhere.

It was only at this time that they finally got to see the whole underground tomb. There was more than one red thread leading down various grave robbers' tunnels and into the lower level where they couldn't see before.

Lieutenant went down and ordered everyone to pull out their pistols.

Zhang Qishan waved his hand, and a group of people put on gloves and carefully sorted out a path around the corpse jars. He went up to one of the grave robbers' tunnels and removed the corpse jar, revealing a straight tunnel. It had been drilled into the stone floor and messily chiseled away with a hammer.

"Doesn't look like it was done by someone experienced." Zhang Qishan stuck the torch down. "And it was dug from below."

Lieutenant touched the hammer marks with his hand. Sure enough, the person who dug this hole had come up from below.

On the other side, Qi Tiezui went over to the place where he had trampled the corpse jar before and found that the jar was really broken. But the debris had completely dried, making it obvious that it had been trampled a long time ago. The filthy black sludge in the jar had also dried up.

The one who stepped on it wasn't him, but someone a long time ago. He looked above his head. Could it be that what he saw and felt was the expert's memory from that time? Was the expert the one who trampled this jar?

He looked around. There was nothing in the underground tomb, so the weasel spirit must have left.

Lieutenant took the lead and went down into the tunnel below, receiving the torches one by one. It was only at this point that they realized they were standing in a huge tomb passage. The tomb's bricks were covered in mottled and moldy murals that were full of all kinds of ancient portraits. But the strange thing was, these ancient figures all had two faces.



## Chapter 29 Face on the Mural at the Empty Grave

“Old Ba.” Zhang Qishan called softly.

Qi Tiezui immediately nodded, raised his torch, and went up to the murals. He could see that each brick on the tunnel had a special diamond pattern that was placed at a diagonal. He said, “The bricks are inlaid with molded patterns. It’s the burial practice of the Southern Dynasty. If my guess is correct, there’s a sacrificial hall in front of the tomb, with a tomb gate in front of it. There are three doors in this gate that are juxtaposed.<sup>29</sup> They connect the left and right walls to the tomb. The characteristics here are similar to the coffin we found on the train.”

“Is it normal for Southern Dynasty tomb passages to have such large murals?” Zhang Qishan asked. “I remember all the tomb murals I’ve seen before, and they were painted on a few bricks. But this mural is so big it covers the whole wall...”

Qi Tiezui also shook his head and looked at the two-faced ancient figures one by one. The paint was peeling off so badly that most of them couldn’t be identified, so he couldn’t make out what the contents were. He had actually conducted a lot of research on murals and often copied them, so he could always figure it out as long as they were traditional patterns. But the mural on this wall was really illegible. Only one thing was for certain—this was really a brick wall from the Southern Dynasty, but the murals definitely weren’t from that period.

“Sure enough, this is an empty grave. Let’s move forward. Maybe there will be more clues,” he said. “The mines here are excavated all year round, so this ancient tomb may have been discovered by them a long time ago. These murals could have been created by miners in later dynasties.”

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<sup>29</sup> Looks something like [this](#), but imagine it indoors since they’re in a tomb.

“This mural is so vivid. Miners wouldn’t have such good craftsmanship.” Lieutenant argued.

Qi Tiezui gave him a blank look and ignored him as the group continued walking along the railway. The soldiers were armed and made sure to stand in positions where they could observe and communicate with each other. Zhang Qishan kept looking at the murals, and when he saw that all the figures had two faces, he couldn’t help thinking of a Qing Dynasty novel he had read before.

Legend had it that Tang Ao was a scholar during Empress Wu Zetian’s<sup>30</sup> reign who went to Beijing to take the imperial exam. He passed the exam and even came in third place.<sup>31</sup> When Xu Jingye raised an army to rebel against Empress Wu Zetian, someone framed Tang Ao by saying that he and Xu Jingye were very close friends. As a result, the high scholarly rank he had achieved was revoked. The frustrated Tang Ao went out to sea and arrived at a place called “Two-Faced Country”, where the inhabitants had two faces: one was kind and easy-going; the other was fierce and sinister. While there, he met an old friend name Xu Chengzhi, who was trapped in the country and couldn’t leave. In order to help Xu Chengzhi return home, Tang Ao hid him in a coffin and pretended to hold a funeral. But Xu Chengzhi refused to leave at the last minute, because after staying in Two-Faced Country for a long time, his back slowly began to grow a second face. He told Tang Ao to leave quickly, or else he would turn out like him.<sup>32</sup>

This mural was very complicated, but it looked like a scene straight out of Two-Faced Country. The Southern Dynasty predated the Qing Dynasty,

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<sup>30</sup> Empress Wu Zetian (624–705) lived and ruled during the Tang dynasty. She took the throne from her own son, Emperor Zhongzong of Tang. [Here’s](#) more info

<sup>31</sup> The imperial exam had rankings based on how well you did. The highest and final degree was called “Jinshi” and throughout the Tang Dynasty, every year around 1 to 2% of test takers would obtain a jinshi title out of a total of 1 to 2 thousand test takers. There were subtypes to “Jinshi” which are broken down [here](#), but Tang Ao was basically #3 out of all the test takers (he got the title “Tanhua”, so he was ranked 1st class in the court exam, and 3rd overall)

<sup>32</sup> It’s an early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese novel “Flowers in the Mirror” by Li Ruzhen (1763–1830?). More info [here](#). I found it in English [here](#) on Amazon if anyone cares

however, so there was no reason to believe that someone would be interested in painting “Flowers in the Mirror” here.

Qi Tiezui had also been staring at the murals, and suddenly stopped when he got to one part in particular. He looked back at Zhang Qishan, “Fo Ye.”

“What’s the matter?” Zhang Qishan asked.

“Look here.” Qi Tiezui replied. He pointed to an extremely small figure on a section of the mural that was only about as tall as a person’s hand. The figure was completely different from all the previous figures because it only had one face.

Qi Tiezui brought the torch in for a closer look and found that not only did this person have one face, but there was something else different about them compared to all the other figures. This person wasn’t looking at some place in the mural but looking out of the mural instead. In other words, the figure was looking right at Qi Tiezui. Qi Tiezui followed the figure’s line of sight and slowly turned around, looking back at the other side of the tunnel.

“If this official is the protagonist of the whole mural, why is he only so big? Whatever the reason, he’s looking at the opposite wall.” The group immediately rushed to the wall on the opposite side and found that it had the same mural on it. But instead of there being a figure in that place, there was a line of words.

The official with only one face had been looking at this line of words.

The handwriting was illegible, and they could only make out eight of the words, which said: descend from the sky, beat the heavenly drums.

“According to my family’s interpretation of the five phases<sup>33</sup>, descending from the sky and beating the heavenly drums means that a meteorite fell

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<sup>33</sup> Pinyin is “wuxing”. He’s talking about the 5 phases of Chinese philosophy: wood 木, fire 火, earth 土, metal 金, water 水

here and caused a huge disaster.” Qi Tiezui said. He suddenly thought of something and looked above his head, “Look. Look at the murals up top.”

Once the torches were raised, everyone could see that the murals extended upwards. But even though there were a lot of murals above the tomb passage, the images weren't clear. All they could make out were mountains and rivers, but it seemed like the key lay within.

## Chapter 30 Two-Faced Queen of the West

The raised torches revealed that a sun, moon, and stars had been painted at the top of the tomb passage.

The stars were painted in a very clever manner to look like all kinds of lotus flowers of varying sizes. During the Southern Dynasty, Buddhism had spread throughout China, so it was common to see a lot of lotus patterns in tombs. Although the images here were badly mottled, everyone could see what they were at a glance. There was even a fiery red lotus pattern that was different from the other stars.

Anyone with a discerning eye would know that this one-faced official's insignificant position on the wall was very important.

If they went to check the mural in other parts of the long tunnel, they wouldn't find anything strange except for those ancient two-faced people. But as they approached the official's insignificant position, they would find that the details on the mural were very different.

Qi Tiezui said, "Fo Ye, the scene recorded here is exceedingly strange, but if I've guessed it right, it's an ancient mural to worship the heavens. But I've never seen these two-faced ancients before. This is really a first for me. There are few records of two-faced people in China, and the only well-known one is the Queen of the West from the "Classic of Mountains and Seas". Legend has it that she was born with two faces. Those who saw one of her faces would live, and those who saw her other face would die. Look at these faces. The ones not facing the red star in the sky are all smiling with joy, while the ones facing the red star all look sad and miserable. It means the ones facing this red star are the dead faces."

"But this one-faced person was mixed in with them. What's that mean?" Lieutenant asked.

"Look at this man's face." Qi Tiezui said. "His expression isn't either happy or sad. He's just kind of smiling, which shows that he's very calm about what's

coming. Instead of looking at the red star in the sky, he's looking at the words on the opposite wall. Based on how he's depicted so calmly and his positioning on the mural, I'd say this man is the tomb owner. And he knows about the red star, so he's not afraid. The red star—in other words, the meteorite—is depicting an astronomical sacrificial activity. And the object is a vision of a rock falling from the sky.”

Zhang Qishan thought there was some truth to it, but this place should be an empty grave. The mural was huge and it seemed somewhat illogical to paint it here. But instead of raising the question, he looked at Qi Tiezui quietly.

Qi Tiezui hastened forward along the railway tracks and gradually saw various traces of habitation. There were wooden, bamboo, and iron frames reinforcing the tomb, which started to look similar to the illusion he had seen before. Zhang Qishan looked at the various decaying shelves, mining baskets, and iron carts along the tunnel and knew that this ancient tomb had been discovered long ago. The miners had used it as a place for correcting and stacking ore. These reinforced shelves had been around for generations, with the new ones being stacked on top of the old ones.

Sure enough, they ventured further ahead and found that the tomb passage's wall was full of large, gaping holes. They looked inside and found that a lot of tunnels had been dug downward, and some of them were connected to the surface. A cool wind blew out from these tunnels, indicating that they hadn't collapsed.

Qi Tiezui pointed to one of the tunnels, “The shape of this shaft shows it was made during the Ming Dynasty. You can see that these knotted leather ropes have all rotted into lumps. This mineshaft should be older than the other ones here. They likely encountered the tomb while digging this mine shaft, so even if there was something in the tomb, it was emptied out hundreds of years ago. But the vein continued down, so all the workers transported their tools down here and cut through the tomb wall to continue chasing it. Look at all the garbage.” Sure enough, there were a lot

of bowls and chopsticks that didn't seem to be too old. "This tunnel has been used recently."

They went further inside and found that they had reached the end of the tomb passage. The tomb and side chambers had completely collapsed, the diamond gate<sup>34</sup> was completely destroyed, and nothing was left. This was also where the railway ended. There were a lot of wooden boxes laying around, as well as a lot of coal and mining equipment piled up on one side.

"How far have we come?" Zhang Qishan asked.

"About three miles," Lieutenant replied.

"Are the mines here all connected to each other?"

"The relationship between the new and old mines here is complicated. The whole mine has been dug like a maze. Those aboveground are divided into regions under the control of the government-appointed chief. It's all very clear-cut. But once you go underground, the one who determines where to dig is the mine boss, so after hundreds of years, these shafts become like secret passages. Those who don't know their way around end up going down the previous dynasties' shafts and can't find their way back." Old Man Zhang said.

Zhang Qishan squatted down, knocked on the railway, and then looked to both sides. "Go and find out if the Japanese bought this mine, and see if it's connected to the surface anywhere. If it is, where does it come out at?"

The old man immediately led people into the mine, and Zhang Qishan turned to Lieutenant, "It takes numbers to operate a mine here, but we haven't encountered any resistance since we've come down. Where is everyone?"

"Do you think it's like the train and they're all dead?"

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<sup>34</sup> Pinyin is "jīngāng" (金刚). It's not actually made of diamonds. It's just a common name of ancient underground gates/doors/walls.

“If they’re dead, where are the bodies?” Zhang Qishan glanced at the scattered mine shafts before turning to look at Qi Tiezui: “Did the expert leave any other messages here?”

Qi Tiezui took a sip of water and spit it on the torch. When the spray connected with the flames, sparks immediately floated up and rolled wildly in the turbulent air. Old Man Zhang appeared nearby, having returned from his exploration of the mine shaft, “Fo Ye, this tunnel really does reach the surface. You’ll have to come and take a look at it. There’s something a bit...eye-catching up there.”

Zhang Qishan gave Lieutenant a look, silently asking him to stay here and protect Qi Tiezui. He then bent down and followed the old man into the mine shaft.



## Chapter 31 Outside the Mine

Zhang Qishan climbed all the way up the mineshaft, following close behind the quick-climbing Old Man Zhang. The shaft was dug at a very steep seventy-degree angle, but small footholds had been dug every foot or so, so it wasn't dangerous. It was obvious to see that iron stakes had been embedded in the stone many years ago, and ropes had been tied to them to help people climb down. But now the ropes had rotted away, and the iron stakes had rusted into the cracks in the wall.

The shaft was crude and unimpressive, but it wasn't long before a light appeared overhead. After climbing more than a dozen steps, Zhang Qishan finally reached the mine shaft's entrance. He found that the enlarged space was actually a gap in the mountain, and logs had been embedded on both sides of the rock for people to use as stairs. Zhang Qishan didn't dare step on them. Instead, he placed one hand on the protruding rock and climbed down.

Zhang Qishan crawled out of the weeds and shrubs and discovered that the gap he had just come out of was about four stories up on a small cliff. There was a dry riverbed beneath the cliff, where numerous shacks had been built.

This was the entrance to an ancient mine, and all the miners had lived in those shacks. Faint traces of cooking smoke could be seen rising up in the distance, and braying mules could be heard alongside the sporadic sounds of ore being mined. Since the weeds were overgrown here and no one appeared to be around, all that activity was probably a few kilometers away.

Zhang Qishan looked to the side and found that the mountain gap he had crawled out of was only one among many mine openings on the cliff here. Based on how the fields outside were overgrown with weeds, these old mines had obviously been abandoned long ago. If they didn't remember carefully, they wouldn't be able to tell which one they had come out of.

He and Old Man Zhang jumped down and landed on the riverbed. No one was in the shacks here. The miners followed the vein, so once it had dried up here, they left.

Zhang Qishan snuck forward and asked Old Man Zhang, “What did you find?”

“Follow me.” Old Man Zhang said. The two of them walked into the nearest abandoned shack and immediately saw that a thick layer of insect silk was almost completely covering all the shacks alongside the river. A layer of silk strands covered the bed, ceiling, utensils, and stove, and when they walked into the shack and parted some of the silk, they found the bodies. Each one was lying face down on the bed or ground, and had completely rotted and shriveled up.

“You wanted to know where the people went... they all died here.” Old Man Zhang said.

“How many do you think there are?” Zhang Qishan looked out at the riverbed and told himself that this wasn’t an ordinary way to die. The insect silk practically covered everything in sight.

“Based on my experience, there are at least two hundred people in the mine here, including the Chinese miners and Japanese foremen who are mixed in. But they’ve integrated with the Chinese for decades, so you can’t tell them apart. Either way, they all died here.”

Zhang Qishan silently swept his eyes over the circle of corpses. He had thought it was strange when he was on the train, but he could still write it off as a coincidence or a feng shui array set up by the expert. But with so many corpses lying face down here, it was definitely bizarre.

“Why did they die like this?” Old Man Zhang muttered to himself. “It’s almost as if there’s something on their backs.”

Zhang Qishan looked down at the nearest body and narrowed his eyes. His gut told him that these bodies were lying face down even when they were

alive. In other words, they looked like this now because something had happened to them before they died. He whispered, "Tell Ba Ye to come up." A soldier immediately left and started climbing up the cliff, quickly making it to the gap at the top.

They had walked several miles underground, but when they had surfaced from the gap, they found that they hadn't actually gone that far. Zhang Qishan climbed back up the cliff and saw that the riverbed led to a distant mountain, which was completely covered in primitive forest. Scattered black smoke rose up from the forest, indicating that the riverbed went deep into the mountain, and the old mines there were still being excavated. There was also a primitive forest between these two mines, so the only way to connect them was by using horses and mules.

"They're all dead, so maybe blowing up the mine will solve everything." Old Man Zhang had also climbed up.

Zhang Qishan shook his head, squatted down, and touched the rocks on the ground: "Haven't you noticed? What's missing from this camp?"

"What?"

"None of these shacks have any mining tools, daily necessities, or dry food. This place is just like a coffin home, a kind of temporary place to put the dead. Even though there are a few daily necessities here like stoves and clotheslines, the bodies don't have money or tobacco on them."

"What do you mean?"

"Someone took all the valuables here, which means there must be someone who survived. We have to find them and make them take us into the mine."

## Chapter 32 Face Down Corpse

In Xiangxi, opium was usually the currency in circulation, and even the bulk of arms sales was settled with it. The people here were very fond of it, and since there wasn't any opium on the corpses, that meant someone must have taken it.

"But where would you find a thief in this wilderness?" Old Man Zhang asked.

Zhang Qishan said, "A few days after the train left, there were a lot of dead people and few living people. He couldn't finish taking everything at once so he must have made several trips. He took anything and everything, which shows he's very greedy. There must still be something left in these shacks, so after Ba Ye's finished his calculations, burn them and see who comes running first."

As he spoke, he pointed to several positions, and the soldiers went over to stand guard. Zhang Qishan continued, "Pay attention to the mining holes on the cliff. If it's a miner here, he's unlikely to be moving about aboveground."

Half an hour later, Qi Tiezui climbed up from the mine and collapsed on the ground. His collar was completely soaked in sweat and he was gasping for air.

When Old Man Zhang went over and helped him up, Qi Tiezui gasped out, "I say, old man, is your Zhang family full of fucking monkeys? They climbed so fast I thought I was going to die trying to keep up."

Old Man Zhang laughed and said honestly, "Ba Ye would be better off doing Wuqinxi<sup>35</sup> every day or training with Fo Ye. That way, your legs and feet will be stronger."

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<sup>35</sup> "Five Animal Exercises". It's regarded as the earliest form of Medical Qigong in Chinese history. It's a set of Daoyin (deep stretching) and Tu Na (deep breathing) exercises that imitates the actions of animals based on the habits of the tiger, deer, bear, monkey, and crane. Info [here](#) and [here](#)

Qi Tiezui took two wobbling steps. He usually rode in rickshaws in Changsha, and always had Lieutenant pick him up and drop him off in the car whenever he went to Fo Ye's house. After accepting apprentices, he didn't even have to go out to the fields to collect rent anymore. It was true that he hadn't been exercising much lately, but only a monkey would be able to keep up with that kind of climbing method.

After taking a few steps, Qi Tiezui was shocked to get an eyeful of corpses. He turned around, but couldn't see Zhang Qishan or Lieutenant anywhere. He grabbed the old man and said, "Look, this is strange. Why did all these people die here?"

"Ba Ye, Fo Ye asked you to come up for this very reason. You don't know?" Old Man Zhang asked.

Qi Tiezui pinched his fingers together and started his calculations. He ordered a few soldiers to cut off the insect silk with their knives and then went in while saying, "They're all covered in quilts, which means they died while sleeping. Tell everyone to remember not to sleep here." Just as he finished speaking, he suddenly smelled something burning. He looked up and saw that several shacks in front of him were on fire and black smoke was rising in the air. "What's going on?" He asked.

Old Man Zhang relayed Zhang Qishan's order to him. Although Qi Tiezui disagreed, he also knew that it was useless to say anything. Those northeast gangsters didn't listen to anyone.

At this time, he also realized once again that all the corpses were lying face down.

The bodies were covered with quilts, indicating that they had died in their sleep, but they were all curled up and the posture looked very stiff. It didn't seem like it would be too comfortable lying face down like that, but all the bodies maintained this position.

He pushed aside the clothes on the nearest corpse's back, but couldn't see anything strange besides the spots on the withered skin that were starting to rot from the inside.

Qi Tiezui did some more calculations and said, "Those who belong to snake, dragon, monkey, tiger, and dog are all out. Is there a rooster?"

All the soldiers looked at each other and shook their heads. Qi Tiezui took a deep breath and said to himself, *you're a rooster. Just do it yourself*. He put on gloves and carefully turned the corpse over so that it was facing up.

He looked down and took another deep breath. This corpse looked to be in the exact same state as the one they had seen in the whistle coffin. Even its hands were curled up in the same stiff position.

He checked for a long time but didn't find anything significant. The corpse's mouth was full of that white silk insect thread, but he couldn't tell if the bugs had been the cause of death at that time. If they were, then these bugs were either carrying harmful bacteria or highly toxic.

He went to move on, but hadn't even taken a few steps before he suddenly heard a "bang" come from behind him as if something had turned over. He looked back and saw that the body he had turned over was suddenly shaking. After a short moment, it started stiffly rocking from side to side like it wanted to turn over.

Qi Tiezui's face turned green, and he tried to shout but found that his throat couldn't make a sound.

The body rocked back and forth again like a turtle trying to right itself and finally managed to turn back over on the bed with a loud "bang".

All the nearby soldiers put away their guns and pulled their bayonets out. Qi Tiezui was sweating all over as he repeated to himself, *don't be superstitious, don't be superstitious, it's not a zombie*. When his racing heart finally slowed down, he ordered Old Man Zhang, "Don't touch it. There may

be something inside these bodies. If you cut them open, it'll be more troublesome to escape. Come here and help me turn another one over.”

As he turned his attention to the corpse of an old man beside him, Old Man Zhang went over to help. But just as he was about to start, he saw the old man's “dead body” jump up from amidst the thread-covered corpses and start running. After taking a few steps, he pushed aside a wooden bed, exposed a hidden mine shaft leading down into the riverbed, and jumped in.

## Chapter 33 To Turn Over

The man looked like a thin old man, but he moved very quickly. After standing there dumbstruck for a second, Old Man Zhang jumped up and ran after him: “Fo Ye! The thief is here!”

When the group of soldiers also gave chase, they found that the mine shaft had been dug straight down into the riverbed. The thin man could barely squeeze through the seemingly bottomless hole himself. It appeared the whole mountain here was riddled with holes. As everyone approached the hole in the floor, a stench assaulted their noses. Old Man Zhang covered his nose and unhesitatingly jumped in before Qi Tiezui had the chance to stop him.

“So reckless! What if there’s a cesspit below?” Just as Qi Tiezui was scolding, he heard the sound of whistles coming from all around. Zhang Qishan led a group of people down from the cliffs where they were planning to ambush and arrived at the entrance to the mine shaft.

“Sure enough, this guy didn’t move aboveground. I just didn’t expect him to dig a mine shaft here. As long as he pretended to be a corpse, we really wouldn’t have found him. If not for Ba Ye, we really wouldn’t have anything to show for our troubles.” One of the soldiers said.

Zhang Qishan slapped him on the back of his head and scolded, “What kind of brown-nosing is this? Go down and help!”

Several of the soldiers hurriedly nodded and jumped down. Zhang Qishan also wanted to go down to help, but Qi Tiezui grabbed him and said, “Don’t, Fo Ye. I won’t stop you if you want to jump into that cesspit, but there’s something even weirder here. You need to stay and check it out first. It won’t be too late to jump down once you’re done.”

With that said, he dragged Zhang Qishan over to the corner of the shack and turned the corpse on the bed over again.



The body's face was distorted and highly decomposed, and its muscles had atrophied, revealing a string of sticky threads.

After turning it over, the two of them watched it for a few minutes, but the body didn't respond.

Zhang Qishan gave Qi Tiezui an exasperated look, "What are you trying to do?"

"Fo Ye, wait patiently." Qi Tiezui said confidently.

After another five or six minutes had passed, there was still no movement from the corpse. Zhang Qishan became impatient and took a deep breath before tilting his head and looking at Qi Tiezui. Qi Tiezui frowned and thought it over before pulling Zhang Qishan a few steps away. When he looked back at the body and found that there still wasn't any response, he said, "Wait a minute, maybe he's a little shy around you. Fo Ye, let's pretend to walk farther away. Don't look at it, it will turn over by itself in a moment."

Zhang Qishan gave the soldiers a look, silently telling them to keep an eye on the mine shaft. He then turned and walked towards the cliff, completely ignoring Qi Tiezui. After a few steps, however, various exclamations came from behind them.

The two of them looked back and saw that the body Qi Tiezui was talking about had really turned over.

"Look, look, Fo Ye." Qi Tiezui said as he jumped up and rushed over to the body. He pointed at it and started scolding, "You naughty boy, are you messing with me?"

When Zhang Qishan came over, Qi Tiezui said, "Fo Ye, there's something wrong with the bodies here. They all died very strangely and they're all lying face down. There must be something inside them."

Zhang Qishan stepped forward, turned over the body that had just turned itself over, waved his hand, and then pointed all around. The soldiers began

turning all the bodies face up one by one and then waited. After about ten minutes, the bodies began turning back over one right after the other, until they had all returned to their original states. It was like that moment when the pai gow<sup>36</sup> dominoes were flipped over.

Zhang Qishan said coldly, "Where's Lieutenant?"

"He's still checking the situation down below."

"Wait for him to come up and then dissect the body." Zhang Qishan said. "Find a clean one to carry out and leave someone to wait for Old Man Zhang to come back up. I want to talk to him. Everyone else, turn this place upside down. Old Ba." Zhang Qishan kicked a nearby bed over and revealed another mine shaft. "What do you think is going on? Why are there holes under their beds?"

"To steal from the mine." After other veins had been dug up, some miners would dig under those mines and steal scraps of loose ore. Qi Tiezui also kicked over a bed near the shaft entrance, pulled out a few sifting pans from underneath, and touched the remnants, "This is a snake-eye stone mine. There are particularly good snake-eye stones in Xiangxi, so some people try to steal them."

"Why dig into the riverbed? Is digging down to the vein not enough? Digging to the surface takes a lot of effort, after all." Zhang Qishan said.

"Fo Ye, you might not know, but good snake-eye stones are very precious." Qi Tiezui said. "They dug this hole because they have a tacit understanding with the miners above. They'll pick out the good ones when sifting the ore and drop it down the hole, where a bag has been placed. Then, someone will pick it up from below. If they get caught, they're likely to be skinned and lynched. The snake-eye stones are an important trade good for the chief, so this kind of behavior goes against his interests."

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<sup>36</sup> Pai gow is a gambling game played with dominoes. The dominoes are shuffled on the table and are arranged into 8 face-down stacks of 4 tiles each in an assembly known as the woodpile. Individual stacks or tiles may then be moved in specific ways to rearrange the woodpile, after which the players place their bets. More info [here](#)

Zhang Qishan nodded and grabbed a handful of the stones from the sifting pan. Fluorite was a luminous stone found in the mountains and seas. It was called fish-eye stone or snake-eye stone because it would shine at night and attract many small fish and insects, which would in turn attract snakes. It was quite interesting that Xiangxi produced this kind of ore. It was said that there were many strange tombs in China, so if there really was a tomb under the fluorite mine, he wondered what it would look like.

## Chapter 34 The Sound of Opera Outside the Mine Shaft

At dusk, Old Man Zhang came back and threw the trussed-up old man in front of Zhang Qishan. The old man had a pockmarked face and kept his head lowered as he sat there trembling.

Zhang Qishan thought of the chief's lynching punishment and knew why he was so afraid. Lieutenant still hadn't come up yet, nor had those who had gone down with him, so he couldn't help but worry.

The others searched the entire camp but found nothing.

Zhang Qishan used a torch to burn the shacks along the riverbed for three or four miles, and Qi Tiezui was relieved to see the raging fire flowing out like a river. The only body left now was the one that had been moved out of the shack. While waiting for Lieutenant to come back up, Qi Tiezui turned the body face up again and watched it flip itself back over. He had done this eight hundred times, and Zhang Qishan felt like the corpse was about to jump up and start scolding him if he flipped it over again.

The soldiers standing nearby thought it was strange and asked him what he was doing. Qi Tiezui said, "This could be the Japanese's secret weapon. You see, if the two bodies are tied back to back, they'll keep rolling. If a bomb was tied to them... do you know how terrible that would be on the battlefield?"

"Do they turn in the same direction every time? If not, isn't there a fifty percent chance they'd roll back to your position?" When one of the soldiers asked this, Qi Tiezui showed a sudden enlightened expression.

Zhang Qishan was questioning the old man while waiting for Lieutenant, but the old man refused to answer. All he would say was that they had the wrong man and he hadn't stolen anything from the mine. As for the dead

here and what happened in the camp before, he pretended not to know anything.

After reaching this stalemate, Zhang Qishan felt like something bad had happened to Lieutenant, and couldn't concentrate anymore. The old man saw that Zhang Qishan looked a little impatient while standing at the entrance to the mine shaft and suddenly asked, "Sir, do you have friends in the mine?"

When Zhang Qishan looked at him coldly, the old man immediately felt that he had made a mistake and quickly bowed his head. Zhang Qishan said coldly, "If you have something to say, say it quickly."

The old man shook his head, too afraid to say it. Zhang Qishan glanced at Old Man Zhang, who quickly grabbed the old man. Zhang Qishan squatted down and stared at the old man's face, "Say it, don't say it. Either way, we'll take you to the mine to have a look."

The old man suddenly tensed and shook his head desperately. "I can't, I can't, I can't go in the mine over there at night. Hurry up and tell your friends to come up. It will be dark soon."

"Why?" Qi Tiezui asked.

"No one knows, but this mine is divided." The old man said. "You definitely can't go in at night, and you can't find your way back out once you do. The older generation said that when the mine was dug to a certain depth, the mountain would come alive and eat at night. Sir, if you don't believe me, just look at how many people died here. Don't think that all of them died outside. Most of them actually died below."

Zhang Qishan couldn't listen anymore and shook his head, "Shut him up." With that said, he signaled a command and someone picked up the corpse. He then took the lead and went all the way down the mine shaft. When he landed, it was pitch black and he couldn't see any traces of the others under the torchlight. He shouted, "Lieutenant!" The people who had followed him down were also calling, and their voices echoed in the tomb passage.

Then, he seemed to hear something.

He motioned with his hand to stop everyone, and even the old man who was still stubbornly begging for mercy quieted down. In the ensuing silence, they heard a strange sound come from the depths of the mine. The sound was continuous and varied in pitch, but it wasn't someone talking. It was someone singing opera.

"So mysterious." Zhang Qishan was amused.

Qi Tiezui leaned forward and said, "Not necessarily, Fo Ye. Listen to the words. It's Er Ye's song. This seems to be something arranged for us."

Zhang Qishan never understood opera and couldn't make sense of the words, so he asked his men to spread out in the tomb passage and see where it was coming from. They ended up finding a tunnel leading downward, where the singing appeared to be coming from. He grabbed the old man and asked, "Where does this shaft lead?"

The old man had been listening to the song and looked extremely terrified as he said, "There's a big cave under the mine with a Taoist temple in it, but I don't know when it was built. That's where everyone started to die."

After he spoke, the old man suddenly saw Qi Tiezui's bag and was stunned. He looked between Qi Tiezui and the bag and asked, "This gentleman... are you also a Qimen feng shui master?"

Qi Tiezui frowned and nodded, and the old man immediately started kowtowing, "I've been waiting for you! Sir, your ancestor came here earlier and told me to give you a message."

Qi Tiezui felt his heart clench, unsure of what the old man meant. "What is it?" He asked.

"That expert said you have to look at this in reverse, and—" he whispered the rest in Qi Tiezui's ear.

## Chapter 35 The Feng Shui Situation

The pockmarked old man said the sentence in the Changsha dialect, so the general idea became muddled. He vaguely recognized a few words that sounded like “bastard”<sup>37</sup> or other swear words, but the sentence was quite long. As Qi Tiezui listened, he couldn’t help but think, *what’s this expert trying to say? Did he specially find some random person on the street to scold me?* But that didn’t make any sense. This expert had gotten so entangled in this mess, so he must have passed on a few useful words.

He continued listening and realized that the old man didn’t know the meaning of these words. He only remembered the general pronunciation. When he asked the old man to repeat it again, the old man obliged.

Qi Tiezui suddenly understood.

This was an ancient verse, which was spoken in a dialect. It was very difficult for those who weren’t familiar with it to understand what it meant.

The gist of it was: those who hadn’t practiced for thirty-six years shall not enter. The dragon, cave, sand, and water seemed to be in chaos but weren’t. The three evils wouldn’t invade if there was a lot of hesitation. The sky was underground and the world was on fire. The cave wasn’t restrained with two combined water sources.

The first sentence made Qi Tiezui’s expression look very ugly. When Zhang Qishan asked what it meant, he said, “This expert said that those who have studied the art of feng shui for less than thirty-six years shouldn’t go in.”

Everyone was silent, and Zhang Qishan asked, “What else?”

Qi Tiezui drew several lines on the ground. “The master must have gone down. He described the dragon, cave, sand, and water as being chaotic, which is the Luan Tou School’s way of speaking. He may be from Shanxi. The

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<sup>37</sup> It actually translates as “turtle descendant”, which is an insult equating to bastard because turtles were once thought to conceive by thought alone, making paternity impossible to prove. Pinyin is guī sūn (龟孙)

feng shui pattern here seems to be chaotic, but not. Why is that? It's because no one will build an ancient tomb where the feng shui is chaotic. But it's actually not chaotic here, the chaos is man-made. These words have a hidden meaning. In other words, someone hid the feng shui here.

“The three evils won't invade if there's a lot of hesitation'. The 'hesitation' here refers to maggots, which means slow-crawling insects. 'Three evils won't invade' means there aren't ordinary insects here, but there are some that move slowly.

“I don't understand the 'sky is underground and the world is on fire' bit. The 'two combined water sources' is referring to the seal boundary around the small hall at the heart of the cave. It binds all the feng shui qi together to form a barrier, which shields against bad luck and evil spirits. That, combined with the first sentence just now...if we look at it in reverse, this—”

Qi Tiezui shook his head. “The purpose of the feng shui qi barrier is to block the invasion of evil spirits. If it's reversed, then it means that the two combined water sources are to prevent evil spirits from coming out. There aren't 'three evils' here because all the living animals are eaten up by the so-called 'hesitation', and so on. If there is a tomb below, then those buried in it must be very evil. Fearing that the tomb's atmosphere would influence the surrounding landscape, feng shui was used to fight it. Since ancient times, there have only been a few people like this.”

“Which historical figure do you think may be buried near Changsha?”

“Fo Ye, if I had to say it, you're the only one.” Qi Tiezui said.

Zhang Qishan looked at Qi Tiezui coldly, and then turned around and said, “Since your expert said it's dangerous, don't go down. Lieutenant's very good at what he does, so if even he can't get out, I'm afraid it's really dangerous down there. I won't be able to protect you, so wait here. Old man, stay here and accompany Ba Ye. If anything happens, take him back to Changsha and gather reinforcements.”



Old Man Zhang shook his head, “Let the younger ones accompany Ba Ye. I’m familiar with this place.”

Qi Tiezui had already made up his mind and said, “Fo Ye, I’m not trying to be brave either. I usually find it too troublesome, and I don’t want to move around more, but you also know the rules of the Nine Gates. Anyone can become a member of the Nine Gates as long as they defeat one of the families. I’ve always been the weakest, and there are eight hundred people trying to take over my position every year. If you hadn’t given me the nominal position of special counselor of the secretarial office before, I’m afraid I would’ve had to abdicate long ago. It’s high time I return the favor. I’ll accompany you to the next level. I want to see this rare feng shui situation and help you find the end of this vein.”

Zhang Qishan nodded and didn’t mention it anymore. Without saying a word, he headed down the mine shaft first. The others followed him down one by one like dumplings. Qi Tiezui didn’t expect Zhang Qishan to be so frank and straightforward and was dumbfounded.

He took a deep breath and thought to himself, *whenever you go somewhere, look at the water gate first. If the gate is completely enclosed, there are real dragon knots inside. If the heavenly tortoise, snake, lion, and elephant guard the gate, there must be a very precious dragon there. The marble pillar guards the sun and moon gate to secure a place of wealth. The gate of Beishen Town must have a big, noble dragon. The prince’s gate has a lion obelisk, while the house of the poor has broken and collapsed walls. If princes live here, the gates will be locked and heavily sealed. If you see those heavenly creatures at the water gate, you can follow the tracks and find their ancestors.*<sup>38</sup>

He then slipped into the tunnel, sliding down into the unknown darkness below.

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<sup>38</sup> Just think of it as mysterious feng shui mumbo jumbo

## Chapter 36 Splitting the Big Coffin

This mine shaft was very deep and had been dug at a thirty-degree angle. The footholds were all grooves that had been smashed out of the stone, which were worn and slippery after being used for so long.

Old Man Zhang had been here for a long time and had some experience in climbing these kinds of tunnels, so he was further ahead.

The old man was second in line, with the others following, making it very cramped. The biggest issue with crawling in the tunnel was everyone's shadows. The light from the torches and lanterns up ahead was blocked by people's bodies, which created indiscernible shadows everywhere.

Zhang Qishan took off his gloves, touched the tunnel wall, and found that it was different from grave robbers' tunnels from before. These tunnels had been made in a much cruder fashion, only focusing on speed and stability. When they were on the cliff, they could see a lot of scattered snake-eye stone clusters, which were the scattered minerals that hadn't formed on the vein. They had been left there because they had a lot of impurities and weren't valuable enough to mine.

They had been walking for almost an hour but didn't seem to be close to the bottom. There weren't any signs that the tunnel had stopped or branched off anywhere, and the sound of the opera singing was flickering in and out with the changing airflow in the tunnel.

"Why is it so long?" Zhang Qishan asked.

The pockmarked old man replied, "Sir, this isn't long at all. Snake-eye stones are buried deep, so it takes several miles to find a vein."

A nearby soldier asked: "If we're holding torches in the mine, will it explode?"

“It’s not a coal mine. There’s airflow. The miners even used flame lanterns for many years. You have nothing to worry about.” Old Man Zhang said.

He had just finished speaking when the opera singing up ahead suddenly became louder, startling everyone. The pockmarked old man tried to retreat, too frightened to go down any further. Old Man Zhang stopped and said, “This is it.” He then told the people behind him to hold his feet while he hung upside down and held the torch out to look around.

Zhang Qishan pushed aside the people in front of him to get a look, but couldn’t see past the overlapping silhouettes. All he could make out was the exit of the tunnel, which led to a huge space that must have been the main mine. When the torch was lowered down, the firelight reflected off something that appeared to be water.

Old Man Zhang jumped out of the exit and slid down the rock wall, landing in the water that reached his waist. As soon as it was stirred up, it gave off the stench of stagnant water.

Zhang Qishan also jumped into the water, leaving Qi Tiezui alone at the exit. Zhang Qishan raised his torch and found that the mine was about four or five meters high, indicating that this vein was quite large.

The others used their lanterns to illuminate the surroundings and found that they were standing in the main vein. They could see all the unmined snake-eye stones everywhere on the rock walls. The top of the mine was vast and empty, and the clear echoing sounds of opera singing were coming from the darkness in one direction.

“What song is this?” Zhang Qishan asked. Although it was Er Yuehong’s song, he still couldn’t recognize it. He had been to Er Ye’s shows several times, but he never really paid attention.

“Splitting the Big Coffin.” Qi Tiezui replied. “After listening more closely, it sounds like Er Ye, but there are still some mistakes.”

As he spoke, he looked around and saw that the snake-eye stones were absorbing the light from the torches and lanterns and giving off a glow. The dark mine above was filled with stars that were neither bright nor dim.

“‘Splitting the Big Coffin’ is a very strange piece of work no matter what era you’re in. It’s from Feng Menglong’s ‘Stories to Caution the World’ and tells the story of Zhuang Zhou, who faked his death and pretended to be a noble in order to try and seduce his widowed wife. The widow fell in love with this noble, so they ended up getting married. In the middle of consummating their marriage, the noble got a headache and said he needed human brains in order to make the medicine. Zhuang Zhou’s wife went to his tomb and opened the coffin to take her late husband’s brain so the noble would be able to make the medicine.”

“That’s quite the setup.” Zhang Qishan said, while secretly thinking that it was a satire of the Nine Gates’ business.

Once the Zhang family began walking in the direction of the song, Qi Tiezui finally jumped into the water. He looked up and saw that reinforced wooden beams had been stuck in the mine one right after the other, withstanding the pressing weight from above.

He frowned. He had seen this scene in the weasel spirit’s terrifying vision before. He kept thinking that the weasel spirit had shown him the situation in the depths of the mine, and now it appeared to true.

He kept trembling as he silently followed after the group. Sure enough, hanged people started to appear on the beams, just like the ones he had seen in that nightmare.

The old man had been leading the way, but refused to go any further and kept trying to retreat. When Old Man Zhang gripped him tightly to prevent him from escaping, he said, “Sir, Sir, the Taoist temple is up front. This is the part of the mine where people started dying. Those who got close to the Taoist temple are all dead.”

Zhang Qishan looked up at where the corpses were densely hanging like flags and thought it was strange. He pushed aside their legs and continued on, soon finding that the area in front opened up into a huge cave. There was an immortal gate in the middle of the cave that was about five people high, with a huge stone tablet in front of it that said: Five Hundred Dragons.

There were a lot of stone statues behind it that were separated on both sides, along with a building that had eaves. This building was also as tall as five people, but it was tilted and distorted. Much of the paint had cracked and was flaking off, and it was covered in white dust.

In fact, the whole cave was covered in this white dust, which stretched on as far as the eye could see.

Zhang Qishan paused. It looked like a Taoist temple, but it wasn't. It was an ancient tomb.

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End of The Mystic Nine Vol. 1

# “The Mystic Nine” Drama Spoiler

I have to post some spoilers:

The core of the Mystic Nine’s story is an ancient tomb under a mine outside Changsha, which was mined during the Qing Dynasty and acquired by the Japanese in China’s early Republic period. According to the Japanese’s Hatoyama Report from that year, a meteorite was hidden in the ancient tomb deep in this mine.

This huge meteorite split into three pieces as it fell: one in Changbai Mountain, one in the Queen of the West’s country, and one near Changsha. Special ancient buildings were constructed around all of them.

This meteorite has a great power, which lets people enter it to see the world of the dead.

“The Mystic Nine” story has been written, and the TV series is already being filmed.

Yin Xinyue is an original character, as well as Zhang Qishan’s wife. In the original work, Zhang Qishan lights the sky lanterns to ask for her hand in marriage, which will be emphasized in the TV drama and novels.

“The Mystic Nine” TV show hopes to fill in the pit of the Queen of the West’s meteorite.

PS:

1. Yin Xinyue is just a nickname, not her real name. It has something to do with her birth. In addition, the meteorite in “The Mystic Nine” is called “Bronze Mirror Stone”.
2. I’m sorry, everyone, but I have to spoil a part of the plot that might cause a bit of a jam. My specific plot setting is still different from the common plot, but there really is a plot to enter the meteorite and reach the world of the

dead to find Ya Tou. The book will be published soon, anyways, so it doesn't matter if I say it here.

3. Of course, the world of the dead isn't the final explanation.

## **The Mystic Nine Vol. 2**



**Summary:**

**Revealing the secrets of what happened to Zhang Da Fo Ye, Er Yuehong, and the other Mystic Nine members in Xiangxi should be the most important piece of the whole Mystic Nine puzzle.**

# Introduction

When my grandpa told me about his past, he always kept it lighthearted and avoided the serious stories. Actually, it was just like what any other ordinary family would do. The version of the stories your elders told you in person was different from the version that people around them told.

It was only when the two versions were combined that the truth might come out.

I still remember that when we were carrying out the funeral rituals for my grandpa, Grandma was sometimes calm and sometimes extremely sad. As we were holding vigils<sup>39</sup>, she intermittently told the younger descendants many stories which were very different from the stories that Grandpa had written in his notes.

Well, it wasn't that the stories were completely different. Maybe I should say that the things Grandma told us made those in the Mystic Nine feel more like human beings instead of characters in a novel.

Grandpa often told the more glorious tales of the Mystic Nine. They were stories about how they rebelled when they were young, how Zhang Qishan's first meeting with Er Yuehong marked the beginning of the most prosperous era in Changsha, how Black Back the sixth went to Hunan, how Chen Pi Ah Si became Er Ye's apprentice, how Jiuye and Old Dog Wu worked together, etc.

Deep down, Grandpa hoped that the Mystic Nine he remembered was a legendary group of people in Changsha instead of the extremely exhausted group of people who were forced to do what they didn't want to during those turbulent times.

The above reasons were how I started to know more about the Mystic Nine. At first, they were all snippets I had gathered one after another instead of

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<sup>39</sup> At Chinese funerals, it's customary for relatives to hold vigils over the deceased. It's a way for loved ones to show filial piety and loyalty to the deceased. Family members thus take shifts to watch over the deceased in their coffin.

complete stories. These snippets were relatively independent, and there was no way for us to know what had happened in between them. But I started to gradually piece those small and incomplete snippets together.

After a long time, the Mystic Nine's style of doing things surfaced from these snippets, and I couldn't help but feel attracted to it. There was no doubt that it was an era full of romanticism, but it was also an era when people had deep desires and were forced to do what they didn't want to do.

No matter what era, if people could face their fates with a sense of romanticism, then it should be a fortunate thing no matter what the outcome may be.

I hope that you can also feel what I feel.

# Chapter 1

Zhang Qishan's relationship with the eighty-two villages originated from Er Yuehong's relationship with the chief tusi.<sup>40</sup>

That year, Er Yuehong hid in the Miao villages to avoid being chased and killed. Due to accidental reasons, Er Yuehong and Qi Tiezui were forced to be in the funeral procession of the chief tusi's youngest son.

At that time, the village's guardian had prepared to have the accompanying warriors kill the Chinese porters, gouge out the chief tusi's eyes, and dismember her body before dumping it in the depths of Death Valley. They were going to lie and say that the youngest son had turned into a zombie and started killing people.

At that time, the chief tusi had already lost all hope, but no one had expected that there were two masters from Changsha's Mystic Nine hidden among the porters.

When they reached the river surrounded by reeds, Er Yuehong killed all of those in the entourage who had betrayed the chief tusi. Afterwards, he brought her back to the village safely.

At that time, the chief tusi had developed romantic feelings for him, but Er Ye had just lost his wife, so it was difficult for him to have feelings for someone else. The emotions of these two people were delayed, and as a result, it was impossible for them to get together once they the opportunity was missed.

Later, Yin Xinyue took Er Yuehong's advice and brought Zhang Da Fo Ye to the Miao villages to hide. From then on, Fo Ye's relationship with the eighty-two villages began.

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<sup>40</sup> Tusi, often translated as "headmen" or "chieftains", were hereditary tribal leaders recognized as imperial officials by the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties of China. Wiki link [here](#)

This was what happened before the birth of this story.

Many years passed and a lot of those in the Mystic Nine died in the war. Most of them died during the Battle of Changsha, where the Xiang River was dyed red with blood.

The Japanese forced Old Dog Wu to use his own dogs to sweep for land mines, so he decided to lure them into stepping on the land mines themselves. He was just about to sacrifice himself when, under the guidance of his lead dog, the group of dogs he had raised unexpectedly jumped onto him to protect him as a series of land mines exploded.

During one battle, Zhang Qishan escaped into the mountains, where he continued to fight the Japanese army with the help of the eighty-two villages.

At that time, Hunan was the core area where they fought against the Japanese. The front line was very long, so the historical environment and geographical location in which this story takes place are very special.

The story occurred in the short period of peace between the two major Changsha battles. The regions involved were almost all over Hunan.

In the eighty-two villages, a chief tusi was appointed to govern every three or four villages. Although this meant that the chief tusi governed more than a dozen mountains, there were a total of seven tuis and thirty-six religious leaders in the eighty-two villages. It was all very complicated.

At that time, disputes happened frequently, and the Japanese spies were able to infiltrate and disintegrate Zhang Qishan's party many times. They were hoping to obtain the support of some people from the eighty-two villages and cut off the Hunan's entire intelligence and supply network, which was as complicated as capillaries.

At that time, the key figure in these disputes was an old man. We can't directly call him by name here, but we can say that he was the most prestigious leader of the eighty-two villages. He had a title, and his status

was very high in the Miao ethnic groups' mythology. Although he didn't actually manage affairs, he had the absolute highest power among the eighty-two villages.

In order to gain his support, it was said that Zhang Qishan and this leader talked to each other for three days in a secret room. When they reached a subsequent agreement, Zhang Qishan led his people into the mountains to follow through on his promise and stayed there for two months.

It was rumored that Zhang Qishan did something in the mountains for this leader, which was how he received the full support of the eighty-two villages. But no one knew what their agreement entailed. This story was outshone by the other splendid Republican Era legends of the Mystic Nine. No one knew how important this story was, but it should be the most important piece of the entire Mystic Nine historical puzzle.

Here are a few of the details:

Before Zhang Qishan went into the mountain, the leader was almost blind. Since there were no records about his age, no one knew how old this leader really was. But some said that they had never seen anyone who was older than this person. This was one of the details.

What was even stranger was that this old man didn't sleep. He would sit down and face the depths of the mountains every night, looking at those mountains with his blind eyes until the sun came out.

Year after year, no one had seen him fall asleep. Based on his behavior, people thought that he was waiting for someone. It almost seemed like he was waiting for someone to come out of the depths of the mountain, and he had probably been doing this more for than fifty years.

Zhang Qishan went into the mountains afterwards, so this story seems to have something to do with waiting. Was it possible that the leader felt that he was going to die and wanted Zhang Qishan to help him look for something in the mountains?

From what I had gathered from my investigation, things started to get a little weird. After Zhang Qishan came out of the mountain, the old man stopped going out of his house. Moreover, Zhang Qishan had his people guard the door to the leader's place, which caused the villagers to spread rumors that Zhang Qishan wanted to seize power to control the villages.

Of course, the village children were very naughty and disobedient, so some of them managed to bypass the guards. When they reached the window and peeked in, they saw that there weren't any lights on in the leader's room. They could only rely on the moonlight that was streaming into the room. They saw a giant mound in the middle of the room, and there was something moving in that mound.

The color of the soil wasn't something that came from the nearby villages, because it was a strange blue-gray color.

The Miao people had a legend about "soil girls". It was said they were naked women who only lived in the soil. They appeared as naked corpses and seduced any merchants who passed by, dragging them into the soil and eating their flesh and blood.

There were records in western Hunan of rotten female corpses rushing out during mudslides, their abdomens full of human nails. These village girls were generally considered to have encountered misfortunes, but some people said that soil girls were actually those who had been smothered by rocks when the mountain collapsed.

As a result, rumors spread through the village that a soil girl was captured and put in the leader's room. But a month later, the leader came out of the room and the mound disappeared. Zhang Qishan also became a guest of honor after that.

What exactly did Zhang Qishan do for the leader? What was in the mountain? What was the origin of that soil mound?

I gained some inspiration from something in the local county records and learned the whole truth.

## Chapter 2

In Xiangxi, there were a few very naughty county record transcribers. Since there were a lot of merchants and guests coming and going, there were many rumors in various places, which were recorded in the county records. As a result, I often had a great time reading them.

Among the villages next to the Myanmar border by the Xi River, there was a village called Shikong that had a kind of herbal medicine called Huancao Shi. There were two types of this herb: horizontal roots and vertical roots. If women ingested it within three months of pregnancy, they could change the sex of the baby at will.

Shikong was a very mysterious village, and the villagers almost never married outsiders. As a result, a lot of people married their close relatives. In the early days, they sold this kind of herbal medicine to make a living. Since this medicine was rare, people had to go deep into the mountains to get it and then give it to pharmacists who specialized in preparing it. The method was only passed down to women instead of men.

The ratio of males to females in this village was almost one to one, which seemed to confirm this medicine's efficacy. This male-to-female ratio was so accurate that it was actually quite terrifying, but it was later said to be the result of a horrifying "scam".

The legend of Huancao Shi was like a scam that the locals had all agreed to practice. In fact, when the ratio of males-to-females in the population became unbalanced, the locals would drown the babies in alcohol at night in order to maintain the legend of this miraculous Huancao Shi medicine and also regain gender balance.

This scam was discovered because an official had done extensive research on the "two years that had been lost". This official found that there was a problem in the age structure of Shikong's children. Each family often had children that were three or four years apart in age.



However, most local people didn't take contraceptive measures, so based on common sense, the age gap between the children should've been much closer. But that wasn't the case at all. Many children were three or four years apart, and some were even five or six years apart.

The official believed that in these families, there was a child missing between the elder child and younger child. For some families, it could even be said that two children were missing.

Where did these missing children go? The official later discovered that the sorcerers in the village drowned those children in alcohol the moment they were born. It was said that those who were drowned in alcohol wouldn't be in as much pain.

Some said that the gender balance was the result of women taking Huancao Shi. But just taking Huancao Shi alone wouldn't work. It required a mixture of multiple herbs in order for the medicine to take effect.

The formula of this medicine was very mysterious, and only a few people in the world knew it. If you asked people in the village, the women would all say that they strongly believed in this medicine's efficacy.

The key effect of this medicine was that it would definitely make the sex of the current baby they were having the opposite of their previous baby. Moreover, local couples generally only gave birth to two children—one male and one female—before they would stop having babies.

There was still no definite conclusion on whether the gender balance came from drowning babies or this miraculous medicine.

On the other hand, the evidence of people drowning babies in Shikong had never been found. According to the rumors, the babies' corpses would be brought deep into the mountains so that Mountain Mother would take care of them.

The legend of Mountain Mother was very similar to the legend of soil girls in Xiangxi in that they were all women living in the soil.

There was another story about this in the county records. In the depths of the mountains outside of the eighty-two villages, there were bandits who threw the people they had killed into a sinkhole until the corpses eventually piled up.

One time, the bandits also jumped into the sinkhole as they were being chased by the authorities. They saw that all of the corpses they had discarded before were dragged into the soil, the flesh and blood sucked clean. That was when they learned that this place had turned into a soil girls' lair.

There was a baby girl among the corpses who smelled of alcohol and was barely breathing, so they rescued her.

At first, they thought that she was an immature soil girl who would grow up and eat people, so they wanted to wait until she grew older before they went to the city to sell her for money.

They didn't expect that the longer they raised her, the more adorable she became. In the end, they developed feelings for her as they raised her.

After the girl turned into an adult, she was extremely beautiful and became a famous female bandit in the local area. She inherited all the skills from her adoptive fathers, and was cruel, murderous, and unpretentious.

Later, those bandits theorized that this girl was probably thought to be dead and was dumped in the mountains. Maybe someone from Shikong had traveled there to sell Huancao Shi and brought the bad habit of drowning babies with them. The baby girl was very healthy and had a large lung capacity, which was why she hadn't drowned in the alcohol. Instead, she grew up and became a good drinker.

After she grew up, it was natural that she wanted to find her biological parents. So, she brought twelve people from the bandit gang with her and went to Shikong. For some reason, they killed all of the people in Shikong and burned the village to the ground.

The legend of Huancao Shi later turned into different versions that spread in Yunnan, Guizhou and Sichuan, and even the name of the herbal medicine varied.

Until now, people still didn't know if such an herb really existed, or if it was just a folk scam. No one knew what truth the girl learned in Shikong that made her do such an extreme thing.

After that, the girl took her bandit gang to Xiangxi and started a business. They went from a gang of thirteen people to establishing the eighty-two villages. That was the origin of the eighty-two villages, which happened more than six hundred years ago.

These thirteen bandits were the original thirteen tuis in the eighty-two villages. Later, their descendants fought each other, which caused the political structure to change several times.

That girl didn't have any descendants even though the remaining twelve people did. The most prestigious leader of this generation was the last of the descendants from those twelve bandits.

Since the power of the eighty-two villages was relatively stable in western Hunan, this story was still recorded in its entirety. In addition to this story, there were also several legends related to the whole thing.

One was that Huancao Shi would grow in places where there were soil girls.

Another legend was that the supreme leader of each generation from the eighty-two villages was assigned to worship something in the mountains. Only the most prestigious leader in the eighty-two villages was qualified to know what this mysterious thing was.

My heart thumped when I learned of this second legend. My intuition was telling me that Zhang Qishan going into the mountains had something to do with that mysterious thing, and this mysterious thing was also related to the baby girl of unknown origins from six hundred years ago.

## Chapter 3

It was summer when I arrived in the eighty-two villages to investigate this matter. The weather in Xiangxi was surprisingly hot and humid.

The place hadn't been called the eighty-two villages for a long time now, and the tuis were long gone. But those villages that had been established in the group of mountains were still there.

I asked many local folklore scholars about the story of the old blind man in the eighty-two villages. Some of them were even writing reports on topics related to Xiangxi, but none of them had heard of it. It was almost like the local Miao people considered it to be a top secret.

But when I asked those elderly people who were almost a hundred years old, I discovered that some of them remembered that there had once been a leader like him in the Miao villages.

Later, I changed the direction of my investigation and looked into any religious or mythological aspects. I found that a large part of the eighty-two villages was in Guizhou, which was an area much larger than I had originally thought.

There was a very transparent legend in Guizhou that some religious leaders in the Black Miao<sup>41</sup> villages secretly worshiped the monsters in the mountains in order to gain a longer lifespan.

Every time the monster granted your wish, the religious leaders needed to give up something from their bodies, which was usually something like their eyes, fingers, a piece of flesh, or even blood.

When Er Yuehong escorted the chief tuis to Death Valley, it was said to be a ceremony in which they presented a child who had died young to the

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<sup>41</sup> The Chinese traditionally classify the Miao ethnic group according to the most characteristic color of the women's clothes. According to [this](#), the Black Miao are in Southeast Guizhou. They could also be called the Hei Miao.

mountain gods. Children were counted as one's flesh and blood, which meant that this legend had an extensive basis.

If that was the case, then did the eighty-two villages' leader also exchange something with a mountain god or monster? What tributes did he make Zhang Qishan bring to it? What did he gain in exchange?

Combining all the background information, I picked out a story from "The Grave Robbers' Chronicles" that I liked very much when I was a child. Grandpa used to tell me this story as a fable.

The protagonist of this story was called Ye Fu Da, and he was a military officer. Since there were numerous details in this story that were too similar to what I had found out about the eighty-two villages, I couldn't help but suspect that this story was related to Zhang Qishan. Later, Fatty told me that Fu Ye Da sounded like Da Fo Ye when the name was reversed. That was when it dawned on me that this was almost certainly the story about Zhang Qishan.

In this story, the chief tusi in the Miao villages—the supreme leader in reality—really did want Ye Fu Da to bring a child into the depths of the mountains and give it to a mountain god in exchange for fifty years of safety for the Miao villages.

Legend had it that a young girl came out of the mountain six hundred years ago and experienced romantic love in the world. But that girl wasn't actually a human being, and when she was in her forties, she gradually grew into another kind of creature.

Before she left, she asked the people who lived with her to provide her with human flesh and blood every year so that she could live in the mountains. Otherwise, she would come out of the mountains and start preying on the villagers. At the same time, she promised that if tributes were paid to her every year, she would give the rulers of the villages a longer life. Otherwise, there would be catastrophic infanticide, such as no boys for a year or no girls for a year.

It was said that there were times in history when some leaders had disobeyed her wishes. During those years, almost all the newborn babies were hunted and killed by monsters. As a result, no one even dared to mention this matter ever again.

Six hundred years later, Zhang Qishan entered the eighty-six villages and learned about this legend. The leader of the villages told him how terrifying this monster was.

Zhang Qishan thought that this kind of story about mountain gods who ate people was too old-fashioned, so he and the leader agreed that the future reward of longevity would be provided by Zhang Qishan. It was time for the mountain god who ate people to step down from power. So, Zhang Qishan took people into the mountain and started hunting this mountain god.

Ever since I was a child, I had been rebellious and thought that rules were made to be broken, so the story of Zhang Da Fo Ye hunting gods was simply refreshing and exhilarating to people like me.

What a majestic person Zhang Qishan was! When I was a child, I used to fantasize about riding a horse into the mountains and hunting a mountain god. This story also made me understand that there was nothing in the world that couldn't be challenged.

I'm sorry about spending so much time and ink to clarify the ins and outs, but the next step is to copy and write down the entire story of Zhang Da Fo Ye hunting gods.

Grandpa usually spent two nights finishing the story, so I'm not exactly sure what the length of it is. But it's not a long story, either.

There were some details in it that were very exciting, which was a rare pastime for people before they went to bed.

## Chapter 4

The people Zhang Qishan brought with him were all elite soldiers of the Zhang family. When they went into the mountains, they all had submachine guns and German-made pistols. Each person was equipped with two horses.

Normally, it was more appropriate to take mules when you were going into the mountains, but mules could only bear weight. If you wanted to hunt, you still had to rely on a horse's ability to quickly charge short distances.

In the mountains of western Hunan, there were "official roads" in some places that were built by the authorities. But they were long gone after several fights and wars.

The leader actually didn't know that Zhang Qishan was going to hunt the mountain god at that time, and gave a child to Zhang Qishan.

"This is a newborn child from the village," the leader had said to him. "I'm too old. I have already given away my eyes. Wars have been going on for years now, so I can no longer find the route to pay tribute to the mountain god. If you help me accomplish this matter, I'll agree to your request."

Zhang Qishan looked at the child. It was a little boy with facial features that were exclusive to the local people. He was probably going to be a brave warrior among the Miao people when he grew up.

The child's parents stood behind them, the father's eyes full of indifference. For men in the eighty-two villages, too many people had died these past few years. Whether it was fights between warlords, fights between tuis, or fighting against the Japanese, death and loss had made people completely indifferent.

But the mother still couldn't suppress the pain deep down and kept crying.

Zhang Qishan nodded. There were a total of thirty people heading towards the depths of the mountain. There was a hunting trail leading from the

village to the back of the mountain that hunters often used. It would take people a week before they could reach the depths of the mountain if they took this trail.

At that time, his accompanying guard—a man called Zhang Xiaoyu—was awkwardly carrying the child on his back. After walking for a few kilometers, the team behind them that was sending them off stopped and slowly disappeared from sight.

Zhang Xiaoyu asked Zhang Qishan, “Isn’t it too sloppy to leave the important task of the mountain god tribute to us outsiders? Do the eighty-two villages have that much faith in us?”

“I’ve asked around and learned that none of the people who followed the leader into the depths of the mountain have ever come out. Every time a group of people entered the mountain, the leader was the only one who came out. So, the child isn’t the only tribute to the mountain god,” Zhang Qishan said. “We pushed the leader too far this time. I figure he wants to give us to the mountain god since he doesn’t think we can make it out alive.”

“What? We can’t let that happen. We can’t let them get what they want,” Zhang Xiaoyu said. “We’ve always had a good relationship with the eighty-two villages. Why do they want us dead all of a sudden?”

“The environment here is too vile, especially more recently. People’s kindness and evilness are changing drastically, and their moral compasses are also changing due to the changing environment. In terms of the safety of the people in the Miao villages, the supreme leader bears the greatest responsibility. To them, we can be sacrificed in the face of good and evil.”

Zhang Qishan looked at the primitive forest in front of him. Two huge wild mountains had appeared. The valley in the middle was called Heitianmen. After passing this point, there weren’t any official roads and the route would become very complicated. Only the most excellent hunters would go hunting in there.



There would be more beasts once they passed this point, but it still wasn't the mountain god's territory yet. Zhang Xiaoyu made a gesture, and the surrounding guards became more vigilant.

"That makes sense." After that, Zhang Xiaoyu patted the baby on his back. Before they set off, they let the baby sip a little bit of wine, so he was sound asleep. They predicted that the baby would cry loudly once he saw that his mother wasn't around, which would probably attract all kinds of beasts and monsters.

"What do you think the mountain god is?" He continued to ask Zhang Qishan.

"We just need to treat it as prey," Zhang Qishan said. "After so many years, have you seen anything more ferocious than us?"

At this time, a trembling voice came from behind Zhang Qishan, "Fo Ye, you have to know your enemies well so that you can win every fight. You mustn't underestimate your enemy. This thing has been alive for six hundred years. During those years, there must have been some courageous hunters wanting to kill it. But they didn't succeed, which means that this thing stands the test of time."

"I hate long-lived things the most." Zhang Qishan turned around and saw Old Ba holding a pistol in his hand as he shrank in on himself among the team.

"You'd better put the gun away before you accidentally shoot someone," Zhang Xiaoyu said.

Qi Tiezui smiled and tucked the gun back into his pocket. "Don't worry, I already made my calculations before we set off. This time, there won't be any surprises and dangers. There's even a love affair. Maybe when I return to the Miao village, there will be a Miao girl who will fall in love with me and the Qi family will have descendants."

“When you marry a woman from the Miao villages, you have to lie on a bamboo bed, and the bride’s female relatives will use their nails to pinch you until you have countless bruises. Since their girl has decided to marry you, they want you to pay back all the hardships she might encounter in the future before you get married. Did you know that?” Zhang Xiaoyu said.

“No. That’s not going to happen. My Miao girl will definitely feel bad for me and flee with me to Changsha before that.” Qi Tiezui touched his glasses and looked at the surrounding mountains. “Xiangxi is full of places that cultivate corpses. Fo Ye, do you think it’s possible that this mountain god is an old corpse in an ancient tomb in the valley that’s living in the exquisite soil?”

Zhang Qishan didn’t answer him. He was also looking at the surrounding mountains. The feng shui here was strange and changeable. Looking at the mountain from different angles, he could come up with three or four different explanations. It could even be said that this was an evil place. No wonder there were so many scary and mysterious stories in Xiangxi.

They continued their journey. To make a long story short, their group reached the densest part of the forest a week after they passed Heitianmen. The team tried their best to move forward and find a way into the valley. These horses were all very clever and would stop when they encountered dense shrubs. Then, the scouts would dismount and open the way for them.

During one of these times, the scouts suddenly came back, saying that there was the sound of flies gathering up ahead.

Zhang Qishan urged his horse to step on the bushes and entered the dense forest valley. There he saw the skinned corpse of a hunter hanging on one of the vines of a tree that obscured the sky.

The corpse had been dead for six or seven days, and the flies had gathered around it in a dense pack. Although the corpse’s feet were entangled in the vines, its head was buried in the mud. But the mud that his head was buried in was somewhat different from the surrounding soil.

## Chapter 5

Zhang Qishan used a tree branch to move the soil away from the corpse. They saw that the head had no skin or flesh, and there was a big hole in the top of the skull.

“The brain was sucked away,” Zhang Qishan said. “Old Ba, tell me what might cause this.”

“The ‘Classic of Regions Within the Seas: North’<sup>42</sup> mentions that Taoquans look like dogs and are green in color. When they eat people, they start from their heads. Qionggis look like tigers and have wings. They also start from the head when they eat people, but they’ll also eat the hair. Qionggis live further north of Taoquans. Some say that when Qionggis eat people, they start from their feet,” Qi Tiezui said. “The ‘Classic of Mountains and Seas’ says that both Taoquans and Qionggis start from the head when they eat people.”

Zhang Qishan looked back at him. “So you’re saying that I ate it.”<sup>43</sup>

“It’s also possible that a Taoquan ate it.” Qi Tiezui started to hide behind Zhang Xiaoyu.

Zhang Qishan cut the vine and the corpse fell to the ground.

Qi Tiezui continued, “There’s also a kind of monster in ‘Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio’.<sup>44</sup> We only know that it looks like a wild dog and eats human brains.”

“Why is the human skin gone?” Zhang Qishan asked. “Does this monster only eat skin and not meat?”

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<sup>42</sup> It’s the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of “The Classic of Mountains and Seas”, which is known as “Shan Hai Jing”. It’s a Chinese classic text and a compilation of mythic geography and beasts. Wiki link [here](#).

<sup>43</sup> Zhang Qishan’s tattoo is a Qionggi.

<sup>44</sup> “Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio”, or “Liaozhai Zhiyi”, is a collection of Classical Chinese stories by Pu Songling, comprising close to five hundred “marvel tales”. Wiki link [here](#).

“When monsters take skin, they take it in order to wear it instead of eating it,” Qi Tiezui said. “We have to be careful. Maybe the thing we’re hunting is dressed in human skin and looks like a human.”

“Maybe that’s your love affair.” Zhang Xiaoyu laughed. “Don’t shy away from it, Ba Ye. It *is* a mountain god after all.”

This place was far from the area that the leader had mentioned, so Zhang Qishan felt that things were a little weird. Why did they see such a sight here? The leader had said that wars had been going on for years. Was it true that the mountain god had been disturbed, left the depths of the mountain, and began hunting near the villages?

He took a moment to think things over, but at this time, a liquid suddenly dripped onto his face. He looked up and saw blood falling down from the branches. His eyes tracked the bloodstains and found that there was blood on the branches of all the trees here. There was even some blood on the vines and branches that formed a bloody line.

It was obvious that this corpse had been dragged along the branches and vines before it was finally dragged here.

Zhang Qishan moved forward to follow the blood and waved his hand, letting the others know to stay alert.

He was puzzled. At first, the scene looked like the hunter had been attacked by an underground monster, but now he seemed to have been attacked by something in the trees. Why did two such strange traces appear at the same time?

“Take a little bit of this soil with you. It doesn’t look like the soil around here to me. Let’s keep moving,” Ba Ye said to Zhang Xiaoyu before following after Zhang Qishan.

They made it less than a hundred steps before Zhang Qishan stopped again. There was another dead body. This one was also skinned and covered in flies.

But this thing didn't seem to be a human being. Zhang Qishan slowly approached it and found that it wasn't a beast, either. He had never seen such a carcass before. It seemed to only have two limbs and a very long body.

He looked back at Qi Tiezui, who was also very surprised. Qi Tiezui slowly approached Zhang Qishan, who was leaning against his horse with a solemn look on his face.

This was a monster.

Qi Tiezui looked at the carcass and said unconfidently, "Fo Ye, if I'm guessing right, this is an Erfu. It's a kind of snake."

"It has a human face."

"This thing is very fierce. It eats human brains and lives underground. The corpse just now should've been eaten by it. But it—" Qi Tiezui paused. "Why is it dead as well?" He wondered.

## Chapter 6

Zhang Qishan looked back at Qi Tiezui and smiled. “What was that? Could you repeat that again?”

“Fo Ye, this is a monster called Erfu. It’s a human-faced snake that eats human brains. The hunter we saw just now was eaten by it. But now it’s also dead, which means that there’s a more formidable monster here in the mountains,” Qi Tiezui said.

Zhang Qishan waved his hand. “Come here.”

Qi Tiezui felt that Zhang Qishan looked like he had ill intentions, so he immediately shook his head. “No. I’m not going.”

Zhang Qishan glanced at Zhang Xiaoyu, who nodded and kicked Qi Tiezui’s horse in the ass. The horse moved forward unhurriedly, but Qi Tiezui couldn’t get it to stop no matter how hard he tried. As a result, he ended up right next to Zhang Qishan.

Zhang Qishan looked at him and smiled evilly. Qi Tiezui covered his nose and looked at the Erfu’s carcass, finding that its neck had been twisted. But at this time, he also realized why Zhang Qishan had asked him to come closer.

This wasn’t a monster’s carcass. A person’s body had been attached to a big snake. Qi Tiezui smiled awkwardly at Zhang Qishan before his face turned grim. He was puzzled. “What is the meaning of this? Is there any purpose in connecting a human body with a snake? This place is already far away from any villages. Could it be—the Lisuma who did this?”

The Lisuma was a branch of the Lisu people.<sup>45</sup> Over the past few decades, they were usually seen in the jungles of Burma and Guangxi, or in Guizhou and Xiangxi. The Miao people called this branch of Lisu people “Guma

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<sup>45</sup> The Lisu people are a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group who inhabit mountainous regions of Myanmar (Burma), southwest China, Thailand, and the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. Wiki link [here](#).

people”<sup>46</sup> because there were some very strange Lisu tribal structures at that time. Some Lisu tribes were very developed and even had many villages, but some tribes were very primitive, wore clothes made of hemp, and practically lived under a system of slavery.

At that time, the Germans inspected this area and said that Lisu was actually a collective name for several ethnic groups of people. They called the primitive Lisu in the deep mountains “Old Lisu”. The Guma people were said to be a branch of the Old Lisu.

The Lisuma were nomads in the jungles who also had the custom of headhunting. Whenever they arrived at some place, they would hunt, eat, and live there. Moreover, each tribe had its own unique religious rituals.

Skinning people and connecting dead bodies together had to be something done by intelligent human beings, which was why it was feasible to attribute this to the Lisuma.

Zhang Qishan looked at the corpse silently, not making any conclusions. He gestured from atop his horse and everyone immediately dismounted. The group of people hid their horses in a well-trained manner before loading their guns and sharpening their daggers.

Zhang Qishan said, “We don’t know what’s killed these people, but it’s very naughty to be playing with corpses. In this world, the cruelest people I’ve ever seen are those who take delight in playing with corpses, even going so far as to act like those corpses are alive. But that isn’t the case here.”

Qi Tiezui immediately understood Zhang Qishan’s words and looked back at the “Erfu” corpse. Whatever had killed these people and treated their corpses as inanimate pieces of flesh that could be played with was a thing that had no secular humanity.

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<sup>46</sup> The Chinese characters of Guma are “古麻”. Gu (古) means “ancient, and “麻” means “hemp”. This refers to the next paragraph about how some of their tribes were primitive and wore clothes made of hemp.

The group of people put on cloaks of leaves that could conceal them and help them hide in the jungle. Zhang Xiaoyu said, "There's still a long way to go before we reach our destination. We can't stay here for too long. After night falls, we need to search this place thoroughly."

"Can we even find it?" Qi Tiezui asked.

"That thing is nearby." Zhang Qishan looked at the dense forest around him. The air was very humid and there was miasma everywhere. Although there was some sunlight, it was still stuffy in the woods so no one felt refreshed. "It's not going to venture far from its toy. It's probably watching us now."

"There are so many of us here that even tigers will be scared away by us," Qi Tiezui said. "Moreover, you're here and as formidable as ever. Look at you. What dares to approach you?"

Qi Tiezui looked around Zhang Qishan. It seemed that the blood in Zhang Qishan's body was more active and vigorous, so the miasma scurried away as soon as it got close to him. It was as if the whole person had a protective layer around his body.

Zhang Qishan looked at Qi Tiezui and thought for a while. "What you said makes sense. Let's change our strategy. Xiaoyu, let Ba Ye walk alone tonight as a bait. We'll follow him from behind."

Qi Tiezui's eyes widened. "Fo Ye, you're the one who's playing with humanity!"

"Don't worry," Zhang Qishan said. "You've made the calculations. There won't be any surprises or dangers."

The group of people began to laugh secretly. As Qi Tiezui immediately took out his copper coins and began to calculate again, Zhang Qishan said to Zhang Xiaoyu, "Xiaoyu, prepare that thing and put it on Ba Ye later."

"What thing?!" Qi Tiezui was startled again.



Zhang Xiaoyu held the child in his arms, teased it a bit, and said, “The secret weapon of the Zhang family. It’s the magic weapon of tomb robbing. You’re going to like it. Fo Ye, this child...”

“This child seldom cries. He’ll become an exceptional man in the future. Take him while you’re hunting. You need to protect him well.”

Zhang Qishan played with the child’s face and noticed that the child was staring at a tree above them with unwavering eyes.

Zhang Qishan suddenly felt alert and looked back at the tree.

There was nothing there.

## Chapter 7

A type of armor similar to chain mail<sup>47</sup> was put on Qi Tiezui's body, except that grenades had been attached all over it.

The night was getting darker, and the forest was full of the sounds of night owls and all kinds of insects.

It was even more humid at night, so almost everyone was completely wet. But there were hardly any mosquitoes since the Zhang family was around.

Qi Tiezui watched Zhang Xiaoyu fiddle with the armor and said, "What do you think? Does Fo Ye have something against me personally?"

"Fo Ye must have done this for a reason. Otherwise, he wouldn't have rashly put you in danger. He must be very confident that this will work."

"If he's that confident, can we just discard the grenades? There are still more than a dozen ears of corn in my bag. How about you replace the grenades with corn?"

"Fo Ye says that if you're dragged away by the monster, it'll probably be very difficult to save you, so you should just pull the grenade pins. That way, you'll be considered to have made great contributions to the eighty-two villages."

"Now I understand where Fo Ye's confidence comes from," Qi Tiezui said.

"Fo Ye says that you've done the calculations yourself, so you should be able to face your fate calmly," Zhang Xiaoyu said. "That's why you'll pull the grenade pins yourself."

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<sup>47</sup> Chain mail (often just mail or sometimes chainmail) is a type of armor consisting of small metal rings linked together in a pattern to form a mesh. Wiki link [here](#).

“I’ll never pull them. I’m going to scream for help until my last breath. I’m going to scream bloody murder so that Zhang Qishan will feel guilty for the rest of his life.”

“Don’t worry, Ba Ye. We’ll feel guilty about it.”

Zhang Xiaoyu finished preparing Qi Tiezui properly before giving him a wind lantern. It was specially made so that it could hang high above Qi Tiezui’s head from a stick that was inserted into the armor. That way, Qi Tiezui wouldn’t be invisible once he walked far away from them.

As all of the others hid in the darkness, Qi Tiezui suddenly couldn’t see anyone. It was as if he was the only person in the forest.

“They’ll feel guilty. They’ll feel guilty. Guilty, my ass!” Qi Tiezui took a moment to calm himself down before he decided to risk it all. Indeed, just as Zhang Qishan had said, Qi Tiezui was very confident in his calculations.

As a result, he walked into the forest with a swagger while singing, “Zhang Da Fo Ye treats people’s lives like dirt. He is heartless. I hold a steel whip in my hand and hit him with it... I can’t defeat him.”

Qi Tiezui was singing Shaoxing opera<sup>48</sup>, so he sang it with a heavy southern accent. He was betting that Zhang Qishan couldn’t understand the Shaoxing dialect since he was from the north.

After walking around for an hour, nothing happened. But as he walked around in circles over and over again, he started to feel a little scared since there was no movement behind him at all. He suddenly began to wonder if he was lost, which meant that there wasn’t a group of people behind him with a bunch of machine guns.

“Fo Ye, can you say ‘beep’ to let me know that you’re still around?” Qi Tiezui said to the surrounding bushes.

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<sup>48</sup> Yue opera, also known as Shaoxing opera, is the second most popular Chinese opera genre. Only Peking opera is more popular nationwide. Wiki link [here](#).

No one replied.

He walked a few steps and asked again, but there was still no answer. Qi Tiezui began to feel a chill running down his spine. “Fo Ye, don’t mess with me right now. Can’t you just throw a stone to let me know you’re here?”

There was still no reply. Moreover, Qi Tiezui suddenly realized that the sounds of birds and insects all around had disappeared at this time. There weren’t any other sounds in the entire forest besides the slight sound of droplets falling down from where they had condensed on the tree trunks.

“God damn it, don’t tell me that thing is around me right now,” Qi Tiezui said as he immediately touched a grenade pin and pulled out his pistol.

At this time, Qi Tiezui suddenly heard the sound of a baby crying coming from behind him. He immediately turned his head and realized that the sound was coming from the bushes six or seven steps behind him.

Qi Tiezui breathed a sigh of relief before tensing up again. The child cried, indicating that Zhang Qishan was six or seven steps away from him. But if the child cried, didn’t it mean that Zhang Qishan’s location had been exposed?

The sound of the child’s crying was getting louder and louder, and Qi Tiezui was a little unsure of what to do. Then, he heard the child’s crying start to approach him little by little.

Qi Tiezui suddenly felt that something was off. Was Zhang Xiaoyu crawling towards him with the child on his back? But why didn’t he hear any movements in the bushes?

While he was thinking this, there suddenly came another sound of a baby crying on his left.

Qi Tiezui was extremely surprised. *How come there are two babies?* It was already outrageous for them to bring a child into this dense forest, so why was there another baby here? Were there two children?

*Did the baby come out of the ground?*

If there was only one baby crying, Qi Tiezui wouldn't be able to tell who was who. But with the two babies crying at the same time, Qi Tiezui immediately realized that the baby on his left was the one they had brought with them from the village, because that child always cried half-heartedly.

But what was crawling towards him? The sound of that baby crying was almost right in front of him, so he raised his gun and got ready for a monster to come out of the darkness.

At this time, however, the sound of that baby rushing towards him suddenly disappeared, leaving only the sound of the crying child on Zhang Xiaoyu's back. Moreover, the sound of him crying was getting farther and farther away, as if Zhang Xiaoyu was carrying the child away from him.

Qi Tiezui was holding his gun and sweating profusely when he suddenly saw a person's shadow practically stand up right next to him. He was startled, but immediately realized that it was Zhang Qishan.

Zhang Qishan took a leap, rushed into the darkness in front of him, and hit something in one fell swoop.

*Fo Ye has always been by my side to protect me, Qi Tiezui thought to himself, suddenly realizing that Zhang Qishan had never been more than three steps away from him. He felt warm in his heart. That was what he meant when he said that he was very confident this would work. But I've been letting out a lot of smelly farts just now. Does this mean that Fo Ye...*

At this time, Qi Tiezui suddenly heard the sound of a baby shrieking in front of him and all the movements disappeared.

Zhang Qishan walked out of the darkness with a strange spherical object in his hand, and Qi Tiezui knew at a glance that it was the head of something.

"What did you eat last night?" Zhang Qishan asked him.

## Chapter 8

The group of people squatted on the ground. All of the wind lanterns were lit and the flashlights were turned on.

The monster that Zhang Qishan had killed was lying on the ground. It was around two meters long. Although it had short hands and feet, its body was very long and it was hairless. Its skin looked pale and wet.

Its head had been ripped off, probably the result of its neck being snapped before its head was forcibly torn off. When they put the head back, they could see a bloated human face that looked just like a bloated cadaver.<sup>49</sup> It had no hair, and its eyes were extremely small.

“Is this a Chinese giant salamander?”<sup>50</sup> Qi Tiezui suddenly had a revelation. Its crying just now and the way it looked made him think that this was a two-meter-long Chinese giant salamander.

Zhang Qishan pried open its lower jaw, revealing a dense row of rotten teeth in its mouth. They weren’t the teeth of a fish, but the teeth of a human being. Human teeth were very easy to identify, after all.

*This was a human being*, Zhang Qishan said to himself. “This was a person with deformities.”

“It’s human?”

“It was.” Zhang Qishan pressed the corpse’s muscles. “It would take more than a dozen years for the muscles to develop like this, so this thing was at least more than a dozen years old. It was a human with deformities. It probably lived in the water for a long time.”

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<sup>49</sup> “Bloated cadaver (巨人观)” is a term in Chinese that describes the second stage of human decay, which is bloating.

<sup>50</sup> One of the largest salamanders (and amphibians) in the world. It’s fully aquatic. Here’s a [pic](#).

“I really didn’t expect the mountain god to look like this,” Qi Tiezui exclaimed. “Just as I’ve said, no surprises or dangers. Fo Ye, I’m still quite competent. In the future, you can consider asking me to make calculations any time you’re going to do something. This time, we’ve gained victory as soon as the battle started. We haven’t even reached the destination yet, and this thing came to us. In the future, we’ll definitely be able to gain amazing feats in war.”

“Nothing is ever done so easily in this world,” Zhang Qishan said. “The legend of the mountain god has existed for a few hundred years. Moreover, the mountain god is able to reach such an impenetrable agreement with humans, which means that she’s quite intelligent. The mountain god has been living in the depths of the mountains, which shows that she has kept to her promise. This thing we’ve just encountered was playing with human corpses as if they were toys and even connected them to snakes. Its level of intelligence shows that it was still just a kid. Furthermore, it appeared at the edge of a densely populated area, which isn’t in accordance with the agreement. This isn’t the mountain god.”

“If this isn’t the mountain god, then is it a foreign monster?”

Zhang Qishan didn’t answer, but had his people gather the horses and get ready to set off.

Qi Tiezui knew that Zhang Qishan had come to a conclusion, so he kept asking him. After being questioned a few more times, Zhang Qishan finally said, “I’m wondering if this was the mountain god’s child. There wouldn’t be two ferocious things in a mountain. If there had been such a monster invading here, the mountain god definitely would’ve hunted it and marked her territory. But the mountain god was willing to let this monster play around here. This is more like an act of a mother indulging her child.”

“Woah, Fo Ye. Then the mountain god will definitely feel a lot of enmity towards us,” Qi Tiezui said. “Let’s bury it quickly. We’ve killed her son, so the mountain god will probably go into a murderous rage.”

Zhang Qishan picked up the head and threw it at the soldier behind him.  
“Find a pole and hang it up.”

“That’s not very nice, Fo Ye. People should be more merciful so that things won’t be too difficult in the future,” Qi Tiezui said.

“The reason we entered the mountain is to kill them all,” Zhang Qishan said.  
“What’s the point in us being merciful? How many parents and children in the eighty-two villages have been separated because of these monsters? Plus, we need their help to fight the Japanese.”

Just as Zhang Qishan finished his sentence, the soldier who had gone to get the horses ran back and shouted, “Fo Ye, this is bad. The horses!”

Zhang Qishan immediately ran after him. They rushed back to where they had hidden the horses and were met with the pungent scent of blood.

All of the horses were gone. There was blood everywhere on the ground and in the bushes and even more was dripping from above. Zhang Qishan looked up and saw that all of the horses were hanging in the trees. Their heads had been torn off, but there weren’t any traces of them. The bodies of the horses were bleeding heavily, the blood dripping onto the bushes like rain.

“Did that Chinese giant salamander do this?”

“No,” Zhang Qishan said. He looked around and suddenly shouted, “Xiaoyu!”

There was no answer.

“Has anyone seen Xiaoyu?”

All of the soldiers shook their heads. That was when Qi Tiezui remembered that Zhang Xiaoyu had run away with the child just now.

“Not good,” Zhang Qishan said. “This thing’s mother is nearby.” *Right. Mothers will never stray far away from their children. I was too careless.*



After Zhang Qishan finished speaking, they heard the sound of a baby laughing coming from the bushes in the middle of the bloody horses. All of the flashlights immediately turned to illuminate that area, but no one could see anything except for a bunch of flying insects.

Zhang Qishan walked over and found a baby covered in blood lying on the ground by the bushes. He picked it up.

It was the baby Zhang Xiaoyu had been holding in his arms. There was a severed hand under the baby's body that was holding onto the baby tightly.

The hand belonged to Xiaoyu. It had been torn off while Xiaoyu was alive.

Zhang Qishan moved his neck, his eyes becoming extremely solemn. The tattoo by his collar flashed.

At this time, he discovered that the child was still staring in one direction with an unwavering gaze. It was a pitch black spot slightly to his left that turned out to be a big tree. Since it was very dark and there was little light, only the shadow of the tree could be seen.

The baby looked at the tree and giggled. Zhang Qishan stared at the tree and suddenly realized that it wasn't a tree at all.

## Chapter 9

Zhang Qishan stared at the dark shadow which looked like a tree.

The baby's eyes seemed to be different from others since he could see things that were difficult to distinguish under complicated lighting. But the baby staring at the black shadow wasn't the only reason why Zhang Qishan had discovered that it wasn't a tree. At the same time, he had found that the appearance of the tree formed by dark shadows was very similar to the Chinese giant salamander he had just killed.

It appeared to be a Chinese giant salamander that was standing up, but because it was covered in so many leaves, it looked just like a big tree.

It would have been absolutely impossible for ordinary people to discover this kind of thing so easily in the dark. Even a trained person had to have someone else point in that direction for them to see it.

Zhang Qishan motioned first, and everyone looked over there. But Qi Tiezui couldn't see what was wrong at all, so he kept trying to look around.

"Are you the mountain god?" Zhang Qishan asked.

That "Chinese giant salamander" didn't move at all. Zhang Qishan pointed his flashlight directly at it, but it was blocked by too many tree canopies. He was just about to order everyone to shoot it when he heard Zhang Xiaoyu's voice from that "tree".

"Fo Ye, no. Don't...don't shoot," Zhang Xiaoyu said.

Zhang Qishan searched for Zhang Xiaoyu with his flashlight, and saw that the "tree" was slowly retreating into the darkness where the flashlight couldn't reach it.

Zhang Xiaoyu's voice also sounded more distant as the "tree" retreated. "This really... really is the mountain god. You can't shoot it."

The voice was getting farther and farther away until they gradually couldn't hear it anymore. Zhang Qishan's subordinates immediately wanted to give chase, but Zhang Qishan stopped them.

"Fo Ye!" The soldiers were all very anxious.

"It's trying to lure us in," Zhang Qishan said

"But Lieutenant Xiaoyu...."

"She can still remain calm even though we've killed her child. That isn't a monster. We mustn't underestimate the enemy." Zhang Qishan looked at the baby, who was looking in the direction the mountain god had disappeared to. "Something isn't quite right here."

## Chapter 10

Zhang Qishan frowned as he thought about what Zhang Xiaoyu had said.

He knew exactly what Zhang Xiaoyu's background was like. He wasn't some strong man from the villages. He was a brother who had followed him from the northeast. The northeastern Zhang family received a strict education and wouldn't easily draw conclusions on a matter unless they saw irrefutable evidence.

So, there had to be a solid basis for Zhang Xiaoyu to claim that this really was a mountain god and that they couldn't shoot it. If that was the case, then what signs would people see to make them think that a creature had to be a god?

As the miasma continued to permeate the area, everyone else gathered around. Zhang Qishan had them check their ammo. At the same time, he pointed at the mountains on both sides of the valley. When it came to tracking prey in the valleys, it was very easy to lose sight of them. If monsters were hiding in the dense forest, then there was a chance that people were unaware that they had failed to detect them. The best tracking method was to trek up the mountains on both sides of the valley where the view was good. That way, they could also look out for each other.

Qi Tiezui's expression was also very serious, but he was out of breath after all the trouble he had gone through tonight.

"Why wasn't your hexagram accurate?" Zhang Qishan asked him.

"My hexagram is definitely accurate," Qi Tiezui said. "If it's not, then there's only one possibility for this to happen."

"What is it?"

“Fo Ye, our opponent isn’t within Wuxing<sup>51</sup>, which means it isn’t something that belongs to our world. It may really be a mountain god.”

Zhang Qishan looked at the baby who was starting to fuss. It seemed that nothing could attract the baby’s attention now that the monster had left his sight, so he was a little unhappy.

Zhang Qishan was still wondering why Zhang Xiaoyu called this monster a mountain god. He must have seen something, but there was no time for Zhang Qishan to think about it now.

He had Qi Tiezui go to another team and lead them, while he took action according to his own ideas. He climbed up the left side of the ridge with his own team and the baby in tow.

When his people asked him why he let Qi Tiezui go to the other team, Zhang Qishan replied, “Ba Ye isn’t good at a lot of things, but he’s learned from his family and is a master at self-protection. Besides, if he’s not here with us, we can get closer to our target.”

Now that the two teams were separated, Zhang Qishan quickly led his group to the mountain on the left side of the valley. The trees were dense in this part of the forest, so they could hardly see the situation at the bottom of the valley as they walked around. As a result, they had to climb up to the tree canopies and look out over the valley from time to time.

Under the moonlight, the bottom of the valley looked like a sea of trees. The valley was very flat further in, like a small plain sandwiched between two mountains. Initially, they could see tree canopies shaking somewhere in the center of the valley, as if a giant beast was pushing the trees aside and moving forward.

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<sup>51</sup> Wuxing, usually translated as Five Phases, is a fivefold conceptual scheme that many traditional Chinese fields used to explain a wide array of phenomena, from cosmic cycles to the interaction between internal organs, and from the succession of political regimes to the properties of medicinal drugs. The “Five Phases” are Fire, Water, Wood, Metal or Gold, and Earth or Soil. Wiki Link [here](#).

After a period of time, the valley became very wide, the distance between the two mountains opened up, and the trees stopped shaking. They could only watch for any birds that were scared into flight. That was when they knew that something was moving under the trees over there.

After about two hours, they didn't see any more birds that were scared into flight, so they took the baby up to the tree canopy. The baby stared straight ahead at a certain place in the valley.

When the monster returned to its lair, there was a high probability that it would start eating, so Zhang Qishan knew that he couldn't wait any longer. He looked back at the opposite mountain, but because the distance was too far, he couldn't see Qi Tiezui and the others at all, nor could he see their lights. If he had guessed correctly, Qi Tiezui should still be in the position he was in about an hour ago because he walked twice as slow as Zhang Qishan.

Their group loaded their guns and then quickly entered the sea of trees at the bottom of the valley, rushing towards the place where the baby was staring. No one could march like them, for they saw the gaps between the trees and walked through them without much difficulty. Most of the places in the dense forest below were inaccessible since the tree roots were intertwined and the vines were like woven nets with various angles that spanned three hundred and sixty degrees. But Zhang Qishan and his people moved like water, quickly running and jumping between these obstacles without stopping. They quickly leapt through the gaps or simply climbed over them.

As they continued moving along, Zhang Qishan quickly realized why the mountain god had disappeared—there was a swamp below the sea of trees.

As it turned out, there was a lot of water in this valley. Before entering the swamp, the mountain god was probably crawling across the tree tops like an arboreal animal. But when it reached the swamp area, it immediately sank into the water. It probably swam quickly under the swamp and only came out of the water when it needed to breathe. This moment when it came out of the water was probably when the birds were startled into flight.

*If that's the case, I really hope Zhang Xiaoyu didn't drown, Zhang Qishan thought to himself.*

As they approached the area quickly, their surroundings became more and more quiet, and they soon found that the whole forest was silent. They couldn't hear the sounds of a single living creature at all.

Zhang Qishan also realized that he was close to his target, because he found that they had entered a special woodland area. The plants here were completely different from those on the periphery, and the forest close to the mountain god's habitat was full of banyan trees. Based on his experience, this banyan forest had actually been developed from a single banyan tree. One tree grew and became a whole forest.

In the center of this forest, there had to be a real "big tree" that he had never seen in his life before.

## Chapter 11

Banyan trees had a strong effect on soil consolidation. In banyan forests, there were so many mosquitoes and insects that the number was several times higher than those in the outside forests.

Zhang Qishan and his team saw that mosquitoes were filling almost all of the gaps here, but they couldn't hear any sounds around them. Not even the mosquitoes were making a sound. It was as if the creatures here had all evolved and weren't able to make any sounds.

One of the soldiers on the side caught a bug, but he couldn't get a good look at it under the moonlight so he put it in his mouth and chewed it. "It tastes of blood," he whispered. "It lives off of blood, but it doesn't taste like a mosquito."

Tasting water and insects was one of the Zhang family's techniques, because in many cases, it was necessary to rely heavily on taste and smell to judge the surrounding situation when visibility wasn't all that good.

Zhang Qishan and the others climbed the banyan trees and walked on the branches so as to avoid wading in the water. There were aerial roots everywhere here like curtains, which made for poor visibility. They continued moving forward until Zhang Qishan saw the big tree.

It really was a very huge banyan tree. It didn't have an independent trunk, because its body was made up of countless aerial roots that had grown upwards. And because these aerial roots were already thicker than ordinary big trees, the space between them was very narrow, which made it look like a single tree.

How big was it? In Zhang Qishan's opinion, it was like a wall in the forest. He waved his hand first, and everyone climbed down from their positions and began to crawl on the branches.



Almost all of the branches of these banyan trees were connected, and there were a lot of vines and moss on them that made it easier for the group to stay hidden. In the space inside this group of tree trunks, everything was pitch black.

Zhang Qishan lowered his head to look at the baby, who was staring at the innermost part of the group of tree trunks with an unwavering gaze. It almost seemed like the baby had some connection with this mountain god.

*The mountain god is in the darkness somewhere, right?* Zhang Qishan thought to himself. He couldn't wait any longer and waved his hand. Everyone began to crawl carefully towards the group of tree trunks.

As soon as they had arrived in the area of the tree trunks, Zhang Qishan immediately heard a gurgling sound coming from the depths of the space. They continued to crawl towards the darkness, moving ever so slowly until everything gradually became dark around them. The moonlight above their heads was the only thing left, but it was extremely difficult for it to shine through the tree canopies and illuminate the area below.

There were more mosquitoes here, but they didn't make a single sound as they flew around.

The gurgling sound was very strange and creepy, as if a monster was quickly swallowing a liquid.

Zhang Qishan moved his neck and thought to himself, *I really hope the monster isn't eating Zhang Xiaoyu.*

As they crawled towards the gurgling sound, they discovered that there were holes all over the trunks of these banyan trees. The holes had been dug out with claws, and they were full of bones. Although Zhang Qishan couldn't see clearly, he knew just by touch that they were both human and animal bones. The bones had all been strung together with hemp ropes woven from plant fibers. The larger bones were broken into pieces with stick-like objects going through them, almost like ornaments.

As he went further inside, he suddenly saw lights appear ahead of him. Zhang Qishan checked the people around him to ensure that they were all in the darkness. He wasn't sure if the others had caught up with him, but he continued to crawl forward carefully. He found that the huge trunk—or the middle of the group of tree trunks—was actually hollowed out.

About four or five huge aerial roots had been cut off, leaving only the most primitive main trunk of the banyan tree. It was a really huge tree trunk that would take more than thirty people holding their hands out just to surround it. Countless branches were radiating out from it.

One branch of the main banyan trunk was covered in wind lanterns, which was where the light was coming from. He figured they had all been left behind by the people the monsters had killed. The wind lanterns were all gathered together, but only one of them was lit. The huge monster was lying on a thicker branch below the branch holding the wind lanterns.

Zhang Xiaoyu was lying on the monster's body, motionless.

Under the wind lantern's weak light, the monster looked like a giant baby salamander or maybe an immature fetus that had enlarged indefinitely. The monster's skin was sickly pale. It was about six meters long, but its arms were even longer. Based on the distance between them, the monster only had to reach its hand out and it would be right in front of Zhang Qishan's face.

A soldier came out from the darkness further away and motioned to Zhang Qishan, asking if they should kill the monster.

Zhang Qishan waved his hand before trying his best to see what state Zhang Xiaoyu was in. Then he realized that Zhang Xiaoyu was interacting strangely with this huge "baby salamander".

If he had guessed correctly, based on their positions, it was as if the mountain god was breastfeeding Zhang Xiaoyu.

Zhang Qishan could see that Zhang Xiaoyu was lying on a protrusion on the monster's chest, which had to be its breast. When he looked closely, he could even see that the monster had hair and body hair. He couldn't see Zhang Xiaoyu's expression clearly, but it almost seemed as if he had passed out. Of course, the other possibility was that he was completely engrossed in sucking the milk.

The soldier far away from Zhang Qishan motioned and asked him what to do.

Zhang Qishan looked at the surrounding environment. It was too quiet here, so the monster was likely to spot them if they continued to get closer.

But based on the distance between them, if he leaped directly and took off at the fastest speed, he could pierce the mountain god's forehead with a dagger. In such dim light, he firmly believed that no animal could react within the three or four seconds it would take him to complete the action.

He also looked at the mountain god carefully but didn't see any traces of a "god". He couldn't understand what Zhang Xiaoyu had said before. Could it be that Zhang Xiaoyu felt a huge power difference when he fought against it?

But Zhang Xiaoyu's skills weren't weak. Among the several lieutenants under Zhang Qishan's command, Zhang Xiaoyu should be counted as one of the top three. Zhang Qishan truly shouldn't underestimate the monster since it could seriously injure Zhang Xiaoyu.

Moreover, what kind of monster was this and how did it come about? It had too many human characteristics to it.

As Zhang Qishan was thinking, Zhang Xiaoyu suddenly coughed. The monster held Zhang Xiaoyu up, and Zhang Qishan found that its breast milk was black. Furthermore, the monster's nails were firmly stuck in Zhang Xiaoyu's scalp, the nails piercing very deep into his head.

Zhang Qishan couldn't afford to think too much about it anymore and made three gestures. The first gesture indicated that he was going to make a surprise attack. The second one instructed everyone to fire together after his surprise attack seriously injured the monster, thus preventing it from chasing him before it died. The third gesture indicated that if his surprise attack failed, everyone would come out to attract the mountain god's attention. Then, they would wait and look for another opportunity to strike again.

After he gave his instructions, he slightly moved his joints, pulled out his bayonet, and held it in a reverse grip.

The monster's head was very big, so its skull had to be very thick. The bayonet had to pierce through its head completely for it to be seriously injured.

As he was thinking, he crawled to the top of the canopy, climbed up, looked at the position of a few branches, and suddenly accelerated with his most explosive strength.

In the first jump, he made it almost half the distance and landed on a middle branch. Then, he stepped on the branches and ran more than a dozen steps.

The monster instantly turned its head and looked at him, but Zhang Qishan had already made the second jump. He reached the monster's face and instantly thrust the bayonet at it, but Zhang Xiaoyu's body suddenly blocked Zhang Qishan's path of descent and he almost stabbed Zhang Xiaoyu.

Zhang Qishan immediately twisted his body and fell onto the monster's body, which was very slippery since it was covered in milk. Zhang Qishan slid down instantly and stabbed his bayonet into the monster's ribs to prevent himself from falling off the tree.

The monster opened its mouth wide but didn't scream. Its expression, however, was full of extreme pain and it instantly threw Zhang Qishan away.

Zhang Qishan controlled his posture and fell directly into the swamp below. At the same time, he heard gunshots ring out everywhere, which meant that the soldiers had started shooting.

Zhang Qishan climbed out of the water, grabbed an aerial root, and quickly climbed back to the tree trunk. All of the soldiers' gunshots instantly became inaudible, but he didn't have time to think about what was going on as he quickly climbed back into the tree canopy. As soon as he regained his footing, he saw Zhang Xiaoyu's face poking out of the darkness.

The mountain god was holding Zhang Xiaoyu's head in one hand and pulling Zhang Xiaoyu's body towards it.

Just as Zhang Qishan wanted to fire his gun, Zhang Xiaoyu opened his mouth and spoke, "Who are you?"

Zhang Qishan was stunned for a moment before he immediately realized that something was wrong. Zhang Xiaoyu's eyes were rolled into the back of his head and he wasn't conscious at all.

Who was talking to him?

Who was talking to him through Zhang Xiaoyu's mouth? Was it the mountain god?

"Are you the mountain god?"

"Why did you kill my child?" The mountain god showed its teeth to him as its face also peered out of the darkness. This thing had at least a dozen rows of teeth, all of which were messy and long. And now, its mouth was full of blood.

"Do you eat people?"

"People are delicious," the mountain god said through Zhang Xiaoyu. The movement range of Zhang Xiaoyu's mouth was exactly the same as that of the mountain god's own mouth, which made the whole scene look creepy.

“If you eat people, you must die,” Zhang Qishan said.

“I don’t want to die.”

“It’s not your decision to make.”

Zhang Qishan drew his gun at close range and aimed it at the mountain god’s forehead. In an instant, the mountain god used Zhang Xiaoyu to block its face.

## Chapter 12

Zhang Qishan couldn't fire. Even though the mountain god looked humongous, it moved very fast. Every time Zhang Qishan quickly moved the gun's muzzle, the mountain god used Zhang Xiaoyu to block itself.

Zhang Xiaoyu began to "laugh". In fact, every time the mountain god moved, it would laugh a few times.

Zhang Qishan became angry. On the one hand, he was angry that the mountain god was teasing him. On the other hand, he was angry that the mountain god was treating Zhang Xiaoyu like a doll.

He suddenly attacked. After throwing the gun straight up into the air, he rolled over and charged. As Zhang Xiaoyu slammed into him directly, Zhang Qishan moved like a loach and used his physical skills to duck under Zhang Xiaoyu's armpit.

This was a technique only humans would use. It was a skill for people to move themselves at the fastest speed while sticking close to the opponent. It was generally used for close combat.

The mountain god obviously didn't expect Zhang Qishan to make such a move, so Zhang Qishan's bayonet was in front of its face before it knew it. But Zhang Qishan didn't stab the mountain god's head. Instead, he went for the mountain god's elbow joint.

The bayonet immediately pierced the joint, going right through the cartilage. The mountain god wanted to withdraw its hand, but the joint was stuck. It couldn't move as easily as before and ended up hitting its hand on the branch on the side. Zhang Xiaoyu was instantly released from its hold and fell down.

Zhang Qishan was alarmed since they were still very high up, but the mountain god used its other hand to catch Zhang Xiaoyu in mid-air.

At this time, Zhang Qishan's gun finished its descent through the air. Zhang Qishan instantly caught it and put the gun directly against the mountain god's head.

"I will kill him if you shoot me," Zhang Xiaoyu suddenly said.

Zhang Qishan immediately fired, pulling the trigger so fast that all the bullets instantly shot out and hit the mountain god's head. The mountain god fell onto the branch and stopped moving, its brain matter and blood flowing out quickly and dripping down the branches.

When there was a stalemate, the more you hesitated, the more dangerous the situation would become for the hostages.

Zhang Qishan loaded another magazine and shot again and again until he shattered the mountain god's skull. Then, he went to grab Zhang Xiaoyu, who was hanging from the mountain god's hand.

The nails of this mountain god had firmly pierced through Zhang Xiaoyu's skull and went into his brain. They were so long and thin that they looked like needles. These needles seemed able to control people's speech once they were embedded in the human brain.

Zhang Qishan carefully pulled Zhang Xiaoyu off of the mountain god's nails, taking note of the wounds covering the other man's scalp. He put Zhang Xiaoyu on his back until he found a place on the branch where he could set him down. He felt Zhang Xiaoyu's heartbeat and found that it was still beating, but both of his eyes were rolled into the back of his head. Zhang Qishan had seen this kind of situation before. Most people who had been shot in the head all had this expression.

He didn't know if Zhang Xiaoyu could be saved, but he could at least stop the bleeding first. He then quickly flipped over to where the wind lanterns were and used one to signal to the others in the darkness.

None of his soldiers responded.



He lit the wind lanterns one by one and hung them everywhere on the branches, making the area as bright as possible.

There was blood everywhere. Some guns were scattered on the branches, some had been snapped to pieces, and some had fallen into the water. But there was no one in sight.

Zhang Qishan had an unpleasant feeling in his heart. Was it possible that his people had been killed just now? But the mountain god hadn't been that powerful, so why did his people suffer such a big loss?

As he was thinking, he suddenly heard the sound of a baby crying coming from the tree canopies above his head.

Meanwhile, Zhang Qishan was unaware that Qi Tiezui's team was already very close to this banyan forest. But Qi Tiezui didn't approach it and instead chose to remain in a tree canopy in the distance, looking anxiously at where Zhang Qishan was.

"Ba Ye, why aren't we moving?"

"That's a banyan tree, isn't it? A very big banyan tree?" Qi Tiezui asked.

The soldier nodded. "We scouted the place just now. It's a banyan tree. Fo Ye should have gone in by now."

"I don't think it's a banyan tree. No, it's not just a banyan tree. It's like a container."

"Container?"

"The container used by the Miao people to raise Gu."<sup>52</sup> Qi Tiezui looked at the banyan forest. "I get it. I get it now. That thing isn't a mountain god, but

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<sup>52</sup> The traditional preparation of gu poison involved sealing several venomous creatures (e.g., centipede, snake, scorpion) inside a closed container, where they devoured one another and allegedly concentrated their toxins into a single survivor, whose body would be fed upon by larvae until consumed. The last surviving larva held the complex poison. Gu was used in black magic practices such as manipulating sexual partners, creating malignant

it isn't something from our world, either. That thing is a Gu, which was cultivated by the ancestors of the Miao people. The Gu is to be raised and this is the Gu's longevity. The old leader who asked us to send the baby here wants to transfer the baby's lifespan to himself."

The soldiers didn't completely believe him, but Qi Tiezui just wiped his sweat and continued, "You have to find a way to notify Fo Ye about it. He has to leave there as soon as possible."

"Ba Ye, didn't you say that you predicted that we would be safe on this journey?"

"This Gu isn't something in the human world. It's neither human nor ghost, so my calculations may not be accurate. But I didn't expect my calculations to be this wrong. There must be another reason for it." Qi Tiezui's face turned pale. "There are three things our Qi family don't calculate. First and foremost, we don't make calculations about people who have Qilin tattoos. We aren't sure about these people, so we may not be able to make accurate calculations about them. It might even result in bloodshed if we make calculations about them. I remember that Fo Ye doesn't have a Qilin tattoo, and none of you have Qilin tattoos either. Is it possible that the mountain god was a human before becoming a Gu?"

Not only was it a human being, but it was also a woman. A woman with a Qilin tattoo. That was why he couldn't see in his hexagram what effect this person would have on the whole incident.

Since this mountain god was a human before, was she from the main branch of the Zhang family? Was this the place where the Zhang family cultivated Gu? Was it something that had been designed a long time ago?

Qi Tiezui pinched his fingers and did the calculations again, his brows furrowed. *A Qiongqi met a Qilin. Fo Ye is back to his old job.*<sup>53</sup> *This is fate.*

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diseases, and causing death. According to Chinese folklore, a gu spirit could transform into various animals, typically a worm, caterpillar, snake, frog, dog, or pig. Wiki link [here](#).

<sup>53</sup> He meant that Fo Ye met people from the main Zhang family again after he wanted nothing to do with them.

*Although I can't figure out the calculations, it's fate that these two people met each other here.*

*Wait, that's not right. Qi Tiezui felt that it was too coincidental. Then who's the person with a Qilin tattoo? Shit, is it the baby?*

In the banyan forest, Zhang Qishan had climbed up to the tree canopies and was slowly moving in the direction where the sounds of the baby crying were coming from.

He had twisted the mountain god's head off and hung it by the wind lanterns. Zhang Xiaoyu lay in the original spot where Zhang Qishan had left him, still in a deep coma.

As he gradually moved forward, Zhang Qishan saw the baby standing on a branch by himself in the depths of the tree canopies, pretending to cry.

He was fake crying. Although the baby was making crying sounds, his expression was calm and he was staring at Zhang Qishan with an unwavering gaze. Not only could he see Zhang Qishan, but he also seemed to see him clearly.

"Who exactly are you?" Zhang Qishan asked.

The other party didn't answer, but staggered and walked towards Zhang Qishan while making a gesture asking for a hug.

## Chapter 13

When Qi Tiezui saw that the soldiers weren't making any moves, he muttered something under his breath and started crawling towards the banyan forest.

The soldiers immediately followed him, and that was when Qi Tiezui realized that these soldiers wouldn't act of their own accord unless they received precise orders.

Fo Ye had given him the right to command, so he had to command them by himself.

Although Qi Tiezui was a civilian assistant, he also knew that human lives were essentially pawns on a chessboard when it came to fighting in wars. Some people had it in them to pave the way with human lives and destroy others for the greater good. There were few people who could play the game without making mistakes when human lives at stake.

He thought about it carefully and knew that he couldn't really do much if he commanded them. After all, if something happened and people died because of him, not only would he feel guilty for the rest of his life, but he would also carry a lot of bad karma.

It would be better if he treated everyone like how he treated himself, so he waved at the people behind him and instructed everyone to climb like caterpillars. After that, they moved towards the banyan forest bit by bit.

After climbing for several hours, a soldier behind Qi Tiezui said, "Ba Ye, it will be dawn by the time we get there. Do you still want to save Fo Ye?"

"I'm saving you." Qi Tiezui's head was covered in a cold sweat. "With Fo Ye's abilities, he can definitely make it if he escapes. It's just a question of whether he's willing to run for his life or not."

"Why wouldn't Fo Ye be willing to run for his life?"

“When has he ever run for his life?” Zhang Qishan was the kind of person who flexibly changed strategies, but he would definitely attack without hesitation as long as there was a chance of succeeding.

Inside the banyan forest, Zhang Qishan did exactly what Qi Tiezui had thought he would do. The thought of leaving here had never even crossed his mind. He stared at the baby in the dark, not moving his eyes away as the baby stared back at him.

“What are you exactly?” Zhang Qishan asked.

The baby giggled and then stopped when he was thirty steps away from Zhang Qishan. Zhang Qishan pointed his gun at him, which stunned the baby for a moment. Then, the baby’s expression turned ferocious.

During this period of time, the baby’s expression sometimes looked ferocious, sometimes adorable, and sometimes cunning. It was as if he hadn’t completely forgotten the memories of his past life and they were still influencing him to some extent.

Almost at the same time, Zhang Qishan saw a pattern start to appear on the baby’s body.

Only part of it could be seen through the waning moonlight but it was obviously an unfinished tattoo.

A small portion of the Zhang family’s tattoos would first appear during infancy, but they could already tell by the scales whether it was going to be a Qilin or a Qiongqi.

“A Zhang?” Zhang Qishan was surprised. Did the old man in the village take a child from the Zhang family and give it to the mountain god in exchange for a longer lifespan?

Did he do this for ultimate longevity?

Where did this child come from?

The baby was extremely vigilant. Zhang Qishan put his gun away, snapped off a banyan branch from the side, and made a toy similar to a cat toy.

This was one of the few toys that his father had made for him when he was little, and one that he still remembered how to make.

He teased the baby with it. The little baby's motion capture ability was very strong and he was quickly attracted by the toy. He gradually relaxed and began to laugh.

Zhang Qishan went over and picked the baby up again.

At this time, the little baby's face suddenly turned ferocious again, but he wasn't looking at Zhang Qishan. Instead, he was looking at something behind Zhang Qishan.

Zhang Qishan turned his head and saw the mountain god crawling over with its head drooping down. It instantly flung its arm out and knocked Zhang Qishan off the branch.

Zhang Qishan changed his movements in the air, fell into the water, and immediately lifted the child out of the water.

As the huge mountain god jumped down from the tree canopy above, Zhang Qishan saw that there was a human head under its armpit.

Conjoined twins!

## Chapter 14

That little head happened to be exactly where the mountain god's breasts were. Zhang Qishan realized that the mountain god probably hadn't been breastfeeding Zhang Xiaoyu just now. But did that mean that the little head been kissing Zhang Xiaoyu instead?

The small head couldn't open one of its eyes and it looked like it wasn't in a particularly comfortable position, so Zhang Qishan was able to successfully avoid the first blow.

He turned his head and saw that there was a submachine gun stuck on a tree stump. He instantly rushed over, held the child in one hand, and then raised the submachine gun with the other hand.

The barrel of the gun was bent.

He escaped another blow, raised his hand, and threw the child into the air so that he could forcefully bend the barrel straight again.

As the monster's eyes followed the child, it used its claws to swat at the child. Zhang Qishan raised his gun and fired, causing the mountain god to withdraw its hand upon impact.

By the time Zhang Qishan jumped up and caught the child again, the mountain god had already hidden itself in the darkness between the tree branches.

Zhang Qishan directly followed the child's gaze and shot wherever the child was looking at. The mountain god was tossing around in the dark, but the trail of light left by the bullets continued to follow it. The projectile motion looked as if someone was peeing at where the mountain god was.

But all of a sudden, there weren't any bullets left. The mountain god rushed out of the darkness, its body already covered in bullet marks. Zhang Qishan

found that the small head was controlling the body, but it wasn't moving as smoothly as before.

He thought for a moment and then suddenly jumped onto the tree, hung the child on the branch, and directly charged at the mountain god. The mountain god went to attack him with its palm, but he turned around in the air, avoided its palm, and instantly grabbed its wrist. He swung around in the air before he landed and rushed towards the monster again.

The monster leaned down, its movements slower now since its legs were in the swamp. Zhang Qishan moved at his fastest speed and reached the monster's feet in an instant. Now he could reach its pelvis.

The monster hunched over and tried to wrap its arms around him so that it could pin him down, but Zhang Qishan ducked under its armpit like he did earlier when he rescued Zhang Xiaoyu. He immediately circled around the mountain god and flipped onto its back, piercing the monster's back with both hands. He then pinched its spine, put his feet against the monster's back, and gave a shout as he forcefully pulled his hands out. He managed to tear half of its spine out, the spinal fluid and nerves splashing everywhere. The monster twitched all over and then fell into the swamp.

Zhang Qishan also fell into the swamp, but he climbed out of it and quickly went up to the head that was under the monster's armpit.

He pulled out the bayonet that was still lodged in the monster's joint, aimed it at the head, and then stabbed it directly. The head wasn't protected by a skull at all and deflated like a urine bag, the brain inside flowing into the water like tofu.

The monster was completely motionless now.

As Zhang Qishan stood there panting, he discovered that he had six or seven deep wounds on his body. He didn't know when he had gotten injured, but the wounds weren't critical.

*It's still mortal after all,* he thought to himself as he looked at the monster.



He climbed back to the branch and grabbed the baby once more. The kid was no longer looking at the monster; it seemed that he wasn't interested now that the thing was dead.

"How could you be a child of the Zhang family?" Zhang Qishan looked at the baby, already feeling relaxed. At this time, however, he found that the baby's eyes were still looking in a certain direction.

*Why aren't things over yet?* Zhang Qishan thought to himself.

As he returned to where Zhang Xiaoyu was, the baby continued to look in the other direction. After checking Zhang Xiaoyu and finding that his condition was stable, Zhang Qishan grabbed a nearby wind lantern and threw it at the place that the baby was looking at.

The wind lantern flew up, hit the canopy, and broke, the burning kerosene quickly illuminating the area.

Zhang Qishan saw a huge, old brass coffin sitting in the tree's canopy. It was wrapped in aerial roots and vines to such an extent that it had almost integrated with the tree.

Zhang Qishan could see that it was inlaid with gems of various colors. Although they looked dim because of the dust, they still reflected halo-like flashes of light under the firelight.

The baby kept looking at the coffin, not moving his eyes away from it for a second.

## Chapter 15

Zhang Qishan couldn't find the other soldiers anywhere, and there weren't any corpses either.

He cut the mountain god's belly open and found that it was full of minced meat. He could see the remains of military uniforms, as well as bullets and belt buckles.

This meant that his soldiers had all been eaten and chewed to shreds.

He stood in front of the mountain god's body, not speaking for a long time.

Death was death, and there was no difference between suffering and not suffering. But these people had all been alive when they first arrived.

He saw a flare gun among the minced meat, so he took it out, climbed to the top of the tree canopy, and fired a flare into the sky.

As fate would have it, the people who had followed Zhang Qishan were all dead—with the exception of Zhang Xiaoyu, who was the first person to get seriously injured—while those who had followed Qi Tiezui were still alive.

This was always the case. The number of people he brought with him when he left the Northeast became fewer and fewer. Although they weren't all from the Zhang family, it was starting to become rare for him to hear the accent of his hometown.

He couldn't help but feel sad about it, but he didn't dwell on it too much.

Soon after, he heard Qi Tiezui's group whistle from the edge of the forest. Zhang Qishan replied back and had them come to him so that the two sides could reunite.

The group was silent upon seeing the miserable scene. Some people began to carefully tend Zhang Xiaoyu's wounds while some took care of the baby.

Qi Tiezui looked at Zhang Qishan and patted him. Zhang Xiaoyu's skull had been pierced, but they didn't know whether his brain was injured. The fact that the mountain god could control people by putting its nails into human brains was very mysterious.

"Do we tell Zhang Xiaoyu the truth after he wakes up?" Qi Tiezui asked.

"We'll tell him the truth. If we lie to him, he'll only be able to come to terms with half of the matter. It's only when we tell him the truth and he accepts it that he can get over it. And once that happens, it means he's really recovered from it."

"Fo Ye, it's not easy to get over this kind of thing."

"When it comes to truly painful things in the world, they're all difficult to get over. But the pain will pass eventually."

"Ordinary people will get old, but you—"

"This is a fact that already exists. We have nothing to complain about."  
Zhang Qishan gave Qi Tiezui a look, and then the two of them climbed to where the coffin was.

Zhang Qishan asked what Qi Tiezui thought of it. "This is a copper coffin. Copper was like gold in ancient times, so they treated brass like it was gold. The coffin seems to be from the Han Dynasty. Why is it on a tree?"

"That's what I'm asking you."

Qi Tiezui took a closer look and said, "Look at this. This vine grew out of the coffin and coiled around the banyan tree. I've never seen anything like this before. In our family, we need to learn pharmacology and how to identify herbs. If we're in other places, it's reasonable for me to not recognize what herb it is since I didn't learn pharmacology very well. But do you see how this vine is growing? Have you seen anything like this before?"

Zhang Qishan took a closer look. Indeed, there was a vine growing out of the coffin, and the leaves on it were a bit like curled nails. All the leaves were curled up, which made it seem very different from the plants they had seen before.

“This is an ancient coffin, but do you see how the vine comes out of this hole in the coffin?” Qi Tiezui pointed at a hole in the coffin. “This seems to be a deliberate design. When someone put the corpse in the coffin, they knew that something would grow out of the corpse.”

“What if some seed just fell into this hole?”

“Look here.” Qi Tiezui pointed at the embossed pattern on the coffin. Zhang Qishan saw that the pattern painted on it was that of a vine growing out of the coffin, as if a tongue was sticking out of the coffin.

This relief had been carved with an extremely small awl, and in order to make the grooves deeper, each line must’ve been struck thousands of times so that they wouldn’t oxidize.

*So this is a potted plant.* Zhang Qishan thought to himself. “What kind of vine is this?” Qi Tiezui illuminated the vine’s leaves with his flashlight. “Does it have anything to do with the mountain god?”

“Call someone up and open the coffin,” Zhang Qishan said. “This coffin being here must have something to do with the monster. The villages bring babies here and sacrifice them every year in exchange for longevity. These are all clues. Open the coffin and see if there’s any evidence inside of it.”

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End of The Mystic Nine Vol. 2

## **Chen Pi Ah Si's Extra**

# Chapter 1 Spring Killing

There was a layer of mist on the surface of the Yangtze River, and the sun was shining through the white fog. When the children went running past, Chen Pi, who had been sitting in the cold wind by the riverside, felt a little tired. He straightened the bamboo pole in his hand, shrank his neck back into his shirt collar, and leaned against the tree to continue his previous nap.

Before, he had been dreaming that he was by the sea, watching the fishing boats come back to shore. It was always a big event whenever the fishermen returned because many died at sea. Some old women were waiting for them impatiently on the beach, so Chen Pi looked at their expressions. As the sun sank to the horizon, he watched their faces gradually change from hope to despair.

The children stopped beside Chen Pi again and looked at him curiously. The beggar had been sitting there all day but didn't catch a single fish and had been sleeping the whole time. He didn't even lift the fishing rod up. This beggar was lazy enough not to wander around the market and too lazy to even fish by the river. Their parents had already warned them about him.

The children stood nearby and threw pebbles into the river, many of which landed in the lake in front of Chen Pi. They started to sing: "lazy beggar, hungry belly, copper coins rolling into the Yangtze River, begging mother, pure rubbish; the water for washing feet is full of dirt, and all the dirt on your body can be rubbed into dough. Cover the bucket to worship Buddha."<sup>54</sup>

Chen Pi didn't lose his temper. Those living by the river had diverse accents, so he couldn't really understand what they were saying. These children pulled the boatmen's tow-ropes, while their fathers either worked as barge haulers on shore or were fisherman. The children were a mixed group of

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<sup>54</sup> It's a Wuhan nursery rhyme. The kids are basically being little shits.

varying ages. They would run up and down the shore every day and make trouble everywhere, which was very annoying.

Seeing that Chen Pi didn't respond, the brats started throwing pebbles at him. There were eight- or nine-year-old children among them who were actually quite strong. A pebble hit the drowsy Chen Pi on the head, surprising him, but as soon as he turned his head, the brats ran away in a hubbub. There was only one brat left, and he continued to throw pebbles at Chen Pi without paying attention to where the others had gone.

Chen Pi recognized this child as Chun Shen, whom all the other children called Silly Shen. He seemed to be dumber than his peers, his reactions were slower, and his throwing was uncoordinated, so the pebbles landed very close to him rather than Chen Pi. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't seem to hit him.

It was only when Chen Pi stood up and grabbed the back of his collar that the child thought of turning and running away. Chen Pi picked the brat up, walked over to the river, and threw him in.

The child struggled in the water. Children who lived by the river were very good at swimming, but Chen Pi used all his strength to kick the brat down every time he reached the shore. Slowly, the brat started to turn pale and sink.

Chen Pi lazily went back to the tree he had just been leaning against and pulled the bamboo pole up. It was very heavy, meaning that the bait below was also very heavy. After lifting it up, the whole fishing pole was bowed.

He pulled the bait out of the water, dragged it to shore, and then glanced at it. It looked like a big lump of rocks and hair all mixed together, but it was actually a rotting corpse stuffed full of rocks. He had recently found it in a mass grave on the outskirts of the city. The corpse had a very long braid, and

he didn't know whether it was a Qing Dynasty relic<sup>55</sup> or a woman. Chen Pi had tied the long hair into various knots and managed to pull up countless crabs whose feet had become entangled in them.

He picked the crabs out one by one, snapped off their pincers, and then tied them to some nearby sticks. He put the broken pincers into his pocket like melon seeds, and then grabbed one and ate it. At the same time, he kicked the corpse back into the river.

At this time, he saw Chun Shen pop up from the river one last time and swim to shore.

Unfortunately, it was high tide on the Yangtze River, so the water was an arm's length away from the shore. He had no strength to climb up and could only lean there while holding onto the rocks. His face had turned pale with the cold, but Chen Pi looked at him coldly and went to lift his foot up.

At this time, he found that the brat wasn't crying, but looking back at him dully, as if he was too stupid to even cry.

Chen Pi looked at the brat and felt that he was a bit like himself when he was a child. But whether it was back then or now, it didn't make a difference whether they lived or died, so Chen Pi kicked him back into the river. Chun Shen sank into the water without making a sound.

Chen Pi walked back to the city while eating crab legs in the sunset. He passed by Chun Shen's group of friends in the distance, who were looking for Chun Shen and calling his nickname. When they saw Chen Pi again, they started throwing threw stones at him, but he didn't care. He had eaten enough tonight, so now he had a big plan to put in motion. He was going to change his situation.

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<sup>55</sup> He's talking about the queue (or cue), which is a hairstyle worn by the Jurchen and Manchu people of Manchuria, and later required to be worn by male subjects of Qing dynasty. The hair on top of the scalp is grown long and is often braided, while the front portion of the head is shaved.



## Chapter 2 The Six Words of Life

There was a Mahuo Temple by the sandy lakeshore on the outskirts of the city, which seemed to belong to a “grassroots religion” that followed the Taoist teachings. The past few years had been rife with chaos and war, so these kinds of religions had sprung up everywhere. Candles and incense burned all night inside the temple, and beggars would gather outside in hopes of receiving the discarded tributes that had been tossed out. When Chen Pi arrived and found a place in the corner, the other beggars quickly got out of the way.

In regions that had docks, beggars would usually be able to acquire a big pot that they could cook some water and spices in for a few meals. Chen Pi found an earthen stove, took out a broken bowl, and boiled the crabs using the lake water. He then pulled a wooden board out from underneath the straw he was squatting on, as if it was his precious possession.

This was the window board he had stolen from the tailor shop on Dashengfu Street in Hankou. The back of the board had been painted red, and a few words had been written on it: one hundred coins, kill one person.

(In 1932<sup>56</sup>, Changsha suffered a fly disaster so terrible that they offered twenty coins for every twenty flies that were killed. In six days, six hundred thousand flies had been killed. He could also get a hundred coins if he killed a hundred flies, but Chen Pi found that killing a hundred flies was much more difficult than killing one person.)

He wiped the board as he chewed on the crab legs. When he was done eating, he took the board to the streets, avoiding Dashengfu Street as he looked for an alley to post up at. When he found one, he leaned the board against the wall and then squatted beside it.

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<sup>56</sup> It really said Ren Shen (9<sup>th</sup> year of the 60-year cycle)

He had been doing this for three days. There were many legends as to how this came about, and the most famous one in the future was related to Xi Xiucan, a man from a Japanese foreign firm.

It was said that Xi Xiucan was a very interesting man, who had seven fingers on his left hand. He was nicknamed Xi Qi<sup>57</sup> because the foreign firm had the character “Xi” in its name. But now that the firm was gone, Xi Xiucan—who had worked for the Japanese—didn’t have any new job prospects. Even his house had been taken over by the government. He set up a street stall some time ago, saying that he would write things for others in exchange for some coins. He also stayed close to the Mahuo Temple’s walls, but the beggars knew he had worked for the Japanese, so they beat him and broke his pens every day. He would always yell, which annoyed Chen Pi to no end. But the Mahuo Temple’s miao Zhou<sup>58</sup> soon gave him a job of copying the names of those who lit incense at the temple.

Xi Xiucan had to hold his pen in a strange posture because of his seven fingers, which made his calligraphy very powerful. The miao Zhou liked how the thin gold lines he wrote were very strange and said that people with five fingers couldn’t do it.

“This can only be done by someone who has either seven fingers or very long fingers; otherwise, even the great Zhang Yuzhao<sup>59</sup> wouldn’t be able to write it.” Xi Qi was often heard saying.

He would copy the names of those who lit incense every day and get ten coins for it. The temple was very popular, so his hands would swell up, but he finally had a bite to eat. Moreover, the beggars wouldn’t dare fight him, but they would still spit on him and curse him out whenever he passed by.

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<sup>57</sup> Xi (喜)= to be fond of/to like/to enjoy/to be happy. Qi (七)=seven

<sup>58</sup> Acolyte in charge of incense in a temple

<sup>59</sup> Famous calligrapher. Lived from 1823-1894.

For some unknown reason, he suddenly started to take notice of Chen Pi. He would send him some leftovers and even seemed to regard Chen Pi as his friend, coming over and trying to make small-talk with him.

Chen Pi obviously knew that Xi Qi was pretending to be familiar with him since he had killed no less than four or five beggars after coming here. The beggars were split into two groups known as the “Sha Hulu” and the “Caisheng Zhege”<sup>60</sup>, and they constantly fought over the Hanchang territory. They were far more vicious and cruel than ordinary people and would be buried on the spot whenever they died. They were beggars, after all, so no one cared about them.

But when they came up against someone like Chen Pi, they couldn’t do anything. If you tried to kill him, he’d kill you, and if you spit on him, he’d kill you too. No matter whether it was day or night, if you messed with him, you’d definitely die. As a result of this, everyone left him alone and didn’t even dare to look at him.

Xi Qi was a very observant person, so once he saw this, he knew he could get the better life he was craving. As a result, he pretended to be close to Chen Pi. Although Chen Pi was annoyed by it, it was too troublesome to find food by himself, so he played along. But Chen Pi also kept thinking that this Xi Qi wasn’t an ordinary person.

Chen Pi had seen a lot of people’s eyes and knew what an ordinary person looked like. Even if someone were to dress luxuriously, Chen Pi would still be able to tell that they were an “ordinary person”. But Xi Qi wasn’t. Whatever he was thinking wasn’t on an ordinary level.

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<sup>60</sup> “Sha Hulu”= Kill/Murder Gourds (I’m assuming they’re the ones that just hold out the bowl and beg for coins/food). “Caisheng Zhege”= Harvesting and cutting (like organs). It’s basically a special term for the most vicious professional beggars. They would artificially create cripples or “monsters” as a pretense to win the sympathy of the world, so as to obtain a lot of money from passers-by. They’d catch a normal living person like a young child, and use a knife, axe, or other method to turn them into a strangely shaped “monster”.

But Chen Pi didn't have time to figure out what Xi Qi was thinking, because the seven-fingered man got the plague and died shortly thereafter. When he had died, he was still copying the names of those lighting incense.

Before he died, however, he told Chen Pi something.

As he lay dying on his bed, he used Chen Pi's stolen board as a writing desk to keep copying the names. He hadn't been able to ask a doctor for help before things took a turn for the worse, and now he was even more desperate. "When I used to write before, the Japanese would give ten silver dollars, while the Chinese only gave ten small coins. It's obvious why I would work for the Japanese. But now that the Japanese are gone, the Chinese won't even give me a coin for my words and want to kill me. Back then, how many other people wanted to work for the Japanese? They're not angry with me for working for the Japanese, they're jealous of the silver dollars I earned."

As he spoke, he sounded more and more resentful: "It's not like those doctors haven't treated the Japanese for silver dollars, right?"

Chen Pi asked him: "Are you angry with them?"

"Of course, I'm angry. I want to tear the flesh from their bones." Xi Xiucai said viciously. He was no longer cautious around Chen Pi like he had been before, and Chen Pi knew that he wasn't afraid of him anymore. There was no need to fear death when it was right around the corner.

"If you're angry with them, why not kill them?" Chen Pi wondered aloud.

Xi Xiucai froze for a moment before suddenly bursting into laughter. He was laughing so hard that he ended up coughing violently. Once he recovered, he showed a grim expression that Chen Pi still vividly remembered, and said: "I learned one thing working in that foreign firm that we Chinese can't compare with. Before ever doing anything in the firm, the Japanese would always ask: what's the advantage? Has anything good ever come of killing people, Chen Pi? You've killed so many people, yet you're still a beggar. It

means you've killed all those people in vain. Killing them hasn't done anything good for you at all."

Chen Pi stared at Xi Xiucai for a while. He didn't immediately understand, but he suddenly felt that he was on to something. Xi Qi slowly removed the yellow paper he had been working on and wrote on the board: one hundred coins, kill one person.

"These six words are for you. All the glory, splendor, wealth, and rank you can ever hope to achieve in this life is on this board."

Those were the last words Xi Qi ever said to Chen Pi.

## Chapter 3 Chun Shen

The legend of Xi Qi was very famous among those in the Mystic Nine. In fact, you could find some information on Xi Qi Xiucan if you went to Hankou, but it was impossible to tell whether it was true or not. Whatever the case, many people in Wuhan still remembered Chen Pi holding up his “one hundred coins, kill one person” signboard during the early years. The only thing was, when Chen Pi first set up his booth, people passing by would say that he was crazy and no one would be interested in what he had to offer. Some people would even point and sneer at him.

Chen Pi only remembered the look in Xi Qi’s eyes before he died, and couldn’t help thinking that he wasn’t an ordinary person. Xi Qi often said that he should have met a noble person, but ended up meeting Chen Pi instead. It wasn’t a fated meeting, but it was still enlightening.

Over the past few days, Chen Pi survived off of the crabs he caught and then went to the market to set up his killing stall. As usual, the brats came by the river to stir up trouble, acting as if they weren’t missing one. The people here were poor and destitute, so it wasn’t surprising if one suddenly went missing. Chen Pi ignored them like usual. As the days went by and winter came to Hankou, the crabs were getting harder and harder to catch. But the military was all over the city, so he didn’t dare rob or steal. Instead, Chen Pi went to the dock to see if he could find some work to survive the winter.

No one had come to visit his stall after all this time, and he couldn’t help but wonder if Xi Qi was just talking crazy before he died.

On this day, he hunched close to the stove, warming himself in a daze. The “one hundred coins, kill one person” plank wasn’t as precious as before, and lay under his butt, seemingly forgotten. One could see that the words on it were quite faded. A sudden pain exploded in his head and it took him a second to realize he had been hit with a stone. When he opened his eyes, he saw a boy sticking his nose up at him and throwing stones at him.

He was stunned. That expressionless face was none other than Silly Shen, the brat he had kicked into the water before. The kid didn't die and actually looked as if he'd gained some weight.

While he was still in a daze, Chun Shen threw two more stones and hit him on the head hard, causing him to see stars. They hadn't seen each other for a while, but the fool had become much more skilled at throwing stones. When Chen Pi blocked the next stone and stood up, Chun Shen immediately turned and ran away, hiding behind a big man.

The big man raised his head and looked at Chen Pi. His eyebrows were very similar to Chun Shen's, so he was either his father or his uncle. The two men stared at each other for a while. The strong man didn't speak but continued standing in front of Chun Shen.

The Yangtze River barge haulers were not only very fierce but also very tight-knit. Chen Pi instinctively took a step back as his killing intent surged up again, but he immediately saw the soldiers close by on the dock.

Chen Pi remembered that this man was one of the foremen on the dock who everyone listened to. Now that the dock was busy handling all the military goods coming in, it would be unwise to go up and fight him. The soldiers wouldn't arrest the foreman, and Chen Pi might even be beheaded if he disturbed their logistics.

He glared at Chun Shen and then shrank back as he comforted himself with the idea that he killed for money now. If it wasn't particularly convenient, then he wouldn't do it. He hoped he wouldn't see the brat next spring; otherwise, he'd have to kill him. But if he didn't end up seeing him, he'd let bygones be bygones.

The brat must've had a strong will to live. Chen Pi watched as the man patted Chun Shen on the back of the neck. The brat took off and ran along the riverbank until he reached a small fishing boat on the river, where a woman pulled him up. The family was obviously making their living on the river by fishing during the spring, summer, and autumn, and pulling the

boatmen's tow-ropes in the winter. The whole family appeared to be living on the boat.

Now that pirates were running rampant on the river, these people could only live on the shore and protect themselves with the army on the dock.

Chen Pi looked at the woman holding Chun Shen from a distance. He found that she wasn't Chun Shen's mother, but his older sister. The young girl was about eighteen years old, with very smooth curves. Most of the girls in Hankou had long legs and were used to swimming in the water after so many years. At eighteen, there was still the distinctive beauty of a young girl. It was rare for a girl to be on a boat all year round and still retain her white skin, but this girl's arms were like white lotus roots, which really made people want to cut them off and use them as pillows.

After he was done working, Chen Pi involuntarily found himself dragging his signboard to the shore where her boat was moored. He sat under a tree and watched the girl come and go as she went about her tasks. Chen Pi would stare at her slender and well-proportioned calves as she walked—no, glided—on the boat deck. He touched the back of his neck, feeling strange and a little irritable. It almost felt the same as that moment right before he killed someone, but it wasn't bloodlust.

Chun Shen had snot on his face and was staring blankly at Chen Pi while standing on the bow of the boat. He wasn't afraid of Chen Pi, either. As the girl kept working, she would wipe her brother's nose from time to time. After some time had passed, she also started to take notice of Chen Pi and stopped working.

Girls from poor families understood a lot of things early on, so when she saw Chen Pi staring at her neckline, she started to scold him in the Hankou dialect: "Disgusting bastard. Who do you think you're looking at? My father will gouge your eyes out when he comes back."

Chen Pi continued staring at her, which annoyed the girl even more: "If you like looking at people that much, why don't you just go home and look at



your mother?" With that said, she picked up an oar and slapped the water beside the boat, causing it to splash onto Chen Pi.

He quickly dodged it and looked at the young girl's white neck, feeling his anxiety increase. He stood up, grabbed his sign, and stared into the girl's eyes, but he didn't know what to do. The girl looked back at him angrily. "Did you hear me? Get away from my boat!"

Chen Pi said coldly, "I set up a stall here. The boat's yours, but the shore isn't. You should move your boat so it doesn't block me from viewing the scenery."

The girl laughed: "What kind of beggars' stall are you trying to set up? Is this a new way to beg for food? I bet nobody even patronizes you."

Chen Pi pointed to the signboard: "One hundred coins, kill one person. It's a killing stall."

The girl slapped the water with the oar again and splashed Chen Pi. The river water was freezing cold in winter, and the drenched Chen Pi shivered. "When my dad comes back, he'll take care of you. You're sick in the head." With that said, she pulled Chun Shen into the cabin and closed the curtain.

Chen Pi patted the water from his body. As soon as the cold water had hit him, his anxiety suddenly went down a lot. He looked left and right and found that he couldn't see the girl anymore, but he could hear someone laughing. All the barge haulers had finished their work for the day and had witnessed the scene as they were walking home. Chen Pi had no other choice but to leave, angrily carrying his signboard with him.

On the boat, the girl huddled on the bow and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Chen Pi leave. She couldn't stop herself from taking a few more peeks at the soggy Chen Pi walking towards the setting sun.

In fact, the girl had heard of Chen Pi before. Her father had even told her to get as far away as possible if she ever saw him. That summer, many people

on the lakeshore had said that Chen Pi was a ruthless character, but now it seemed that he was just sick in the head.

But for a girl that age, it was clear to see that Chen Pi was different from the fishermen and barge haulers she was used to. She glanced at him a few more times and tugged her collar, blushing as she thought of how his eyes had looked.

When he arrived back in the city, the soaking Chen Pi wasn't in the mood to set up a stall anymore. He dragged the wooden board into a food stall, found some stones to hold it up, put two coins on the wooden frame, and then downed the hot pepper soup that was handed over. Even though it was watered down, he was still sweating profusely by the time it was all gone. For another coin, he could clean up in the bathhouse next door, and for his last coin, he could go to the temple and gamble on the cockfights.

As he soaked in the bathhouse and thought of his own affairs, he suddenly felt depressed. This bathhouse by the river was full of unskilled laborers scrubbing each other's backs, and the river wind could be felt blowing in through the cracks. He thought of the little boat girl's white neck and snake-like calves and became anxious again. He stood up and went to stand by the cracks in the bathhouse where the river wind was blowing the strongest, and found that his body had reacted.

As he looked out of the cracks, he could see the lights from the fishermen's boats dotting the river's surface, along with the fog that was rolling in. When would the things Xi Qi mentioned come true?

## Chapter 4 White Water Ghost

The fishing lights were bright as Chun Si walked out from under the boat's awning<sup>61</sup> and shivered in the strong winter breeze. She covered a yawn as she looked towards the bustling old city where the lights were brightly lit.

"Don't go in and out." Her father said from beneath the awning. Chun Si sighed, filled a bucket with river water, and then slipped back under the awning.

It was a fishing boat with double awnings, and there was a quilt hanging at the entrance and a stove inside. The river became so cold at night that icicles would form by the hanging quilt, so they slept close to the stove to stay warm. Chun Si poured the river water into a pot and boiled it. Once it was heated, it could be poured into the soup.

Random little trinkets that were hanging from the top of the awning swayed and clinked together in the breeze. They had been picked up from the bottom of the river over the years. In the summertime, the children would often dive into the river to see if they could find some garbage that had washed down from upstream. It was hard to tell what these things were, but some of the more interesting ones had been hung up.

"That Chen Pi stared at me for a long time today. Let's not park the boat here tomorrow." Chun Si said to her father. "He also told me that he kills people to make money. One person for a hundred coins."

"The poor man is sick, don't pay any attention to him." Chun Si's father said lightly as he patted Chun Shen on the back.

Chun Shen raised his head and asked his sister, "Won't the government decapitate him for killing people?"

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<sup>61</sup> I think their boat is a sampan with a shelter on it (and blankets put up to keep out the cold). Sampans are a relatively flat-bottomed wooden boat like [this](#).

Chun Si's dad poked Chun Shen on the forehead. "He's lying, he wouldn't dare. Go to sleep and don't listen to the adults talking."

Chun Shen tucked his head under the quilt. There were a few hollowed-out spots at the bottom of the boat, and two near the stove, which was where he and his sister slept. Since he was small, he could fit his whole body into the hollow.

Chun Si's dad wrapped his clothes tighter around his body and said to Chun Si, "Those who roam around don't have anything. No one knows this ghost Chen Pi's origins, so don't mind him. He definitely won't be around come spring. This kind of person can't stay in one place for long."

Chun Si nodded as her mother dug out the clam meat nearby. During the winter, the river tributaries flowed into the nearby lake, and the clams buried under all the mud weren't as easy to find as they were in summer. Clams were said to give you strength, so Chun Si, Chun Shen, and their mother would go dig them up from the lake during the day while their father pulled the boatmen's tow-ropes. Clamshell ash was also used to treat burns, so the army had been collecting it. Chun Si's family could get a copper coin for every twenty taels<sup>62</sup> of clam shells they found.

When Chun Si went to help, her mother glanced at her and then straightened her hair. "Dear, Chun Si is a big girl now. She needs to go ashore and marry so she doesn't have to suffer through these kinds of hardships. The Japanese are coming, and it will be hard to survive."

It was impossible for a small fishing boat to go upstream. If they tried, Chun Si's father couldn't be sure where they would end up. Moreover, they had been living on the Yangtze River for several generations, so they didn't know how to live on shore.

The boat was silent.

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<sup>62</sup> Unit of weight equal to 50 grams (modern) or 1/16 of a catty

Chun Si's dad lit his pipe and kept his head down, while Chun Si stood there speechless. She had never thought of this problem before. Of course, she had heard that a lot of things had happened, but she had never witnessed them. She felt uneasy, but she never thought of leaving here.

After she was done helping her mother, Chun Si went to lie down and sleep, but a series of strange sounds suddenly came from the distance. They seemed to go on endlessly as they spread across the river. Chun Si's dad was surprised, but quickly recognized that it was the sound of a drum. He immediately opened the curtain and looked out. He didn't see anything on the river, but the drumbeats still rang out through the darkness.

"Why is someone playing the drums?" Chun Si's mother asked.

Chun Si's father grabbed the nearby lantern and dipped it into the river to extinguish it. He then entered the awning, used the soup water to put out the stove, jumped to the scull, and untied the anchor rope. Chun Si was surprised and asked him, "What's going on, Dad?"

"Don't talk. Pirates are coming." Chun Si's father looked towards the shore and began moving the scull from side to side. When he looked in the direction of the original dock, he was horrified to find that the garrison's campfires had been extinguished. He didn't know when it had happened, but the garrison had withdrawn sometime during the day.

The pirates were usually located around the various lakes and followed the river's direct current, but after the Japanese came, they all rushed to the Yangtze River. There had been an army on the dock earlier, but now that the military goods were ready, they had pulled out and headed towards the front line. When the army left, it wasn't the Japanese who came first. It was the pirates. These pirates killed people without batting an eye, so they would all surely die.

As the ship slid smoothly upstream, the drumbeats suddenly stopped. In the sudden silence, Chun Si's father breathed a sigh of relief and glanced at his daughter, who also looked pale. He was just about to speak when the whole

ship suddenly shook and the bow dipped into the water. As it rose back up again, Chun Si's dad jumped up and said, "Not good!"

He had been sailing for many years and knew from the feeling under his feet that someone else was on board.

He rushed to the bow and saw a half-naked man crouching there in the moonlight. He had big arms, a thick waist, and his pale skin was covered in water. His body temperature seemed extremely high, for the cold river water on his body formed a white mist. This man had chased their boat all the way through the cold river.

Chun Si's father grabbed the nearby harpoon and leveled it at him, but the man completely ignored the weapon as he stared straight at Chun Si, who was clutching her collar and holding a clam knife.

"I'd like a bowl of hot water to drink." The half-naked man said suddenly. "I'm a little thirsty."

## Chapter 5 Three Ships, Eight Drums

Seeing Chun Si's dad stiff and unresponsive, the half-naked man seemed to feel a little guilty. He waved his hand and tried to say something, but seemed unable to say it in the end.

"Don't worry, I'll leave in a minute." The half-naked man whispered. "Really. Could you get me a bowl of water to drink? I had to come up because it's so cold."

Chun Si's dad was a little confused and couldn't help but think that this man was completely different from ordinary pirates. He could chase after a boat in freezing water during the middle of the night and was obviously an excellent swimmer. He said he would leave soon, so what was he doing in the water? Was he chasing another ship?

Were the pirates fighting amongst themselves?

Seeing that Chun Si's father still didn't respond, the half-naked man took out some small coins from his pocket, suddenly looking a little unhappy: "I'll pay for a bowl of hot water. Sir, you know what I am. I just want a bowl of water. I'll drink it and leave. Be sensible, you don't want to provoke me."

In the moonlight, the man's pale hands were like claws, and the icy river water did nothing to hide the fact that they were covered in scars.

Chun Si's father still hesitated, not quite sure how to deal with the current situation, but Chun Si's mother immediately poured the wet coal out of the stove, put in dry coal, lit it, and told Chun Si to fetch water from the back of the boat.

As the water quickly boiled, a warm light suffused the boat and the copper coins were placed on the bow. "I won't go in. Please bring it and the stove over. I want it to be warm."

Chun Si's mother picked up the stove and carried it to the bow, where the half-naked man pulled a small, two-finger wide tin bottle from the water-proof bag at his waist. The mouth of the bottle had been sealed with mud, and the man quickly peeled it off and poured the contents into the boiling water.

A fragrance immediately filled the whole boat, which turned out to be wine lees.<sup>63</sup>

"I like to drink this." The man said in the Hankou dialect. He chuckled as he took out two small bowls, filled one with the warm wine mixture, and then placed it in front of Chun Si's dad. He then took a sip from his own bowl and smacked his lips appreciatively. "Come on, it's not been easy for you."

Chun Si's dad looked at him warily, but the smell of wine made him a little restless. In the cabin, Chun Shen was woken up by the pungent smell. He looked up curiously but was quickly pressed back under the quilt by his mother, who also covered his mouth.

"I'm offering you a drink. Why are you standing there staring?" The half-naked man seemed a little unhappy that Chun Si's dad wouldn't sit down. "You're not giving me any face. Come on, I'll leave after a few drinks. Chat with me a little. Oh, don't be afraid. If I were after you, I'd have overturned your boat already."

Chun Si's dad looked at his expression and felt that this man wasn't a vicious person. Moreover, pirates normally went around in groups, but this man was all alone. He didn't seem like he was there to harm them. Chun Si's dad breathed a sigh of relief, looked at the bowl of steaming wine, picked it up, looked at Chun Si and her mother sitting nervously under the awning, and took a sip.

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<sup>63</sup> Wine lees are deposits of dead yeast or residual yeast and other particles that are carried to the bottom of a vat of wine after fermentation and aging. In this context, it could also be "distiller's grains" I guess



The wine lees were very sweet, so the taste was very strong despite being diluted with the river water. As the flavor burst across his tongue, Chun Si's dad swallowed, and involuntarily took another sip.

The man was happy, and grinned, "That's right. We all live on the river. Being a water locust<sup>64</sup> is also a last resort. Drinking wine like this... we're not all that different after all."

"Drink and go quickly." As Chun Si's dad kept drinking and a warmth spread throughout his body, he no longer felt afraid.

"Hahahaha all good wine isn't the same. Leave after drinking? Don't you worry, I haven't lied to you. I'll leave after drinking." He took out another tin bottle from the bag at his waist and poured it into the wine mixture. "Let me tell you, I'm so fucking tired of it. Being a water locust is all about bluffing and scaring people. You could say our 'contributions' come from merchant ships. Boats like yours have little money and few goods. With the recent military troubles, it's hard to distinguish the merchant and military goods, so it's easier to go after fishing boats. But don't you worry about the future. With this bowl of hot water, I'll remember you. I'll even go back and tell my brothers about this. Here, take this." He pulled out a yellow cloth from his waist and tied it to the rope on the bow of the boat that was used to dry fish. "This is the no-contribution flag of our Huang Kui<sup>65</sup> water locust group. With this up, Huang Kui won't trouble your boat in the future."

Chun Si's father looked at the yellow cloth, which was painted with a strange flower pattern. The man's face was red, and it was clear to see that he was already drunk. He sighed and continued lamenting, "Remember this: I was the leader of the Huang Kui water locust gang's hitmen. Now all the water locusts in the five lakes and eighteen rivers have been pushed to the Yangtze River. All the desperate brats are looking forward to the death of us old people. I've been the hitmen's leader<sup>66</sup> for more than ten years, and have made great contributions to Huang Kui, but now I've been fucking reduced

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<sup>64</sup> If you couldn't tell, "water locust" is slang for pirate

<sup>65</sup> Huang Kui= yellow sunflower

<sup>66</sup> I'll be referring to this guy as either "leader" or "hitmen's leader" from now on.

to 'beating the flower drum'. If I can't beat the flower drum tonight, I'm afraid I can't be the leader anymore. Did you hear the drums just now? That was the sound of beating the flower drum. It's so annoying."

Chun Si's dad looked at the man suspiciously. He didn't understand what 'beating the flower drum' meant, but the man drank another bowl of wine and continued, "Fortunately, I'm not that old and managed to beat eight flower drums in one breath. But I'm exhausted now, so I came to your boat to take a break. You don't have to be afraid."

With that said, the leader bent down and put his hand into the river. It turned out that there was an iron hook on the bow, which was attached to something underwater. The leader lifted it up and revealed a string of dripping human heads that had turned pale in the freezing water. "I just barely beat the flower drum. It was a coincidence that the first three boats had exactly eight."

Chun Si immediately recognized the heads and screamed. She could see the head of the little girl from the boat next door, who often played with Chun Shen. The four-year-old girl had only half of her face left—as if it had been forcefully torn off—and her mouth was wide open in a silent scream.

Chun Si's dad was also frightened and immediately stood up, feeling like he was going to vomit.

"One, two, three, four, five." The leader fiddled with the heads, but suddenly froze and looked at the water. "Wait a minute. I'm missing some. Where did they go?"

## Chapter 6 Sliced Heads

The hitmen's leader looked at the water with an annoyed expression, and then glanced at Chun Si's family with a bitter smile. "How could my heads fall off like that?" As he spoke, he jumped into the water, floated up, and then turned around and said to the boat, "Brother, please boil some more water. My things have fallen, so I'll go look for them." With that said, he dove down.

Chun Si's dad was pale as he looked at the bunch of heads that had been thrown onto the bow. He was shaking all over as fear gripped his heart and a wave of nausea made his mind go blank. Several people he had just chatted with during the day were all dead. Their mouths were wide open, their blood had been washed away by the river long ago, their hair stuck to their faces, and their eyes stared vacantly at the boat's floorboards.

"Dear! Dear!" Chun Si's mother came up and shook him back to his senses, took the harpoon from his hands, and put the heads into the water. "Move, honey, move! Chun Si! Take over the scull!"

Chun Si wiped her tears, ran to the back of the boat, and began moving the scull back and forth. Chun Si's father stumbled towards the stern as if he were sleepwalking, tripped over something, and didn't get up for a long time.

At this time, Chun Shen poked his head out again but was pressed back by his mother. She then took all the blankets that were hanging on the awning and covered Chun Shen while shouting, "Chun Si, go ashore, go ashore!"

Chun Si realized this, but she was in such a hurry that she couldn't turn the boat around. When the boat went up against the current, Chun Si's mother grabbed the scull, set the direction so that the ship leaned toward the shore, and then handed it back over to Chun Si. She then rushed to the awning and lifted Chun Si's father up while crying, "Dear! Dear!"

Chun Si's dad's eyes were unfocused, and he was clutching his chest and looking out at the lake. Chun Si's mother scooped up some of the lake water and threw it on his face. He shivered, came to his senses, and then grabbed the harpoon on the side. "Go! Go!"

The two of them rushed to the stern to replace Chun Si but found that she was no longer guiding the scull.

Chun Si's mother screamed when she saw the soaking wet leader sitting on the stern with Chun Si's head pressed on the deck beneath him. Her neck had been cut in half, and a lot of blood was gushing out from her mouth and nose. Her legs were kicking wildly, and her eyes widened in horror as she looked at her parents, unable to even shed tears.

The leader's movements were very skilled, and the knife he used was very small. He quickly cut through the meaty part of her neck until only her spine was keeping her head connected to her body. He then gave a hard yank and Chun Si's head broke off.

"Oh, fuck. I'm sorry, big brother." The leader washed Chun Si's head in the water, threaded a cord through her neck and out her mouth, and then placed her head on the original string of heads, just like a fish. It appeared he had fished them up after Chun Si's mother had thrown them back into the water. "I can't find those flower drums just now. It's such a fucking hassle, but I have to get a few more as soon as possible. I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Chun Si's dad let out a mournful cry, lifted the harpoon, and threw himself at the leader. They both fell into the water, but the leader broke free, turned around, and kicked Chun Si's dad away. When he surfaced, he started scolding, "What are you doing?"

"You fucking bastard!" Chun Si's father cursed at him with blood-shot eyes and went to stab him with the harpoon. The hitmen's leader swam backwards, dodged the harpoon, and then disappeared.

Chun Si's mother was still standing on the boat in a daze. As she squatted down and picked up Chun Si's lifeless body, tears started flowing uncontrollably from her eyes.

The leader popped out of the water, hoisted himself up on the boat, pulled a pistol from his water-proof bag, and then shot Chun Si's mother in the head. Her brain matter splashed under the boat's awning and landed all over Chun Shen's quilt. "You're really fucking sick."

Chun Si's dad screamed and tried to pull himself over the edge of the boat while still holding onto the harpoon, but the leader merely squatted down and shot him right between the eyes. Chun Si's father's brains splashed into the water.

For a moment, there was only the sound of the river lapping at the bottom of the boat.

"What the fuck is wrong with you? So what if you harpoon me?" The leader yelled at the corpse. "I call you brother and this is how you repay me?! Do you even have a conscience?!" He fired four more rounds at the body in the water.

After venting, he sat down, shook the blood from his hands, and then stretched out and dragged Chun Si's father's body up. Once that was done, he quickly began cutting off their heads with a knife. A large amount of blood flowed under the awning and into the hollow where Chun Shen hid, soaking into his quilt.

After finishing everything, the hitmen's leader suddenly took notice of Chun Si's body. Some of the buttons on her shirt had been torn off, exposing her snow-white belly. He unbuttoned the rest of her shirt and revealed the gentle and graceful curves. He played for a long time and wiped the blood off Chun Si's chest.

Chun Shen didn't fall asleep but watched everything coldly through the gaps in the quilt. His eyes were the same as when Chen Pi had thrown him into the water before.

When the drumbeats started up again across the river, the leader spit in contempt, tidied up the heads, jumped into the water, and then swam towards them. As the boat drifted downstream to the shore, the fishing lights still burned bright.

## Chapter 7 Female Corpse

Chen Pi walked along the riverbank, bleary-eyed. He had lain in the bathhouse all night, and now his whole body ached because of the damp. The disturbance from last night had long since disappeared from his groggy mind, and he felt nauseous as the river wind blew all around him.

The sun had just risen as he started heading for the dock. If he wanted to eat, he still had to work as an unskilled laborer today. As he approached, however, he suddenly saw a thick circle of people standing on the bank in front of him.

Chen Pi instinctively leaned away from them. He could stand the stench and mildew, but the smell of people gathering together made him sick, so he usually avoided crowded areas. As he got closer, a breeze blew up from the river, bringing with it a smell that made him stop.

The wind carried the strong scent of blood, and the crowd was whispering amongst themselves. When Chen Pi pushed his way through, he saw a fishing boat stuck on the embankment, and the dock manager and a few others going through the boat investigating. Blood had dripped down all along the boat's rails, and Chen Pi squinted and saw several dead bodies lying on the deck. Their heads had been cut off, and the meaty part of their necks had been exposed to the wind for some time, making them look like the color of baked sweet potatoes.

He could see a young white body in the pool of blood that belonged to a half-naked female corpse. The skin was as white as snow and made for a stark contrast against the black blood on the deck.

Chen Pi listened to the people talking nearby and got a general idea of what happened. He glanced at the female corpse and found that the dazzling white still made him restless. Just as he was about to turn and leave, he suddenly saw a bloody boy sitting on the side of the boat.

It was that Chun Shen, who remained blank-faced and motionless as he watched the dock manager order people to carry the bodies out. He was clutching a jar tightly in his hands.

*That kid is really lucky*<sup>67</sup>, Chen Pi thought as he turned and walked away. He looked at the river and found that the soldiers who used to be everywhere on the embankment were now gone. No wonder the pirates suddenly came back and went on a killing spree after not appearing for such a long time. He hadn't cut anyone's head off, but it seemed like way too much trouble to do so.

As he thought this, Chen Pi suddenly realized that he had left his signboard in the bathhouse, so he angrily went back and got it.

There weren't many people on the dock today, and even the barge haulers were afraid to come out. The news of what had happened last night would spread all throughout Hankou today and reach those upstream by evening. Many ships would directly unload at the upstream dock and transport the rest by land so that they could bypass this area. There would definitely be less work tomorrow.

Since there were fewer people and more goods, Chen Pi managed to earn ten coins after making two trips. As the sun set, he dragged the plank behind him and went to the bathhouse again. When he passed by the place he had walked by earlier that morning, the crowd of onlookers had long since dispersed. The boat was still there, but the bodies had been carried away. Chun Shen squatted at the stern alone, washing the blood on the deck with a rag.

The blood had frozen on the deck, so it had to be scrubbed very hard before it could be washed away with the river water. Chen Pi could see that the river's surface outside the boat was now covered in a layer of bloody foam.

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<sup>67</sup> Per Tiffany: The Chinese saying "Life/Fortune is hard" means that someone is still able to survive even though they've been through bad things that might have killed them



The child seemed to have grown up a lot overnight, and the scrubbing action looked exactly like those group of barge haulers on the dock.

When Chen Pi stopped to look at him, Chun Shen also looked up at him. Chen Pi had a sudden impulse to kill the brat. *What are you doing alive? How long can you live?*

Chen Pi looked around but didn't see anyone. Even all the nearby boats had fled towards the scattered lakes.

After staring at each other for a while, Chen Pi suddenly felt tired. Xi Qi's dying words made him uncomfortable, and he really couldn't gather his strength, so he didn't do anything. Instead, he dragged his signboard and kept walking.

After taking a few steps, however, he suddenly felt that something was off. He turned around and saw Chun Shen getting off the boat, still holding the jar in his arms. He followed behind Chen Pi stupidly and kept looking at the signboard he was dragging.

Chen Pi looked at his foolish appearance and suddenly got angry. He walked over, lifted the plank up, and swung it, knocking Chun Shen to the ground.

As his bloodlust surged up, he suddenly heard Xi Qi's dying words: "All the glory, splendor, wealth, and rank you can ever hope to achieve in this life is on this board." The accumulated anger burst forth all at once, and he went up and took the board to Chun Shen's head, smashing it three times in a row.

"Glory and splendor?! Wealth and rank?! Where the fuck is it?!" The wooden board cracked, and the skin on Chun Shen's head split open. His nose and mouth were covered in blood, and he couldn't stand up.

Chen Pi looked at Chun Shen coldly. It was as if he had seen himself, a helpless man who had been trapped in the same place without any hope. A murderous rage rose up in his heart.

He went to raise the wooden board again but suddenly stepped on something. When he looked down, he saw that Chun Shen's jar had been shattered and a handful of copper coins fell out.

## Chapter 8 Fate's Coin

Chen Pi gave Chun Shen a bowl of hot pepper soup, but the hungry Chun Shen took a bite and quickly spit it out.

When Chen Pi looked at him a little disgusted, Chun Shen fearfully looked into his eyes, apparently afraid that he would get hit again. Chen Pi ignored him and continued counting the copper coins on the table. Chun Shen breathed a sigh of relief and finally began eating again.

The blood on his head had dried into a crusty scab on his forehead and behind his ears. Chen Pi couldn't help but think that this child had a thick skull like him, so the space inside was small and his brain was stunted.

The copper coins were divided into ten groups and stacked one by one. Chen Pi had already counted them several times and was sitting there scratching his head. He couldn't count over a hundred, and he was so nervous that the number of copper coins he counted was different each time. There were ninety-eight for a while, then ninety-seven. How many were missing? He couldn't seem to figure it out.

The no-contribution flag the boss had tied to the fishing line had been placed on the table with copper coins holding it down. A yellow sunflower pattern had been embroidered it. Chen Pi was tired of counting, so he gave up after a while and looked at the flag carefully.

A yellow sunflower was the symbol of the Huang Kui Gang, so it was only natural that he knew who Chun Shen wanted to kill. But it would take some time to find out who this flag belonged to.

Chen Pi was too excited to care. After waiting for so long, Xi Qi's words came to fruition and a customer had finally come to the door. He couldn't remember Xi Qi's exact words to him, but he felt like Xi Qi had given him a prophecy, which was now coming true.

Chen Pi put down the no-contribution flag, and once again put the copper coins in order one by one. This time, he counted them clearly and found that they were exactly ninety-nine. He let out a sigh, thinking that even though it was one short, he couldn't let it slide. If Xi Qi said a hundred coins, then he would get a hundred coins. Otherwise, what if it didn't work?

He looked over at Chun Shen and said, "One hundred coins to kill one man. You're one short, there's not enough money."

Chun Shen had been sitting there all night eating his hot pepper soup and had even licked the bowl clean. He obviously wasn't full and looked at the bowl in front of Chen Pi.

Chen Pi pushed the bowl over, but Chun Shen didn't dare pick it up. It wasn't until Chen Pi pushed the bowl in front of him that he started to eat it.

"One short. It's not enough money." Chen Pi reminded Chun Shen again. Chun Shen's mouth was full of soup as he looked at the money and choked. He couldn't swallow and couldn't speak, but his chopsticks never stopped moving as he kept stuffing them into his mouth.

Chen Pi went to grab the bowl and pull it back to get him to stop eating, but Chun Shen hugged the bowl and looked up at him. Chen Pi raised his hand to strike him, but Chun Shen quickly put the bowl down.

The two stared at each other. Chun Shen's cheeks were bulging and he was still chewing as the hot soup dripped from the corners of his mouth in an endless stream.

"A coin is missing, damn it!" When Chen Pi Ah Si slammed his hand on the table, everyone in the vicinity looked at them. They had originally been whispering to each other, wondering why someone like Chen Pi would take Chun Shen to dinner.

Although this year was chaotic, they didn't think Chen Pi would want to kill Chun Shen. First, everyone in his family had been killed, and the boat was probably looted. Second, if Chen Pi killed him and gained his boat, it wasn't

like he'd bring in more money. This year, it was still more valuable to do hard labor. There were many old, ownerless ships that had run aground along the East Lake embankment and were rotting. Mud and silt had flowed to the Yangtze River, so those who could earn a living on shore had already left. Winter on the water was difficult enough, and one more boat wouldn't solve anything.

Chun Shen didn't respond at all. The jar of copper money had been saved by his mother burning clamshells, so it was only natural that he didn't know how much was in there or bother counting it. He just looked at Chen Pi with eyes full of panic.

Chen Pi suddenly realized that he wasn't talking to someone of equal intelligence. He looked at the money on the table, wrapped it in the flag, took Chun Shen's hand, and then walked to the riverbank. They went up to Chun Shen's boat in the dark, and Chen Pi said, "Now, I'm going up to look for it. As long as there's a coin, I promise I'll kill that man. Got it?"

Chun Shen nodded, his eyes suddenly widening when he heard the word kill.

Chen Pi completely ignored him and climbed up to start rummaging around.

Chun Shen didn't get on the boat but retreated to the tree on the shore instead. He hid in the shadows and watched silently as Chen Pi rummaged everywhere. The stench of blood on the boat was still very heavy, and he became more and more manic. He searched all over, but there wasn't a copper coin to be found.

Chen Pi irritably threw all the scrap metal back into the lake and said to himself, *one more, just one more*. He was really anxious. He wanted to accept the first payment as soon as possible, but it was all going to fall through because of a fucking coin.

He rummaged until midnight, and it was only when the bottom of the boat had almost been turned over that Chen Pi realized that there really wasn't a single coin left on the boat. It was like fate was mocking him, telling him that Xi Qi may be right, but he would always fall a little short.

Chen Pi's emotions switched from calm to rage, and then to emptiness. When he got off the boat, he was completely disheartened. He held the lantern in front of Chun Shen, threw the flag and copper coins down, and then turned to walk away.

Chun Shen froze for a moment before immediately getting up and chasing after him. He struggled to get in front of Chen Pi and then held up the money.

Chen Pi pushed him aside, "One hundred coins, kill one person. You're short." With that said, he kept walking.

Chun Shen chased after him again, ran in front of him, and tried to hand him the money. His face was panicked, and it was obvious he didn't know what had happened.

Chen Pi pushed him away again and showed his greatest patience as he repeated, "One hundred coins, kill one person. You're missing one."

Chun Shen still held up the coins in his hands, but Chen Pi was indifferent and kept moving forward. After Chun Shen continued following him with raised hands, Chen Pi stopped and looked at him coldly. He kicked the back of Chun Shen's knee, and Chun Shen fell to the ground.

Chen Pi continued walking away. Chun Shen tried to get up, but found that he couldn't stand at all and his legs didn't have any strength. He dragged his body across the ground to try and catch up with Chen Pi, but Chen Pi quickly got further and further away until he slowly disappeared into the darkness. Chun Shen held the money and watched Chen Pi leave, his dull face finally starting to show despair. Tears welled up in his eyes and he started crying.

He didn't know how long he had been crying in the middle of the road when another lantern suddenly came along. Chun Shen stopped crying and looked up, finding that Chen Pi had come back again.

He took the copper coins from Chun Shen's hands and said coldly, "I thought of a way. Tomorrow, you'll go begging for food and give me that missing coin."

Chun Shen nodded desperately and wiped his nose.

## Chapter 9 Cockfighting

In the bathhouse, Chen Pi stripped Chun Shen completely and scrubbed him with a board brush to get all the dried blood off his head. Chun Shen stared curiously at Chen Pi's crotch.

You still had to be fastidious when begging. Children couldn't be too dirty or look diseased; otherwise, they wouldn't be able to enter people's shops. Now that the country was chaotic, it was very difficult to beg on the road. As soon as one person gave money, all the other beggars would come and surround them. As a result, people were afraid to give alms on the road. If you wanted to beg, you'd have better luck going to the back of somebody's shop. This child was suitable, but he had to be cleaned up a little so he didn't look too dirty or infectious. Otherwise, he'd be beaten away as soon as he entered someone's shop or temple.

After Chen Pi helped him clean up, the brat slipped into a bamboo basket full of all kinds of old towels. The bathhouse was warm, and Chun Shen soon fell asleep. Chen Pi found a place to lie down and thought to himself, *this brat's miserable appearance will definitely earn a coin tomorrow, and then I'll be able to make a name for myself.*

While his thoughts kept him from falling asleep, Chun Shen was curled up in the bamboo basket, snoring.

When Chen Pi got up late the next day, he started stretching. His tibia had been loose since he was a child, so his joints were different from those of ordinary people. Chun Shen followed his example and also started doing stretches. When they were done, Chen Pi slipped them out of the bathhouse, grabbed a handful of dirt from the ground, patted Chun Shen's cheeks and hair so that he looked as if he'd just returned from the frontlines, and then kicked him into the street.

As Chun Shen took to the street with a broken bowl in his hand, Chen Pi weighed his money bag and decided he didn't need to go to the dock today. He went to the east gate instead, where the Kaifeng people had set up



cockfighting pits. They were said to come twice a year and stay for two months each time.

Kaifeng had a long tradition of cockfighting and had been coming here to open cockfighting pits for more than ten years. In the beginning, there was only one pit here, but now there were three or four big ones in the square outside the east gate. Some Hankou people also set up cockfighting pits and gambling dens everywhere, but it was always the liveliest whenever the Kaifeng people came. For three months, all kinds of “rooster kings” and “fighting roosters” from all over would gather and fight in succession. Tens of thousands of silver dollars flowed in and out each day, and there were also many “rooster heads” for breeders to buy and sell.

Kaifeng cockfighting was more civilized and had a lot of rules, but if you walked past the east gate cockfighting pits to the forest behind it, you would find a hidden mountain depression. That was where a special cockfighting pit had been set up. The roosters here had all kinds of iron hooks and needles on their beaks and claws, which made them appear quite dashing. The owner of this pit was a local named Cai Dongnan, who was a descendant of a famous cockfighting family in Kaifeng. The cockfighting was dressed up in order to please the various dignitaries in Hankou, and the ground would be covered in blood, which made the gambling even more exciting.

Today, there was a famous rooster called “Qinhuai Murderer” that would be fighting. It had a red neck, a red crest, and eight small steel needles on its beak, which made it look like a trumpet when it was opened. Its neck was as thick as a man’s arm, and even a human wouldn’t be able to stand if it pecked at a vital point. Within half a day, it had already pecked four opponents to death.

Chen Pi placed three bets against it. He was greedy and wanted to earn more, but all the chickens he bet on were pecked to death by Qinhuai Murderer. As a result, the copper coins in his hand were reduced to less than half. He weighed them and then left angrily. When he returned to the bathhouse, he saw Chun Shen sitting on the steps holding a bowl of tofu.

Chen Pi went up to him, squatted down, and scooped out the tofu. He fiddled with it for a long time, looking for a coin, but there was nothing else there besides the tofu.

Chen Pi grabbed a fistful of the tofu and threw it in Chun Shen's face. Chun Shen wiped it—and the dirt—from his face and put it in his mouth.

Chen Pi lay there that night, feeling annoyed. It wasn't because Chun Shen didn't get a coin, but because he had lost money during the day. Why did he lose so much at once? His mind was full of "Qinhuai Murderer", and he shouted in his sleep. The next day, he left before dawn and took the rest of his money to the cockfighting pit.

## Chapter 10 Cold Weather

Chen Pi watched the cockfighting pit all day and night but didn't place any bets. He was waiting for Qinhuai Murderer to come out, but it appeared the rooster wasn't fighting that day. His anger had finally calmed down some, so he bought some wine and walked over to the rear coop. As he peeked through the curtain from a distance, he could see that "Qinhuai Murderer" was locked in a carved mahogany cockfighting cage. The cage was half a man high, and the two-pole buckles on top made it look like a sedan chair. Chen Pi glared at the rooster through the curtain, and the rooster glared right back without a trace of fear. There were several rooster servants on both sides who were using sheep knives to cut meat into strips to give to the rooster. Upon seeing Chen Pi approach, everyone stopped working and looked at him coldly.

Chen Pi had to turn and walk away silently. He stretched his arms and then sat by the riverbank for a while.

As dawn approached, the fishing boats got to work. The river had been peaceful for several days after Chun Si's family had died, so most of the fishing boats started returning from the lakes. But there was an underlying sense that it was the calm before the storm.

At dawn, he went back to the bathhouse and found Chun Shen asleep on the steps. He was leaning sideways against the wall, and his bowl had fallen to the side. There were some leftovers in it, and when Chen Pi picked it up, he saw that half the bowl had been carefully eaten. Chun Shen obviously didn't dare finish eating while waiting for Chen Pi to come back and had left half a steamed bun for him.

It was already starting to smell, so Chen Pi poked around it, but still didn't find a coin. He felt around Chun Shen's pocket but didn't find anything there either.

Chen Pi glared at the sleeping Chun Shen, angry beyond words. He threw all the leftovers on the ground and raised his hand to slap Chun Shen awake, but suddenly rethought it and put his hand back down.

He remembered his goal and knew he couldn't wait anymore. He thought of Qinhuai Murderer and hated that a rooster was living a more comfortable life than him.

He took out a coin from his pocket, threw it into Chun Shen's bowl, and then walked into the bathhouse.

After taking a few steps, however, he stopped and looked up at the sky.

He felt that Xi Qi was watching him, so doing it this way wouldn't work. Xi Qi Xiucan was an accountant, after all, so he would never miss a coin.

He stepped over Chun Shen dejectedly, took his money back, huddled into a corner, and soon fell asleep. He was exhausted after spending days watching the cockfighting pit, and the rage had slowly worn away. *Tomorrow's the last day*, he told himself. *No matter what happens tomorrow, I'll get a hundred coins.*

When Chun Shen woke up, Chen Pi was already asleep. He saw the leftovers lying there and picked up the half-eaten bun, breaking it in half. As he ate one of the halves, he looked at Chen Pi and put the other half on the sleeping man's chest. He then picked up his bowl and limped out.

The air was so crisp that morning that Chun Shen had to squint as he walked to the market with his bowl.

Most of the shops were opening one right after the other.

The boss of the rice shop in the eastern part of the city had closed it and fled to the northwest. That day had been the last day before he left, so he gave the remaining tofu to Chun Shen. But Chun Shen didn't understand the ways of the world. If a begging bowl was full, people would think he no longer needed charity and was just being abhorrently greedy.

Chun Shen walked among the crowd, holding his bowl up, but no one looked at him. He walked to the end of the street and then came back.

He sat at the door of the rice shop, put his bowl at his feet, and then looked at the pedestrians passing by in front of him. His clothes were too thin and his feet were covered in frostbite, but all he could do was curl in on himself to try and stay warm.

He stared blankly. The steamed bun stall opposite closed at noon, but no one gave him steamed buns this time. It was a lot colder today, and the stall owner's little daughter was wearing a red cotton-padded jacket. She and Chun Shen looked at each other.

It was getting colder and colder, and the clouds were rolling in.

He retracted his little hands into his sleeves and curled up into a ball. As he sat there in a daze, he suddenly felt a figure sit down.

He rubbed his eyes, looked up, and saw a large, half-naked man with especially white skin sitting beside him.

As if he wasn't afraid of the cold at all, the big man took a few deep breaths of the cold air, looked down at Chun Shen, and then said slowly, "Little boy, when I visited your boat last time, I forgot something. Where's my flag?"

Chun Shen's body shook. He recognized that this man was the hitmen's leader who killed his whole family.

"It wasn't easy to find you. I also heard from the people at the dock that there was a small survivor. Fortunately, our boss said I only needed to get the no-contribution flag back. Since everyone on your boat is gone, I have to take the flag back. I went to your boat, but the flag's gone. Someone saw you take it." The hitmen's leader touched Chun Shen's hair. "Little boy, give me back the flag and you'll get to see your father and mother again, ok?"

Chun Shen was shaking all over as he stared blankly at the leader and remained silent.

The leader picked up his bowl, put it in his hands, and then tried to pick him up.

Chun Shen immediately shrank back, refusing to let him hold him. All the nearby people stopped and watched as the leader tried to drag Chun Shen away.

The leader looked around impatiently but didn't let go. He then squatted down, took out a coin, and put it in the bowl. "Little boy, little boy, go with uncle now."

Chun Shen sat there stiffly, watching the coin roll around in the bowl. He stared at the copper coin, hesitated for a moment, and then reached out to catch it. As soon as he dropped his guard, the hitmen's leader picked him up and started walking towards the riverbank.

Chun Shen lay on the leader's shoulder without struggling and watched the street fade away. People looked at them a few times but then turned to keep on walking, not caring anymore.

Chun Shen clutched the coin tightly as if he were holding on to his only hope.

## Chapter 11 Remnant

When Chen Pi found Chun Shen, he was hanging from the tree by the riverbank. The rope was drawn tight around his thin neck, making it look strangely elongated.

Chen Pi only took a quick glance, but already knew that he was dead. The small, dangling body was shaking to and fro in the wind.

It was already dusk by this point, and the riverbank was deserted. There was no one there, and he didn't know what had happened. There was a charred smell in the air, which came from Chun Si's boat that had been burned down. Only some burnt shelves were left floating more than ten steps out on the water's surface.

Chun Shen had been beaten to death, and his face smashed in. From the gaping wounds crisscrossing his face, it was obvious he had been beaten with a paddle. All of his teeth were broken, half of his jaw had been horribly dislocated, and blood was dripping from his mouth onto the soil below.

Little Chun Shen's eyes weren't closed but remained wide open.

Chen Pi could picture a man on the boat, gripping the oar tightly as he viciously beat the child's face in over and over again. The child didn't close his eyes and got a clear view of all the blood.

Chen Pi gloomily looked at Chun Shen's eyes, and instantly felt the anxiety in his heart twist and almost crack.

Escaped once, only to die in the end. There was no such thing as comfort or justice in death.

How many people in this world were like Chun Shen? No matter how hard they tried, there wasn't any hope at all. What Xi Qi had said could be achieved with that missing coin, but God just didn't give him the chance. It was no wonder most people didn't need to live. If they had the chance to

die, then they should die obediently. He thought of the many people he had killed before, and the look in their eyes when they had died. He just couldn't figure why there were so many people unwilling to die.

Chen Pi turned away coldly and took a few steps before suddenly realizing something.

He turned around again, walked up to Chun Shen's body, and looked at Chun Shen's hand. The brat's left hand was a little strange, as if he was holding something tightly enough to make a fist.

Chen Pi expended a lot of effort to open the body's left hand, and when he did, a copper coin fell out. It landed on the bloody soil below, bounced, and then started rolling towards the river.

Chen Pi took a few steps forward, stepped on it, and picked it up before it could roll into the water.

He froze as he came to a sudden realization. His blood started pumping, he felt a burst of ecstasy bloom in his heart, and he started to laugh. It was only twitching at first, as if his heart wanted to laugh, but his face didn't believe it. But then, the laughter broke through and he found he couldn't stop.

He looked up to the sky and saw that the sun had already set. He didn't see Xi Qi up there, nor did he see any immortals. He only saw the last rays of the dying sun as it sank into the darkness.

"Xi Qi!" He yelled. "You son of a bitch! I'll show you!"

No one answered as his voice echoed across the river, but Chen Pi kept yelling until he was soaked in sweat.

He turned to look at Chun Shen, who seemed to be looking at him.

Chen Pi couldn't help laughing again. He climbed up the tree, untied Chun Shen, and then dragged the corpse along the ground until he reached the



entrance of the bathhouse. He went in, took out a basket full of old towels, threw Chun Shen in, and carried the bamboo basket to the sandy lakeshore.

There was a dilapidated temple two miles east of the lake, where Chen Pi had slept the first night he arrived in Hankou. Chen Pi dragged Chun Shen to the temple, kicked down the Buddha statue in the shrine, and put the corpse in its place.

As Chun Shen's body leaned against the shrine, the blood began to attract flies. Chen Pi examined his handiwork and then put Chun Shen's hands and feet in a more comfortable position. Once he was satisfied, he walked to the corner of the temple, removed the bricks from the floor, and dug out a bag from the mud.

This was the murder weapon he had used when he escaped from Zhejiang. It was a pineapple knife with a blade only as long as his middle finger, but it had a sharp, nearly ninety-degree hook that was specially used to peel pineapples. There was also a nine-clawed hook with a ribbed leather rope that was specially used to catch crabs on the beach.

Chen Pi put all these things on his belt and then unfolded the no-contribution flag. He dumped the money out, placed the last coin on the string, and then found a bamboo pole. He tied the flag to the pole, picked it up, and walked to the market with the flag waving in the wind.

## Chapter 12 Huang Kui Pirates

Over the past few months, more things happened on the river than people on shore could ever hope to imagine.

Most of the Yangtze River pirates came from various lakes in the tributaries along the Yangtze River. During the war, the armed pirates fled to the Yangtze River with many men and few boats. As soon as the boats moored on the beaches, several big gangs rushed at each other, and hundreds of corpses ended up floating on the river.

Chen Pi had heard that the Huang Kui water locusts originated from Dongting Lake, and their first boss was a Taoist priest, who was cultivating in Huang Kui Temple. The first ones to start acting like pirates were a group of Taoist priests that called themselves Huang Kui.

Water locusts were generally divided into two types: ship bandits and drought bandits. Ship bandits not only frequently robbed merchant ships, but their main source of income came from smuggling and selling salt. On occasion, they would target certain merchant ships if they got good intel. The drought bandits boarded ships from shore, robbed the crew and passengers, and then met up with their buddies on the river. The ship bandits had a huge organization with strict rules, while the drought bandits were both cunning and cruel.

Now that dozens of water locusts had been pushed to the Yangtze River, it was just like making gu.<sup>68</sup> Robberies and boat seizures were rampant on the river, and hundreds of people had died. The surviving pirates were said to belong to Huang Kui, which had slowly become the largest water gang in Hankou. Their organization was complex, and their founder seemed to have

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<sup>68</sup> Gu was a venom-based poison made by sealing several venomous creatures (e.g., centipede, snake, scorpion) inside a closed container, where they devoured one another and allegedly concentrated their toxins into a single survivor, whose body would be fed upon by larvae until consumed. The last surviving larva held the complex poison. More info [here](#)

some skills. Among all the Huang Kui members, it was said that there were seventy-eight flags, so it was really hard to tell whose flag it belonged to.

Chen Pi swaggered through the market with his wooden signboard, a string of copper coins strung around his neck, and the no-contribution flag.

His appearance became even funnier, and people passing by pointed and laughed. Chen Pi was completely oblivious to it all and continued strutting about.

Baiping Building was located near the riverbank and had an open area right outside where stalls could set up. All kinds of snacks would be set up on the stalls amidst the strong river breeze. After four in the afternoon, they would set up one after another and stay open until dawn the next day. Although they sold snacks, they were too expensive for the unskilled laborers. Instead, these stalls were patronized by the merchant ships' sailors. Baiping Building was involved in the water transportation industry, so all kinds of good and bad people were mixed together here. There were even a lot of water locusts who blended in to listen for any news.

Chen Pi went in to find a noodle stall and sat down. He put his signboard beside the table and patted his copper coins. The owner of this particular noodle stall, Cai Mingwei, had been doing business on Changdi Street all year round. Now that Changdi Street was undergoing construction, he had to move the stall here. The noodles were very good, and there was a crowd of people waiting in line. Chen Pi waited for half an hour to eat noodles and ended up ordering six bowls. He mixed the spicy sesame oil with two plates of red oily dishes and then opened a bottle of old wine. Chen Pi was really hungry and ended up eating until his belly was bulging like a drum. When he was done, he turned to face the river.

With the combination of wine and spicy food, Chen Pi was feeling hot all over as he held the bamboo pole with the flag. But his mind was extremely clear as he watched the lights stir all around him and the sailors come and go. When several people passed by him, he watched as their eyes shifted to his flag. After some time, there was finally a flicker of recognition.

When the man bowed his head and walked up the dark riverbank, Chen Pi got up and stumbled after him.

As he kept his distance, he noticed the man go into a lonely stall that had been set up on the riverbank far away from Baiping Building and sit down.

Chen Pi followed and found that it was a stall that sold deep-fried breadsticks soaked in soup. There wasn't a stream of people here, but it was full of people whispering, which was obviously abnormal. Chen Pi didn't get near, but took off his clothes and jumped into the river.

He clenched his teeth as the cold water made the veins on his head bulge. He then swam and dove along the riverbank, slowly making his way towards the stall. He was just about to take a peek when he suddenly saw a single-sail passenger boat moored on the river opposite the stall with its lights out. Even though it had some years on it, it was much larger than a fishing boat, and couldn't moor too close to the embankment. Unfortunately, the stark contrast between the bright embankment and the dark river made it impossible to see anything.

Just as he was feeling a little puzzled, his eyes suddenly locked onto a person standing on the dark bow of the boat, who was looking at him in wonder.

Chen Pi cursed at his carelessness as he pushed away from the embankment, sank into the water, and quickly dove under the boat. He surfaced and tossed his nine-clawed hook out, immediately hooking it onto the ship's railing and pulling himself up. When he saw the person trying to light a lantern, he flipped the pineapple knife out and pointed it at the other's throat. The person instantly flipped over the side of the boat and fell into the water. Just as Chen Pi rushed to the side to look, he heard the sound of water coming from the stern. He felt the boat shake once and knew the person had obviously climbed back up at the stern. They were clearly an excellent swimmer.

Chen Pi used a rope that was strung across the middle of the boat to climb to the top of the cabin, where he saw that a lamp had been lit and hung at

the stern. He leaned over to get a better look and found that the person was also looking up at him. It turned out that the person was a young petite girl. She was older than Chun Si and had a plump, fair-skinned body. She was wearing her hair in two braids, and her red shirt was completely soaked. The way it stuck to her body accentuated her curves.

The river water dripped onto the ship's deck and made a sound like beating drums. Just like Chen Pi's heartbeat.

## Chapter 13 Boat Girl

Chen Pi was stunned for a moment. The boat moored here was obviously the pirates' backup. After going ashore to ask for information, the pirates would take the boat back to the river that night. With so many people active, it appeared that the pirates had something big planned. But he really didn't expect that the ship's backup would turn out to be a girl.

She was petite and had a delicate-looking face. Although she wasn't beautiful, she was very attractive and belonged to the category of girls who were pure and lively. Now that her clothes were wet, she was using her hands to cover her chest, and her face was red and angry. She was actually quite cute.

Chen Pi wondered if she had been kidnapped, but quickly changed his mind. He felt that wasn't the case at all. Based on her bearing and posture, the girl was used to living on the water. Plus, ordinary girls who jumped into the Yangtze River in winter wouldn't be able to swim a few meters at all. He was afraid she was the daughter of a pirate, and not an ordinary one either.

The girl didn't scream but glared at Chen Pi without any hint of fear. "Who are you?" She asked softly

Chen Pi looked into her eyes and realized that she was looking at the no-contribution flag around his waist. He suddenly understood why she didn't make any noise—she didn't seem to know who he was. Chen Pi turned his head to look at it. He had several tricks up his sleeve, but he wasn't in the mood. Moreover, he wasn't the kind of person who could trick others. He jerked around, pulled his hand from around his waist, tossed his nine-clawed hook out, grabbed the lamp, and threw it directly into the air.

The girl was shocked. She obviously didn't expect Chen Pi's first target to be the lamp, so all her reactions were wrong. She could only shrink back, unable to dodge anything. As soon as the light went out, she immediately wanted to shout at the people on shore, but Chen Pi grabbed her neck

before she could make a sound. He squeezed her windpipe so hard that she couldn't scream at all.

She became desperate and immediately grabbed Chen Pi's groin. No man could defend that area in that kind of situation. Moreover, her hand joints were very loose, so she was able to grab it at an angle that ordinary people couldn't. At that moment, however, Chen Pi used his other hand to shove her upper back until her whole body was bowed. The pain was so great she couldn't maintain her grip and let go. Chen Pi was exerting so much force that he could probably break her spine if he pushed just a little more.

But this action also meant that the girl's chest was stretched to the extreme, and all the buttons on her shirt went flying. The girl's clothes gaped open, revealing her whole chest.

It was a very humiliating state, and the girl's tears flowed down and stained Chen Pi's hands on her neck.

Chen Pi felt as if his fingers had been scalded by the hot tears, and he unconsciously loosened his grip. From this angle, he could vaguely see the curve of her chest, and his heart beat faster and faster.

"Who the hell are you?" The girl asked reluctantly, not daring to shout.  
"What do you want?"

"I'm looking for the Huang Kui gang." Chen Pi said coldly. "Are you Huang Kui?"

"I'm not." The girl's tears continued to flow. "I'm the owner of this boat. It's my dad's. We took the boat from Suzhou and fled. He's gone ashore to stock up. I'm here to guard the boat."

Chen Pi paused and then touched the girl's neck. The skin was very delicate, which didn't fit the image of a pirate who stayed out on the water all day long. She really seemed like the child of a decent family.

He slowly let go, and the girl fell on the deck, immediately wrapping her clothes around her chest and shrinking into the corner. Chen Pi shook his nine-clawed hook, and the lamp that had fallen into the water was pulled back up. He caught it and put it back on the shelf, then took a match and oil core from his pocket, lit the lamp again, and held it in front of the girl.

The girl was pale from shock and her lips had turned purple with the cold. Chen Pi asked, "Who was that on the shore?"

"I don't know, please don't kill me." The girl shivered, and Chen Pi stared coldly at the exposed part of her chest. The girl curled up and continued to retreat to the cabin, crawling backwards using her hands. This meant that the clothes on her chest parted, revealing her childish white breasts.

Under the lantern's light, Chen Pi's eyes were almost blinded by the white skin, and he couldn't react. The girl retreated all the way into the cabin and looked at Chen Pi with a terrified expression before she suddenly laughed. She no longer seemed to care and opened her shirt completely, revealing her whole, attractive white-as-snow body. She moved her hands as if to highlight her curves to the fullest extent and then went to reach under the futon in the cabin.

Chen Pi rushed in and threw himself on her. The girl let out a seductive groan and said, "Don't rush it, take a good look at me again." She arched her body into a very attractive curve, while her hands slowly reached under the futon. She remembered that there were two pistols there, but at this time, she suddenly noticed that something was wrong. Her legs were tightly pressed against Chen Pi's crotch, and she found that he wasn't interested at all.

She immediately opened her eyes and saw Chen Pi expressionlessly reaching for her mouth. Without an ounce of hesitation, he pierced her beautiful eyes with the pineapple knife.



## Chapter 14 Business Loss

Liu Sankao listened to the movement on the boat. His ears were very good, but all he could hear was a woman's gasps and cries. He touched his neck, feeling uncomfortable.

He was a cheap man who used to play with the prostitutes by the river. He didn't realize what was wrong with those rough-skinned women until he joined the Huang Kui gang. Once he saw Shuixiang there, he despised any and all women. She had thin ankles like chopsticks, a waist that could be clasped with both hands, and white skin that didn't seem like it belonged to someone living on the river. The most terrible thing was that this Shuixiang spoke in a low, delicate voice. Although her mannerisms were a bit bold and lively, she was just like those well-off ladies on shore.

Liu Sankao felt suffocated when he imagined how Shuixiang's chest moved every time she combed her hair. He touched the short harpoon at his waist. There were many moments that he wanted to get on the boat and deal with the slut.

But he wouldn't dare. After tightly squeezing the harpoon several times, he eventually relaxed his grip. He had clenched his hands so tightly that his nails had dug into his flesh and drawn blood.

He knew the consequences of offending Shuixiang.

He had been listening to the movements on the boat for several days, and the jealousy made his teeth tremble. Shuixiang had been seeking out information for Huang Kui, so there were all kinds of men going on board. Every time he heard the gasps, he felt as if ants were crawling up and down his spine. He could imagine the two jade-white legs connected to a petite, round butt wrapped around the men's waists. It was said that Shuixiang's legs were flexible enough to wrap around a man's neck, but he never got to experience this kind of good thing.

While he was thinking all this, he continued to take a few mouthfuls of wine. The others were talking about what was going to happen on the river, uncertain when the Japanese would come calling. Now that the military goods were coming and going on the river, many people were secretly paying them high prices to hijack the ships. These kinds of jobs were basically putting their heads on the line since military cargo ships had armed escorts. Ordinary people wouldn't dare make a move, but it was said that they could make a huge profit each time.

Tired of listening to it all, he glanced at where a few girls were lying behind the shop. Their hands and feet had been tied and their mouths were sewn shut. They were the real owners of that boat. After Shuixiang had taken a few people to intercept the boat, she let the girls' fathers go ashore to raise money to redeem them.

When he walked over, the girls cowered in the corner, ceaselessly trembling. Liu San shoved one of the girls' hair away from her face. This Jiangsu girl looked healthy enough but was as plain as a Buddhist nun. And her trembling body wasn't as well-endowed as Shuixiang's was. But fortunately, her skin was also pale white.

He reached into the girl's clothes and startled fondling her chest. Her body broke out in goosebumps, and she started to struggle and twist. She wanted to scream, but the wounds on her stitched-up mouth only ended up bleeding instead.

The fondling made Liu Sankao excited and the veins on his forehead started bulging. He was surprised to find that the girl looked thin, but her skin was comfortably smooth to the touch. He felt as if the suffocating desire he had been suppressing was about to burst out, and his eyes became a little blurred.

He looked at the people behind him and saw that one of them had noticed what he was doing and was looking at him coldly. "Sankao, you know the rules. You can't touch the hostages. They're worth more if we can send them back intact."

Liu Sankao was extremely anxious and said to the speaker, “I’ve been holding back for so fucking long. Will they be less valuable just because I’ve touched them?”

The man glanced at Liu Sankao contemptuously and stopped talking. Liu Sankao picked the girl up and tore off her pants with his hands, revealing her whole butt and white legs. The girl struggled desperately, and tears flowed from her eyes.

Liu Sankao swallowed, unable to see anything else besides that white flesh. At that time, everyone else in the shop turned to look at him. Liu Sankao pulled her pants to her ankles and used them to cover his hands. He looked like he was about to do something obscene, but was actually secretly untying the rope around the girl’s legs.

The man who spoke before seemed to be a self-appointed leader and immediately went to stop him. “Shit, you’re fucking crazy!”

Liu Sankao sneered, put the girl on the ground, released his grip, and then watched as she ran away.

Everyone was shocked and could only watch as the girl ran towards the river like she wanted to jump in.

Liu Sankao sneered: “Escaping hostages can’t be left alive. You know the rules. You can’t stop me.” With that said, he ran a dozen steps and caught up to the girl. He pushed her down on the riverbank, pressed her head against the ground, and went to untie her underwear.

Liu Sankao knew Huang Kui’s rules all too well. An escaped hostage could never be left alive. They had to be killed. As long as this girl ran, she would die. But no one would care if he had a little fun with her before she was killed. When he looked back and saw that everyone had surrounded him, he immediately changed tactics and tried to bash the girl’s skull in on the embankment. His eyes turned red, and his burning desire left him with only one thing in mind.

At this time, Chen Pi's head suddenly poked out of the water beside the embankment, giving Liu Sankao a fright. He could only stare in shock as Chen Pi climbed up, knocked him away from the girl, and sat astride him in the same position Liu Sankao had just been in. With his pineapple knife held in a reverse grip, he stabbed Liu Sankao's throat a dozen times at breakneck speed.

Blood started gushing out of Liu Sankao's nostrils and mouth.

Chen Pi looked up with eyes as red as Liu Sankao's had been, and yelled at the sky: "I only received a hundred coins. What the fuck are you doing?!!"

## Chapter 15 Beggar's Knife

There were a lot of thatched huts along the riverbank that had rows of pickles strung up outside of them. An old woman was in one of these huts, swatting pickles with a cattail fan to drive away the flies. Her eyes had turned white, indicating that the cataracts were very serious.

There was a square table in the hut, and rows of coal stoves and pots full of boiling medicine set up along the shore. There were three stacks of small dishes on the square table, which the hitmen's leader was eating with an unremarkable-looking short man. The leader took a bite of pickled vegetables, looked between the old woman and the dishes on the table, and said, "Boss, is this what you normally eat?"

The short man scooped out half of the rice from his bowl and poured it into a new bowl. He then put two or three chopsticks' worth of pickled vegetables, peanuts, and fried clams on top, and then brought them to the old woman, who really couldn't see them. She touched the short man's hands with her own trembling hands, felt for the bowl and chopsticks, and began eating.

"What do you think I should eat?" The short man went back to the table. "This is the kind of food that's always easily available, and it's just a matter of adding less grease and water to it when times get tough. If you eat well all year round, you'll feel even worse if you don't get to eat in the future."

A voice came from the low hut next to them, "When you say things like this, it'll be a miracle if he even understands what you're talking about." The speaker turned out to be a middle-aged man wearing a changshan<sup>69</sup>, who sat down at the table and picked up a pair of chopsticks. He and the leader eyed each other and then looked at the short man, who didn't bother looking at them. Instead, his gaze was focused on a row of corpses lying

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<sup>69</sup> Traditional Chinese dress (or robe, long jacket, or tunic) worn by men. Basically, the male equivalent of a cheongsam

under the table, and the flies swarming around them. He said to the leader, "Tell me what happened."

The leader was a little embarrassed. He wiped the sweat from his head, fiddled with the peanuts in his bowl, squeezed out a timid smile, and said, "It has nothing to do with me."

The short man put a few pieces of clam meat in the leader's bowl and then looked at the man in the changshan, who shook his head. "I'm going to Baiping Building later. Two of the three gangs invited me out to eat, so I'll just eat a little now." The changshan man spoke in Southwestern Mandarin. His tone was so clear that one would think he was a scholar.

The short man picked up the clam dish, poured the rest of the clams and soup into his bowl, stirred it, and ate it all. He then said to the leader, "It's so cold, yet you're sweating so much. You still haven't changed."

The leader felt the sweat on his head and seemed surprised that it was there. He said, "I'm scared and flustered since I'm eating with you, Boss."

"If you didn't do anything wrong, then why are you flustered?" The short man put down his bowl and chopsticks and stared absently at the medicine pot beside him. The hitmen's leader also looked at the medicine pot and started sweating even more.

"Boss asked me to do something, so I did it. I just don't know if it was a bad thing." The leader stuffed a few heaping mouthfuls of rice into his mouth.

Off to the side, the changshan man put a few pickled vegetables in his bowl and then walked over to the place where the corpse had been placed under the table. He squatted down and used his chopsticks to lift the linen cloth covering one of the bodies, revealing Shuixiang's head.

Her hair was a mess, one eye had turned into a bloody socket, and half of her face was covered in dried frozen blood.

The changshan man narrowed his eyes and continued moving the linen cloth down, revealing the rest of Shuixiang's body. Her shirt had been ripped open, revealing her round breasts, but her pants were still in place. Her pale white chest and abdomen were thickly dotted with countless blade marks that had chunks of flesh hanging from them.

The changshan man took a bite of his meal and pointed to Shuixiang's eyes with his chopsticks: "This knife wound was the killing blow. And it was the first one, too."

"How do you know? Did you stab her?" The leader immediately asked. "Oh, I already know you're a fake scholar. You've been having an affair with this woman for a long time, and all your books are shit—"

Before the leader could finish, the short man slapped him on the back of the head. The leader immediately shrank back, not daring to speak.

The short man scolded him in a dialect that obviously wasn't the local dialect, but seemed to come from the Yunnan ethnic minority. He didn't give the hitmen's leader a second look as he picked up the peanuts and squatted in front of Shuixiang's body. The changshan man continued: "The wounds on her body aren't fatal. But the shape of this knife is very strange. The blade is curved, but thin and difficult to use. If the person had stabbed her stomach first, Shuixiang would have definitely struggled and the wounds would have been enlarged. But the flesh from these wounds was actually brought out when the knife was pulled out. The wounds are neat, indicating that Shuixiang wasn't moving at the time they were made."

The changshan man pointed to Shuixiang's eyes with his chopsticks. "They first stabbed the knife into her brain, killing her instantly. Then, they used the knife to stab the rest of her body."

"Was it revenge? Was someone targeting her specifically?" The short man ate a peanut as the changshan man shook his head.

“No.” He looked at the other bodies. “Of the thirteen people she brought ashore, twelve died. There aren’t as many knife wounds, and most of them were stabbed in the ear.”

“Was it an expert?”

“I haven’t seen such a connoisseur, but this kind of weapon is hard to use.” The changshan man stood up, tapped his bowl, sat back in his seat, and continued eating.

The hitmen’s leader glanced at him with pleading eyes, but the changshan man looked back at him coldly without responding. The leader was covered in sweat and shouted to the old woman with cataracts, “You don’t need to heat the coal stoves anymore. I’m so hot, I’m dripping with sweat.”

The short boss also sat back down, and someone outside dragged a man in. The man had been stabbed in the chest three times but didn’t die. His face was pale, the blood in his mouth had dried, and his chest was covered in the steaming dregs of herbal medicine. He couldn’t stand up and had to lie on the ground.

“Now tell me, what happened?” The changshan man asked him.

The wounded man’s lips trembled and he took two or three breaths before mumbling, “There’s a beggar. We went to catch him, but he didn’t run away. He just lost his temper and said that he only received a hundred coins.”



## Chapter 16 One Hundred Coins to Buy a Name

The short boss lit a water pipe and sat down next to the wounded man. "This is Huang Kui liquid. Try it. Your body won't hurt after you've inhaled some." With that said, he let the man inhale a mouthful. The opium seemed to have a medicinal effect, for the injured man's pain seemed to ease up almost immediately.

There was a grateful look in the wounded man's eyes. The short boss asked him to inhale a few more times, and then asked, "Why did the beggar go after you? Did you mess with somebody else's girl again?"

The injured man shook his head. His eyes were distracted as if he were trying to recall what had happened last night. "I really don't know, but, but he had a no-contribution flag on him. He kept asking me whose it was."

Behind him, the hitmen's leader turned pale and wiped the sweat from his trembling hands. When the changshan man laughed, the leader stared at him with red eyes and felt the flesh on his face tremble.

"Contribution-free flag? Then will you be able to recognize that beggar?" The short boss let the wounded man take another puff of opium before pulling the pipe back. The wounded man nodded, "I can. I can definitely recognize him. Master, prepare a cart for me, and I'll take my brothers to beat his flower drum and bring it back."

The short man sighed and waved his hand. "No need to ask. This is a disgrace. Twelve people died last night. How many brothers do you need?" With that said, he put his hand gently on the wounded man's nose and mouth.

The wounded man couldn't breathe and struggled to break free from the boss' hand, but all he could do was shake a few times, as if his hands, feet, and neck had lost their strength. Unable to move, his eyes looked straight at the hand covering his nose and mouth, but there was nothing he could do.

The short boss didn't look behind him, but asked angrily, "Didn't you say that flag had been burned to nothing? Why is it still in the hands of a beggar?"

The leader's eyes were red, and he finished his meal in a few mouthfuls. "I couldn't find it, so I burned the whole boat down. How was I supposed to know that little one gave it to someone else?"

"You didn't find it, but dared to say you did. Are you senile? Or is your skull broken?" The short boss calmly watched as the wounded man's eyes slowly turned white, his face turned red, urine flowed from his crotch, and he began to twitch violently.

"Boss, why do you say it like that? I beat the flower drums and brought them back, what else do you want me to do? Isn't it just a rag?" The leader finished speaking and started walking out.

"Where are you going?" The changshan man asked from behind him.

"I'm going to get your rag, and kill the one who has it." With that said, the leader stepped over several corpses and went out.

The short boss frowned but watched it all silently as he waited for the wounded guy to finally stop twitching and die. He picked himself up and walked over to the edge of the embankment to wash his hands in the river. When he saw that the hitmen's leader had already gone ashore, he showed a very tired expression on his face and complained, "Changshan, you're the advisor. I told you this leader couldn't be used and would bring us trouble sooner or later. Why didn't you listen to me? Do you also want me to remove you from your position?"

"Without a hitmen's leader, these four beams and eight pillars will be uneven. Boss, you tested him before, but he managed to beat the flower drums. And he got a lot, too. It's all justified. The Japanese are getting closer and closer, and the people are unstable. If you want to remove him again without a justified reason, the pillars will be displaced and the people's morale will be shattered." The advisor said.

“Then you should hurry and find a way!” The short boss took a deep breath as if to calm his anger and then pointed to the bodies: “What can you see?”

“Boss, the beggar is a novice. He’s not been trained, but he still managed to kill so many of us. I noticed him a while ago. He set up a stall some time ago that offered to kill someone for a hundred coins. I think someone gave him a hundred coins to kill the hitmen’s leader.”

“A hundred coins, eh? Our Huang Kui’s leader is worth a hundred coins.” The short boss smiled, got up, and walked towards a coal stove, where he picked up a pot of the boiling medicine and handed it to the old woman with cataracts. As the old woman blew on it and started drinking, Changshan saw that she appeared to be holding something in her arms that was nursing. But it was wrapped in clothes, so he couldn’t see it clearly. It became anxious when it smelled the medicine and started squirming.

“Go look for the beggar and ask if he’s interested in being our hitmen’s leader. The pay’s negotiable. If he’s not, then take care of him. Don’t give the leader a chance. I don’t want to listen to his prattling anymore.” The short boss patted Changshan on the shoulder and suddenly whispered in standard Mandarin, “Aren’t you tired of being a water locust after twenty years? The river is about to change. What should be done now... only you and I can understand the truth.”

“I’ll get it done,” Changshan said quietly as he looked at the old woman’s arms one last time and then left.

The short boss rubbed his back and sighed before going to help the old woman up. He said something in an unintelligible dialect, which the old woman answered in the same dialect. She patted the thing in her arms, seemingly wanting to calm it down. He helped the old woman into a hut on the embankment and looked inside. There seemed to be a crowd of people in the darkness.

The short boss said a few words to the darkness, locked the hut’s door, and then washed the dishes in the river.

As he was washing them, he looked at the water's surface with eyes full of disgust.

## Chapter 17 Changshan

Chen Pi woke up from where he had flopped down in the corner of the Mahuo Temple. He looked up at the clothes hanging nearby. He had spent a long time washing them in the river to get the blood out. When he touched his face and felt the hard bristles, he walked over to the lake, washed his face in the water, and then made a few hasty shaves. At this moment, the pain in his hand fully woke him up.

He looked down and saw that all ten knuckles were skinned. It wasn't caused by the battle he had fought last night, but the injury he suffered when he punched the tree on his way back to the Mahuo Temple.

He wouldn't have been so annoyed if he had killed them before he started his "hundred coins, kill one person" business. But ever since Xi Qi had said those words, he had been a little concerned. Doing it one by one wasn't feasible, and could even be regarded as losing money.

Chen Pi got up and saw that his clothes were still wet, so he wrapped the torn quilt around his body, tied it tightly with a rope, and started walking to Baiping Building. This time, he looked at the no-contribution flag he had tied to the pole and took it down.

Whose fucking flag was this? Yesterday, he held off killing the last one and interrogated him for a long time, but the other party refused to talk. Chen Pi felt that instead of withholding information, the other party really didn't know anything. Now, there was nowhere else left to ask about which Huang Kui member owned this flag. He suddenly felt that this was the wrong way to go about it. If even Huang Kui's own people didn't know whose flag it was, then when could he finish this thing?

He still remembered Xi Qi's words clearly and knew he had to wrap this up. If he couldn't even kill that one person, then having these hundred coins would become a joke.

As he walked along, he felt pain coursing through his body. His joints had been severely torn, which made him feel tired with every step he took. He suddenly became a little dizzy and leaned against a tree by the road, still staring at his injured knuckles. He started to hear Xi Qi's dying gasps in his ear, and the "one hundred coins, kill one person" curse.

Countless Xi Qis appeared and kept repeating the phrase over and over again, and Chen Pi's face became more and more gloomy. As his inner disgust and anxiety reared their heads, he suddenly remembered his previous self, who never used to suffer from killing anything.

"Bastard." Chen Pi looked at the Xi Qis in front of him with narrowed eyes and then wiped his face. He tilted to one side, started vomiting violently, and then fainted.

When he woke up again, a group of children were throwing stones at him. He had been awakened when one of the stones managed to hit his chin, and the brats scattered once they saw that he was up.

As Chen Pi stood up and patted the frozen vomit from his body, one could see that his expression had changed. The inner suffering and turmoil had disappeared, and he had suddenly changed back to his former self.

"Since you can't find out whose flag it is, you'll have to kill them all. One of them is bound to be it." Chen Pi looked at the sky, and all but one of the Xi Qis disappeared. This last one looked at him with a smile, as if betting that he wouldn't be able to finish it. Chen Pi also smiled and then turned to continue his walk to Baiping Building.

Meanwhile, Changshan was crying and smoking a pipe beside the river bank. His hands were shaking so much that he could hardly lift the pipe up. He was followed by someone who looked like an accountant. This person didn't dare speak but merely accompanied him silently.

"Do you think Shuixiang was soiled by that beggar?" Changshan suddenly stopped and asked.

The accountant shook his head. "Mr. Advisor, there's no way to tell."

The corners of Changshan's mouth twitched, and the tears flowed down to his neck. He wiped them away and said, "What do you mean, you can't tell? Haven't you checked?"

"Mr. Advisor, everyone's dead. Who's going to want to check?" The accountant said timidly. He took a step back before he dared continue, "Moreover, Miss Shuixiang was no longer an innocent girl. It's not like you don't know how many she's been with."

"Fuck you, you know nothing." Changshan suddenly became furious and started shouting, "What would that make me if I let someone touch her after I did? After I fucked her, would she dare mess around again? I killed them one by one. The women I've been with are mine for life. No one can fucking touch them."

"Yes, yes." The accountant nodded and almost fell to his knees in fear.

"Shit, how dare that damned beggar touch my woman. There's no way I'll let him become the hitmen's leader." Changshan's tears started flowing again. "Do you think that bitch Shuixiang knew that she might be ruined, so she... she ended it herself first? Doesn't she know she's my woman? I feel sick at the mere thought of this whole mess."

The accountant was covered in a cold sweat when he suddenly saw some girls passing by. He immediately had an epiphany and said "Mr. Advisor, would you like to get another young girl to take Shuixiang's place? You know, Shuixiang wasn't your first after all. I'll go and see if the matrons at the Ximen brothels have any new ones in."

Changshan didn't speak for a long time and then sighed, "Forget it. The seventh house on Willow Street has a fifteen-year-old daughter. I've taken a fancy to that pert little ass. Take care of it for me. I have something to do." He looked at something hidden under his wrist and wiped away his tears. Once he had restored his composure, he said, "The beggar usually stays in the corner of Mahuo Temple. Find someone to go there and ask the other

beggars where he is. They all know him. His name is Chen Pi. You can't fight this Chen Pi, so remember to treat him with courtesy. Buy three boxes of gifts, a good set of winter clothes, and give him a thousand coins. Tell him it's thanks for his work yesterday, and to make up for the money he missed out on. Be sure to tell him we'd like to discuss a big business deal with him.

"Where at?"

"Baiping Building. Prepare a table of food and wine inside the building. Find a group of brothers good at using spears and set up an ambush. As soon as he comes, don't say anything, and just do it directly. Be sure to cut him down and bring me the evidence."

"But didn't Boss ask you to invite him?"

"You know, there have been other men who have touched my women. Even if they only touch my women's hands, it's still dirty. I won't let either the man or the woman off. When Boss asks, just keep it short and say this Chen Pi didn't want to. Now, go to the building and ask the leaders of the three gangs and five factions to move to the cockfighting pit at the east gate. I'll wait for them there. The table of food we've already ordered in the building will be Chen Pi's sendoff." Changshan shook his sleeves and hid the things under his wrists. "By the way, don't move Shuixiang's corpse to my place. I don't want it dirtied. Let Boss dispose of it himself."

The accountant nodded and then started planning out how to go about his tasks. Changshan straightened himself up, blew his nose in a handkerchief, and then let out a sigh. "She had a slender waist. She had just reached the age of fifteen. Newly married, she put her hair into two buns on her head. It was the first time she learned to adorn herself properly, like a beautiful figure cut from stone. Her face showed a kind of timidness and shame at the affection. Her every movement was very sweet and charming. Unfortunately, she hadn't learned how to take the initiative to show her love to her husband. It was late at night, yet she refused to enter the quilt to



sleep. Her husband undressed her, but she was shy and turned her back to the lamp, telling him to sleep first.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> The whole thing is a poem written by Liu Yong in the Song Dynasty. It’s a poem about a 15 or 16-year-old girl who was married as soon as she reached adulthood. Because she still didn’t understand love affairs, she couldn’t fully adapt to the newly married life, which caused headaches for her husband. About the whole hair thing, young women used to wear their hair down in order to show the public that they were unmarried. Once married, a girl would tie her hair up.

## Chapter 18 Found Chen Pi

Chen Pi walked along the riverbank and watched the people coming and going. Everyone looked like they belonged to Huang Kui, which made him agitated. He contemplated going to the stall outside Baiping Building and listening to the sounds of those eating next door. When he found one, he would follow them and kill them.

There was a man crying in front of him, who was reprimanding the person following behind him. Chen Pi found it a little strange and ended up following them for a long time. He eventually watched the crying man walk away from the riverbank, while the man who looked like an accountant was left behind. The man watched the changshan man walk far away, and then spit in contempt. It seemed he despised his master from the bottom of his heart.

Chen Pi didn't care. He dug around in his pockets, but there were only a few copper coins left. The main problem he was facing right now was that he didn't have enough money to eat at the Baiping Building stall. He had gone through his killing fee surprisingly fast and was just feeling a little depressed when the accountant turned his head and saw Chen Pi. He called out to him, "Beggar, come here."

Chen Pi looked up at him, unsure what he was planning. The accountant came up to him, looked at the copper coins in his hand, and asked him, "Do you live in Mahuo Temple?"

Chen Pi cocked his head. He didn't understand this guy's intentions but involuntarily nodded. The other party took out a handful of copper coins from his clothes, "Come on, it just so happens that I have ten coins. Come help me carry some things."

Chen Pi looked at the ten coins but didn't move. The accountant snorted, "What? This is more than you'd make working hard on the dock." With that said, he put the money in Chen Pi's hand. "Look at you. No wonder you

deserve a lifetime of begging for food. Now come on, what are you doing standing there in a daze for?"

Chen Pi felt a little embarrassed. Since he had taken Chun Shen's job, he no longer regarded himself as an unskilled laborer, but it felt weird now that someone had mentioned it.

When the accountant saw that he still didn't respond, he went to take the money back while looking around for any other clever unskilled laborers. Chen Pi looked between Baiping Building and the account, thought about his remaining copper coins, and didn't return the money to him. Instead, he put the money into his clothes with a cold look on his face.

This kind of work could be found everywhere on the dock. When rich people got off the boat, their housekeepers would go and look for unskilled laborers who needed a quick coin or two, or barge haulers who were familiar with the streets, and ask them to help carry stuff. Or if a large household in the city wanted to transport things out of their warehouse, they would send out notices in advance, and those who took them would get to eat a hearty breakfast. This was done to ensure they had enough physical strength, so they wouldn't damage the goods.

These two kinds of jobs actually paid more than the short-term work of unloading things at the dock, but Chen Pi looked reserved, so he was rarely approached.

As they walked all the way down the street, the accountant bought three boxes of clothes, cakes, and bedding, which Chen Pi had to carry. Chen Pi was constantly looking around, wondering what to do. It wasn't like the Huang Kui pirates would have it written on their faces, so where would he find them? It certainly wouldn't work out as nicely as yesterday had. There were several dikes and docks along the Yangtze River's shore, so he'd have to search them one by one.

He was absent-minded as the accountant chattered the whole way, and ended up not understanding a word.

In less than an hour, the accountant finally had everything settled. He checked the things again, tied them all together, and then took Chen Pi to the Mahuo Temple. Chen Pi's mind was still muddled and he didn't realize where they were going until he found himself back at the temple.

All the beggars were hanging around outside the temple wall. When Chen Pi came back to his senses, he saw the accountant looking around at the beggars. "Hey, help me find out which one is Chen Pi." He said to him.

Chen Pi was stunned for a moment and then looked at the accountant. "Why are you looking for Chen Pi?"

"It's none of your business." The accountant said angrily. "Which one is he? Tell me quickly."

Chen Pi took a closer look at this accountant and found that he was a short, fat, and inconspicuous man. Chen Pi had never seen him before. What did this man want with him? Since he bought so many things, was it a proposal? The accountant and Chen Pi looked at each other. The accountant found that this guy didn't seem to want to point to anyone at all.

He immediately became impatient and said to Chen Pi, "Ok, I see it's no use. Go away." He then went up to the beggars and asked in a low voice, "Everyone, I have something to ask. Do you have a person named Chen Pi here?"

All the beggars looked up at the accountant and then pointed to Chen Pi, who was standing behind him. The accountant looked back, but Chen Pi ignored him and walked silently towards his corner. He walked in a straight line, and all the beggars in front of him retreated one right after another, not even daring to look Chen Pi in the eye.

## Chapter 19 Commoners Like Ants

“Well, this must really be fate if we were able to meet each other like this. Are you Chen Pi?” The accountant wasn’t a fool. Although he was covered in a cold sweat and keeping his distance, he still bowed respectfully to Chen Pi. “You could say this coincidental meeting is fate at work. It’s like seeing the dragon’s head, but not its tail. Playing a trick like that really makes things lively.”

Chen Pi was a little tired. He had just carried a heavy box all that way, so now his physical strength was a little overdrawn. He turned to look at the accountant. Not only was he wondering what to do about Huang Kui, but now he was wondering why the accountant was looking for him. It was a little annoying.

Without waiting for Chen Pi’s response, the accountant immediately laid out all the gifts and whispered, “These thousand coins are for helping me eliminate those useless and troublesome people last night. According to the market, this is the price that Chen Pi asked for. I also came to send these gifts and clothes as a welcoming present. If these things are satisfactory, my boss wanted to know if you’d like to have a meal with him?”

“Helped you? How did I help you?” Chen Pi felt his heart move as he looked at the thousand coins, and he immediately sat up.

At that moment, Chen Pi felt as if his heart had undergone a faint change, but it was too fleeting to grasp.

For the first time in his life, someone came to him with a gift and even talked to him in such a polite way.

“Hehehe.” Upon seeing Chen Pi’s reaction to the money, the accountant relaxed and thought to himself, *commoners really can be moved by a thousand coins. It’s just as Mr. Advisor expected.*

He took a deep breath, and smiled, "You helped me. Surely you must know how. I don't know how my gang offended you recently, Master Chen Pi, but my boss was glad when you helped kill Shuixiang. It just so happened that our boss saw how she wasn't doing her job and wanted to take care of her. But you went and did it for us. So, thank you. But this shows that there must be some kind of misunderstanding between Master Chen Pi and our gang, so my boss prepared a dining table in the Houde room at Baiping Building. In the future, this "hundred coins" business will flourish, and we Huang Kui will have more opportunities to work with Chen Pi."

Chen Pi immediately understood, "Are you from Huang Kui?"

"Yes. I'm the accountant."

"Your people are waiting for me to eat at Baiping Building?" Chen Pi suddenly smiled, and his hands shook with excitement.

"The feast is ready." The accountant looked at Chen Pi with a smile and knew that he had completely fallen for the advisor's trap.

He had been in Huang Kui for so many years and followed Mr. Advisor the whole time. Although the middle-aged changshan man had many quirks, he was very accurate when it came to judging people, and could read most of them in a single glance. With two or three well-placed moves, he could set people up to walk right into the traps he had designed. After that, the changshan man had complete control over them.

"Commoners are like ants. They'll move when you pull them and die when you twist their legs off." This was what the changshan man often said. He was so arrogant that many people thought he wouldn't live long in Huang Kui, but over the years, all those who wanted to touch him ended up dying. Not only did Boss really trust him, but his men didn't even dare discount his words, because they never failed to come true. The reckless ones feared the hitmen's leader, while the other three gangs and five factions were afraid of Huang Kui. But that was more because of this advisor.

If the current situation wasn't so turbulent, it would truly be a loss having the advisor deal with a brat like Chen Pi. But it was probably because it involved Shuixiang, and the advisor had a personal stake in it.

As the accountant was thinking all this, he looked at Chen Pi. He decided the best course of action was to respectfully take Chen Pi to Baiping Building and flatter him along the way. Other people would give him looks for treating a beggar like this, but he didn't care. After taking Chen Pi to the private room in Baiping Building, everything would be over, and Changshan wouldn't have to worry about it anymore. Yes, Changshan wouldn't remember that his casual game had ruined someone's life.

Chen Pi stood up, walked over to the gifts, pulled out a piece of clothing from inside, and held it up. The accountant chuckled to himself when he saw Chen Pi hold the clothes up to his shoulders. *This boy knows how to dress up*, he thought to himself.

Before he could react, Chen Pi stabbed him in the heart.

The accountant was shocked and looked down to find that blood was flowing from his heart. Chen Pi pressed the clothes over his heart and stuffed them into the wound on his chest. The accountant couldn't believe what had just happened as he slowly collapsed in Chen Pi's corner of the temple.

Chen Pi looked around, but no one had noticed what was going. He wiped his hands and turned around before taking off his clothes and walking back to the gifts. He found a new outfit and put it on, finding that he looked somewhat magnificent. He headed to Baiping Building with a thousand coins in his arms, two pistols, and nine pineapple knives.

He didn't notice, but Changshan was in a nearby tree watching the whole thing. He felt happy when he saw the knife stab into the accountant's chest.

He knew Chen Pi was this kind of person, but he didn't expect Chen Pi to kill the accountant like this. It was really vulgar.

Those who were being schemed against never knew that they were being schemed against. The accountant saw him scheming against so many people, and always thought that it would never happen to him. This was the sorrow of commoners. Changshan's face suddenly darkened as he remembered that the accountant had mistakenly entered his room the day before yesterday. At that time, his concubine hadn't yet entered the inner courtyard. He was playing with her feet but didn't have the chance to cover them up before the accountant saw them.

Those small ankles were as thin as chopsticks, and he was afraid he wouldn't be able to find anything like them again. The accountant was very effective, but Changshan didn't sleep well for several days. He couldn't accept the fact that the pig-eyed accountant had actually seen his own private things. Damn it, he'd definitely think about those ankles when he went back. If he didn't, then he'd probably think about them when he masturbated. How the fuck was that ok?

Changshan was covered in goosebumps and feeling extremely sad. He cried like a baby when he beat the concubine to death and swore to himself that the accountant was doomed to die. He had to pay for inflicting this bad karma on his girl.

When he climbed down from the tree, he was met by several guys who had been waiting for him. Changshan gave them a look. "Go and tell Boss that Chen Pi killed my accountant and looked down on Huang Kui. I want to take his life." One of the men left, while the others followed behind Changshan, silently trailing Chen Pi to Baiping Building.



## Chapter 20 Hua Qian

They kept their distance from Chen Pi.

The weather was good, the river was sparkling, and it was rare for the sun to be so bright. Those out in the sun were actually getting hot. The younger brother on the side handed some fennel beans to Changshan, and the group ate them as they watched Chen Pi walk to Baiping Building.

It was very relaxing under the sun. Changshan appeared to be in a good mood and hummed a little song as he walked. The guy went to hand him the pipe, but Changshan waved his hand, "Did you see what happened to the accountant?"

All the guys paled, glanced at each other, and then nodded. No one dared speak.

Changshan pointed to the pipe. "This kind of thing is a habit. You need to use it less. The fewer habits you have, the harder it is for me to set up my schemes, understand?"

No one knew how to respond, so they stayed silent. Changshan smiled and looked at them. "What's the matter? Afraid?"

One of the guys said, "Since Mr. Advisor had to tell us this, it shows that the young ones aren't even qualified to be schemed against. We understand you're just saying it as a joke to entertain us."

Changshan burst out laughing. He looked particularly happy as he pointed to the man, "You have a brain. You get to take over the accountant's position."

The man froze, unsure if he was joking.

Another man asked, "Mr. Advisor, why don't we just take care of Chen Pi directly? There are so many of us, and we're beside the river. With you here to give us a plan, how could we let our brothers in Baiping Building take care of Chen Pi? Can't we handle him alone?"

Changshan chewed on a bean and laughed, "Kill Chen Pi? Rely on you? Do you know what kind of guy he is?"

The guys were puzzled. Changshan looked at Chen Pi's walking posture from a distance and narrowed his eyes. "This kind of person is called a 'hua qian' in our profession. He's got quick hands, good ears, and good eyes. When ordinary people fight, they'll look at their opponent's bearing, size them up, and see if they have any skills. But when a hua qian fights, it doesn't matter who the other person is. Everyone is the same to them because he can see their flaws."

"Flaws?"

"Yes, a hua qian is the kind of person with God-given talent. Their eyes can see all of a person's flaws. When you come across a hua qian with a sharp knife, not even ten or twenty people can get close. They won't even know how they died."

"But Mr. Advisor, don't we still have you? You could come up with a scheme to make him believe us, and then we could do it secretly. No matter how fast he reacts, he won't be able to guard against a surprise attack by so many of us, right?" One of the guys was clearly trying to flatter him.

Changshan shook his head and looked at Chen Pi coldly, "It's easy to plot against people, but animals? Not so much."

Everyone was puzzled, and Changshan gave a wry smile. He knew in his heart that Chen Pi couldn't be plotted against.

The most terrible thing about Chen Pi was that his understanding of the world had no secular logic at all. If you tried to lie to him to get him to fall for your scheme, he wouldn't understand your words or hints. You probably wouldn't even be able to get a few words out before he became impatient and stabbed you with a knife.

He was just like an animal. When animals stared at you, all they would think about was your heart, liver, spleen, and lungs. It didn't matter whether it

was intimidation or seduction, they wouldn't understand anything you said to them.

"You're too modest, Mr. Advisor. Look, this boy is still obediently headed to Baiping Building—"

Changshan was still eating the beans, and suddenly stopped, as if he had thought of something: "It's not enough to call it a strategy, but as soon as he enters Baiping Building, shoot and kill him." He then turned away from the embankment and said to the guys, "Keep following him. I'll come up with an idea to have some fun. Don't lose him. If there are any changes, come find me at the east gate's cockfighting pits immediately."

Once the men agreed, Changshan left in a hurry. He had a big grin on his face as if he had thought of something good.

As soon as he left, the group of guys all looked at each other and then at Chen Pi, who was still walking leisurely. One of the guys asked, "What happened to Mr. Advisor? He was so idle just now, but suddenly left in a hurry."

The newly appointed accountant had a dark look on his face and was trembling slightly, "Based on my understanding, Mr. Advisor wants to gamble."

"Gamble? Gamble on what?"

The accountant looked at Chen Pi and knew that Mr. Advisor had more planned than just leading Chen Pi to Baiping Building. He didn't do things that weren't fun. Everyone was involved in his scheme, and not everything he said was what he really thought. He seemed to have left so suddenly just now, but he must have had it planned for a long time. When he thought of this, the new accountant suddenly broke out in a cold sweat. He didn't know what he would face if he was left on the embankment.

## Chapter 21 Head for Head

When Changshan arrived at the cockfighting pit outside the east gate, the three groups and five factions were already there. Everyone had obviously been caught off guard since they suddenly had to move to this place. There were a lot of small, open-air stalls near the cockfighting pit, and the group of people wearing furs and yellow silk crowded around the stalls' four-square tables. When they looked at the spicy tofu and other dishes in front of them, they didn't know whether to laugh or cry. But they were a coarse group, so they weren't very particular. They took out the wine they had brought and started drinking.

The three gangs and five factions all had their own thugs. The three gangs were loan sharks to gamblers, while the five factions engaged in prostitution and piracy. There were many gangs bigger than Huang Kui, but the situation right now was unstable. A lot of businesses relied on the waterways, and Huang Kui had suddenly taken a big seat. The relationship between all the gangs was very tenuous.

Seeing that Changshan had finally arrived, several of the leaders stood up, but Changshan immediately urged them to sit down. "No, no, sorry, sorry. There was an emergency, so we had to relocate."

Everyone waved their hands as if to say it was no big deal. Changshan looked at the circle of people and saw that they were all waiting with their buddies. He laughed when he realized he was the only one who had come alone. "Let's talk while we eat. We'll let the brothers find another place to eat, too." He started fiddling with his shoes, which meant they had to have a detailed discussion and wouldn't be moving around for the time being.

When the others saw this, they immediately took their seats. These nine people used to throw their weight around but were now crowded into such a place. The seating was cramped and they all looked ridiculous. Changshan was the only one who looked comfortable as he took his chopsticks and started eating. There was a brothel owner among the three gangs and five

faction members, who had a bluish-black bruise on her face. It was still very eye-catching despite her attempts to cover it up with makeup. Changshan smiled, "Madam, what happened to you?"

"What happened to me?" The madam looked up at Changshan and said, "That hitmen's leader from your group slept with one of my girls and broke her legs. Her brother came to seek revenge, and ended up hitting me in the face with a stick."

"If he dared to hit you, then I bet you skinned him alive." Changshan thought it was so funny that he burst out laughing.

"Bah, we also have to be reasonable when doing this shady business. Aren't prostitutes humans, too? An able-bodied person was beaten just like that. We're different from you Huang Kui guys, who don't talk about morality or justice."

The others laughed with Changshan, which caused him to laugh even more. "That's not what I meant. The leader is the leader and I'm me. We each mind our own business. I can't interfere with the brothels, so you'll have to ask my boss to handle it."

The madam stopped talking. After drinking a few mouthfuls of wine, Changshan discovered that the others were looking at him without moving their chopsticks. "Don't be like this, everyone," he said. "I'm also in a difficult position. These days, the pirates have been scattered by the army and profits are down. There are thirty-four more people in Hubei this month alone. Huang Kui is in charge, so they're all at ease. If no one took care of them, then they'd still be scattered and end up causing trouble when the time comes. We all have to take care of this river, or we won't be able to make a living in this business."

"Oh, cut the crap. We all know that you want more money for the no-contribution flag." A big white fat man spoke up from the side. It was clear to see that he was really uncomfortable sitting there. "We can add more money if we're able to. If we aren't, we'll just stop using the waterway."

“I haven’t said anything yet, and you’re already putting words in my mouth?” Changshan suddenly became a little impatient.

The madam stared at the white fat man. “Can you fucking talk less? You sell opium to Yunnan, and I sell girls. Fuck, if you don’t go south, are you telling me to sell to the northern nomadic people?”

Changshan glanced at the madam: “Hey, that reminds me. What happened to the person my brother asked you to prepare?”

The madam was embarrassed for a moment, and then answered with, “Advisor, none of the girls you’ve previously asked for have come back yet. No one’s seen them, so how could I find a girl for you?”

Changshan looked at his wine coldly, “You can say this to my boss, but I dare not say it for you.”

The madam’s face immediately turned pale, and Changshan looked at the others. “That’s just how my boss is. You can either send them, or we’ll go to someone else. Do you want to wait for him to come and ask for someone himself? I really can’t handle this matter.”

Everyone’s expressions looked bad, and they all glanced at the madam. She took a deep breath and gave the man behind her a look. The man dragged a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old girl out from the back room. She was wrapped almost from head to toe, with only her face exposed.

The little girl was very beautiful. Her skin was white and youthful, but her eyes were a little yellow, indicating that she had been raised in a poor family.

“Mr. Advisor, in our line of work, we sell our bodies, not our lives. This girl hasn’t been touched by anyone. I personally picked her out. Take her back and keep her, but give us some accommodation. Let me meet the girls from the previous batches so that I can have an explanation for their families.”

Changshan looked at the little girl, who bowed her head and dared not look at him. He walked over silently, grabbed her chin, squeezed her mouth open, and looked at her teeth.

They were all neat and white, which made Changshan smile. “Madam, where did you find her?”

“Huaiyang.” The madam didn’t want to look at him.

Changshan narrowed his eyes and felt the girl’s body. As the little girl started trembling, the blue veins on Changshan’s neck bulged. Without warning, he grabbed the little girl’s chin from behind and suddenly gave it a fierce twist, breaking her neck on the spot.

Before the madam could react, the little girl fell to the ground. The madam screamed, “A Luo!” and then rushed to pick the little girl up, who was foaming at the mouth and twitching.

The madam looked at Changshan with red-rimmed eyes, and all the guys around her rushed over. Changshan pointed at the madam and shouted, “You better think it over!”

The madam was trembling all over and bit her lip until it bled. Changshan said coldly, “I’m trying to save you, Madam. Calm down and think about what you just did. We have to let everyone know what the consequences are.”

The people at the other tables didn’t dare speak. Changshan lowered his hand, and his eyes became wet. “Do you think Boss wouldn’t know about this? If you give me this girl and I accept it, all three of our heads will be hanging from Baiping Building’s roof the very next day. Is she pitiful? Of course she is! As to who to blame? Blame yourself! What the fuck do you think Huang Kui is?!!”

No one made a sound as Changshan pointed in the direction of the Yangtze River, “When we first set off from Dongting Lake to Hankou, there were 243 people in Huang Kui. Only eleven people remained after your Hankou water

locusts were done with them. When my boss looked at the piles of heads and asked me why, I couldn't answer." Tears came pouring from Changshan's eyes. "My boss held his daughter's head and looked out at the river for seven days and seven nights. We were just trying to make a living." Changshan looked at the table full of people and continued, "My boss said later that if he wanted you Hankou people to join him in the future, he'd have to kill as many women as he wanted. Do I dare to lie to him about this? Tell me, do I dare deceive him?"

"Even if he wants revenge, he can go find the water locusts that killed your people. This girl wasn't even thirteen." The madam cried out.

"Everyone's come to the table, yet you think you're pitiful? Or she's pitiful? Bullshit!" Changshan said coldly. He swiped all the dishes on the table to the ground, took out a pile of no-contribution flags from his pocket, and threw them down on the table. "I'll give you another chance. If you don't want to give my boss the women he wants, you'll have to do something else fun. A beggar has offended Huang Kui and is headed for Baiping Building right now. If you catch him before he gets to the building and bring his head here, I'll forget this whole matter and let you continue carrying the no-contribution flag. If you can't do it, you'd better stay off the Yangtze River."

The madam stared at Changshan, who looked around at everyone else, "Everyone, let the game begin. Be sure not to spoil the fun."

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Chen Pi walked along the embankment, feeling more and more sleepy as the sun beat down on him. The thousand coins in his pocket were surprisingly heavy, but he was still depressed. He had killed thirteen people, so he was three hundred coins short, but forget it. He had it all figured out now.

Chen Pi suddenly felt tired as he passed an embankment. His new clothes were a little too warm, so he sat down, leaned against a tree, and started to nap.



The guys who were still following him from a distance also stopped and looked at each other. It wasn't long after he fell asleep that Chen Pi suddenly woke with a start.

He had dreamed of Qinhuai Murderer, and that all his copper coins were lost in one fell swoop.

The unease in his heart had him sweating profusely, and he stomped his feet a few times.

He looked at the thousand coins and suddenly stood up with a dark look on his face. He walked to the cockfighting pit and forgot all about Baiping Building.

## Chapter 22 Buy the Dead Rooster

The cockfighting pit at the east gate was still very lively, so Chen Pi stopped by a pit and watched for a long time. In the sea of people, the madam's group passed by in the distance, heading for the embankment. Neither side noticed the other.

Chen Pi arrived outside the cockfighting pit that Qinhuai Murderer was normally in, took out his copper money, and wanted to find out when Qinhuai Murderer would fight. But as soon as he approached, he found that he didn't even have to ask.

This pit was so famous that there were more people around it than the other ones outside. Business was lively. Qinhuai Murderer was on the court, facing off against a green-feathered rooster.

The feathers on Qinhuai Murderer's neck puffed up, and his whole head seemed to swell to twice its size as he threatened his opponent. Chen Pi was depressed when he thought of the previous losses Qinhuai Murderer had brought about. Almost a few seconds after the feathers puffed up, the rooster usually lunged forward and pecked his opponent to death.

Sure enough, at almost the exact moment Qinhuai Murderer's neck puffed up, he hit the green rooster's crest. This was a routine commonly used in cockfighting and often required a dozen pecks before the other party was killed. But Qinhuai Murderer's mouth had a sharp and slender needle in it, which easily pierced the opponent's eyes.

Qinhuai Murderer seemed to be aware of it, for Chen Pi saw him aim the needle at the opponent's eyes every time he pecked. The green rooster had armor on his face, and a barb sticking out of his chin. It was as long as someone's middle finger and had a bent hook on the end. The green rooster watched as Qinhuai Murderer lunged in to peck, and then flew up immediately. He used the barb on his chin to stab Qinhuai Murderer's neck.

The blows were very heavy once the fighting began. When Qinhuai Murderer pecked the green rooster on the forehead, Chen Pi was surprised to see sparks explode. At the same time, the green rooster stabbed Qinhuai Murderer right on his neck.

Qinhuai Murderer felt the stabbing pain and jumped up. As the rooster's blood went flying, the surrounding people immediately became excited.

The man who collected the gambling money on the side came to collect a second round. Now that Qinhuai Murderer was injured, the odds had immediately gone up. When he saw Chen Pi, he walked over and said, "Hey, young man, do you still want to place a bet? Come on, come on. Don't miss out. The odds on Qinhuai Murderer are now one to forty. Now's the time to bet."

Chen Pi took out a handful of copper coins and patted him on the shoulder, "Qinhuai Murderer."

The man bit his cigarette, took the money, gave him a ticket, and then shook his head and smiled: "So stubborn. You're quite reckless."

He had just finished speaking when the green rooster on the stage fiercely launched an offensive. In the great cacophony, it was as if the green rooster had taken a stimulant. He flew up and pecked Qinhuai Murderer a dozen times in a row. Qinhuai Murderer didn't even try to dodge and went straight in to attack his opponent. The steel needles and barbs struck each other in the air. Both sides were seriously injured, and blood was scattered everywhere.

Chen Pi watched it all coldly and found that something was wrong. This green rooster's barb was very fatal, and Qinhuai Murderer just barely managed to avoid the most direct attacks. But the barb had been installed on the green rooster's chin, and Qinhuai Murderer couldn't see it from that angle. Every time he went to attack, he'd get cut almost every time because the green rooster would raise his neck to avoid it. As a result, Qinhuai Murderer's whole neck was bleeding profusely.

Sure enough, the red-eyed Qinhuai Murderer seized an extremely good opportunity and even gave three fierce pecks. When the green rooster jumped back and escaped, the barb hooked Qinhuai Murderer's neck and pulled out a big bloody chunk.

Qinhuai Murderer landed and only took two steps before he found that he couldn't stand. The green rooster came up to launch a continuous attack on Qinhuai Murderer's head, but Qinhuai Murderer stumbled away. Finally defeated, he fled to the haystack in the corner.

Everyone shouted, tore up their gambling tickets, and laughed heartily.

The man patted Chen Pi and gave him a meaningful smile, but Chen Pi didn't look at him at all. He watched the green rooster swagger unsteadily in the blood-covered court, and suddenly felt that he was looking at himself.

This kind of meaningless killing was just like how he was before. These two roosters had no idea what they could get if they put each other to death.

Another man entered the court, grabbed Qinhuai Murderer's neck, and dragged it to the back room. They immediately started taking bets for the next fight, and a new rooster was brought out.

Chen Pi felt a rare sadness as he watched it all silently. He touched his heart and found that he was suddenly hungry.

"Hey!" He called out to the man, "How much is that dead rooster? Can you strip away its feathers first?"

## Chapter 23 Face to Face

Chen Pi hid Qinhuai Murderer in his pocket and looked around to see if there was anyone nearby. He saw several people smoking under a tree, but they weren't paying any attention to him. He lowered his head, hunched his shoulders, and walked out.

There were many rules in cockfighting. The dead rooster's head and claws should be sent back to the original owner so they could make a tonic out of it. Rooster tonics—especially the ones made from famous roosters—were hard to come by. Although this was a gambling pit that was run differently from ordinary private cockfights, they still weren't allowed to sell the dead roosters. First, many of the roosters looked the same but had different decorations, so the bookies sometimes took advantage of this to cheat and arbitrage.<sup>71</sup> Second, the roosters were often fed strong drugs if large bets had been placed on them, and they might be eaten if they were sold.

Chen Pi didn't know all of this. He strolled around, sat down at a nearby stall, and then asked the man, "Hey, do you have soup here?"

The man looked at the rooster in Chen Pi's pocket, gasped in surprise, and then furtively looked around, "Sir, did you steal a rooster?"

Chen Pi slapped the guy on the temple so hard he staggered back and bumped into the corner of the table. Two of the leaders of the three gangs and five factions on the side turned to look at Chen Pi and then turned back to continue drinking with Changshan. One said: "Hurry up and bring the tofu."

Changshan took a bite of salted vegetables and touched the back of his neck. The white fat man said to him, "I remember this Chen Pi is a beggar. What business does Huang Kui have with a beggar?"

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<sup>71</sup> Arbitrage betting is an activity in which you go on placing bets at the same time on all potential results of an event at chances that assure profit, whatever the outcome of the event will be.

Changshan looked up and said, "See? Even you've heard of him. Have you ever seen a beggar so famous?"

The white fat man grinned, and Changshan continued, "You haven't seen him. I'm a water locust, but I saw a big bandit in Hunan once. He killed thousands of people without batting an eye. That Chen Pi is exactly the same as him. His face is filled out by human life. Madam, I say this from the bottom of my heart. Use the best people you have."

The madam turned pale but refused to look at him. Changshan smiled and shook his head, "Why so angry? Just know that it's a good thing you're still alive. This kind of thing won't come to pass if you recognize Huang Kui." With that said, he poured some wine for the madam. Her tears were flowing and she was trembling so much that she couldn't even pick up the glass.

Changshan drank by himself and then shook his head again, "Unfortunately, no matter how carefree this Chen Pi was before, today is his day of reckoning. In other words, I know how to deal with him. We just have to snuff him out directly. Don't say anything, don't give him a chance, just calmly and steadily approach him. Otherwise, once he runs away, you'll be out of luck and won't know when he'll strike."

Chen Pi was sitting nearby and looked at the table full of people who appeared to be talking about him. It seemed that they were from Huang Kui, but he didn't care about them right now. Instead, he stood up and went to the stall's back kitchen, which was just a simple brick stove off to the side that was heating brine. When Chen Pi came in, he poured it out, then lifted a bucket and filled it with water from the jar sitting nearby. The stall owner, who worked in the kitchen, stood there dumbfounded for a moment before he picked up a kitchen knife and came over. Chen Pi flicked his left hand and a nine-clawed hook flew out, skimmed over the stall owner's head, and then landed behind him. Once it grabbed the bowl of spices at the top of the cabinet, Chen Pi pulled it back.

Not a single grain spilled from the bowl of spices as it flew over and landed in Chen Pi's hand. Chen Pi poured it into the water and then glanced at the stall owner holding the knife.

Beggars seldom got to eat chicken, so now Chen Pi was solely focused on spicy stewed chicken.

The stall owner put the knife back on the shelf, slowly passed by Chen Pi, and walked out to the table with the three groups and five factions' leaders. Although the diners were talking attentively, all their buddies had seen the scene just now and were stunned.

Chen Pi skillfully chopped the onions without washing them first and then threw all the seemingly good ingredients he could find into the pot. As he stirred everything, he suddenly saw something covered in a rotten mat. He went over and lifted it and found the little girl whose neck has just been broken.

He paused. The little girl had turned blue, which had to be a result of the cold weather. He touched her body and looked under her, but didn't find any more food, so he put the mat back.

When he got up, he saw that the leaders of the three groups and five factions were standing around him. Changshan's eyes lit up as he looked at Chen Pi with great interest. He had obviously never dreamed that he would see Chen Pi here, but he couldn't let the people around him know that.

Chen Pi secretly stuffed the rooster into the crotch of his pants, thinking that he had been discovered by the people watching the cockfighting pits. Changshan opened his mouth and said, "Little Brother Chen Pi, let's sit together and talk."

Chen Pi looked at the salted vegetables on the table, spit in contempt, and patted his crotch disdainfully. There was a big bulge there, which made Changshan's face instantly turn red. He remembered Shuixiang and thought, *damn it, is this Chen Pi telling me he touched my woman with that thing?! And why is it so big?*

Changshan tried to suppress his anger, but two spring-loaded needles slowly dropped down from his sleeves. He didn't attack immediately, because he saw that Chen Pi also had something in his hands. He knew that even if he suddenly attacked, he would still be slower than Chen Pi. And Chen Pi didn't fall for his trap. Since they met each other by accident, he knew he wouldn't stand a chance at this distance.

"Have you received those thousand coins?" Changshan asked. "Those were from me. I heard you're looking for someone in Huang Kui. I can help you."



## Chapter 24 Forced to Kill

At this time, Changshan had two people appear in his heart. One was looking at Chen Pi, thinking about how to get him to lower his guard. As soon as that happened, all he needed to do was unhesitatingly raise his hand and shoot the needles hidden in his sleeves.

He only had one chance. He knew very well that this person was worthy of the title “hua qian”, and all his reactions were far superior to those of normal people. In other words, Chen Pi wouldn’t even need to avoid his needles. As soon as he focused all his attention on Changshan, he would surely know what would happen the moment Changshan raised his hands.

He needed to distract him. Moreover, so many people from the three gangs and five factions were watching. He had just talked so eloquently, but now he had driven himself into a corner. If he couldn’t kill Chen Pi efficiently, his legendary advisor status might immediately collapse, and he wouldn’t be able to make a comeback even if there were ten of him.

Chen Pi looked at Changshan while he continued to cut onions. His appetite had waned a little because he knew he couldn’t have the chicken soup now. He had been a little surprised when Changshan touched on his sore spot. He thought about the thousand coins as he recalled what Changshan had said just now.

Chen Pi pulled the no-contribution flag out of his clothes, “Do you know whose it is?”

Changshan nodded, “I know. And I also know that a child gave it to you, right? He gave you a hundred coins to help him kill the owner of this flag.”

“Isn’t it yours?” Chen Pi saw the no-contribution flags on Changshan’s table. “It *is* yours. Who are you trying to fool?”

Changshan didn’t look embarrassed at all as he said, “It’s not mine. You see, each Huang Kui member has a different flag. What I have is a provisions flag,

which is for those in the same profession who have greeted me. What you have is a no-contribution flag. It's the flag of our Huang Kui's hitmen's leader, which is given to those boatmen who have helped him. It's different. The small print above it is different."

All the no-contribution flags were the same, but Changshan unfolded the flags on the table flawlessly, so that Chen Pi could compare them. His grip on the needles in his hand tightened.

When Chen Pi looked at Changshan, nothing about him seemed unusual, and he even appeared to be sincere. Chen Pi cared more about getting rid of Chun Shen's problem than eating chicken, so he stopped chopping. When he looked at the onlookers, however, he found that their expressions were all strange, and he suddenly felt that something was off.

"I don't want to see this side. Show me the other side and hold it up." Chen Pi said. Changshan smiled, shook his head, and looked at the people around him, feeling helpless. As soon as he went to comply, Chen Pi turned around and lifted the little girl's corpse out from under the mat.

He bear-hugged the little girl's body so that he was hidden behind it, and then cautiously walked towards Changshan to look at the no-contribution flags.

Changshan secretly cursed him for being so clever. From his position, the female corpse practically blocked all of Chen Pi, making it very difficult to hit him. He immediately poured wine into the bowl in front of Chen Pi and urged him to sit down. "Sit and let's discuss it slowly."

Chen Pi sat down with the girl's corpse in his arms and drank a mouthful of wine. The others naturally didn't dare sit down and looked at this extremely absurd scene from the side.

Chen Pi reached out to pick up the flags in front of Changshan. The patterns on them had been blurred and blackened over time, and they were all greasy. After getting hold of them, he had trouble comparing them to the one in his hand.

At this moment, Changshan's hand followed the flag that had been brought over, reached out in front of Chen Pi, and flipped over. He twisted his wrist so that the mechanism was activated, and then instantly shoved his hand towards Chen Pi's armpit. A finger-long steel needle directly shot into Chen Pi's armpit.

Chen Pi reacted very quickly, and immediately twisted his body away, trying to block the needle with the corpse. He hadn't expected Changshan to be daring enough to reach under his arm, but he managed to grab Changshan's fingers. He gave them a hard twist and broke three fingers, but the needle had already punctured his armpit and Chen Pi felt the area go numb. He tried to exert his strength but found that he couldn't lift his hand up.

Changshan screamed, but he was also a strong character. Although Chen Pi had broken his fingers, he was able to twist his wrist, press down on Chen Pi's heart, activate the mechanism again, and send another needle out. Chen Pi was already prepared for it this time. He knew that it would be impossible to hide, so he threw himself backwards. The needle went into his body at an angle, scraped past his ribs, and then fell to the ground.

Changshan was screaming and laughing when he saw that Chen Pi couldn't get up. Chen Pi looked at his limp hands and feet in horror and immediately understood that the needles had been coated in something.

Changshan looked at his broken fingers and then at the leaders of the three gangs and five factions around him, and said, "Did you know this bastard touched my woman? Open your eyes and take a good, long look at what happens when you touch my things." With that said, he picked up the kitchen knife and walked up to Chen Pi. He squatted down, untied Chen Pi's belt, reached in, and pulled out Qinhuai Murderer's head.

Changshan shivered in fright when he felt the rooster's feathers. Chen Pi used all his strength to squeeze Qinhuai Murderer's body. The nearly dead rooster's neck suddenly popped up and fiercely pecked Changshan right in the eye. Changshan screamed and fell to the ground.

Chen Pi bit his tongue, flicked the nine-clawed hook out towards the stove, grabbed the bowl of spices, and pulled it over. Most of the spices had already gone into the soup, but there was still some left in the bowl. He pinched them and applied them directly to his wound.

The searing pain made Chen Pi turn over. His veins bulged and his whole body broke out in a sweat. He finally got up with a loud roar and climbed in front of Changshan, who was rolling on the ground and holding the used needle. Chen Pi knocked the needle away, grabbed his knife, climbed on top of Changshan, and started slashing.

After going at it for a while, Changshan's head was finally cut off. Blood flowed all over the floor, and the nearly dead Qinhuai Murderer hanging from Chen Pi's crotch finally lowered his head and died. Chen Pi was covered in a cold sweat as he used all of his strength to stand up. He looked at his wounds and then at the people around him, feeling another extreme emotion overcome his anxiety. It was rage.

"You're all Huang Kui, yes?" Chen Pi roared as he threw Changshan's head at the white fat man.

Everyone shook their heads, "No, no."

"Then who's in Huang Kui?" Chen Pi had an extremely calm and furious expression on his face. The white fat man pointed to Changshan's man, who had just returned with the madam's thugs. The man who was regarded as the next accountant immediately ran away, but Chen Pi's nine-clawed hook flew out and caught the back of his neck. He gave it a yank and the back of the man's neck was completely torn off. As blood soared through the air, several other Huang Kui members scattered and fled. Chen Pi threw the kitchen knife behind him and killed one of them. He shook his wrist and pulled the nine-clawed hook back, wrapping the cord around another man. He pulled the man towards him, kicked him to the ground, stepped on his throat with one foot, and crushed his neck.

Two more ran away, so Chen Pi took out a pistol and shot them to death. When he turned around, the three gangs and five factions seemed to have run away.

But they weren't afraid of Chen Pi. In fact, they all had excited expressions on their faces. The white fat man's face was twitching all over as he said to his men, "Call all the brothers! Huang Kui's advisor is dead!"

## Chapter 25 Fight

Chen Pi's eyes kept rolling into the back of his head, and he felt like he might faint at any moment. He relied on his willpower and the severe pain to remain conscious.

He dug his fingernails into his wound, pulled out the needle that had penetrated deep into his body, and threw it on the ground. Seeing that the pile of no-contribution flags on the table had been left by the fleeing group of people, he stuffed them into his pocket. He then turned back to the person whom he had thrown the kitchen knife at.

The man wasn't dead, but the kitchen knife was deeply embedded in his spine. Chen Pi pulled the twitching body towards him and found that the man was completely limp and couldn't even support his head. Chen Pi grabbed his head and asked "Where's the hitmen's leader?"

The man couldn't move or speak but lifted his eyes in a certain direction. Chen Pi looked around and found that everyone had already run away. He pulled out his pineapple knife, cut off all the heads of the people he had just killed, and then strung them together on his belt, even including Qinhuai Murderer's body. Once that was done, he headed in the direction the man's eyes had pointed to.

After taking a few steps, he suddenly remembered something and turned to pick up the two steel needles.

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Meanwhile, the white fat man and his people quickly gathered at Baiping Building. Each gang had brought out all their guns, and the rest of them took out their knives and short axes. They had set up an impenetrable wall of people by Huang Kui's gangplank, but no one dared make a move.

The gangplank had been removed from the shore, so if they wanted to get on the ship, they'd have to get into the water. This obviously wasn't the three gangs and five factions' specialty.

Huang Kui's boss gave the gathered people an inexplicable look and immediately knew that something was wrong. He opened the dark cabin, helped the blind old woman out, let her sit by the edge of the gangplank, and then shouted to the shore, "What are you doing?"

The white fat man lifted Changshan's head up, "Huang Kui, your advisor is dead. Do you still want to talk?"

After he spoke, he looked at a man in a straw hat behind him, who was carrying two baskets of bamboo hats on a pole. There was an old man hiding behind the bamboo hats, who had a burn scar on his face. He was an old hunter from the mountains. He quietly lifted a gun up from behind the bamboo hats and aimed it at the boss.

"Hit him right in the head and do it right." The white fat man said softly in a different dialect.

The old hunter nodded, "Do you want his brains to fly to the left or to the right?"

The short boss watched this all from a distance, and suddenly turned to the old woman and said something in an incomprehensible dialect. Something in the old woman's arms stirred, and her jacket suddenly burst open. A mass of brown and yellow-looking things suddenly plunged into the water.

When the white fat man saw it, he immediately dropped Changsha's head and retreated. Before the head could even land on the shore, a thin long arm popped out of the water. The nails were as long as a cigarette, and all an ashy yellow. It grabbed Changshan's head and dragged it into the water.

After a moment, that thing returned to the blind old woman's arms and curled up again. The head had been thrown out of the water and rolled until it stopped at the short boss' feet.

The short boss looked down. Although Chen Pi had cut him into a meaty pulp, the boss still recognized his brother after so many years. He immediately sat on the ground, and the white fat man continued to shout, "Huang Kui, the advisor is dead. Those drum crawlers you raised don't scare us. A little beggar could kill your advisor, yet we have so many people. We'll give you a chance to live if you kill those drum crawlers and leave the Yangtze River."

When the short boss looked at the white fat man, the madam shouted from nearby, "Where did you put my girls? Give me back my girls."

The short boss held Changshan's head and turned his face away. No one saw that the corners of his mouth had lifted up into a large grin. Surprisingly enough, he wasn't sad. Instead, he was experiencing unbearable ecstasy.

*Changshan's dead. My God, Changshan is actually dead.*

This was really an unexpected result. For so many years, Mr. Advisor had been forcing him to be a water locust. Yes, he had brought these brothers from Hunan, but it wasn't like he could always be a water locust. Staying on the river every day was scary, but their power kept growing. The advisor had created a good plan to realize Huang Kui's ambition step by step, but whose ambition was it?

At first, he thought it was his own. If he wanted someone to die, the advisor would make it happen. Even if it took eight months or a year, no one could escape. The three gangs and five factions weren't afraid of Huang Kui's ferocity, but the advisor's. They were afraid of whatever scheme the advisor would come up with.

But later, he gradually found that he couldn't do what he wanted, and these weren't his ambitions, but the advisor's.

He didn't want these things at all. He wanted to go to the city, buy a batch of shops, forget the people he had killed and harmed, and be a normal person. But the advisor wouldn't let him. He always told him that he had brought his brothers into the water locust lifestyle, so he should keep doing



it for their sake. He had no way to resist. He knew that the advisor had set him up as a figurehead, but the people below were extremely afraid of him. They were afraid of those drum crawlers they had raised. He couldn't get out of it. If he did, he'd have to die first.

But now it was different. The advisor was dead. He didn't expect that a beggar like Chen Pi could kill the advisor.

The short boss stood up, trying not to look too happy. He put Changshan's head on the dining table, found a bamboo stick, and started writing on it, completely ignoring the people on the shore.

The madam grabbed the white fat man and pointed to the water, "Look carefully." He looked under the ship, and could faintly make out a bunch of iron cages. He didn't know what was inside, but he didn't care. He sneered and said to the old hunter, "Left side."

The old hunter instantly fired a shot. The short boss had only started writing down the first word when his head was blown away. All the brain and skull fragments splashed on the left side of the table and landed on Changshan's face.

All the people in the three groups and five factions instantly rushed into the water and swam towards the ship. The short boss's body stood there without falling down for a long time. He only had half of his head left and one remaining eye, which seemed to be looking at the river coldly. Then, the short boss with only half his head left suddenly took a step forward and smiled.

## Chapter 26 Nine-Clawed Hook

The three gangs and five factions rushed into the water and started heading for the ship, which was about eighty meters or so from the shore. Since the old woman was blind, she didn't know what had happened and was still sitting there silently. The short boss's body didn't fall down, but stood there like a pillar. When the people in the water looked up and saw this scene, they all hesitated and then stopped.

The white fat man snorted and said to the old hunter, "Break his legs."

When the old hunter didn't make a sound, the white fat man became angry and turned his head. "Are you fucking deaf?!" He saw that the old hunter's head was drooping on his gun and he was leaning against the bamboo hats. A lot of blood was oozing out from under the bamboo hats.

When he went up and tore the bamboo hats away, he saw a strange thing lying on the old hunter's back. The old hunter's scalp had been completely torn off, revealing the white skull underneath. He was dead. That thing had been lying motionless on the old hunter's back, but suddenly turned to look at the white fat man the moment the bamboo hats were torn away.

The white fat man saw an extremely thin, slightly deformed face. Not only was the face small, but its head was as well. At first glance, it still looked like a person, just one with a little head.

Then it moved a bit, and he could see that it was an extremely thin "person", but its nails were all crusted, and they were as long as a finger. The skin all over its body was wrinkled, and it looked especially creepy because of its disproportionately small head.

The white fat man cried out and went to pull his gun from his waist, but the little-headed thing opened its eyes wide, leaped up, and threw the white fat man to the ground. Two claws pierced directly into the white fat man's chin and tore through his whole face and scalp.

Almost at the same time, the people in the water heard the sound of six or seven doors opening in quick succession on the ship. Countless shadows emerged from the doors and jumped into the water.

Then they saw a lot of strange little figures in the iron cages hanging under the ship.

“Go ashore!” Someone shouted from the water. Everyone immediately began to retreat, but three or four seconds later, a series of screams were abruptly cut off as people were instantly dragged into the water. They struggled desperately but were quickly dragged under the ship, where they saw that the iron cages were full of barbed hooks. Those little-headed “people” pulled them into the water and pressed them onto the barbs until their chins and clothes were pierced. They put up a fierce struggle, but couldn’t break free.

A mass of blood rose up in the water. Only twenty people managed to escape, but before they could react, the little-headed “person” still on the shore dashed over. All twenty people pulled out their guns and shot at it until it was riddled with holes. But before they could relax, more of those little-headed “people” climbed out of the water. The people on shore scattered and fled, but were instantly killed just as they were about to make it to the tree-line. At that time, shots rang out everywhere and blood spattered all over the place.

The short boss’s body still stood there motionless, but then it slowly reached out and pulled a cable on the side. All the bamboo curtains on the ship were lowered, and then the corpse’s shoulder seemed to crack open and another head appeared.

It looked at the destroyed head and took a deep breath before moving. After a moment, it stretched a hand out from the place where the destroyed head used to be.

This two-headed trick was a skill he had learned when he was a “Xuandeng bandit” in his early years. It was originally a trick only known by a generation

of great witches and monks in Hubei and Hunan. He was actually curled up in his clothes, with one hand reaching up into the dead man's decapitated head to control his expressions and speech. He would use his other hand to act, which made him look much shorter. A truly skilled person could even make the decapitated head roll its eyes to seem more lifelike.

There were very few firearms in the three gangs and five factions, and the bullets only went as far as thirty meters. He had originally been saving this trick because he was afraid the hitmen's leader was plotting against him. He even went so far as to wear inconspicuous armor and set up this head trick. He just didn't expect that the white fat man could find a man with such accurate marksmanship.

He walked up to the table, finished what he had just written, sealed it with a bamboo tube from the medicine jar behind him, and then whistled. When one of the little-headed "people" came out of the water and parted the curtain, he handed the tube to it. The little-headed "person" received it and quickly jumped back into the water.

The short boss then went back to the table, used his hands to neatly break all the bones in Changshan's head, emptied them out, and then washed the head in the water. There were several large wounds on Changshan's face that still looked ok after washing, so he tried to put the head on his shoulder.

After fiddling with it for a long time, he managed to fit it inside.

After several twists, the short boss moved again. It was as if he had come back to life, but his face had become Changshan's (although there were gouges where whole pieces of his face were missing). He moved his hand to make an expression, but it looked very strange. It was obviously not as good as his previous head, but now there was nothing he could do about it.

He pulled back the curtains and watched the killing spree taking place on shore.

“Huang Kui, how many people do you have to harm?” The madam was in the middle of a protective circle, but several of those close to her had already gone mad with the killing.

“They look a little strange, but aren’t they human beings, too?” The short boss shouted. The three gangs and five factions looked at Changshan’s face in surprise. His face looked ragged, but he was looking at them with a strange smile.

“Mr. Advisor!”

“Isn’t the advisor dead?”

“No, that’s Huang Kui’s voice.”

“Was he pretending to be dead?”

“The boss’ head was hit! How could it be fake?!”

The short boss sat down beside the gangplank and turned to look at one side of the river where dozens of boats had appeared. The hitmen’s leader had returned. “It’s inevitable that everyone would come out to fight and kill. I can’t completely destroy the three gangs and five factions, but now the hitmen’s leader has returned. Today, there’s one gang left in the three gangs, and three left in the five factions. If you don’t want to die, kill the most effective men to save your life. You get to live if you kill the others first.”

Everyone looked at the distant Huang Kui boats, and the increasing numbers, and froze. Changshan really hadn’t deceived them. During this time, Huang Kui’s numbers had far exceeded any of the gangs’.

The short boss spoke a few words in a strange dialect, and the drum crawlers backed off, leaving them a little breathing room.

Everyone started eyeing each other with very complicated expressions. A lot of them had despairing expressions on their faces, when an old man from the five factions suddenly shouted, "He who has life, has hope. Let's go!"

But as soon as they moved, all the drum crawlers surrounded them, sealing off any means of escape. Everyone was fighting in close quarters again.

The madam was in the middle of the chaotic army. A very calm-looking man looked around at the situation and then looked at the madam again, who said to him, "Don't be afraid, fight."

The man shook his head, pointed his gun at his temple, and shouted, "Huang Kui, look." Just as he was about to shoot, however, the madam snatched the gun away.

"Madam, the people you've taught are really good." When the short boss spoke, the nearby gang leaders immediately looked at their own buddies, and the atmosphere became very strange.

At this time, Chen Pi finished peeing, came out from behind a bush beside the embankment, and looked to one side. There were a lot of fishing boats bearing the Huang Kui's flag that were approaching, while a group of people were fighting on the other side. Chen Pi sniffed, and the man on his shoulder looked up and pointed to the man on the first boat. "The hitmen's leader!"

The leader stood on the bow of the boat and coldly looked at the people on the ship and embankment. He took out a bamboo tube, drank three mouthfuls of traditional Chinese medicine, and then passed it around, "Remember to drink three mouthfuls of this Huang Kui soup. You'll be paralyzed if you drink less, and die if you drink too much. After drinking three mouthfuls, you won't be tired even after killing for three days and three nights. Follow me to pick the flower drums."

The people came up to drink one after another, and the leader cracked his neck. Just as he was about to sneer, a nine-clawed hook flew from an inconspicuous place on the shore and hooked him on the face. He could only manage an "Oh!" before he was dragged into the river.

“I’ve finally caught you!” Chen Pi, who was on the shore, tugged at the claw’s rope and shouted excitedly, “I thought I was going to die looking for you!”

The three gangs and five factions in the distance saw the aggressive hitmen’s leader suddenly get pulled into the river and dragged to shore like a fish. They suddenly understood what was going on and turned to look at the short boss again. Their men also put down the guns they had aimed at each other, and the madam said coldly, “We can’t be outdone by a beggar. Let’s kill this bastard.”

The short boss silently looked at the scene that had just occurred. For the first time in his life, he felt very embarrassed.

## Chapter 27 Fight

Huang Kui's men on the boat were dumbfounded as they watched the scene unfold. They didn't react until the boat had sailed about twenty meters away, at which point the first boat immediately put their bamboo poles in the water and stopped. Several guys cursed at Chen Pi on the shore, while others jumped into the water to chase after him.

Chen Pi on the shore already had murder in his eyes and ignored them all. He desperately tugged at the clawed hook's rope and pulled the hitmen's leader to shore, as if he was pulling the boatmen's tow-rope.

The nine-clawed hook was a very precise weapon. The tighter the rope was pulled, the more the claws contracted. Although the hitmen's leader was very strong, swimming in the water meant he didn't have any purchase like Chen Pi did. Chen Pi had found a tree on the shore to wrap the rope around and give himself leverage as he engaged in his tug-of-war. In addition, the pain that the clawed hook was inflicting on the leader's face also made it difficult for him to resist. In the face of the clawed hook's strength, the leader had no choice but to rush ashore. When he flipped over and landed on shore, Chen Pi silently lifted Shuixiang's pistol and fired.

The hitmen's leader was dazed after being dragged ashore, but he managed to roll back into the water when he saw the gun pointed at his head. The bullet almost grazed his shoulder, but the fierce momentum still managed to tear half his face off. Before he had a chance to feel the pain, Chen Pi went up to the shore, faced the shadow in the water, and fired three more times. The bullets were used up in an instant.

At this time, the water under Chen Pi exploded, and a Huang Kui guy rushed up out of the water. The short knife he held in a reverse grip almost lodged itself in Chen Pi's stomach, but Chen Pi's legs were too fast. The knife hadn't yet been lifted when Chen Pi had already raised his leg and stepped on the blade. When the sole of his foot pressed down, the blade twisted aside. He



stepped on the back of the Huang Kui guy's knee, pulled out one of his pineapple knives, and slammed it into the guy's ear.

Brain matter coated the pineapple knife as it was pulled out.

Chen Pi looked back and saw that the hitmen's leader with his half-torn-off face and more than a dozen Huang Kui guys had finally made it out of the water and had all taken out their weapons. The leader's eyes were blood red, and the medicinal properties of the Huang Kui soup were already starting to show. He was about to say something to Chen Pi, but Chen Pi flung his nine-clawed hook out again and immediately grabbed the leader's head. This time, the hitmen's leader immediately grabbed the clawed hook's rope with his hands, pulled it with all his strength, and tried to remove the claw while shouting, "Let go! I'm bleeding!"

But this hook contracted and loosened based on the strength exerted on the rope and the claw's mechanism. Although it was very simple to learn, you had to know the trick to loosen it. The hitmen's leader wouldn't be able to remove it himself. Chen Pi sneered and tied the clawed hook's rope to his waist, "If I let you go, you'll run. I have to end this hundred-coin job today."

The leader yelled, "Run?! You bastard, when have I ever run?!" In an unexpected move, he used his own skull to press the hook in the opposite direction, causing it to deform and loosen. The leader pulled on it, took out his pistol, shook off the water, and fired twice at Chen Pi, who instantly jumped into the Yangtze River. The leader yanked on the rope and pulled him out again, but a quick glance showed that it wasn't Chen Pi. Instead, it was the string of heads he usually wore around his waist.

Behind the hitmen's leader, Chen Pi immediately sprang up and rushed towards him. The Huang Kui guys immediately shouted a warning, and the leader flipped the gun around and fired a volley of shots. Chen Pi instantly swung left. His upper body tilted at an angle that was practically impossible for humans to maintain, which enabled him to evade all the bullets. As the leader twisted his whole body to turn around, Chen Pi rolled over, took out

the second pistol, shook off the water, and fired. The leader actually avoided the bullet using almost the exact same action as Chen Pi did.

Practically all of Chen Pi's body was pressed to the ground, making him look just like a snake as he rolled around. He suddenly accelerated as he shuttled across the ground, and all the leader's bullets missed him. By this time, Chen Pi had rolled to the left of the leader and used all his remaining strength to shoot towards the leader like exploding shrapnel.

The hitmen's leader reacted the exact same way.

As they rushed towards each other, they both took out their knives. The hitmen's leader was very strong, and he thrust out with his knife to block Chen Pi's hands. As he was pushed back, Chen Pi grabbed his wrist. He swept the leader's legs out from under him and used his body weight to twist the leader's arm. As the leader rolled over with the momentum, he used his other hand to stab Chen Pi's leg with the nine-clawed hook.

Chen Pi's leg went weak with the pain, and he grabbed the nine-clawed hook. Just as he extricated himself, all the Huang Kui guys rushed over. Chen Pi shrunk down and rolled into the crowd, avoiding the disorderly knives while managing to stab three of the opponent's knees.

Three people screamed and fell over. The hitmen's leader yanked on the clawed hook's rope and pulled Chen Pi out of the crowd. Chen Pi grabbed the claw's mechanism and separated it from the rope, stopping his forward momentum.

He turned over and looked at the bloody wound on his leg with eyes that had turned dull and feverish. He gave a strange smile and looked at the hitmen's leader. "Feeling old?"

## Chapter 28 Chen Pi is Younger

Chen Pi had clearly felt that the hitmen's leader was the same kind of person as him since he instinctively knew how to attack and evade. But at the same time, Chen Pi also knew that the leader wasn't on par with him, because as he said just now, he felt that the hitmen's leader was old.

The hitmen's leader was gasping for breath and his face looked gloomy. Huang Kui's boss had also said something similar to him when he told him he'd done his best by coming to Hankou from Dongting Lake. As a butcher, he hadn't paid attention to anyone besides the boss and the advisor over the years. He didn't know why, but a rift had suddenly formed between him and the boss at the beginning of the year. The boss had even said he was old.

"Beat the flower drums" was a Huang Kui custom they carried out on the river at night. When the drums sounded, they would gather as many of the boatmen's heads as they could. Once the drums stopped, the heads would be counted, and the one who had the most would take the position of the hitmen's leader. Since he had been in power for so long, no one had dared challenge him. But he had been forced to beat the flower drum very recently. Although he had won, he was very unhappy and his position in the gang was unstable.

But he knew that Huang Kui's boss was generally infallible, which was the source of his constant fear. Now that Chen Pi had suddenly brought it up again, his heart thumped and he felt very unhappy.

"Little brother, are you here to avenge that kid?" The leader asked. "How many people are in your family? Are you not afraid of Huang Kui seeking revenge?"

The hitmen's leader was never nervous, and fighting was never a difficult task for him. As a result, he'd often say something that was particularly calm and inconsistent with the scene at hand. That calmness—as if the situation wasn't happening—was especially creepy.

Chen Pi didn't respond, but as soon as the leader spoke, he suddenly started running with everything he had. He ran into the woods next to the dam without any hesitation and disappeared.

The leader was stunned, and it took him several seconds to realize that Chen Pi had run away.

Huang Kui's guys all looked at each other, picked up the injured, and then looked in the direction Chen Pi had gone. The leader's eyebrow twitched, and he had a strong feeling that he was being teased.

He felt that the Huang Kui medicine in his body was getting heavier and heavier, and the pain emanating from his face was no longer there. While Huang Kui's guys went ashore one after another, he looked up at the riverbank where the massacre was occurring. He stopped the Huang Kui guys from chasing after Chen Pi and pointed to the boss' ship.

In any case, it was necessary to save the boss first. When it came to battles, people were most afraid of losing their momentum in front of ruthless people.

The guys got their weapons sorted out and then rushed towards the riverbank. The hitmen's leader looked down at the clawed hook's rope in his hand, threw it into the river, and also moved to follow.

But before they had taken a few steps, Chen Pi came up from behind them, ran past, and jumped into the river.

The hitmen's leader was really tired by this point, so all he did was watch as Chen Pi swam to where the clawed hook fell into the water and dove down. He wanted to let the guys around him go into the water to intercept him, but he knew none of them could handle Chen Pi. On the other hand, he couldn't get stuck here fighting with the brat. It didn't make sense for all of Huang Kui to be held up here by a mere beggar.

As soon as he thought that, he waved everyone to continue rushing to the ship. He didn't want them to get distracted any further. But before he had

even finished waving his hand, the nine-clawed hook flew out from the water, latched onto the neck of a man beside him, and then dragged him directly into the water.

“You fucking bastard!” The leader yelled at the water as he ran. The clawed hook flew out from under the water’s surface again and latched onto the people running beside the leader. Like picking peaches, they were dragged into the water one by one. After six or seven people had been snatched, Huang Kui’s guys lost their composure and ran into the woods. The hitmen’s leader had never encountered such a dilemma and tried to force himself to calm down. He had never felt alarmed before, but now he suddenly found himself shaken to the core. For the first time in his life, he was panicking.

It was in this moment of hesitation that the nine-clawed hook flew out from the water again and aimed its claws at his feet. The leader watched in horror as the claws contracted and he forced his exhausted body to take a step back. The claws hooked the clothes at his crotch and started pulling them into the water.

The leader grabbed the nine-clawed hook and tore it off, causing a big hole to form in the crotch of his pants. This time, he didn’t let go but made a frantic effort to pull on the clawed hook with everything he had. He yelled as he dragged Chen Pi out of the water and onto the shore. He went up and squeezed his neck, but immediately found that something was wrong. He hadn’t grabbed Chen Pi, but a Huang Kui guy whose ear had been stabbed. There was a sudden movement behind him and he quickly turned his head. He didn’t know when, but Chen Pi had gone ashore and circled around behind him.

The hitmen’s leader was shocked and immediately turned just as Chen Pi leaped through the air. Chen Pi landed on the ground, leaving a wet mark behind as the frightened hitmen’s leader rolled away to safety. When the leader glanced up, his entire face looked incredulous. Not only was he witnessing a hua qian as strong as himself, but there seemed to be something different about this brat.

It wasn't age. Age wasn't fatal. It was...it was intelligence. He realized that the brat in front of him was using his brain to fight.

The hitmen's leader gasped for breath and then turned and ran towards the boss' ship. His fear made him unable to think. He understood what it meant to be a hua qian with a brain.

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On the riverbank, Huang Kui's boss and the three gangs and five factions were fighting a battle to the death. The river was full of blood and all the drum crawlers were covered in injuries. Some surrounded the boss, while some continued to lurk in the water. The three gangs and five factions' numbers had been reduced by at least half, and some of the injured could barely stand.

The hitmen's leader was beside himself with fear as he rushed over. All those left in the three gangs and five factions looked behind the hitmen's leader and saw the beggar taking out the Huang Kui guys one by one. When he would catch up with someone, he would grab their shoulders and stab their ears. Everyone forgot to put up a fight and immediately fled in all directions.

Huang Kui's boss watched it all silently and knew in his heart that it was really over this time.

But even so, that little, unpredictable beggar would eventually fall victim to this farce.

"Ok, ok. That's enough." He turned to the three gangs and five factions and said, "Let's stop being so childish and sit down and talk about the conditions. It's not good for everyone to fight like this."

## Chapter 29 Beat the Flower Drums

The cold river breeze blew on everyone's faces, and there was blood everywhere. This kind of fighting wasn't unprecedented, but it had never lasted for such a long time. If the killing continued, no one would benefit.

No one answered Huang Kui's boss, but the screams and slashing sounds slowly died down as everyone turned to look at him. In the ensuing silence, only the sound of those gasping for breath could be heard.

At this time, everyone was finally able to take a look around. Although it was difficult to tell whose brother or friend was dead, there were only a few people left standing. Bloody pools from all the severed limbs covered the ground, and the people with murder in their eyes finally felt their hands lose strength. Their knives fell to the ground and they couldn't pick them back up again.

Huang Kui's boss was right. At this time, they had to admit that there were various forces in the city, and everyone had been weakened in this fight. What was awaiting them wasn't something exclusive, but a greater chaos.

Huang Kui's boss looked at them silently, feeling like the boredom in his heart was beyond measure. "Whether you admit it or not, the outcome isn't ours to decide." As his voice echoed over the river, he looked at the hitmen's leader and Chen Pi who was behind him. "There's no need to kill. Instead, let's keep our lives and make a bet. Let's have whoever survives between the two of them determine who wins between the two of us."

"Huang Kui, stop bullshitting. If you want to negotiate, tell me what you did to my girls first." The madam said coldly.

Huang Kui's boss looked at the people around the madam and knew that no one had the strength to help her now. He pretended not to hear and continued, "How about this? If Chen Pi finally kills the hitmen's leader, then we'll count it as Huang Kui's loss and we won't have to fight to the last person. I'll leave here, and give this waterway to you. But if the leader finally

kills Chen Pi, I won't ask for too much. You'll have to give me next year's annuity as a mortgage. I won't stay. I'll still give this waterway to you. I'll just go live on shore."

As everyone glanced at each other, Huang Kui's boss noticed that the hitmen's leader was about to reach them. He sped up his speech, "This is the only way for us to live; otherwise, how many of those remaining right now will survive? I'm a Huang Kui water locust, after all. I've never been afraid of death. If you feel the same, we can start killing each other again."

With that said, Huang Kui's boss emitted a strange sound from his throat, and all the drum crawlers immediately arched their backs and got into position to fight again. The three gangs and five factions raised their knives, but one of the leaders immediately stepped forward and raised his hands to stop both sides, "Huang Kui, will you keep your word?"

"We don't have the means to cheat." Huang Kui's boss said tiredly. "I can give you one more concession, but this is it. As long as Chen Pi makes it onto the ship alive, it'll be my loss and I'll leave the ship."

The three gangs and five factions all looked at each other, still unable to come to a decision. Huang Kui's boss squatted down on the edge of the ship. He was bored, tired, and relieved. Although they couldn't see his true expression, he didn't want to hide it anymore. Once he saw that Chen Pi had caught up to the hitmen's leader, he finally said, "At this rate, we'll be standing here all day. You've got until the count of three. If we don't come to an agreement, we'll each have to face our own destiny." When he spoke, he started to clap his hands once, twice, and on the third one, he deliberately slowed down. The gang leader raised his hand and shouted, "Ok, let's bet!"

No one had any objections, and even the madam didn't speak again. Huang Kui's boss didn't look overjoyed but merely gave a loud roar. All the drum crawlers retreated, and those in the water climbed up to the ship. The numerous shadows in the water were motionless as if they had been frozen to death.



At this time, the three gangs and five factions also understood that Huang Kui could never cheat.

Huang Kui's boss silently walked up to a pile of thatch on the inner part of the ship and shouted, "Hitmen's leader! Look at what you've become now!"

"Let your drum crawlers help!" The distant hitmen's leader tumbled away from Chen Pi and rushed to the middle of the three gangs and five factions. They all retreated, leaving a huge space around him. The hitmen's leader looked at the people around him and suddenly felt that the atmosphere was off.

Chen Pi was panting as he went to catch up with him. He was covered in blood, and the smile on his face almost reached his ears. He had never been so comfortable. In fact, he had almost forgotten Chun Shen and what he was supposed to be doing.

The Huang Kui pirates scattered in all directions. Some had already escaped, but the rest finally reacted and began surrounding him. Chen Pi looked at their large numbers and slowly retreated towards the stack of corpses behind him.

No one dared attack him first.

They all formed a huge circle, turning the riverbank into a huge cockfighting pit. Chen Pi felt dazed as he looked between the hitmen's leader hiding among the three gangs and five factions and the Huang Kui pirates. When it came down to it, Huang Kui still had a large advantage. It originally looked as if Huang Kui had miscalculated, but everyone's eyes were staring at Chen Pi alone.

All the pirates had the same thought, *this man will kill me.*

Huang Kui's boss moved the thatch aside, revealing several strangely shaped old drums.

The hitmen's leader was panting and his face was dark as he realized that things had taken a wrong turn. He suddenly heard the sound of drums coming from the ship.

"Beating the flower drums?" He asked doubtfully. Huang Kui's boss returned to the gangplank and pointed to Chen Pi, "Hitmen's leader, since you're panicking, let me tell you how to beat the flower drum for this beggar."

"Advisor?" The leader's eyes lit up, and he suddenly relaxed. He looked at Chen Pi and said to himself, *great, this boy is out of luck.*

## Chapter 30 The Contest Between Instinct and Experience

Huang Kui's boss, who was using the advisor's face, only had to say a word before the hitmen's leader felt his heart sink.

The hitmen's leader was covered in blood, and the Huang Kui concoction had started working while he ran, causing the snow-white skin on what was left of his face to flush red.

After drinking the Huang Kui medicine, he wouldn't feel any pain or fatigue for three hours. But there was a very special process for mixing the medicine. Drinking a single sip of it would paralyze and poison the whole body, so other drugs had to be added to it in order for it to work.

Huang Kui's guys would drink this medicine before battle, but only Huang Kui's boss knew how to prepare it. This was also one of the invincible magic weapons Huang Kui had at its disposal, which came from the ethnic minorities all around Hunan. The only reason the person on Chen Pi's back could show him the way earlier was because Huang Kui's medicine still worked.

But Chen Pi's knife was fatal. He either stabbed their knees and damaged their joints, or inserted it into their ears and killed them directly. In the face of this kind of fighting style, the Huang Kui medicine was completely useless. You'd die before you even felt any pain.

As a result, Huang Kui's guys were terrified. Once they discovered that their habit of relying on the medicine was useless, they lost their footing. But when the flower drums sounded, the other Huang Kui guys were relieved to find that the responsibility now fell on the hitmen's leader.

Chen Pi gasped, wiped the blood from his face, and watched as the Huang Kui guys made a path for him. The path ended up leading right to the hitmen's leader, who kicked the corpses on the ground, rifled through their

weapons, and finally picked up a short knife. With a short knife in each hand, he moved his wrists back and forth.

Huang Kui's boss looked at Chen Pi, the man who had accidentally ruined everything. From this distance, he couldn't even see Chen Pi's facial expression, but it didn't matter anymore. There was no denying that Chen Pi was very powerful. Based on the fact that he could kill so many Huang Kui members like this, it was easy to see that he wasn't an ordinary person. But he only relied on instinct. In this world, there was something that was more important—experience. Experience was something that could make a world of difference when your opponent didn't have it.

There were two reasons why hua qians loved to use short knives. One was that they were instinctively familiar with how people tended to move. For them, close-quarter fighting and assassinations were as simple as using a long weapon. He had indirectly asked the hitmen's leader about it one time. In the leader's eyes, people were sticks, and their hands and feet were simply weapons on the stick. But in ordinary folk's eyes, people were people, and whatever they held in their hands would be weapons.

This wasn't a concept that could be learned with practice. In hua qians' eyes, everyone's movements were much more complicated than ordinary people could ever think of. And since they thought the same of themselves, they only needed a short knife.

The second reason was that they knew how to make trade-offs. They often got hurt, but the other party ended up dying a tragic death. This was because few people who practiced formal martial arts would intentionally receive an injury to make a move, but hua qians would.

To kill Chen Pi in the shortest amount of time, the hitmen's leader needed to sacrifice an ear. Before that happened though, he'd have to get rid of the two short knives in his hand. It was only by doing this that Chen Pi would be able to get close to the leader and stab his ear.

Chen Pi would definitely end the battle like this, since stabbing the brain through the ear was a direct kill. It was Chen Pi's habit and the most surefire way for him to succeed. As long as his knife penetrated the leader's ear, Chen Pi would immediately lower his guard.

As long as the hitmen's leader didn't die, that would be the moment Chen Pi died.

So, the most important thing was how to ensure that the hitmen's leader wouldn't die when Chen Pi stabbed his ear.

Huang Kui's boss whispered something in one of the drum crawler's ears and then had it swim across the river and crawl onto the leader's back to whisper it to him. The hitmen's leader nodded profusely and suddenly smiled. He then looked at Chen Pi, suddenly flipped his two knives upside down, scraped them against the back of his head, and forcefully cut his ears off.

Blood immediately started flowing down his neck, but the hitmen's leader didn't feel any pain at all. Without further ado, he threw his ears to the ground and rushed towards Chen Pi.

## Chapter 31 Miserable Victory

This wasn't a fight, because all the leader's flaws were basically being flaunted. Chen Pi already felt like something was off, but his bloodlust was too far gone, and so he put his left foot out to meet him. The hitmen's leader slashed his knives a dozen times in a row, but Chen Pi avoided all of them. In the sudden gap, he aimed his knife at the leader's chin, but the leader quickly pulled back and threw his two knives right at Chen Pi.

Chen Pi knocked one knife out of the air, while the other one flew past his neck. When he turned back around, he saw that the hitmen's leader was already upon him. The leader raised his fist and grabbed Chen Pi's hair.

Chen Pi didn't even think about it as he raised his head up. But just as the leader was feeling overjoyed, Chen Pi grabbed the leader's arm, twisted his whole body, and pulled his hair out directly.

The sharp pain made him shout, but he still managed to flip his knife around and stab the hitmen's leader in the ear.

But he knew it was bad as soon as the knife went in because that was when he realized the leader's real purpose for cutting his ears off.

Chen Pi could always determine the position of someone's ear hole by looking at their auricle. It was how he always managed to kill people with chopsticks or knives. But when he stabbed down just now, he found that the auricle had been cut off by the hitmen's leader himself. In a panic, his hand became unstable. The leader tilted his head and the knife struck near his temple, completely missing the ear hole.

The leader's skull was extremely hard, and Chen Pi's knife slashed across his scalp, carving out a terrible bloody hole. But with Huang Kui's medicine preventing him from feeling any pain, he immediately grabbed Chen Pi's neck.

Chen Pi froze.

He didn't resist because he didn't know how to. All the people he had stabbed before were usually dead by this time.

The hitmen's leader pulled his arm free, used all his strength to get up on his knees, and then smashed Chen Pi's head on his knees.

Blood burst out as Chen Pi's whole nose caved in. The hitmen's leader looked at Chen Pi, unable to believe his eyes. He couldn't believe he had actually caught the beggar. He let out a shout, lifted Chen Pi up high, and smashed him directly against his knee. When Chen Pi's waist connected with the top of his knee, he heard Chen Pi's spine make a snapping sound. The beggar's whole body bent at an unnatural angle and he fell to the ground.

Everything was silent as a breeze blew up from the river. Huang Kui's boss was watching it all coldly as his palms sweated.

This all happened in just a few short moments, and by the time everyone reacted, it was already over.

The leader's strength gave out and he stumbled. The blood from his ears and scalp dyed his body scarlet. He sat down beside Chen Pi, bowed his head, and looked around for a knife.

When he saw Chen Pi's knife still firmly grasped in his hand, he tried to take it, but found that Chen Pi's hand was as immovable as a rock. His nails dug into the skin on Chen Pi's hands and tore some of the flesh off, but the beggar's hand still wouldn't move.

His own hands were shaking as he looked around for one of the knives he had used just now, but he couldn't find them. He used his remaining strength to pull himself onto Chen Pi's body, and found that he could still feel the beggar's body heat and hear his breathing.

The brat was still alive.

He couldn't let him live. He grabbed Chen Pi's neck but lacked the strength to squeeze, so he ended up having to press his elbow against Chen Pi's neck and lean all his weight on it.

Chen Pi's eyes widened as the leader's blood dripped down onto his face. There was a stabbing pain coming from his waist, but he could still feel his lower body. He couldn't breathe, and just barely managed to get some oxygen by twitching. He couldn't see the leader's face and couldn't think.

There was a salty taste in his mouth, which turned out to be the leader's blood. His gaping mouth wanted to absorb any hint of oxygen, but he ended up choking on the blood instead. Gradually, he couldn't feel the pain anymore and thought that he was going to die.

But that wasn't the case.

At that moment, maybe the leader's blood flowing into his throat was full of the Huang Kui medicine. The immense analgesic and stimulating effects suddenly made his eyes clear. His waist and face didn't hurt anymore, and his weak body gradually regained consciousness. He looked at the hitmen's leader, slowly lifted his hand, aimed at his throat, and slashed.

The hitmen's leader didn't resist at all, as if his eyes had been captivated by the blood. Maybe he didn't see the knife clearly at all, or maybe he didn't think that Chen Pi could still move.

As he fell on Chen Pi, the blood flowed from his slit throat and Chen Pi gulped it up. The hot blood slowly warmed his body, and Chen Pi finally managed to stand up.

His waist was still crooked. He glanced at the leader's limp body twitching on the ground and thought it looked just like Qinhuai Murderer. The people around him watched as their bet came to an end. This time, they had finally won.

He walked over to the river, leaned down with some difficulty, and washed the blood from his face and neck. There was a drum crawler not far away



from him in the water. Its strange little head was sticking out of the river, and he didn't know whether it was dead or alive.

Chen Pi didn't even look at the ship again as he turned and walked towards the temple. He'd done it. He'd finally settled the account and earned those hundred coins.

Fuck, it hadn't been easy. But some of his rage had died down with his exhaustion.

After taking a few steps, however, his way was blocked by a middle-aged woman.

"There's one left. Let's kill him together." The madam pointed to Huang Kui's boss on the ship. "If you don't kill him today, he'll definitely kill you later."

"Go away." Chen Pi said as he pushed the woman away. He had only taken a few steps when a string of copper coins was suddenly thrown at his feet.

He looked down. It was a string filled with a hundred copper coins. He turned back to find the trembling madam looking at him. Chen Pi looked up at the ship and saw the drum crawler climb up the side. The Huang Kui's boss was looking at them silently, but Chen Pi couldn't see his expression clearly. He thought it over and then picked up the copper coins.

## Chapter 32 Mystic Nine Preface

In those days, the old people along the river still remembered that on the forty-third day before spring, there was a trail of blood floating along the Yangtze River. The fat in the blood froze on the water and coagulated on the edge of the embankment. For several months, a rotten board that read “one thousand coins, kill one person” leaned against the corner of the Mahuo Temple. There was even a string of a hundred coins, along with a yellow paper filled with names and addresses hanging under the roof beams in the corner.

But the beggar who took money to kill people had disappeared. Some people said that he was caught by the authorities and sent to the frontlines. Some said that he died in the freezing rain the night he destroyed Huang Kui. Others said that he went to Changsha because someone had given him a big golden horseshoe to kill someone there.

People in Changsha still mentioned these things about Chen Pi Ah Si even after liberation. As Xi Qi had said, the Chen Pi who had killed the hitmen’s leader was no longer the same. He finally understood his own value.

There was another rumor that seven years before the Great Epidemic in Changsha, the Mystic Nine’s Hong family received a southern apprentice. The boy was sitting on the eaves of the Hong family’s inner courtyard and said to Er Yuehong who was trimming three red flowers, “Are you the most powerful person in Changsha?”

Er Yuehong looked up at him and replied, “Little boy, you’ve made a mistake. The fiercest surname in Changsha is Zhang.”

“I’ll find him later.” As soon as the words fell, a nine-clawed hook instantly flew at Er Yuehong, opening like a ghost’s claws.

Er Yuehong raised his hand and gave it a gentle tap. The nine-clawed hook was extremely fast, but his hand seemed to slowly reach up and grab it as if he were holding a flower.

At that moment, only the boy on the eaves could see that Er Yuehong's attention wasn't on him, but on the weapon in his hand. He gave it a curious look and twisted his fingers, causing the nine claws to bloom. As the mechanism retracted, the nine claws in Er Yuehong's hands fell off like withered petals and scattered on the ground.

It was said that this defiant boy's name was also Chen Pi. Later, he became the only southern apprentice in the Hong Mansion. This novelesque wuxia story also came from Changsha's common folk, which makes it too hard to research.

In fact, Er Yuehong and Chen Pi's first meeting shouldn't be like this at all. Not to mention whether the timing was correct or not, but the description was really romanticized. Based on how the Nine Gates were at that time, someone like Chen Pi stepping on the eaves of the inner courtyard shouldn't be able to leave alive. There should be a lot of stories about them, but they can't be investigated now. We can only rely on our imagination.

The Mystic Nine had a long history, which made it difficult to distinguish fact from fiction. They had experienced things that were completely different from ordinary people's experiences, which made it seem romantic. And people always had a need for romance. As the old people told their tales, the edges and corners of history were softened. It was just like a wool sofa under a warm lamp. It was suitable for reading in early winter, not for stirring up one's blood.

When Wu Xie was in a rural village in Fujian, he lined up the Zhang family's tree with Zhang Haike and shared all kinds of stories about the Mystic Nine. Zhang Qiling's long gaze on the name Zhang Qishan also made people think about it. Did they ever meet each other? People in the Zhang family had a long life, so why did Zhang Qishan choose to die like an ordinary person, while Zhang Qiling had to live so long? If they had a brief intersection in time, what would they talk about?

In Sand Sea, the "greatest project" Zhang Qishan supervised buried one of the biggest secrets of this century. The destinies they had stumbled into

were finally intertwined. Wu Xie was like an unavoidable button, finally seeing “the ultimate” of the whole world.

Many people say that the story of “Grave Robbers’ Chronicles” is over, but for me, it has just begun.

This chapter is the introduction. “The Mystic Nine” will be divided into several volumes.

The tentative titles are “Changsha Ghost Car”, “Crescent Hotel”, “Corpse Meteorite”, “Ancient Heimiao Village”, and “Dongting Lake Ghost”.

Most of you have seen it in the TV drama, but the actual novel content will be very different. The scenes that can’t be shown in TV dramas and can’t appear because of production problems will also be reflected.

Please forgive me if I don’t write for a long time and my skills become rusty. Serial novels can’t guarantee I’ll stay in shape every day. Read the text for free and hopefully share it a lot. I feel encouraged when it’s spread and praised. Thank you all.

This chapter is short, so I’ll write a few more paragraphs to increase the number of words.

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Yin Xinyue was peeling a pomegranate while Lieutenant stood off to one side, waiting for Zhang Qishan to come out of the study. Yin Xinyue looked at the thick documents in Lieutenants’ hands and said coldly, “Batch after batch after batch. Every day it’s like you’re presenting the memorial to the emperor.<sup>72</sup> Will you all die if you don’t?”

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<sup>72</sup> The memorial to the emperor (folded in accordion form) was an official communication to the Emperor of China (like a status report). They were generally careful essays in Classical Chinese and their presentation was a formal affair directed by government officials. They were used in imperial China as a means of regulating corrupt local officials who might otherwise have escaped oversight. More info [here](#)

Lieutenant said solemnly, “Madam, if we approve it privately, we’ll really be dead.”

Yin Xinyue’s eyes widened and she almost threw the pomegranate, but she managed to hold herself back. She stood up irritably, rolled her eyes, and asked Lieutenant, “Zhang Rishan! What’s the purpose of your name? What did you do to your parents to make them give you this name?”<sup>73</sup>

Lieutenant was still very serious as he smiled and said, “Madam, I was born in Baishan. They meant to name me “Baishan”, but a stroke was removed out of respect for Fo Ye since his name is Qishan. He’s held in high esteem, so the character “Qi” is taller to show authority.<sup>74</sup> Madam, don’t make fun of my name.”

Yin Xinyue was stunned and took a long time to recover before she dazedly said, “How can you say something so ridiculous? Why don’t you just go be a eunuch?”

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## End of Chen Pi Ah Si’s Extra

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<sup>73</sup> Shan (山) means mountain and Ri (日) can mean sun, but Tiffany said it can also mean “fuck” (probably like a regional dialect kind of thing). So Fo Ye’s wife is basically like “Did you offend your parents so they named you ‘Zhang Fucking Mountain?’”

<sup>74</sup> The generation name is shan (mountain, 山). The main Zhang branch is based in Changbai Mountain (長白山), which can also be abbreviated to just Baishan (白山). Apparently Fo Ye and Lieutenant’s generation have names based around Baishan to indicate that they’re from the main branch. Lieutenant’s name is Zhang Rishan (日山). His name is basically Baishan, but with one stroke removed from the Bai (白 → 日) to show humility. Depending on how you look at it, Zhang Qishan’s name (肩山) can basically be Baishan, but with two extra strokes added (白 → 肩) to indicate that he is held in high esteem. Or you can just count them as two totally different characters and say “肩” has one more stroke that looks taller than “日”. The strokes will look like they’re the same height if it’s “白”, so the stroke is removed to show humility. The generation names thing is where each member of a generation shares the same character. More info [here](#)

## **The Mystic Nine Extras**

# The Mystic Nine (1) A Story Related to Er Yuehong

There's a story about Er Yuehong in "The Grave Robbers' Chronicles".

The silk curtain hadn't been changed in a long time.

It was the middle of the night, and she couldn't sleep. When she opened her eyes, she saw the curtain hanging from the bed, looking extremely dull in the moonlight. The silk threads had originally been bright, as if they had been spun from the purest silver.

Sure enough, no matter how good things were, they would never last.

In the past, she would personally remove the curtain at the start of Autumn and wash it herself. She knew how delicate this thing was, so she had to wash it very carefully and pass it through the water inch by inch.

Now that she wasn't allowed out of bed, this thing was no longer cleaned and appeared more and more unworthy of being treated so carefully.

Maybe someone would dare touch this thing when the next Autumn came, but that person definitely wouldn't be her.

At noon, the doctor broke the news to him. Although they were standing outside the room, she still overheard a few things about her illness. She didn't know how many days she had left.

She breathed a sigh of relief. The pain in her chest seemed to be a little better. How many days had it been? She couldn't remember clearly. Her mother had taught her since she was a child that it was hard for sick people to count the days. She had always been sick even as a child and hadn't bothered counting the days back then either. No matter how long she was ill, it only counted as one day. It didn't hurt so much when she thought of it like that.

But even though she couldn't count the days, he could.

Compared to her own physical pain, the dull pain in her heart came more from him. These painful days could be forgotten by a stupid woman, but the clever man remembered each one like it was a cut from a knife.

In the past, when she was a little girl, none of the smart men who ate noodles at their stall were happy. It seemed there was a reason for it.

She looked at the silk curtain and got lost in thought again. The curtain had been specially cut by a master in Suzhou, so the place it could be hung up was very different. The hook had a hanging strip inlaid with jadeite, and the golden part had been sewn with mandarin ducks. She used to feel that the hook needed to be as finely done as the curtain, but such a thing was rare in the market. She had nothing to choose from, so she brought this one back and found that it matched surprisingly well with this special silk curtain.

Who would be the next person to help him wash this silk curtain? It was priceless, so it shouldn't be damaged. He also liked its texture, so he might keep it, right? If he did, someone always had to make sure it was clean.

Did she want to leave a letter for that person? She thought it over again and wondered if the next person would feel troubled if the curtain was still there.

She was a little uneasy, unhappy, and worried.

She suddenly didn't want anyone to touch this silk curtain, even if it got dirty. She wanted it to hang there forever.

Her heart ached. If possible, she wanted to continue on like this. Even if she couldn't get better and had to lay down her whole life, she didn't want to leave if she could see him every day.

In a daze, she remembered the moment when he had saved her. She had been thrown over someone's shoulder, facing a terrible and unknowable fate. She was desperate. At that time, she saw him. Her last lifeline.



She watched him descend from the sky like a god, and then come and stand in front of them. Even now, she remembered every word clearly.

“Follow me, and no one will dare bully you.”

“Really?”

“As a man, I will never break my word to a woman.”

*And he didn't*, she thought to herself. Unfortunately, they didn't expect that she wouldn't be with him for the rest of his life.

At midnight, she got out of bed silently. He had been laying quietly beside her. He always seemed to sleep very deeply whenever she was beside him. She was careful not to make a sound as she took down the silk curtain bit by bit and then cleaned it in the yard.

It was hard exerting her strength with her sick body, and every movement triggered the pain in her chest. As she washed it, her face got paler and paler, and her hair hung down messily. She used her wet hands to wipe the hair out of her face, but she still couldn't see clearly. She wasn't sure if it was the water or her tears.

*This is the last time*, she told herself, wanting to pretend that everything was the same as usual.

She didn't see Er Yuehong standing in the room looking at her. He hadn't been asleep at all.

The two people didn't disturb each other but stood there quietly under the same moonlight.

## The Mystic Nine (2) Fortune-Teller Qi Tiezui

I can live through the years by telling people's fortunes. When I ask for Heaven's help, my predictions are accurate every time— the fortune-teller, Qi Tiezui.

The temple fair was drawing to a close, and people were scattered. With the exception of a few good shadow plays and Western painting stalls on the street, the other stalls were already being cleaned up and dismantled.

The old city temple in the middle of the street was still flourishing. There were fewer people going to the market and more worshipping Buddha. Now more than half of the stalls were devoted to fortune-telling, and only a few of them were still sticking to it. Previous business obviously hadn't been very good, and they were hoping to make a last-minute profit at the end of this session.

There was a sudden buzz among those gathered on the street, and a large group of soldiers parted the crowd. A man dressed in casual clothes headed towards the old temple.

"Fo Ye, Fo Ye, will you still send rice this year? Our family hasn't eaten your sweet rice for a long time." A beggar on the side of the road shouted to the man in casual clothes.

Zhang Da Fo Ye took off his hat and said to the beggar, "Didn't you recently go to work as an assistant in the clothes store? Why are you begging for rice again? Bad habits are really hard to change."

"Hey, Fo Ye, don't you know? Life as a beggar is more comfortable than being a shop assistant. I can sleep as much as I want, and get up whenever I want. It's pretty great. Old Wang Huang Mao, who died a few years ago, lived to be a hundred and two. He lived more comfortably than the former emperor and lived longer than the president." The beggar said. "Besides, doesn't your family still send rice? When you send it this year, tell your cook to sauté it with sugar so we don't have to light a cooking fire."

Zhang Da Fo Ye smiled, shook his head, and then said to the people around him, “Sounds like he has the makings of a Manchurian Qing wandering hero. He really knows his stuff. With this kind of mindset, he won’t have to worry about food and drink.”

A scholar beside him said: “If this person is so talented, Fo Ye can employ him. When it comes to employing people now, we don’t care about their origins.”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. It’s not yet time.” Zhang Da Fo Ye said. “These are all minor characters. This time I brought you to see a real giant among men.”

“What Qishan said is a little embarrassing.” The scholar smiled and pushed up his glasses. “I hope you’re not playing favorites, Qishan.”

“I’m not. Haven’t you heard? If I said it’s good, it must be good.” Zhang Da Fo Ye laughed. As they were talking in the middle of the crowd, they arrived at the area where the fortune-telling stalls at the temple entrance were. Zhang Da Fo Ye called out, “Smooth talker, smooth talker! Come out quickly and bring your good wine.”

The scholar looked at the fortune-telling stalls in confusion and said to Fo Ye, “These strange, chaotic...”

“Don’t talk nonsense.” When Zhang Da Fo Ye saw that no one responded, he asked a nearby fortune teller, “Brother, where’s that smooth talker?”

“You mean Qi Tiezui?” The fortune-teller saw Zhang Da Fo Ye’s imposing manner and stuttered out, “He was still here just now. I don’t know where he went. Maybe he went to take a dump.”

“Which stall is his? We’ll wait for him there.” Zhang Qishan said. The fortune-teller pointed to it, and Zhang Qishan led the scholar-like person over.

“Fo Ye, do we really have to rely on these fortune tellers when it comes to our affairs?” The scholar asked. “Who is this giant among men?”

Zhang Qishan was just about to speak when he suddenly saw a piece of paper on Qi Tiezui’s stall table. It was held down with a paperweight and seemed to have just been written.

Zhang Qishan lifted the paperweight and saw that something had been scribbled on the paper. It had obviously been done in a hurry.

“Fo Ye, thank you for the recommendation, but unfortunately, the Qi family’s ancestors stated we don’t calculate politics or military affairs. I can live through the years by telling people’s fortunes. When I ask for Heaven’s help, my predictions are accurate every time. I’m unwilling to discuss the matter further. If forced, I’ll leave Changsha and never return. Please give up. We can still drink together in the future.”

Zhang Qishan looked the scholar in the eye and then smiled. “Sure enough, this guy already calculated this day.”

“Did he really?” The scholar looked at the note skeptically.

“It’s not fortune-telling, it’s just a timely calculation.” Zhang Da Fo Ye sighed and looked at the sky before saying, “Sure enough, we don’t have an easy path to walk. This road is dangerous, and the smart ones have already seen it clearly.”

The scholar glanced at the note and couldn’t help shaking his head. Zhang Qishan looked at the wine his entourage had brought, and then put it on the stall table. “Forget it, this wine has no taste. We’ll leave it here.”

The two men turned to leave. Several of the nearby fortune-tellers looked at each other, but no one dared to go look at the bottle of wine. Moments later, the beggar from earlier walked up to the stall, picked up the bottle of wine, carried it to the temple’s outer wall, and then handed it to one of the four or five beggars over there. As the man took the wine and poured a

mouthful into each of the beggars' bowls, the fragrant scent of alcohol permeated the air.

"Ba Ye, you truly have incredible foresight. That Da Fo Ye has such good eyesight, but didn't find you hiding here."

The man took off his worn felt hat and gave it back to one of the beggars. "Who said he didn't find me?" He shook the pot of wine and said, "He knows how I feel about it. He just doesn't want to force the issue. Otherwise, how else would you get a drink?"

The few beggars were skeptical, but Qi Tiezui merely picked himself up, patted the dust from his body, and sighed in the direction Zhang Da Fo Ye had gone. "There's no going back, Fo Ye. Although I know a little, it's a pity I'm powerless to change things. Forgive me for not telling you. Good luck."

## The Mystic Nine (3) Black Back the Sixth

They thought he was crazy, but only he himself knew what he was doing—Black Back the Sixth.

“Is that madman still out there?” An older woman wearing crimson clothes leaned against the beauty on the second floor of the teahouse and asked the young servant who had come up to add water to the teapot. There were a few small chips on the teapot’s spout, and the porcelain figure of a flower on it wasn’t very clear. It was a kind of inferior blue color, and one could tell at a glance that it was a cheap tea set.

“No, Aunt Bai. He’s still squatting at the door!” The young servant said. Although his tone was respectful, the woman could still see the contempt on his face.

She was accustomed to this duplicity now since she was a woman from a low-grade brothel. She wasn’t beautiful. She knew she would never become a famous beauty in a big city like Changsha, but she was unwilling to go back to the town to serve those local men. Although she wasn’t beautiful, she also dreamed of catching the eye of a white-faced scholar, who would one day win top marks in the imperial exams. He would come to redeem her on a palanquin carried by eight men, and the pheasant would finally be transformed into a phoenix.

Unfortunately, the white-faced scholars were worse off than the pheasants these days. There was no way out. All the promising men had gone off to be soldiers in the war, and the situation was precarious. It was a waste of money to catch the eye of a soldier since he could easily die on the frontlines. At that time, instead of being carried away on a palanquin, she’d have to help send his coffin to be buried.

“Tell me, where does this madman’s money come from? Just look at him. He’s crazy, but he always has money to pay.” A fat woman beside Aunt Bai wondered. She was Aunt Bai’s sister. She had been ill a few years ago and became fat as a gourd after she ate some Chinese medicine. Now she could

only sell her ugliness in the building and earn some money by making the others laugh. The both of them had a hard time, so they were always stuck together.

“Hmm, this kind of madman is either stealing or robbing from others. You can see that he smokes and certainly doesn’t do anything else. He can’t even last long in bed.” Aunt Bai said. “But this man is really a fool. He’ll give me as much money as I want. In the beginning, I held my nose for the sake of those coins and gave it to the dog, but I didn’t expect him to pester me. He said he would save money to redeem me. I went with the flow and told him to help me pay back the money I owe those ingrates first, but I’d borrow a little more every time he paid it back. He’ll never finish paying it back, and will always have to make money for me.”

“He hasn’t noticed?” The fat woman asked. “So stupid.”

“A man like this is endlessly stupid. He deserves to fall into my hands.” Aunt Bai took a sip of tea.

“Then he paid back the money for you, and you accompanied him at night?” The fat woman asked a little coyly.

“Bah, don’t make it sound so romantic! I’ll have you know, this guy is smelly and dirty, and can’t be served by anyone.” Aunt Bai said. “Even if I can’t find a man, I still wouldn’t want to be with this madman at all. But I’ve already thought about it. This kind of person can’t live long. And if he’s stealing or robbing people, he’ll be killed sooner or later. As long as he can keep living, I’ll have my fun first. He’d better hope God blesses him with a long life. And he needs to be careful in case someone breaks his legs.”

“True.” The fat woman showed an envious expression. “By the way, speaking of that ingrate, why hasn’t he come to trouble you recently? He beat you so terribly last time!”

“I don’t know. That beast also has a lot of enemies, so maybe he’s hiding from them.” Aunt Bai said. “That bastard! I also accompanied him several times before, but now he pretends like he doesn’t know me. I only owed

him some money, yet he went and beat me for real. There are no good men in the world.”

With that said, Aunt Bai laughed, as if she thought her idea was very funny. The fat woman smiled enviously. The servant had been listening nearby and secretly spit in disgust before going back downstairs.

He ran downstairs and saw the unkempt madman still sitting at the teahouse’s door. He was basking in the sun and holding onto a broken knife. When the shopkeeper gave the boy a look, the boy quickly gathered a pot of wine, some opium, and a dish of peanuts. He walked over to the unkempt person and put the things down one by one.

The madman took out a pipe, and the young boy lit the opium for him. He took a deep breath and nodded to the young boy.

“Black Back the Sixth,” the young man said very respectfully, “if you need anything, just let me know.”

Black Back the Sixth took a sip of wine and pulled a coin out of his clothes. The young man immediately shook his head, “I dare not.”

Black Back the Sixth grabbed the young man’s hand, stuffed the coin into it, and whispered in a hoarse voice, “Here. I only owe lives, not money.”

The young man had no choice but to take the coin. Black Back the Sixth turned around and took another puff of smoke. He saw several ingrates on the street corner in the distance, pointing at the teahouse’s upstairs area.

When Black Back the Sixth looked around, all those people immediately retreated behind the wall.

Black Back the Sixth touched his knife and closed his eyes. Despite his shabby clothes, he no longer felt cold as the midday sun shined down upon him. He took another puff of his pipe and felt extremely satisfied as the dizzying feeling spread throughout his body.



## The Mystic Nine (4) Xie-Wu Matchmaking

Originally, Wu Xie's grandpa's marriage had an interesting beginning.

Xie Jiuye pushed his glasses up. This was the third time he had done this action, and the girl sitting across from him was a little overwhelmed.

They were in the teahouse, and this man had been looking at her like this for almost two hours. If it wasn't for her mother's insistence that they should meet, she really wouldn't have stayed so long and been stared at by such a strange man.

The girl thought it was odd, and also couldn't help looking at the man for a long time. Although the atmosphere was very awkward and this man was very strange, his weird temperament kept her from leaving under the pretext of being uncomfortable. Her mother would never let her faint and embarrass herself here.

What kind of temperament was it? She really couldn't tell. Whenever she looked at this man, she kept feeling like she couldn't see through him.

There were many kinds of people like this in the world. Some were taciturn, some were duplicitous, some people smiled and laughed on the surface, but were actually plotting something. Some acted like everything was normal, but gave off the feeling that something was wrong. But what about this man?

She was a very, very clever girl. She knew that if a person could be easily read and had something hidden in his heart, then he wasn't truly a shrewd person. The more shrewd someone was, the more plans he would have concealed. But all your guesses would be wrong, for the other party would have already set everything up so you wouldn't be able to touch his real thoughts. This was a real strategist.

But this Jiuye—she didn't know why such a young man was called Jiuye—had such a strange temperament that she couldn't make any

determinations. When she saw him, she kept feeling like he wasn't that simple, but she wasn't sure. Really, when she wasn't forcing herself into believing that this person wasn't sitting there idly, she kept feeling like she was thinking too much.

*Give me some clues*, the girl thought to herself.

No man could be that difficult for her to see through. Out of all the men she had met in the past, they always had a reason for contacting her. As long as she could tell what kind of person this man was, then it was game over for him.

This was really tricky. She wondered if it would be considered a loss if she just got up and left.

"How much longer are you going to keep staring?" The girl decided to give in and see what would happen if she took the initiative to attack.

Xie Jiuye looked at her baby face and sighed in his heart. This girl was petite, strange, and had a particularly charming babyface. It was no wonder that men liked her so much. Not only was she beautiful, but she was particularly clever, too. She looked down on them all, which made her mother utterly devastated. If she wasn't his cousin, he wouldn't want to wade into this muddy water and introduce her to anyone.

"Say something." The girl was a little impatient and wondered if she had been wrong and this person was actually a fool.

"If you don't examine the goods carefully, how can you sell them?" Xie Jiuye shook his head, took a sip of tea, and then looked at his pocket watch. He got up and walked downstairs while sighing heavily.

This cousin was good, but it was a pity he couldn't be with her. Out of everyone in the whole world, he was afraid only one man could handle her. Moreover, it could be regarded as a good marriage. He was too ambitious, and such a life wasn't suitable for love. Seeing such a fine thing could also count as karma.

Xie Jiuye remembered what he had done that night four years ago, and felt his heart clench. He rubbed his chest and sighed.

The girl in the tea house was stunned and sat there staring blankly at the empty table opposite. It took her a long time to react, and when she did, her face was livid. She turned and said to the young girl following her, "Let's go." Just as she was about to leave, she saw a young man bounding up the stairs with a dog in his arms.

When he came up, he called, "Where's Xie Jiu? Didn't Little Jiujiu say he had some good tea and was waiting for me here?" When he saw the girl's livid face, he couldn't help laughing, "How come Xie Jiu's turned into a big girl? Now that I think about it, you do look a little similar. Girl, the sun is shining, so don't be angry."

"You're Xie Jiu!" The girl became angry and poured a bowl of tea directly on the newcomer's face.

The waiter who followed the man up had a breakdown and immediately came over and wiped him with a towel, "Master Wu, are you okay?"

Old Dog Wu shook his head, looked at the petite figure making her way down the stairs, and looked at his poor puppy. He couldn't help shaking his head and asked the waiter, "Whose girl is that?"

The waiter scratched his head, unsure what to say. He heard the girl downstairs shout, "Whoever dares say it, I'll skin him alive! Find out yourself! Go to your Xie Jiu and settle the accounts!"

The waiter looked at Old Dog Wu, who motioned for him to stop talking. He sat down by the railing, shook out his wet clothes, and couldn't help but smile as he watched the girl walk down the street.

## The Mystic Nine (5) Black Back the Sixth (Part 2)

(There are many crazy people, but how many of them can really take every step as firm as a rock? Look at Black Back the Sixth.)

In Hu'erling, Changsha, a group of more than thirty people were walking alongside an ox cart on the mountain road to Yunnan.

Torches dotted the road like starlight, and heavy snow fell from the sky. No one knew how many years it had been since such heavy snow had fallen in Changsha. The whole road was covered in a layer of it that reached as high as their boots. The snow floated down from the sky like cotton. At the rate it was falling, it would definitely reach their knees by tomorrow.

A lot of women could vaguely be seen on the cart. The thirty or so people escorting it were all dressed as farmers, but it was clear to see that they were all carrying knives and guns. The leader was Lao Qi, one of the more competent traffickers in Changsha. He sat alone on the ox cart's frame, looking at the women behind him and thinking about things.

His cousin, Hu Ba, had just recently entered the business with him and was walking beside him. This was the first time he had gone on such a trip, so he was very curious and kept asking a lot of questions along the way. Lao Qi also wanted to teach him something because he kept feeling like things were going to get bad—was the country going to change or something? He had experienced many wars before, but the situation right now wasn't quite right. It was best not to do too much at this time. Instead, it was safest to find a woman and stay in bed every day.

As a result, Lao Qi wanted his cousin to learn more from him so he could travel in his place. He was his kin, after all, and easy to control and to talk to. But this line of work wasn't doing very well recently. It made him angry whenever he thought of it. He used to be able to take a batch of women and sell four or five of them to last him half a year. But now women were

becoming fucking clever, and he didn't dare sell anyone who was too beautiful. If an official took a fancy to them, he'd be the one facing the consequences.

Now, he was stuck with the stupid old women who owed a lot of money. If it weren't for the foreigners tossing them a line now, these women really wouldn't know who to turn to.

"How much are these women worth?" Hu Ba asked as he walked. "They're all old and ugly. They're past their prime and all dried out, so can they really receive any patrons? Who the hell would choose these kinds of goods? You can't even find this kind of stuff in the remote areas right now."

"Who said they're going to be prostitutes? Have you ever seen such a prostitute sold like this? Prostitutes are at their peak value the first time, but once they're sold, they lose their value. Who would engage in this kind of unprofitable business? Those who have money all go to the countryside and collect some young girls. With the war going on, they're not all that expensive." Lao Qi took a few puffs of his cigarette, revealing the few yellow teeth he had left. He poked his tongue out between the gap in his teeth and then whipped the ox as he tried to decide what he wanted to eat tonight.

"Where are we sending them?" Hu Ba asked.

"To the South Sea to work as laborers. Just because they can't serve men anymore doesn't mean they can't work for another thirty years."

"These women used to separate their legs to make money. Can they even do hard labor?"

"When they get there, they can't not do it." Lao Qi coughed a few times and spit out a mouthful of phlegm. A few of the nearby escorts looked at him, thinking he was going to speak. They were all from Vietnam, so there was a language barrier even though a lot of money had been spent to hire them to escort the cart. It made things a bit difficult, but he waved them to continue walking.

The mountain road ahead was getting more and more rugged as it led all the way to the sea. There was a small boat that would shuttle everyone to a big ship anchored out at sea, but they weren't there yet. It took more than ten days to walk from here to the beach, and he felt bored whenever he thought of it.

He took a few more puffs, threw his cigarette down with a sigh, and suddenly remembered that Hu Ba hadn't taken a wife yet. "By the way," he said, "why don't you pick one to relieve the fire first? Although they're a little old, you can still pick out a few if you want to. It's getting dark so you won't have to see them clearly."

"The boss won't care?" Hu Ba asked enthusiastically.

"Just don't kill them. Don't strangle the goods like that idiot before. The boss obviously wouldn't let him go after something like that. These people are used to playing with men and being handled very roughly, so if you don't put in some effort, they probably won't get off." With that said, Lao Qi laughed. Hu ba looked at the women in the cart behind him and also laughed.

Aunt Bai was in the ox cart and could hear the whole conversation clearly. She sighed. She had heard such foul language so much that she thought she didn't care anymore. But that was when she was listening to it in the teahouse. Listening to it from the back of an ox cart was a whole different story.

Some of the women started crying as they listened, and Lao Qi patted the side of the cart and shouted, "Why are you crying? It's a little too late for that! You'll attract the fucking ghosts! Now you listen to me. You can't blame anyone but yourselves for your bad lot in life. I'll tell you a little something: if you get on the foreigners' boat and don't want to suffer, it's better to jump into the sea. Death ends all troubles. It's better than being a slave in the South Sea. They're treated worse than pigs."

The women were so scared, they cried even more. In the heavy snow, this line of people really did look like a ghostly procession in the wilderness.

Aunt Bai felt sad when she heard this. She was shivering in the corner, but she didn't know whether it was because she was freezing or scared.

She knew that everyone in this cart had their own sad story, but she had really asked for it if she had gotten to this point. She had been unwilling when she took the first step, but as she went down step by step, it was like she was possessed. In fact, there had been a few really good people who liked her. They didn't care about her origins and even wanted to redeem her. But she was choosy and picked others instead. She always dreamed of finding a champion who would redeem her, so that she could fly to the branches and become a phoenix.

She owed those ingrates so much money by this point that she should've expected it. She didn't know what kind of suffering was awaiting her when she arrived in the South Sea. Maybe she should die halfway and end it all.

She was really desperate this time. This was completely different from all the difficulties she had faced before. With those, she would worry, panic, and curse, but she knew there was still a way out. But this time, she felt cold from the inside out. Except for the regret, she had completely given up.

Just as Aunt Bai fell into despair, she suddenly heard the Vietnamese people in front whistle a few times. As everyone became alert, they heard Lao Qi scold, "What's going on? We haven't even left the province yet, but somebody's causing trouble?"

As Lao Qi was scolding, he pulled out his gun. He was upset at first, but now he was interested in seeing who had decided to try their luck. Lao Qi had just jumped off the ox cart and taken a few steps when he saw an unkempt man with a knife in his hand standing under the torchlight in front of him.

Lao Qi looked at the man's familiar appearance and felt his scalp go numb. *Not good*, he said to himself, *why is the plague god here?* But as soon as he

went to speak, Hu Ba took it upon himself to shout to the Vietnamese, "Kill the beggar!"

Lao Qi's mind buzzed, and his heart stopped.

Aunt Bai listened to the noise in front of the cart, and quickly covered her ears in fright when the sounds of gunshots and knives rang out. But after some time had passed, there wasn't any sound besides the heartbeats of the women holding their breath in the cart and the sound of snow falling on the ground.

Then, she heard the sound of someone walking on the snow. She saw Black Back walk up to the cart with a torch in hand, cut off the lock with his knife, and stick his head in.

As the cold wind blew into the cart, everyone immediately broke out in goosebumps. Black Back stuck the torch into the cart and looked around. When he saw Aunt Bai, his snow-covered face broke out in a smile: "So this is where you were."

Aunt Bai nodded her head. Black Back put his knife into its sheath and stretched out his dark, grimy hand, "Let's go home."

Aunt Bai nodded again. Under the gazes of all those people, she was pulled out of the cart, only to find that her shoes weren't suitable for walking in the snow at all. They got wet as soon as they touched the snow.

She was about to grit her teeth and take a few steps when she suddenly found herself lifted into the air and put on Black Back's back as if she weighed nothing at all.

Amid the heavy snow falling like goose feathers from the sky, she found that his back was scalding hot. As he advanced step by step through the snow, the woman on his back suddenly put her arms around him tightly and leaned her head against the back of his neck. Black Back didn't hesitate and didn't stop, but continued to walk. Every step was as firm as a rock.



It was as if they were the only two people between heaven and earth.

## The Mystic Nine (6) Er Yuehong

While playing mahjong in the middle of the night, several of the younger Mystic Nine members began to bicker. It was raining outside, which seemed both sad and meaningful.

“Er Ye, what suit do you want to play?” One of the servants held up a few of the sets and waited beside Er Yuehong. These mahjong sets were rare products that Er Yuehong had collected from various places. Most of them were ivory painted in different colors. Both the colors and designs were exquisite, and he even had a favored set that had nine-tailed cats on them. The bonus tiles in that set had all kinds of cats finely carved on them. He also had another very beautiful set that had been carved in such a way that crystal flowers were embedded in each of the tiles. But this had its disadvantages. There was a huge weight difference, and the tomb robbers’ hands were very steady. If they played too long, they would know which tiles were which.

Er Yuehong looked at him a little absent-mindedly. Qi Tiezui beside him had already drunk a little too much and was leaning against the armchair as he said, “Not only do they have to be carefully chosen, but there are so many tricks when it comes to playing mahjong. I say we pick a random set.”

“With the three of us playing, you won’t win much even if you get ‘thirteen orphans’.<sup>75</sup> When we play, we focus on the pleasure of it, not on winning or losing. Ba Ye, if you’re so idle and bored, why don’t we go to Qingshangzhai and book a table. The ups and downs of the money we gamble there in one night are equal to the harvest we earn in a month. It’s really in line with your style.” Old Dog Wu said.

“No, I know you have your way of playing mahjong. If you want to play big, we’ll just have to put our favorite things at stake. If you don’t have a few pennies, just use one of your dogs. If you lose, I’ll put it in a stewed hotpot.

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<sup>75</sup> If you get “thirteen orphans”, you win big. Since Ba Ye’s playing against 3 people, the pool is pretty small (is how I took it).

Do you dare?" Qi Tiezui retorted. "This is my style. It's not based on calculations, just on luck."

"What if I win?" Old Dog Wu smiled while secretly scolding the damned man for being so cruel. He deserved to have his legs chopped off.

"If you win, I'll let you stab me a few times. But you can only use a three-inch blade."

"Ba Ye, what good is it for me to stab you? I have no reason to. Or, if I win, I can sell the rights to Master Four. He'll definitely like it."

"That won't work. If you win, you have to stab me yourself. But I know you're too soft-hearted to do it. That bastard Chen Pi Ah Si can't wait to plot against me every day, so he'd probably end up stabbing me in the ass. Young man, let's not mess with those old men, ok?"

Old Dog Wu laughed and said, "Don't say that. Er Ye's the oldest today. It's his birthday, so he's the master." As he spoke, he looked at Xie Jiu.

Xie Jiu, who hadn't said a word the whole time, gave them a meaningful look and told them to stop talking. Old Dog Wu looked over and found that Er Yuehong wasn't listening to them at all. Instead, his eyes were staring blankly at the mahjong tiles.

Old Dog Wu asked softly, "What happened to Er Ye? He looks possessed."

The servant holding the mahjong sets beside him looked like he was about to collapse. His face was turning green as he looked at the gathered people for help.

Old Dog Wu looked at Qi Tiezui, who was drinking by himself and then at Xie Jiu, who shook his head to tell him to drop it. But Old Dog Wu was soft-hearted, so he said to Er Yuehong, "Er Ye, if you can't pick, just order another set."

Er Yuehong slowly came back to himself, sighed, and then said, "I was having trouble finding my favorite set. It appears to be gone as well." After saying this, he smiled and said to the three people, "Don't argue. Since you have to listen to me, I'll sing you a song if I lose. If I win, you'll each have to give me a bowl of noodles. How about it?"

The three men looked at each other and nodded. Old Dog Wu thought about it some more, and couldn't resist saying, "Making Xie Jiu boil noodles... Er Ye, aren't you afraid of death?"

"I won't necessarily eat it. I'll feed it to a dog if it smells wrong."

Old Dog Wu showed a meaningful smile that looked a little bitter, "Er Ye, I've tried. Dogs don't have it easy. Leave them alone."

No one knew what Xie Jiu was thinking as he pushed his glasses up and looked out the window. Qi Tiezui and Er Yuehong both laughed.

Two years after he lost his wife, Er Yuehong celebrated his birthday. He only invited a few guests. It was raining in the middle of the night as the mahjong tiles were set up. He seemed to be less sad, as if all the sorrow had been scattered to all corners of the house, waiting to be stepped on at any time.

## The Mystic Nine (7) Banjie Li

Birth of a son.

Ordinary people said that he was so cruel, he didn't have a bottom line. But who knew that he was also gentle and tender? No matter how ruthless or furious he was, it seemed that he couldn't resist being wrapped around those soft fingers.

"Let's play a game of chess for two or three hours. If you don't find something to do, how do you expect to get through it?" Xie Jiu lit some incense and fanned it. He seemed a little dissatisfied with it, but he didn't want to change it.

"No." Banjie Li said. He glanced at the incense and then slapped it to the ground, smashing the porcelain plate it sat on.

The man behind Xie Jiu stepped forward to attack, but Xie Jiu waved his hand to stop him. After thinking about it, he felt that the atmosphere wasn't very good with his men here. He waved two fingers, and all the men withdrew from the patio.

"You don't want to drink tea either?" Xie Jiu picked up the debris from the ground, glanced at them, and then buried them in a nearby flowerpot. His heart ached a little because the plate had been broken.

"No!" Banjie Li said. "I don't want a damn drink." He glanced at Xie Jiu's expression again and asked, "What, is that plate so precious?"

"It's from the middle of the Ming Dynasty. It's not very expensive, but I really like it."

"My warehouse is full of that kind of stuff. You can just go there and find one another day." Banjie Li spit in contempt, as if he thought Xie Jiu was being a little stingy.

Xie Jiu sighed, "This plate belonged to my mother. When I would cry as a child, she used to hit two of these plates together and sing to me."

"Your mother's relics are also piled up in my warehouse. Take them back as soon as possible!" Banjie Li didn't buy it at all.

Xie Jiu sighed again. His mother really was extravagant. These kinds of relics were piled up in Banjie Li's old house because they got in the way when the room had to be clean. Who would have thought he and Banjie Li would be living in two big houses so close to each other?

If he didn't live nearby, he wouldn't even be here.

"As I said before, Third Master, you can't rush this kind of thing. Instead of being so anxious and hurting your body, you might as well do something else to distract yourself." Xie Jiu reiterated as he finished burying the plate and paid his respects to it.

"I can't beat you at chess, and I can't drink tea. Aren't you afraid I'll throw everything in your face?" Banjie Li asked angrily. As he spoke, he grabbed the blanket and went to get out of the chair.

"What are you doing?" Xie Jiu asked.

"I want to go in and have a look." Banjie Li responded.

Xie Jiu immediately came up to stop him and said, "You're too angry. Didn't Old Ba tell you not to act rashly?"

"If I stay here like a fool, I'll suffocate. And it won't be good for anyone. Moreover, Old Ba, that bastard, is full of nonsense. I don't believe him."

"You don't believe in Old Ba? Do you remember when Fo Ye didn't listen to him? What happened then?" Xie Jiu continued, "This matter is non-negotiable. If you try to make a move, it will involve too many people. It's not easy for you to live a good life, so think about it clearly."

Banjie Li took a deep breath and thought about it. Then, his eyes showed a fierce light, "Little Jiu, no one's dared talk to me like this before. I don't like it. You'd better stop talking."

Xie Jiu gave a slight smile. He wasn't afraid of Banjie Li at all. He knew that this man was cruel, had no bottom line, and thought things like brotherhood, trustworthiness, and the underworld's rules were all bullshit. He was more ruthless than Chen Pi Ah Si, but others associated with him more because he had an absolute weakness.

If you got hold of that weakness, the wicked master would become a particularly safe neighbor.

As he looked at Banjie Li's expression, Xie Jiu wanted to jump up and shout, "I'll keep talking, I'll keep talking! What can you do to me?" But his character still made him appear completely unruffled.

"Fine, but don't go in there." Xie Jiu finally said.

Banjie Li sat back, apparently calm now. His whole state suddenly changed and he became very quiet, as if the anxiety had completely disappeared.

This was the most terrible thing about Banjie Li. Xie Jiu knew that the man was out of control, and would use this state to isolate himself from the outside world, so as not to do anything irrational.

Xie Jiu didn't bother worrying about him, but he didn't dare sit next to him either. He knew that this man might suddenly snap and stab him with a knife. He went to the center of the patio and looked at all the strange plants before quietly glancing at his pocket watch. He really didn't want to endure it any longer.

He didn't know how much time had passed, but Xie Jiu had almost stared those plants to death when he suddenly heard a cry come from the back room in the distance.

Xie Jiu immediately looked up and turned to Banjie Li, only to see the disabled person fly out like a rabbit. With a bang, his figure quickly disappeared, and the door he had knocked open dangled to and fro.

*Oh, no!* He thought to himself. He immediately rushed over, ran two steps to the back room, and saw that the door of the delivery room had been opened. The midwife had just come out with a child in her arms, but when she saw Banjie Li practically panting at the door, she was so scared that her hands shook and she actually dropped the child.

Xie Jiu gave a “tsk” and thought, *after this, not to mention whether anything will be wrong with the child, but I’m afraid the midwife’s family, myself, and Old Ba will be in a lot of trouble.* He was too far away and his skills weren’t that good, so he knew he would be too late.

At almost the exact moment the child touched the ground, Xie Jiu suddenly saw a shadowy figure shoot out from behind a nearby porch pillar, grab the swaddled child, and then put it on the ground.

The shadow quickly jumped into the yard and then stopped. It turned out to be a big black dog.

Banjie Li rushed in. It had all happened so fast that he didn’t know what had happened. There was suddenly only the frightened midwife, the wide-eyed Banjie Li, the stiff Xie Jiu, and a big black dog left at the scene.

The midwife was the first to react. She immediately picked up the child and said to Banjie Li with a big smile, “Good fortune and a strong life. This child will have a promising future. Yes, a very promising future.”

Banjie Li looked at the dog and then at the midwife, his face practically the color of pig liver. If it wasn’t for the midwife holding the baby, he would have definitely gone up and snapped her neck.

Xie Jiu immediately came up to stand between Banjie Li and the midwife, and said to Banjie Li, “Hurry up and ask. Is it a boy or a girl?”



“You ask!” Banjie Li said. Just as he finished speaking, he heard a faint voice from inside the room say, “You’re the father of the child, yet you’re telling Little Jiu to ask. Are you trying to piss me off?”

Banjie Li looked at the room. The door was ajar, and the curtains had been drawn across the bed, making it difficult for him to see anything clearly. “Is everything okay?” He asked. “Are you injured?”

“I’m giving birth to a child, not causing trouble like you.” The faint female voice said. “Look, who does our child look like?”

Banjie Li was very short, so it was only at this time that the midwife put the child down. The child was still crying and obviously had some congenital deficiencies. He had worn himself out crying, but the tears still fell from one of his unopened eyes. Banjie Li looked at him carefully and suddenly burst into tears as he cried out, “He looks like Big Brother! Just like Big Brother! A son! We have a son!”

“Like Big Brother? This is your son. If he looks like your brother, doesn’t that mean he looks like you?” The female voice inside coughed a few times. “I’m really angry right now. Bring the child in. You can accompany Little Jiu to drink. I don’t need you tonight. The midwife is fine.”

“Yes!” Banjie Li wiped his tears, then turned to Xie Jiu and said, “Let’s go drink! Let’s go!”

Xie Jiu grabbed Banjie Li and resisted the urge to slap him, “The woman you love gives birth to your son and you’re going to drink when she tells you to?”

“If my sister-in-law wants me to die, I’ll die.”

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” The normally steady and prudent Xie Jiu blurted out such a dirty word. Fortunately, Banjie Li wasn’t in a normal state right now and didn’t hear it. Xie Jiu said, “She’s being sarcastic. At this time, women want you to be by their side to share the happiness. Don’t drink. Just stay here. Take the opportunity and go in there.”

“Yes, yes!” Banjie Li said. “Xie Jiu, you really are a good brother. You’re right to remind me!” Then he raised his voice and said, “I’m not going to drink. I’m staying here to take care of my wife and child.”

When there was no response from inside, Banjie Li turned and looked at Xie Jiu again.

Xie Jiu said, “She must be happy. It seems she’s agreed.”

Banjie Li started laughing and Xie Jiu said, “Then, I’ll drink with you when the child is one month old.<sup>76</sup> I’ll take my leave now. It’s not convenient for me to intrude any longer.”

“Ok, I won’t see you off. But take the dog away. It is your dog, right?” Banjie Li asked.

Xie Jiu looked at the black dog and thought, *with such a dog suddenly appearing out of nowhere, that guy must be around*. He nodded and said to the dog, “Go to your Master Wu. Go!”

When the dog ran away, he followed it all the way to a nearby yard. As soon as the dog went in, he quickly followed behind and suddenly saw Old Ba and Old Dog Wu squatting behind a bush.

“Why are you here? How dare you leave me alone with that violent cripple and hide here by yourselves.”

“The most capable ones do the most work, the most capable ones do the most work.” Qi Tiezui said. “We’d have been stabbed to death early on. You’re the best and most steadfast one here. Thank you for your hard work.”

“Don’t try to flatter me.”

“It’s not flattery.” Old Dog Wu said. “Old Ba was going to let me accompany him, but then he did a calculation and saw disaster that resulted in blood!

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<sup>76</sup> It’s a Chinese custom to invite friends to a feast when a baby turns one month old.

We calculated yours and saw a surprise, but there wouldn't be any danger or mishaps."

"Is it over?" Xie Jiu asked.

Qi Tiezui said, "Third Master has committed too many evils and married his sister-in-law. It's incest. This baby is facing many dangers, but the first hurdle has really passed. I've done some calculations before, Old Jiu. You run a tight ship and you have the wisdom to keep cool even under heavenly pressure. But you could only control the situation temporarily. Old Wu is impulsive and prone to causing disasters. That's why I wanted you to contain Banjie Li. If you couldn't do it, I would bet on Old Wu's unlucky aura and have him help you. Looks like my plans succeeded."

"Huh? That's not what you told me before." Old Dog Wu said. "Didn't you say that Old Jiu was too slow to react, so you wanted me to help out?"

"It was too risky for you to interfere in other people's lives, so I naturally didn't bother telling you." Qi Tiezui said. "If I did, you might not act, and things would change again."

"What risks?"

"Maybe your whole body would explode and you'd die or something." Qi Tiezui said.

"Shit, can't you mention that earlier next time?" Old Dog Wu smacked Qi Tiezui on the head and petted the black dog beside him.

"Well, it's not appropriate to stay here for long. Let's accumulate more merits for Master Three in the future. I also want to do it for the sake of our sister-in-law."

"Do you also recognize Third Master's wife as a sister-in-law?"

"Of course! We have to recognize sister-in-law so that she'll protect us. That way, Master Three won't put corpses in front of our houses every day!"

The three people looked at the mansion, wiped their sweat, and then looked at each other, “Come on, let’s find a place to go grave robbing and suppress the shock.” With that said, they mounted their horses and went to the outskirts of the city.

## The Mystic Nine (8) Er Yuehong's Problem

Before doing something, there are bound to be consequences. Staying behind closed doors doesn't always mean that things will be peaceful and quiet. Under persistent questioning, you might find it's not just your heart's demon that you're afraid of.

"Why are you here?" Er Yuehong asked as he stopped the scissors in his hand. The red bamboo in front of him had been trimmed to take shape, and all the buds that had grown in various directions had been cut off. In summer, they would put the bamboo into a pot to be placed in the front hall, where its color would complement the green baskets there.

"Master is still so focused on these elegant things." Chen Pi Ah Si stood on the front hall's threshold with his hands behind his back, but he didn't step in.

"Elegant things are still things. When you do them, time passes by quickly." Er Yuehong said. "You won't understand even if I say it." He sighed, put the scissors away, and then wiped the sweat from his hands with a handkerchief.

"This apprentice doesn't understand, and Master doesn't seem to want to teach anymore." Chen Pi Ah Si replied.

"I told you, you're no longer my apprentice. Stop calling me Master. I've heard a lot about what you're doing outside, and I don't want to have anything to do with you." Er Yuehong didn't look up at him but took a sip of tea instead. "Now go. You won't be living in poverty anymore. You won't gain anything from me if you stay here."

Chen Pi Ah Si smiled and said, "Everything this apprentice does outside was taught by Master. After only a few words, Master wants to separate himself from it? I'm afraid you know in your heart that it's impossible."

“I’m different from you.” Er Yuehong finally looked at him. The boy was much more glamorous than when he had followed him as an apprentice. He was wearing a satin jacket, and the worn-out cloth bag with iron pellets that used to adorn his waist had now been replaced with a mink one. “You’re bound to get results whatever you do. But no matter how many wicked things you do with what I’ve taught you, I’ll still just be spending my time here planting flowers and writing. Everything that goes on outside has nothing to do with me.”

“Yes, Master, you’ve always been the type of person who could live their life behind closed doors.” Chen Pi Ah Si said. “But you didn’t expect that people would still come to trouble you despite you closing the door and trying to ignore everything. Now that the situation is turbulent, do you really think you can stay quietly behind these four walls for the rest of your life?”

Er Yuehong sighed. He knew what Chen Pi Ah Si meant, but he—he just wanted to finish his life quietly with Ya Tou. But even if he used every means possible to stay on his own little plot of land, he knew that the wind and the waves outside were so big that they seemed to engulf everyone in the whole country.

He thought that he was strong enough to continue being infatuated, willful, and unruly. He could do anything and face the world without shame.

But he was wrong.

“You know all about it?” Er Yuehong asked.

“Everyone in this business knows about Master’s wife. Although this apprentice hasn’t been active in Changsha for a long time, there are still some eyes and ears here.”

“If you know, you know. What else can you do?”

“This time, I just want to ask Master a question. Once I get an answer, I’ll leave.” Chen Pi Ah Si’s eyes seemed to flash.

Er Yuehong sighed deeply. He hadn't wanted to pay attention to him originally, but maybe mentioning Ya Tou had made him soft-hearted. He paused and decided to listen to his apprentice, even though he had a premonition that he would regret it.

"Ask away."

"Did you agree to Fo Ye's request?" Chen Pi Ah Si asked.

Er Yuehong looked at him for a long time before he nodded his head.

"So, are you sure you can't do anything else for your wife?" Chen Pi Ah Si asked.

"What else can I do for her?" Er Yuehong countered. "If I can't do it, no one can."

Chen Pi Ah Si shook his head, "I think if people really want to, they can always find a way."

Er Yuehong closed his eyes and sat down on the rattan chair. He knew the meaning behind every one of Chen Pi Ah Si's words, but he didn't want to think about it, let alone remember it.

When he opened his eyes again, Chen Pi Ah Si was gone. There was a bamboo basket sitting on the front hall's threshold that held some fat crabs and a handful of incense.

Ya Tou loved eating crabs. It wasn't the season for them now, but these crabs were very fresh and looked very fat.

They must have been brought from further south.

Seven years ago, Chen Pi Ah Si had been kicked out of his master's house. At that time, Er Yuehong had said to him, "You will never set foot across this threshold again."

Today, the boy had brought crabs from far away and stood on the threshold without taking a step further.



## The Mystic Nine (9) Old Dog Wu

It's not known where the feeling started, but it runs very deep. Old Dog Wu and Huo Xiang's prior involvement.

"Not going to smoke?" Huo Xiang looked at Old Dog Wu and fiddled with a box of foreign cigarettes in her hand.

"No, I'm too busy." Old Dog Wu cut the Crucian carp in his hand with a kitchen knife, dug out the fishy black innards, threw them into a porcelain jar on the side, and then scraped the scales off. His movements were very skilled.

Huo Xiang lit a cigarette and took a gentle puff.

"A woman smoking a lot of cigarettes, aren't you afraid you won't get married?" Old Dog Wu laughed.

"Isn't there still you?" Huo Xiang asked lightly.

Old Dog Wu's hands paused and then continued slicing the scales off of the carp, "I don't like women who smoke, either."

Huo Xiang blew the cigarette smoke in his direction before putting it out in a nearby flowerpot and straightening her hair, "What, are you just going to ignore what happened?"

Old Dog Wu's knife stopped again. After a short pause, he said, "You have no sense of shame. You slept on the bed, and I slept on the threshold. I didn't touch a hair on you. What do you mean I'm ignoring what happened?"

"Who's to say if you touched me that night or not. I drank so much. You had plenty of opportunities to enter the palace."

"Can you stop acting like a brothel owner?" Old Dog Wu washed the fish, stuffed it into the ham, and then fried it in the pan. The aroma immediately

started to spread through the air. "Let me tell you, I've seen a lot of unruly girls, so I'm least afraid of girls like you."

Huo Xiangtu stood up and walked behind him to where a big German Shepherd was lying on the chopping board, salivating. She stroked the dog's cramped back and said, "Ok, then you can wait and see if you like girls like me."

Old Dog Wu poured water into the pot, closed the lid, and wiped his hands with an apron. He then looked back at her and said, "You should go. I'm going to give this dog an enema. It's disgusting, so you'd better avoid it."

"Isn't this fish soup for me?" Huo Xiangtu asked.

"This damned dog must have eaten at Xie Jiu's house again. Xie Jiu's cook recently returned to his hometown. Xie Jiu has a delicate palate, so he doesn't eat out. He cooks noodles by himself and eats very little. He must've given the rest to this dog. I have to make it spit it out; otherwise, it won't last for two days."

"Why did your dog go to Xie Jiu's house?"

"I lent him out to smell the soil. Xie Jiu seems to be writing a book. Something like 'Notes on Xie Study Room'." Old Dog Wu made an incomprehensible gesture. "He's a promising scholar, but I'm illiterate, so all I can do is help with the rough work."

Huo Xiangtu smelled the fragrant soup. "Who would have thought Xie Jiu's noodles are enough to kill a dog? Your craftsmanship is good, and rough work is still work. You don't have to belittle yourself."

"Generally, no matter how unpalatable the noodles are, dogs won't get sick like this. And dogs eat shit. That means Xie Jiu's cooking must be better than shit. But every time I send a dog to Xie Jiu's house, it always eats something and has problems. I think there must be something in his noodles." Old Dog Wu said. "I hope I haven't guessed right. Although it can relieve his headaches, it's very bad for people."

Huo Xiangtu thought about it and immediately understood, "He's such a wise man, so his head must always hurt. It's normal to take some medicine."

Huo Xiangtu finally left right before Old Dog Wu was going to give the dog an enema. He breathed a sigh of relief, picked up the cigarette she had put out in the flowerpot, lit it with a piece of charcoal from the fire, and took two puffs before saying, "It turns out she wasn't asleep that night. Fortunately, I only went over and stared at her for a long time. If I had really done something, I'd be doomed."

He wiped his cold sweat and patted the big black dog. It jumped off the chopping board as if it were perfectly fine.

Old Dog Wu hugged its neck and kissed it a few times, "Tang Seng, it's a good thing I prepared in advance and trained you to pretend to be dying. Otherwise, she'd still be here harassing me."

The dog licked him a few times and then looked at the steaming fish soup. Old Dog Wu shook his head, "No way."

Once he pushed the door open and saw that Huo Xiangtu had really left, he picked up the fish soup and put it in a big bowl. He then cut up some chopped green onions, covered it with a warm blanket, lifted the basket up, and walked to the teahouse. There, a bolder and more vigorous young girl was waiting for him.

After taking a few steps, the black dog found that he really wasn't getting any soup, so he had to go back and squat down in the corner of the yard. After crouching down for a few minutes, he suddenly heard a noise in the tree. When he looked up, he saw the girl who had just left sitting in the tree, staring blankly in the direction Old Dog Wu had gone with her face full of tears.

## The Mystic Nine (10) New Sesame Seeds

When Zhang Qishan went to Nanshan, the first obstacle he encountered was Birmingham. He sounded like an Englishman, but he was actually a native. He was called this because he used to be a porter for foreigners, and they gave him the nickname.

Birmingham was a local rich man with lots of guns and people. He had a good relationship with the locals and even the nearby officials. He was very high-spirited and never took the newly appointed defense officer seriously. Zhang Qishan invited him three or four times, but he never went.

Those up top wanted Zhang Qishan to treat him with courtesy so that they could train and incorporate the local armed forces of these wealthy businessmen into a unified defense of the city. The other party was well aware that Zhang Qishan couldn't use force, which made him even more unscrupulous.

Zhang Qishan had no other choice but to make a few inquiries and later found out that Birmingham had a hobby. He was extremely fond of buying collections of tiny carvings at great expense. He especially liked Guanyin<sup>77</sup> carved on small beads and magnolia carved on rice grains.

Micro-carving had a long history in China, the most famous of which was Wang Shuyuan's "The Peach Pit Boat".<sup>78</sup> Later, many craftsmen traveled thousands of miles to learn how to carve these square cun<sup>79</sup> pieces of art.

Birmingham himself was also a carver, so he was very fascinated by it. It was said that Birmingham had been a porter for a British missionary group at the time. He hoped to earn some income by following the preaching missionaries and carving crosses for them. After entering the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau, he discovered that a certain place was rich in a kind of yellow-pink opium plant, which produced top-grade opium. They were a

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<sup>77</sup> Guanyin is the Buddhist bodhisattva associated with compassion.

<sup>78</sup> It's a very intricate carving on a peach pit or nut. More info [here](#)

<sup>79</sup> Square cun is a Chinese unit of area: 1 cun × 1 cun, or 3⅓ cm × 3⅓ cm

very special species of opium, so he sold them secretly and soon became a local rich man. After that, his business expanded and he became a local leader.

The opium business was extremely dangerous, so Birmingham had to be extraordinarily talented to sustain it. Zhang Qishan knew that he was different from those ordinary wealthy businessmen. He had been living among the Yunnan-Guizhou warlords for a long time and was familiar with guns, so it was difficult to intimidate him. As a result, Zhang Qishan took a lot of money to Zheng Xiaoxi in Yangzhou to ask for a sesame seed to give to Birmingham.

This sesame seed was worth hundreds of times its weight in gold. Those in the Nine Gates called it a “boxwood sesame seed” because Zheng Xiaoxi had carved a vivid boxwood tree with thick branches and leaves on it.

After Birmingham saw it, he liked it very much. He heard that Zhang Qishan had a lot more, so he went to visit and was surprised to see that Zheng Xiaoxi was at Zhang Qishan’s house. He had just finished carving the last of the “Water Margin’s” 108 generals.<sup>80</sup>

Birmingham knew that Zheng Xiaoxi had searched for the best sesame seeds over the past fifteen years. He would oil them, dry them in the sun, roast them into carbonized seeds, and then pick one out of thousands to use as his materials. He had carved more than ten a year and had reached a total of 107 by the end of the decade. But it had been five years now and he had never carved that last one. It was said that he had never started on the last general because he was “dissatisfied”, but now someone had unexpectedly enabled him to finish carving it.

All 108 characters had been vividly carved on 108 sesame seeds. With a magnifying glass, it was easy to see that the eyes were clear and soulful, and

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<sup>80</sup> It’s 14<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese novel attributed to Shi Nai’an. Considered one of the Four Great Classical Novels of ancient Chinese literature. The story, set in the Northern Song’s ending, tells of how a group of 108 outlaws gather at Mount Liang (or Liangshan Marsh) to form a sizable army before they are eventually granted amnesty by the government and sent on campaigns to resist foreign invaders (Liao) and suppress rebel forces (Fang La). More info [here](#)

the swords were very powerful. It was truly a masterpiece. Moreover, all the figures on these sesame seeds had their names engraved on them.

After Zheng Xiaoxi had finished carving, he went to the Buddhist hall in Zhang Qishan's back garden, picked something out, and then left with it.

These 108 sesame seeds that had taken fifteen years to carve were definitely unique. With Zheng Xiaoxi's social status and artistic value at the time, the price couldn't be estimated. Birmingham knew that Zhang Qishan definitely wasn't doing this for the money, so he certainly couldn't use it to convince Zhang Qishan to step aside.

It was making him itch.

Unwilling to submit, he fidgeted and then decided to sound him out: "Sir, why are you suddenly interested in this refined and elegant kind of thing? And sesame seeds of all things? Is it still for the sake of setting up defensive measures? Those people are my people. I've been in the village for many years and have seen a lot of defense commanders come and go. Every time a new one comes, they always say they want to keep the peace, but who can actually do that? In the end, I'm the one that's left doing all the work. Set up whatever defensive measures you want. If you succeed, you're a hero. If you fail, I have my own way to handle things whenever the Japanese come. But these people have been the foundation of my life for many years. I won't hand them over, so don't bother."

Zhang Qishan smiled, lifted up the 108 sesame seeds, and poured them into a bowl half-filled with sesame seeds that had just been used as raw materials for Zheng Xiaoxi. It was too late for Birmingham to stop him. All 108 sesame seeds fell into the bowl and became indistinguishable in an instant.

Zhang Qishan pushed the sesame bowl to Birmingham, "Can you find these 108 sesame seeds that are more expensive than gold?"

Birmingham looked at the bowl of sesame seeds with a glint in his eyes and said coldly, "Sir, do you think I'm a child? If you give me this bowl of sesame

seeds, I can send someone to find all 108 sesame seeds in two hours. Valuable things are valuable things. Valuable people are valuable people. No matter how deep they hide, they'll still be different."

Zhang Qishan laughed. At this time, there was a sudden cry of "Black sesame paste!" from outside the door. Zhang Qishan picked up the sesame bowl, walked to the road outside, and saw someone selling black sesame paste. "I have some good sesame seeds here," He shouted at them. "Can you mash them and make a bowl of black sesame paste for me."

"Right away, Fo Ye. Would you like osmanthus sugar added?"

"Please."

The person nodded, took the bowl of black sesame seeds, and poured them into the mortar. Birmingham started to stop him, but the man had already hammered down three times and turned them into powder. Birmingham sat down on the ground in shock.

The sesame seeds, together with the 108 generals inside, had been mashed into a fine powder and mixed into a bowl of black sesame paste.

A fragrant smell filled the air, but the temperature was too hot so Zhang Qishan didn't go get it immediately. "After fifteen years of hard work, do you think it's a shame?" He asked quietly.

"He knows nothing!" Birmingham was shaking in anger and gnashing his teeth. "If he knew what had been inside, he wouldn't dare do it for eight lifetimes!"

"Really?" Zhang Qishan looked at him.

As the vendor brought the sesame paste over and fanned it to cool it slightly, the fragrance attracted the people in the house to look out.

“The sesame seeds just now were very valuable.” Zhang Qishan said to the vendor. “This bowl is enough to feed and clothe you for several generations.”

“Fo Ye, you’re joking. A bowl of sesame paste is a bowl of sesame paste.” The vendor laughed. “How could it be so valuable?”

Zhang Qishan laughed, took a bite, and walked into his house. As he passed by Birmingham, he said, “You and I both saw Zheng Xiaoxi carving a sesame seed inside this room, so we know their value. But the person outside doesn’t know that he’s been handed the most expensive sesame seeds. Even if you tell him that this bowl of sesame seeds is valuable, he’ll still make the sesame paste for you. The problem you and I are facing right now isn’t the people inside, but those outside. I’m not just telling you this. The key takeaway is that I used such an expensive method to show you the truth. I want you to understand how much I’m willing to spend to fight against this outsider. Even if you’re ignorant, you can’t stand in the way.”

Birmingham didn’t follow him, but shouted, “I’ve been here for more than forty years! To think I’ll be fooled by you! I’ll bring my men here tomorrow to see if they’ll serve you or me!”

“Tomorrow at 8:30,” Lieutenant shouted to Birmingham.

Zhang Qishan waved his hand, and the door was closed. He then sat down on the couch and began to eat the sesame paste seriously. Lieutenant came over and looked at Zhang Qishan: “Sir, why are you eating it like that?”

“This bowl is expensive. Miserably so.” Zhang Qishan said with a tsk.



# Fate

In the inner hall, Er Yuehong made three kinds of side dishes with crabs and put them on the table in front of Ya Tou's spirit tablet.

There were newspapers on the table behind him, all neatly folded. Only some of them were scattered over the other parts of the table.

Within a week, there had been four massacres in Changsha and a total of one hundred and twenty people had been decapitated. They had all worked in the four Chinese medicine shops that Fo Ye had bribed.<sup>81</sup>

It had been a rainy night when Er Yuehong took the dying Ya Tou out to the beach on the southern part of the river. He wanted to have one last bowl of noodle soup with her, but all of the vendors looked at them as if they were crazy and drove them away.

Half a year later, it was also a rainy night when all of those vendors were killed. None of them were spared. The blood rushed into the river and dyed the embankments red.

Er Yuehong knew who did it. But after everything that had happened, he didn't want to pursue it and was powerless to do so.

"You're not going to be happy about this." Er Yuehong looked at Ya Tou's spirit tablet. "He still hasn't changed a bit."

He paused and looked back at the courtyard door, as if he could see the figure on the other side of the threshold again.

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<sup>81</sup> As depicted in the Mystic Nine drama, Er Yuehong had no intention of going grave robbing anymore after he was with Ya Tou. Fo Ye had a case to investigate in order to save the country, and he needed Er Yuehong's help. Ya Tou was seriously ill at the time. As long as Ya Tou lived, Er Yuehong wouldn't explore any tombs. Fo Ye followed Xie Jiuye's advice and made the decision not to give Ya Tou any medicine. Based on this chapter, Fo Ye even went as far to bribe those who sold medicine and had them not to give Er Yuehong any medicine.

“But this crab is delicious. It looks like all those times you were good to him didn’t go to waste after all.”

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“What did you do this time?” Ya Tou couldn’t help smiling when she saw Chen Pi Ah Si kneeling outside the front hall’s threshold.

“I went to catch crabs,” Chen Pi Ah Si said. “Master asked me to practice martial arts, but I was bored. I saw a lot of bubbles in the river and knew that you loved eating crabs, so I couldn’t help catching some. I brought back a basket of them and Master found out about it.”

“Oh? Aren’t you thoughtful?” Ya Tou smiled.

“Yes. Since I brought you crabs, maybe you can put in a good word with Master for me so that I can spend one less hour kneeling on the ground.”

“I can’t do that. If I intercede for you every time, I won’t be able to persuade him when you really make a mistake.”

“Hmph. I knew Master was old-fashioned, but I didn’t expect you to be so stingy. I caught those big yellow crabs in vain. In the future, you can have Master buy you crabs if you want to eat them. I don’t want to impress you anymore.”

“Hey, this and that are two different things. If you don’t practice martial arts, you’ll be punished. But if you impress me with crabs, I’ll reward you.” Ya Tou pulled out a bowl of crab noodles from behind her back and handed it to Chen Pi Ah Si. “You can eat the noodles while kneeling. Your knees won’t hurt so bad after you finish eating.”

Chen Pi Ah Si laughed upon seeing the noodles. “Ma’am, do you only know how to make noodles? Why are you still making noodles when you have crab roe? It’s a little tragic.”

Ya Tou said, "Are you expecting to eat four dishes and a bowl of soup while kneeling on the ground? If you're so sick of eating noodles, then I won't make them for you anymore."

Chen Pi Ah Si immediately ate half the bowl in one bite. He swallowed the noodles with difficulty and said, "No. I can never get tired of eating the noodles you make. Even without the crab roe, the plain noodles you make are the most delicious thing I've ever eaten."

Ya Tou shook her head. "You should practice martial arts more instead of practicing those sweet words. That way, maybe you won't get punished as often as you do now."

Chen Pi Ah Si laughed as he ate his noodles. He had forgotten that he had taken these crabs after almost drowning the crab farmer. He also felt a little panicked and told himself that he would kill the woman in front of him without any hesitation if necessary.

But as he watched her enter the door, he knew deep down in his heart that he had finally found a person whom he cared about. He wanted her to stay alive and hoped that she would live happily.

In Chen Pi Ah Si's life, he once had the fateful chance of becoming someone like Black Back the Sixth or even Banjie Li. But he wasn't so lucky in the end. The woman whom he wanted to live died a few years later.

In the long years that followed, such a person never appeared in his life again.

## Ghost Car Extra

Long Haiou was the logistics receptionist at Changsha Railway Station and worked in the ticket office.

When the black 076 pulled into the station that night, she happened to be the one on duty. Not only should it have been impossible for a train to be pulling into the station at that time, but she hadn't received any prior notice.<sup>82</sup>

In that era, it was normal for military trains to arrive suddenly because of combat readiness, so she didn't think too much about it.

The only thing that made her suspicious was that soldiers would usually be there in advance to take over when the military train arrived. But at that time, no one was on the platform and the train arrived so suddenly. If it weren't for such a monstrosity making so much noise, she would have said that the train slid into the station without anyone noticing.

But she didn't care too much about it. It was the middle of the night, after all, so maybe she didn't see how it had arrived. Or maybe she did see it, but she was just a little forgetful.

She wrapped herself in a military coat and went to lay back down again. Soon, she fell asleep.

When she woke up again, she found that there were a lot of people outside of the duty room.

She got up and saw that the train that came in last night was still on the tracks. All of the railway station's employees surrounded the train and there was a commotion among them.

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<sup>82</sup> This chapter is about the same ghost car incident in the Mystic Nine, but with a different point of view.

She put on her coat and went out. She noticed two colleagues who had just come to work whispering outside the duty room. “What’s the matter?” She asked. “Why is everyone out here? Why hasn’t this train left yet?”

Military trains generally didn’t stop for too long and would definitely leave in the morning if they arrived at night. But the sky was very bright right now.

One of the colleagues said, “No one knows what happened. The train came into the station at eleven o’clock last night. Old Wang checked the tracks at five and found that nobody was on the train. There wasn’t even a serial number or sign on it. No one knows where it came from.”

“It’s a ghost car,” the other colleague said.

The railway staff here often told stories to scare the young girls who were new employees. They said that the trains with no one on them often arrived in the middle of the night. Once people started to investigate, they discovered that those trains had been bombed by the Japanese. Since there was no one on the trains, it was said that the ghost cars carried those who had been killed back to their hometowns before taking them to the netherworld.

But the ghost cars in the stories all left before dawn and were never found again. Why was this train still parked at the station now?

It was a bit cold in early spring, so Long Haiou wrapped her coat tighter around her body and walked closer to the train. She found that all of the train cars—including the front one—had been welded with iron sheets. The ugly welding gaps were thick and full of bubbles, indicating that the temperature of the welding process had been very high.

She looked at how the locomotive was painted and the font of that 076 and realized that this was a Japanese military train. These types of military trains were built in the northeast during the Japanese invasion of China. They once drove to the northwest, but were later seized by the Nationalist government. Now they fell under the Nationalist’s government’s jurisdiction and had been repainted. This train, however, still had the faded Japanese

military flag printed on both sides of the front of the car. There was a lot of rust all over the body of each car, almost as if the train had come out of a scrap iron station.

She looked at the station's big clock. It was now seven o'clock in the morning and this train had entered the station sometime after eleven last night. This train had been at the station for seven hours. Other trains would be coming in soon and accidents might occur if this train was still parked here.

She saw the station master holding a megaphone off to the side and repeatedly shouting in the direction of the locomotive, "The driver of 076, we've prepared a berth for the train up front. Please move away from the main tracks."

On the other side, she saw dozens of soldiers coming out from behind the station master. The man leading them was wearing an officer's uniform. She could recognize that he was the lieutenant of the sub-military district commander, Zhang Qishan. His surname was Wang.<sup>83</sup>

Several soldiers approached the locomotive and found that the door had also been welded shut. There were only two gaps that allowed the light to shine in. The inside of the train was completely dark and nothing was visible.

The station master shouted a few more times, but there was no response or movement from the locomotive. Lieutenant Wang waved his hand and the soldiers took out gas cutting torches. They climbed onto the locomotive and cars behind it and started cutting the iron sheets on the train.

The remaining people divided into teams, raised their guns, and squatted behind the soldiers who were busy cutting in order to cover them.

At least thirty minutes passed before a hole was cut out of the iron sheet of the first carriage. Lieutenant Wang shouted into the hole a few times. When

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<sup>83</sup> Lieutenant Wang was also mentioned in Chapter 4 of "The Mystic Nine" (page 25).

he saw that there was no movement, he waved his hand and let the soldiers rush in.

At this time, Long Haiou and the others had already moved far away from the train station. On the one hand, the soldiers didn't allow them to get close; on the other hand, they were also afraid of what might happen.

Long Haiou saw a soldier go into the train carriage to look around. After a few minutes, he poked his head out and motioned for the other soldiers to follow him in.

After several soldiers went into the carriage, Lieutenant Wang climbed in as well. When he came out of the train later, he walked straight to Long Haiou and her colleagues and said to them, "Lock down all of Changsha Station and tell everyone that no trains will pass by today. Have them take other routes. We're taking over this station. Where's the telephone? Take me to the telephone room."

As Long Haiou nodded, she noticed that Lieutenant Wang's face looked pale. She wondered what was on the train as she led him to the telephone room. So many questions kept popping into her head, but was stopped at the door. Lieutenant Wang went in and closed the door, so she didn't get to hear anything.

From that day on, Long Haiou never saw Lieutenant Wang again.

Changsha Railway Station was closed for twenty-five days following that eventful day. After those twenty-five days, they were able to enter their workplace again. The train was no longer there, but they could tell from the wear and tear on the platform that heavy machinery had been fixed there.

During those twenty-five days, not a single newspaper mentioned anything about this train and no one told her what the subsequent development was.

Everything that happened became a legend. Why did this ghost car stop in Changsha Station in the middle of the night? What kind of cargo was in the enclosed compartments of the train cars?

# Emergency

Er Yuehong walked around the big mansion. There weren't any decorations in this big mansion, so it looked particularly empty.

The last owner had been a fastidious man who loved his possessions, so he took everything with him. This was actually good for Er Yuehong because he wouldn't need to clean the other man's stuff up. Moreover, Er Yuehong also had a lot of possessions. He was a meticulous man who didn't like ordinary objects. In fact, he preferred his things to be exquisite and rare.

He walked back and forth a few times, looking at every detail clearly. He had stepped on every blue brick under his feet and confirmed that the ground was firm and flat.

It was a nice mansion. The backyard was full of green grass, and there were lots of flowers and plants. Despite the fact that it had been so long since anyone took care of it, the feng shui here was still considered very good.

Why hadn't anyone bought the mansion in the past three years? There was still a trace of worry in Er Yuehong's heart. Was it because society was in chaos, so this kind of real estate business was dying? Or were there any details that made the other potential buyers give up the house and he had somehow neglected them?

He felt like he was quite the cautious man, so if he didn't discover any problems, he didn't think anyone else could.

He hesitated for a moment, but decided to buy it after all. His original mansion could no longer handle so many affairs and it was time for a change.

As for the trace of worry he felt, he paused and decided to leave it behind.

He walked out of the house and nodded to the housekeeper who immediately started bargaining with the government official.



The owner of this house had left three years ago, so the place was eventually taken over by the government and was now being sold as public property.

The previous owner was able to move everything out of this house before leaving, but he wasn't patient enough to sell the house himself. There were probably many stories behind it, but things were different and the people were gone now. No matter how many stories there were, they had nothing to do with him.

He walked to the downtown area alone. At this time, he felt that it would be a pleasant thing to drink a bowl of tea while thinking about how many days it would take for him to move all of his stuff and make his new place look decent. Or, he could think about whether to open another opera stage at the dock. He had been too lazy and could hardly remember how long it had been since he went to the suburbs to make some money.

After he took a few steps, he heard someone calling out from behind him. He looked back and saw a uniformed soldier. Er Yuehong recognized this man. He was one of Fo Ye's guards.

"Er Ye, Fo Ye is looking for you. It's an emergency." The guard wiped the sweat from his head. He was only about sixteen years old. Zhang Qishan told him that soldiers who were going to be guards had to be trained from an early age. The world was too complicated and it was too difficult to read someone if you didn't know them for decades.

Why did Fo Ye bother reading people? Er Yuehong found it a little funny, but Zhang Qishan was the type of person who picked his words cautiously. If Zhang Qishan said it was an emergency, then Er Yuehong was afraid that it was something that couldn't be delayed.

The car was parked on the side of the road. Er Yuehong was still unaccustomed to the smell inside this kind of monstrosity and said, "Go ahead and turn it around first. I'll do anything as long as I can wait until the last second to get into this thing."

“Er Ye, we’re not going to headquarters. We’re going to the train station.”

“Hmm? Why?”

“I’m not sure. It’s under martial law right now. I’ve been looking for you for a while. Er Ye, please get in the car. The others should be there soon.”

“Others? Who else is going besides me?”

“They’re all there,” the guard said. “Eight cars were sent out.”

Er Yuehong frowned. Eight people.

Of course, he knew who those eight people were. But from what he could recall, there was nothing in this world that required those eight people to gather together for a discussion. Even if they did manage to discuss something together, it wasn’t like any progress would be made. Those eight people weren’t friends at all.

So, this definitely didn’t mean that Fo Ye had some joyful news to share with them. If Fo Ye and those eight people were together, this indicated that something extremely bad had happened. With that in mind, he immediately got in the car and said to the driver, “Hurry up.”

It only took five minutes for the car to get to the train station, and when it did, it drove directly onto the platform. Er Yuehong drew the window curtain aside and looked out, finally realizing what “heavily guarded” really meant. The entire train station was full of soldiers dressed in green uniforms. They were Zhang Qishan’s military police. The machine guns and roadblocks had nearly been placed all the way to the eastern side of Pozi Street.

“Is the chairman here? Does he want to hear me sing? Why are we meeting at the train station? Is he in a rush but wanted to hear me sing a song on the platform before he leaves?” Er Yuehong joked. He felt that it was the only possibility.

The driver and the guard remained silent. As they went along the platform, he saw a train on the tracks, but he didn't see those people whom the guard had mentioned.

After Er Yuehong got out of the car, the train carriage's door opened a crack. Zhang Qishan stretched his hand out from the inside and asked him to get on the train quickly. The air was filled with the smell of gas cutting and the inside of the car was so dark that Er Yuehong couldn't see clearly. The only thing he could make out was Zhang Qishan's figure.

Er Yuehong began to feel puzzled and asked, "Fo Ye, what's the emergency? Where are the others?"

"They're all on the train. It was hard to find you," Zhang Qishan said as the guards outside immediately closed the door. There were suddenly only a few rays of light coming in through the window, but in the next instant, the entire carriage was lit up. A light bulb had been installed inside the train, its power source seemingly coming from outside.

That was when he saw that all of the Mystic Nine members in Changsha were gathered in this carriage. No one had reacted to his arrival. Instead, everyone was looking at a huge object in the middle of the carriage.

Er Yuehong walked over and found that it was a crystal coffin that was a white translucent color.

He was an expert and knew at first glance that this was an ancient coffin from the Eastern Jin Dynasty. The coffin was almost as high as his chest, but it was indeed a coffin and not the coffin cover. As he approached it, he saw that everyone's attention was on the light shining from the coffin.

The lights in the carriage had been placed at the lower edge of the coffin so as to increase the light transmittance and reveal the shape of whatever was inside the coffin.

It appeared to be a burly shadowy figure, but the strange thing was that there was no order to this figure. In other words, they couldn't find which end of the figure was the head based on its shadow.

"Where did this thing come from?" Er Yuehong asked.

Zhang Qishan shook his head. "I don't know. This train transported this thing here last night."

"If that's the case, then where did this train come from?"

"I don't know, either." Zhang Qishan continued to shake his head and gave a wry smile.

## Conversation

It was raining heavily. Zhang Qishan had never seen such heavy rain in Changsha before. The raindrops made a lot of noise as they hit the roof tiles. If it hadn't been going on for a while now, Zhang Qishan would've thought that it was the sound of gunfire.

A young man was sitting at the desk in the room, reading all of the letters there one by one. He wasn't sure if the lamp kept going on and off because of the rainstorm, but it made him very uncomfortable. He would stop reading the letters every once in a while, but no one could tell what he was feeling at the moment.

Zhang Qishan didn't speak, but simply looked at the heavy rain outside of the window that covered all of Changsha like a veil.

After a long time, the young man put down the last letter. But instead of sighing like ordinary people would do, he took a sip of his cold tea and pinched his brows.

Upon hearing his movements, Zhang Qishan turned around and asked, "Are you finished reading them?"

The young man nodded, poured the tea dregs into an exquisite porcelain bottle sitting off to the side, and said, "I finished reading the letters and sorted them out for you."

Zhang Qishan took a look at the letters. Sure enough, the thick stack had now been separated into two piles. Zhang Qishan had originally piled them up in a sloppy manner, but now they had been meticulously sorted out thanks to this young man.

He knew that the young man hadn't sorted them out after reading them, but had done it while he was reading through them. He had folded them up so neatly that almost every letter looked the same. It was because this person was used to meticulous and rigorous living standards.

“I’m sorry,” Zhang Qishan said. “You shouldn’t have gotten involved in the first place, but I still wanted to ask for your opinion. I think if it’s you, you might know how to deal with this.”

Xie Jiu<sup>84</sup> looked at the letters on the desk and said, “Fo Ye, no offense, but I think you should have the others come over here and discuss this matter together.”

Zhang Qishan shook his head. “I already feel bad enough about letting you know about it.”

Xie Jiu remained silent for a moment and then nodded, obviously agreeing with Zhang Qishan’s logic. He paused and said, “Even so, they won’t understand that they all owe you.”

Zhang Qishan waved his hand—it was obvious that he didn’t want to think about this problem anymore—and said, “You’ve read the letters. Tell me what you think.”

Xie Jiu stood up and came to stand next to Zhang Qishan. “Let’s talk about the basics first. The question of whether to do it or not... I believe that Fo Ye must already know the answer.” He looked at his pocket watch. “If you won’t do it, someone else will. It’s not a matter of whether you’re willing to do it or not.”

Zhang Qishan didn’t speak, so Xie Jiu continued, “To be honest, Fo Ye, you’re not important. This is basically like a hot pot. The fish in this pot is bound to be cooked. Someone wants you to cook it because you’re a good employee. If you don’t want to cook it, they can just make someone else do it.”

“I’m not important? Isn’t this incident targeting the place where I come from?”

Xie Jiu smiled, “Fo Ye, you overestimate yourself.”

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<sup>84</sup> This is Xie Jiuye. “Jiu” means “nine”. “Ye” means “master” in Chinese. The author just called him “Xie Jiu” here since he never really gave him a real name.

Zhang Qishan smiled as well, but it was so bitter that Xie Jiu froze for a moment. He never thought that Zhang Da Fo Ye would express such emotions for others to see in his entire life.

Zhang Qishan smiled and turned his head to look out the window, “You’re so smart. You really can’t figure out a way?”

“Strategies are something you use when dealing with opponents that have considerable strength. Kongming<sup>85</sup> was good at using strategies, but he wouldn’t use them on his own people.”

Zhang Qishan closed his eyes and paused before saying, “Then, I’ll ask you this: What should I do?”

Xie Jiu didn’t speak, but looked at his pocket watch and remained silent for a while.

Zhang Qishan didn’t push him to answer and merely waited. Finally, Xie Jiu said, “If the son of the executioner commits a capital offense and is about to be executed, would the executioner let others execute his son or do it himself?”

Zhang Qishan smiled at him. Xie Jiu looked at him and realized that he had to say a few more words in order to end this conversation.

Even he hesitated a few minutes before he could say them. “Fo Ye, people like us deserve this kind of retribution.” Xie Jiu took his coat off the coat rack in the corner by the window and slowly put it on. “Do we still think we’re innocent?”

Zhang Qishan remained silent. Xie Jiu looked at his pocket watch one last time before turning and moving to leave Zhang Qishan’s office. When he passed by the desk, he grabbed Zhang Qishan’s gun that was lying there and put it on one of the letter piles.

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<sup>85</sup> Zhuge Liang, courtesy name Kongming, served as the chancellor and regent of the state of Shu Han during the Three Kingdoms period. He is recognized as the most accomplished strategist of his era. Wiki link [here](#).

It was a very thick stack of letters that was much thicker than the one next to it.

In Changsha, everyone had killed a few people. No one wanted to die in vain, but everyone knew that it was disrespectful to this business if they cared about their lives too much.

In this business, taking the lives of others was like pulling up weeds. They all knew that their lives weren't valuable at all.

It was raining heavily outside. Xie Jiu looked at the umbrella stand by the door, but didn't take his umbrella. Instead, he walked straight into the rain.



## In The Rain

Xie Jiu walked in the rain, letting the heavy raindrops fall onto him. His coat was drenched and getting heavier, but he didn't seem to notice it.

Many years had passed, and he had always lived carefully and cautiously. Not only would he count every step he took, but he would even count which direction the dust raised up by his feet would go in. But now, he just wanted the rain to wash his warm temples.

He remembered the divination that Old Ba had calculated for Zhang Da Fo Ye and thought of how easily he had just left Zhang Qishan—a man who seemed to be as powerful as a mountain—in the house behind him to face the looming fate alone.

He was trembling as he walked, not knowing whether it was because he was so afraid of the future or because of the cold.

But he told himself that he had to stay calm. He looked at the familiar stone roads and people seeking shelter from the rain under the eaves and told himself that he had to calm down.

On that day, he walked around Changsha for ten hours. He walked until the rain got lighter and then heavier again. He walked until it was dark and then became bright again.

He passed by all those familiar and unfamiliar doorways, guessing what was going on inside. There were various sounds coming from within. Maybe it was the rain making him hear things, or maybe he had actually heard the noises. Either way, Xie Jiu understood that the people inside had no idea about the upcoming storm and subsequent ending. This ending was far different from what they might have imagined on any given day.

Finally, he stopped in front of Black Back the Sixth.

Master Six sat at the base of the wall under the eaves. Behind him was the inn, where the sound of people playing mahjong in the hall could be heard. Although Aunt Bai wasn't a particularly clever woman, she knew better than Black Back the Sixth how to spend money. The clothes Black Back the Sixth wore were clean, and his hair and beard had been trimmed. Although he didn't look very well-organized, he at least looked like a normal person.

It was just that he was still sitting at the base of the wall, listening to his woman playing a few rounds of mahjong in the inn. Maybe his initial enjoyment had left him too impressed. Or maybe his life was too simple to the point that there was no need to change at all.

How long had it been? Was it a few years ago when Master Six carried this woman on his back and returned to Changsha City?<sup>86</sup>

Xie Jiu couldn't recall clearly, but he remembered the series of bloody footprints Master Six had left when he entered the city. Those footprints stretched so far that he couldn't see the end of them. The thin shoes made the man's feet freeze and crack, which resulted in countless wounds that left these bloody traces in the snow.

From then on, no one called him Lunatic Six. Even those who didn't know his origin only dared call him Master Six when they talked about him. Some men would still occasionally ridicule him, but there were always women who would poke them in the head with their fingers and scold, "What Lunatic Six? Could you do what Lunatic Six has done?"

Aunt Bai had a good life later because everyone knew what would happen if they took what was Master Six's. There were no other legends in Changsha City during those few years, so Black Back the Sixth's incident was the only one passed down for a long time.

*However, it's all about to end.*

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<sup>86</sup> This is about the story of Black Back the Six rescuing Aunt Bai (page 364).

Xie Jiu sighed.

He knew in his heart that Fo Ye letting him know about this matter wasn't because he wanted his advice.

What kind of man was Fo Ye? There was no way that Fo Ye couldn't understand such a simple truth.

Instead, Fo Ye wanted him to do something, and he was the only one who could do it.

*I have to calm down.*

Xie Jiu continued moving forward. He no longer walked slowly, but began to walk quickly toward his alley. His head had cooled off because of the rain, but it wasn't enough.

He wanted unprecedented calmness.

## Opponents

The puncture wound was somewhat red and swollen. *Did I disinfect it improperly?* Xie Jiu looked at his arm and sighed.

If the foreign doctor came, he definitely wouldn't allow him to do this kind of thing by himself. But he really had to admit that no matter how cautious he was, he still couldn't do it perfectly since this wasn't a field he was familiar with.

Xie Jiu was sitting in his study. Although he called it a study, there actually wasn't anything in the room besides a fragrant rosewood desk and empty bookshelves. A white tray and syringe were the only things on the desk.

Xie Jiu had been used to doing things without books since he was nine years old. He could memorize all of the things that needed to be remembered and didn't trust any sort of medium, so he never wrote down anything in case other people discovered it.

He closed his eyes, his mind full of all the roads, gates, bridges, and alleys in Changsha City.

The first was terrain.

*I have to know what the stage looks like since I'm going to be directing this big show,* he thought to himself.

The tranquilizer made him extremely focused as the landscape of Changsha City began to expand in his mind. The details didn't flash through his mind one by one, but appeared in his mind almost at the same time. It was as if he was walking through more than a dozen places in Changsha City at the same time.

This was something he normally couldn't do. It was the effect of the drugs, so it wouldn't last too long.

Then, the protagonist of the first scene appeared: Black Back the Sixth.

This name was on the top of the stack of envelopes.

In other words, within three days, Fo Ye would start with him.

When Xie Jiu was reading the letters earlier, he rearranged them and put Black Back the Sixth on top. He did this after thinking about Fo Ye's situation. Black Back the Sixth's death would be the least noticeable, but most significant. If he escaped, he wouldn't report this matter to others. The most important thing was that Black Back the Sixth was always alienated from them, so it would be a little easier for Fo Ye to start with him.

But in doing so, he ended up facing a difficult problem he had created.

He couldn't allow Black Back the Sixth to leave Changsha, because he couldn't estimate what subsequent changes may occur if Fo Ye didn't succeed. But he also had to let Black Back the Sixth survive.

He couldn't do it. Xie Jiu knew very well that he couldn't appear in this script himself. The opponents he faced were far different from those prominent figures in the underworld.

He needed one of Fo Ye's opponents; someone who didn't want Fo Ye to succeed.

*Does someone like that exist?*

*No.* Xie Jiu frowned. A trace of anxiety broke through the drug and surged up, but he quickly suppressed it.

*Three days.*

*I'll give this person a day and a half. No, two days. Then I'll still have one day to create an opponent for Fo Ye.*

Time was the biggest enemy this time.

Xie Jiu looked at the desk and thought about which candidate he could choose. His head became drenched in a cold sweat. He couldn't figure out

who the person should be. Even if some people were suitable, he wasn't sure if it would work.

He couldn't do things that he was uncertain about.

Uncontrollable anxiety flooded his heart. He understood that he was thinking about an impossible thing. It wasn't only due to the uncertainty of the matter, but also because he didn't stay exclusively by Fo Ye's side. He was plotting against people whom he didn't understand at all.

His mind was full of images and he found that he couldn't calm down at all. His heartbeat wasn't fast, but it seemed as if a giant hand was pressing down on his chest, making him unable to breathe.

He patted his face, opened the drawer, and took out another syringe from inside. He then took a deep breath, sterilized the needle in alcohol, and inserted it into his vein again.

He gradually calmed down again. He wanted to put the syringe down on the desk, but found that it was no longer in his hand. He didn't know when it had fallen to the ground.

He lowered his head to pick it up, but his vision suddenly went dark and he fell down.

# Zhang Da Fo Ye

On the edge of the Songhua River, thousands of miles of ice covered the ground. The cold air emanating from the icy river rushed to the embankment, seeming to freeze everything in its path.

There was also a thin layer of ice on the embankment. Maybe it was the condensation of the water that had rushed up, or maybe it was the remnants of the previous snow that had been shoveled away.

Zhang Qishan was dressed immaculately from head to toe. He wore a black coat, but still felt as if his body temperature was being drawn into the river relentlessly.

*I haven't returned to this land for a long time. I can't believe I'm a little unaccustomed to the weather here.*

"Maybe we should go back?" Old Dog Wu said from behind him. He felt that he was going to freeze to death like a stray dog. *People like me shouldn't come to places like the northeast.*

"I'm leaving tomorrow. I've been here for half a month and haven't gotten a chance to walk around. If I don't do it today, I don't know when I'll be back here," Zhang Qishan said. "If you can't stand it, you can go back yourself."

"Well, that's not possible. You haven't brought anyone else with you. If I go back alone, your subordinates will kill me," Old Dog Wu said as he trotted along. "It's alright. I'll tag along. We're leaving tomorrow anyway. It's not like I'm really going to freeze to death."

Zhang Qishan ignored him and suddenly saw a small black spot on the surface of the river. He knocked his cane on the ground and figured that it could probably be used as an alpenstock<sup>87</sup>, so he walked toward the river.

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<sup>87</sup> A long wooden pole with an iron spike tip, used by shepherds for travel on snowfields and glaciers in the Alps since the Middle Ages. It's the antecedent of the modern ice axe. More info [here](#).

“Hey, hey, hey, hey. Fo Ye, where are you going?” Old Dog Wu ran after him.

“Someone is ice fishing in the distance,” Zhang Qishan replied. “Let’s go and see how he’s doing.”

Old Dog Wu looked up and saw that the black spot was far downstream from them. He instantly became speechless, feeling as if the cold went down his throat and almost froze his intestines.

*No wonder he’s Fo Ye. His temperament is so unpredictable,* he thought to himself. Zhang Qishan was different from Er Ye, who was romantic and could talk about everything and nothing. But Zhang Da Fo Ye always seemed to treat them like children, so it was difficult to communicate with him. Among the Mystic Nine, Er Ye was the only one who could hold a conversation with him. It was difficult for others to know what he was thinking.

As Old Dog Wu tripped and slipped on the ice the whole way, he felt fortunate that he had started his business in the south. If he had come to the north with his skills, he would’ve been killed a long time ago. He would’ve even had to learn how to walk in the north.

When they made it to the place where the person was ice fishing, Old Dog Wu already felt that he would definitely die on Songhua River. At this time, he found that an old man had made six or seven holes in the ice and was fishing. He wanted to go up and ask how many fish he had caught, but Zhang Da Fo Ye stopped him.

They stood a dozen meters behind the old man and watched him for ten minutes before Zhang Qishan turned and said to Old Dog Wu, “Let’s head back.”

“How are we going to know how many fish he’s caught if we don’t ask him?” Old Dog Wu asked.

“Who said it’s necessary to know how many fish he’s caught?” Zhang Qishan smiled and patted Old Dog Wu on the back.



Old Dog Wu was puzzled, but also delighted that they could go back, so he immediately followed Zhang Qishan.

“Old Wu, what are you doing in the northeast this time?” Zhang Qishan took a few steps and seemed to suddenly remember something. He asked Old Dog Wu as he walked, “I remember you’ve also stopped what you were doing, right?”

“I’m not doing anything in the northeast. I just can’t stay in Changsha anymore,” Old Dog Wu said.

Zhang Qishan paused. He knew what had happened to Old Dog Wu. “Then why are you in the northeast?”

“Because *you* are in the northeast. I have to ask you something,” Old Dog Wu said. “Once I know the answer, I’ll go to Hangzhou. I might never come back to Changsha again. But if I don’t know the answer, I won’t feel at ease when I go to Hangzhou. What if I somehow trouble others even though I’m off the hook now? I can’t fail those people. You know that.”

Zhang Qishan sighed and started slowly walking back. “Since you want to ask me something, why didn’t you ask your questions a few days ago? Why now?”

“Some questions are difficult to ask,” Old Dog Wu said. He had been hesitant to ask before, but since Zhang Da Fo Ye had suddenly mentioned it, he thought it was better to just go ahead and ask.

On the one hand, he came to the northeast because it was winter, which made it easier for him to hide. On the other hand, he really needed an answer.

Zhang Qishan stopped and stood in the center of the Songhua River. He looked around before saying, “Then ask me now. It’s only the two of us here.”

“Why?” Old Dog Wu asked. “Why didn’t you let them go? If only you had done something, Changsha wouldn’t have been that miserable. You’re not a ruthless person. Many of those people were your underlings, yet you just watched them die? They’re really dead. Can’t you see that? They are absolutely dead this time.”

Qiu Dekao left Changsha and disclosed the names of all the tomb robbers. Zhang Qishan knew all the inside information and personally supervised the matter without showing favoritism to anyone. The tomb robbers in Changsha City were all dead, and many of them were Zhang Da Fo Ye’s own underlings.<sup>88</sup>

What agonized Old Dog Wu the most was that when Zhang Qishan’s people showed up to capture the underlings, no one resisted when they saw who it was. Everyone thought that Zhang Qishan would help them survive, so no one wanted to embarrass him.

However, they were all dead now. As they were being shot at the execution ground, many people still couldn’t believe that Zhang Qishan was behind it.

Zhang Qishan didn’t speak, but thought for a long time before eventually asking Old Dog Wu, “Do you hate me?”

“It’s not about hate,” Old Dog Wu said. “I don’t know what you’re trying to accomplish. I only know that the underlings saw you as a god. It was really easy for you to save them, but you did nothing. Er Ye’s wife, Black Back the Sixth, and your underlings all lost their lives. What exactly are you after?”

Zhang Qishan silently looked at his boots that were about to freeze on the ice and said, “Go to Hangzhou. Forget about these things.” Then he turned and walked towards the shore.

---

<sup>88</sup> Relevant information can be found in Sand Sea, Chapter 206.

Old Dog Wu didn't follow him, but after Zhang Qishan took more than a dozen steps, he shouted at him, "Why did you do that?! You can just give me a perfunctory reason. Any excuse will do!"

Zhang Qishan waved his hand, feeling very calm deep down. Did he feel any guilt? His heart could probably no longer store something like that.

No one knew that on the night he gave the arrest order, he held a pistol to his temple. He really wanted to be like the opera singer who could easily say something like, "I'd rather fail the world than fail the beauty." He also wanted to be like the beggar who could sleep peacefully as long as he held a knife in his arms.

Unfortunately, he couldn't.

*Yes. I do have a reason. But even if I tell you about it, nothing will change.*

When Zhang Da Fo Ye walked onto the embankment, he looked back towards the center of the river.

Old Dog Wu was always the happiest and most willing to let things go. He was someone who really didn't want to hate others.

*He probably came to the northeast to find a reason not to hate me.*

"Someone must take the role of being hated," Zhang Da Fo Ye muttered to himself as he closed his eyes.

"We'll never see each other again."

## The Mystic Nine Memories

“Er Ye, we can’t do this without you. It’s for the good of the country.” A scholar with red-rimmed eyes grabbed Er Yuehong’s arm.

Er Yuehong looked at Ya Tou who was embroidering in the inner hall. “Do you see this woman?”

“Your wife—”

“In this world, she is the only person I want to protect. I can even sacrifice my life for her. Without her, the country and the people of our nation mean nothing to me.”

\*\*

“Master, what do you think of this satin?”

“You can buy whatever you like.”

“I just want you to give me your opinion. There’s a war going on. Things are different from how they used to be. We can’t be willful.”

“Fair enough.” Er Yuehong put aside the letter in his hand and raised it over the candle to burn it.

“Why did you do that?” His wife was somewhat surprised.

“It’s not very good news. If I burn it, I’ll forget about it.” Er Yuehong suddenly smiled and said, “Oh, this satin is really well made.”

\*\*

“Er Ye, how am I inferior to her? Could she go grave robbing? Was she as beautiful as me? Was she as good in bed as I am? I’m with you wholeheartedly, so why can’t you just look me in the eye for a moment?”

The Huo family's little aunt<sup>89</sup> tore off her cheongsam in front of Er Yuehong, exposing her body that was as white as ice jade.

Er Yuehong calmly put down his wineglass, took off his clothes, and put them on her. "Can you cook noodles? I'd like a bowl of plain noodles."

\*\*

"If we keep putting this matter off, I'm afraid things will be brought to their homeland." Zhang Qishan pushed the candle holder away. "Er Ye is the only one who has the skills to enter this place. This fete<sup>90</sup> we're holding is our last chance."

Er Yuehong stood in the corner, listening to Zhang Qishan talking about his arrangements.

A young man on the side handed Er Yuehong a cigarette. "Er Ye, I'm sorry about your wife."

"Xie Jiu, do you think it's worth it?" Er Yuehong asked.

\*\*

"I, Zhang Qishan, and my whole family are here. As long as you agree to help me, you can kill all of us after it's over. Descendants of the Zhang family, kneel!" Zhang Qishan parted the hem of his changshan and both knees hit the ground.

Nearly a hundred people in the Zhang family all knelt down in front of Er Yuehong with unwavering eyes.

Er Yuehong looked at them, raised his head, and shouted, "Zhang Qishan, you're insane. You're really insane!"

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<sup>89</sup> From what we have learned from the Mystic Nine drama, this was Granny Huo's aunt. She was the head of the Huo family before Granny Huo.

<sup>90</sup> A fete is an elaborate festival, party, or celebration.

\*\*

“Fo Ye, you could’ve saved her. Why didn’t you do anything?!” Er Yuehong carried Ya Tou on his back and knelt in front of Zhang Qishan’s mansion.

He had been kneeling there for three days with his wife close to him, but her body was already cold all over.

“If this woman didn’t die, tens of thousands of people would suffer. I can protect all these people in our country at the expense of one person’s life. Even if this means that I’ll have to die thousands of times to compensate for this, I’ll still do it!” Zhang Qishan said calmly in front of Er Yuehong.

\*\*

“Fo Ye, I’ll take you to Japan. The Emperor won’t forget the contributions you’ve made for us in China—” Before the Japanese colonel could finish his sentence, Banjie Li’s bayonet had already pierced his chest.

“You!”

“Don’t make a sound. Let me enjoy this moment.” The bayonet twisted inside the Japanese man’s chest. Banjie Li pressed his hand over the man’s mouth tightly. “Die slowly. You’re a good boy.”

“Old Li, let’s get back to our business.” Zhang Qishan swiftly slashed the colonel’s throat with a knife.

\*\*

“Once it’s done, we’ll send the things to Chongqing. You must escort Er Ye out of the city now,” Xie Jiu whispered to a beggar on the side of the road. “Master Six, I’ll give you ten people. Ten silver coins for each person. Don’t spare any Japanese at the east gate.”

Black Back the Sixth raised his hand. The tip of his knife had already picked up the silver coins in Xie Jiu's hands. "I'll keep the silver coins. I don't want those ten people."

"Master Six!" Old Six pushed Xie Jiu away and stood up, humming and staggering towards the east gate.

\*\*

At the Founding Ceremony of the Nation<sup>91</sup>, Er Yuehong and Zhang Qishan stood by the entrance of the building.

As a plane flew overhead, there was a burst of cheers in the square.

Er Yuehong looked at the plane and asked, "Do you need me to accompany you upstairs?"

Zhang Qishan shook his head and lit a cigarette. "It's not easy to get up there. I can go up by myself."

Er Yuehong looked at the square and asked, "Is it worth it?"

Zhang Qishan didn't answer, but patted Er Yuehong and walked toward the building.

\*\*

"We need to dig here. Make the space sixty-six square meters wide and half a meter tall." Xie Yuchen instructed the craftsmen.

"This is weird. This isn't traditional."

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<sup>91</sup> The founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) was formally proclaimed by Mao Zedong, the Chairman of the Communist Party of China, on October 1, 1949. It was held at Tiananmen (Wiki link [here](#)). Before this, Zhang Qishan was a military officer during Republican Era (1912–1949). In the DMBJ universe, Zhang Qishan was still held in high esteem after the sovereignty changed.

“Grandpa Two insisted on it. Cut the crap. Do you still want to get paid?”  
Xiao Hua scolded.

No one refuted him.

Xiao Hua looked at the coffin on the other side. It had been waiting here for half a century. He smiled, “Take it easy. He’s coming soon.”

\*\*

“Er Ye, look at me. Is my posture correct?”

“Yes. Now walk in a large circle.”

“No, I’m not doing it. Grandpa Two hasn’t given me a name.<sup>92</sup> You promised my daddy that you’d do it.”

“Kid, you seem to always remember everything people say. Alright, I’ll come up with a name for you. Your dad is called Xie Lianhuan, and you’re called Xie Yuchen. How about Xie Yuhua?”

“What does it mean?”

“The flower that speaks is beautiful and delicate.”<sup>93</sup>

“I don’t understand. I don’t want it. Can you give me another name?”

\*\*

“Dead. Everyone is dead.” In the Golmud sanatorium, Zhang Qishan looked at the letters on the desk and closed his eyes.

“Is it worth it?” Er Yuehong’s words echoed in his ears.

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<sup>92</sup> He means a stage name.

<sup>93</sup> The sentence is from a poem from the Song dynasty. The Chinese text is :解语花娇枝朵朵. The Chinese characters of Xie Yuhua are 解语花.



Zhang Qishan waved his hand and looked at the black and white photo of his wife on the wall. The radio broadcast outside was playing a sad song.

“General, what about these documents? Do we still need them?”

“Burn them.” Zhang Qishan took the picture frame off the wall, held it in his arms, sat down, and closed his eyes.

## Huo Lin – Blue And White Porcelain

In the Huo family's warehouse, there was a batch of blue and white porcelain that were all in good condition. Among them were thirteen large sets collected during China's Republican Era.

The handed-down items looked warm and delicate rather than cold and eerie like some of the other objects, so Xiangü adored them very much.

Huo Ling had been in and out of these warehouses since she was a child. The first thing that women from the Huo family learned was how to display objects and decorate places. The more precious the objects were, the more gentle and calm they had to be when holding them. They should never give people the feeling that they were showing off their wealth.

Many precious objects in the Republican Era were stored in the Huo family's inner courtyard. When those objects went in, they smelled like dirt and rust; when they went out, the Huo family had revitalized their appearances and made them look polished.

There was one specific blue and white porcelain vase that Huo Ling liked the best. This had something to do with her personality. Huo Ling was a girl who was quite unpredictable and rebellious. Her family doted on her and never really prohibited her from doing anything, so she had to get whatever she wanted.

This special blue and white porcelain vase was about the size of a modern medium-sized thermos. Compared to other blue and white porcelain, it was neither big nor small. The special feature on this vase was that the porcelain was basically completely white without any patterns on it. There was only a tiny blue flower pattern of a bean sprout towards the bottom of the vase. The blue color was so dark that it almost looked black, and it made the bean sprout look like a stain.

Because of her family and her appearance, she could eventually achieve her goals even if there were obstacles. That was why she had such an unruly personality.

Blue and white porcelain had a fixed form, and the origin of most patterns on them could be explained. There were many priceless ones out there, but Huo Ling didn't like them at all.

For her, if others said that something wasn't good, then she had to disagree with them. She had to do it to prove that she was different from them. After a lot of arguing, she moved the vase away from the warehouse and put it in her room.

Most of the time, this kind of porcelain couldn't even be called porcelain. No one knew why it had been put in the warehouse, but they mostly ignored it because it was too ugly. No one would take it out when they wanted to appreciate the objects, either. It looked even uglier when Huo Ling put it in her room. The more she looked at it in her room, the more she felt that it didn't feel right. But for the sake of saving face, she had to keep insisting that it looked beautiful.

Er Yuehong was the only one whom Huo Ling didn't dare act arrogantly in front of. At that time, Er Yuehong wasn't a young man anymore, but he was surely different from impudent men. He would occasionally get on stage to sing opera, so he looked much younger than he actually was.

Er Yuehong was very quiet and very thoughtful about everything he did, and he was someone who didn't act recklessly.

The women from the Huo family had seen too many people, so in their eyes, most men had many flaws. However, Er Yuehong was different. Among those in the previous legendary generation, Er Yuehong was probably the only one whom Huo Ling admired.

During the Spring Festival of that year, Er Yuehong held a small banquet. Huo Ling went there with a gift on behalf of the Huo family.

Her mother had prepared a carved jade statue of a blue bird standing on a branch. The color of the jade branch was brown, while the bird was very colorful. Although it hadn't been carved with emerald, this kind of craftsmanship was already very precious. Huo Ling liked it very much and felt that such a gift was too valuable.

It was a custom for this generation of the Mystic Nine to attend the small banquet during the Spring Festival. It was a chance for them to visit each other, build connections, exchange gifts, and communicate with others. Many people in the Mystic Nine lived in a simple way and seldom went out, so this was the only time that they could really spend some time talking to each other.

This was also the time when those up-and-comers could introduce themselves to the prestigious figures. There were various gifts exchanged, but they weren't too expensive. Many gifts would also be directly put into the warehouses without being opened.

After thinking about it, Huo Ling kept the carved jade blue bird for herself and gave the strange blue and white porcelain vase in her room—which she ended up hating—to Er Yuehong as a gift.

She thought that no one would find out about it, but to her surprise, the porcelain vase was sent back the very next day. Er Yuehong had even written a note: I feel guilty for accepting such a precious gift. I hope you can keep it properly.

Huo Ling was very clever, so after learning about this, she immediately made sure that the servants wouldn't talk about it. She knew that Er Yuehong wasn't the type to gossip, so as long as the servants kept their mouths shut, her parents wouldn't know about it.

Since she was a little tyrant at home, the servants wouldn't gossip about it, either. But she was very curious as to why this blue and white porcelain was so precious that Er Yuehong didn't dare accept it.

She took the vase and went to find Er Yuehong. At that time, he was repairing a piano in his home. It wasn't easy to get into Er Yuehong's inner courtyard, so Huo Ling thought she might have to wreak some havoc. But she didn't expect Er Yuehong's underling to lead her directly to him.

Er Yuehong pressed hard on the piano board and slowly wound the strings. "Speak," he said without raising his head.

"This vase..."

"I'm not taking it," he said calmly. "There's something I don't understand. Why would you give me such a precious gift?"

"Is this vase really that precious?" Huo Ling suddenly became timid after seeing Er Yuehong. "It's not very expensive. I have a lot of them in my house."

Er Yuehong eased his strength and looked at Huo Ling. "You have a lot of them in your house?"

"Yes. Many of them are complete sets," Huo Ling said softly. "Er Ye, you don't look like someone who is unsophisticated."

Er Yuehong was a little confused, but quickly got over it. He obviously wasn't that interested in why Huo Ling had come to talk to him about this matter or why the Huo family would give him such an expensive gift.

He washed his hands in a copper basin on one side, wiped them dry, and then handed the cricket jar<sup>94</sup> in his arms to his underling.

He came to stand in front of Huo Ling, took the blue and white porcelain vase, and put it on the table. He then picked up the hot tea pot and poured the hot water into the vase.

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<sup>94</sup> I'm not sure if the information is correct, but this is what I've found: Some wealthy people in Beijing would participate in cricket fighting back in the day. They would put crickets in a jar and put it in their arms to keep the crickets warm. It's apparently still a thing. Some more info [here](#).

Huo Ling watched as the blue bean sprout towards the bottom of the vase slowly started to grow. A trace of blue vines gradually began to spread until they eventually covered the whole vase. The lines were extremely refined and the vines grew so vividly that it was almost as if the bean sprout was alive. Huo Ling was dumbfounded.

“The color of this porcelain is specially made with a kind of herbal medicine from the southern lands,” Er Yuehong said. “It’s very rare, and the color will only appear when the temperature rises. The color is usually black, so this vase is even more precious considering how the color of the flower is almost blue. Needless to say, the process for these lines to appear and spread all over the vase from the bottom after the temperature rises is very particular. You’re extremely lucky to be able to find this kind of vase.”

Huo Ling was so shocked that she couldn’t react to his words.

Er Yuehong left her there and went to the courtyard. He looked at the bright spots on the ground from the sunshine and took a deep breath.

Many things were rare, and it was extremely lucky for those who were able to find even just one of them. For people, such a fact was really too cruel.

# Talking About The Mystic Nine In Rain Village

*[The Author's Notes: I was a very good-looking man among writers, but now I have developed a triple chin after writing all these novels....]*

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“When it comes to the Mystic Nine, I only know the bits and pieces of their stories. But there are some trivial things that you may not know about.” Jin Wantang lit a cigarette. He was collecting corbels<sup>95</sup> and old furniture in Fujian, so he came to visit us.

He gave us a lot of beverages, but it was easy to see that he hadn't really spent time preparing gifts for us. He bought the stuff straight from the canteen's supermarket in town, which was at the foot of the mountain.

Fatty was going through the stuff Jin Wantang brought us and took out a box of low-calorie drinks that were called Black Black Milk.<sup>96</sup> Fatty was amused and said, “What Black Black Milk? This company needs to find me to endorse them. If they want to find someone with black nipples, I'm the best person for this.”

Jin Wantang ignored him and continued talking to me, “This incident can only be seen as gossip, but it's an interesting story, so I'll tell you about it.”

I was sorting out the legends about the Mystic Nine, and this man knew a lot of things. He could always tell a lot of stories whenever he showed up, all of which were stories that I had never heard from Grandpa.

Most of the Mystic Nine stories turned into folk tales in the end, so it was extremely difficult to know the truth of what happened at that time. According to Jin Wantang, if those who bought and sold antiques in the

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<sup>95</sup> A corbel is a structural piece of stone, wood, or metal jutting from a wall to carry a superincumbent weight, a type of bracket. Think of something like [this](#).

<sup>96</sup> This story is an advertisement for a sesame company. Black Black Milk is one of their products. Sesame seeds, oatmeal, and black beans are the ingredients of Black Black Milk. The Mystic Nine extra, “New Sesame Seeds” (pg 388), is also a story sponsored by this company.

alleys back then could tell a few Mystic Nine stories, then they would be considered skilled antique dealers. This was because it meant that they had been to Changsha and stepped onto the lands of the Mystic Nine's leaders.

The Mystic Nine always acted very secretively, so people from all walks of life began making up many stories since only telling two or three wouldn't be enough. After a while, most of the stories became oddities.

I was a little bored before Jin Wantang came to visit us, but after he showed up, the house became livelier. I figured his words might lift my spirits.

"You all know about the major events. But when it comes to the trivial things, even Little Master Three may not know about them clearly. Let me ask you a question: Among the Mystic Nine, which person was the fattest? Can you answer it?" Jin Wantang took a puff of his cigarette and showed his teeth. "Everyone in the Mystic Nine was a hero, but there were definitely some that were fat and some that were thin. It's impossible to say that everyone in the Mystic Nine wore the same size of clothes because it's not in accordance with the laws of history."

Among the Mystic Nine, Zhang Qishan was from the Zhang family and he was a soldier who had marched and gone to war, so his body must've been strong and lean. Er Yuehong was an opera singer who was good at using rock climbing sticks to jump around, so he must've been thin. Chen Pi Ah Si (aka Grandpa Si), my grandpa, and Granny Huo were all thin people.

The possibilities were narrowed down to Banjie Li, Black Back the Sixth, Qi Ba Ye, and Jiuye.

Master Six was a beggar, so he must not have been fat. The remaining three people had a better life, but Jiuye abused morphine. If I had to guess, it would be safer to say that the fattest one was either Banjie Li or Qi Ba Ye.

But before I could even say a word, Fatty immediately said, "It must've been Zhang Qishan. The generals back in the day were all fat."



Jin Wantang shook his head and said contemptuously, “Tsk, Fat Master, you’ve gotten old and senile. Zhang Da Fo Ye would use his index and middle fingers to test the holes of tombs. If he was fat, what would he do when his hands got stuck in the holes?”

Fatty said, “He could’ve had a fat body and thin hands.”

“Was he Spongebob then?” Jin Wantang got angry. “You can argue with me, but your arguments have to be logical.”

I almost burst out laughing. I didn’t expect that Jin Wantang also watched cartoons.

Fatty stretched out his fat hands and poured tea for Jin Wantang. “Fine. Tell us who it is.”

“You’d never guess it,” Jin Wantang said. “Among the Mystic Nine, the fattest person was Old Dog Wu, Grandpa Dog.” With that said, he looked at me and then looked at my stomach. “Little Master Three, you’ve inherited this from your grandfather as well. If it hadn’t been for the fact that you’ve been running around over the past few years, you would’ve had the same figure as Fat Master.”

*Oh?* I suddenly became interested.

My grandpa was very thin before he died. It seemed that the people in the Mystic Nine were as thin as dry corpses before they died. I had never heard Grandpa say that he was fat. And when I looked at the old photos we had, I couldn’t see what he looked like when he was young because it was such a long time ago. This was the first time I had heard that my grandpa was a fat man.

“How do you know about this?” I asked.

Jin Wantang said, “I’m not making this up. In the 1980s, your grandmother told the director of Hangzhou Federation of Literary and Art Circles about it. Her original words were: Mr. Wu was very busy before he came to

Hangzhou, so when he first came to Hangzhou and started to settle down, he and his dogs became fat. The dogs he brought with him were as fat as pigs and could hardly walk. It was a good thing that Er Ye gave him sesame, brome, and black beans as ingredients for his diet. He ate those things and lost weight.”

With that said, Jin Wantang looked at Fatty’s belly. “It’s not that I’m judging you, Fat Master, but we aren’t young anymore. We’ve aged. Maybe you should consider losing some weight. Since we haven’t died in any tombs, it’s not worth it if we die because we have a very wealthy lifestyle.”

Fatty rubbed his belly and sighed, “My amazing fat body has been with me for half a lifetime, so I can’t bear to lose it. You know that people can miss past relationships. This fat has been to the Heavenly Palace in the Clouds. If I kill it as soon as I retire, what does that make me? Isn’t it like burning my bridges or killing my employees after what we’ve been through? Killing my fat after all it’s done for me? I can’t do that. I have to hold it in high regard.” With that said, Fatty shook his belly.

I didn’t remember Grandma ever mentioning this before, so I felt surprised.

Jin Wantang continued, “Er Ye—also known as Er Yuehong—was also famous for being particular about food. There’s one amusing thing that I think you’ll also be interested in. You all know that Er Ye’s wife loved cooking noodles and he loved her for it. But this could also be a very troublesome thing..”

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It rained a lot that year. Changsha hadn’t had such heavy rain in a long time. Er Yuehong looked at the Xiang River downstairs. There were only a few small boats parked in the middle of the river during the heavy rain. The rain was pouring down and the weather was exceptionally cool.

He was leaning against the railing and peeling an orange. The rain curtain was only a short distance away from him, but no matter how he moved, the rain would never touch him.

“Er Ye, you’re a really cautious person. No one can find any flaws in your behavior. I can tell what you’re doing because I’ve been with you for a long time. If it were other people, they would never know.” The housekeeper came up to take away the orange peel. He was all wet because of the rain, so he hastily wiped himself dry.

They were the only two in the wing room. Before the housekeeper came, Er Yuehong had silently watched the clouds gather before the rain started. When he was a child, he liked to stand in this spot and watch the boats on the Xiang River at night. The lights on the boats illuminated the river, making the water look colorful. Now he no longer liked such a view at night. Maybe it was because he finally understood what kind of business those people on the boats were up to.

He was here today to wait for the game that Old Ba had bought from hunters after he went to pick up goods from the mountains. Now it seemed that Old Ba was probably delayed because of the rain and was stuck at one of the piers on the Xiang River. Since the rain was so heavy, there was no need for him to keep waiting anymore. But he had no idea why the housekeeper suddenly showed up.

“Now it seems that you don’t even mean it when you say something nice to me.” Er Yuehong smiled upon seeing how weary the housekeeper looked.

He handed the housekeeper the tablecloth from his table. The other man wrapped it around his neck to block the water that was dripping from his hair. The housekeeper managed a smile, but he seemed to be struggling to say something.

“Why did you come here all of a sudden?”

The housekeeper knew that Er Yuehong didn’t like to make small talk, so he nodded. “Er Ye, your wife is in the kitchen again.”

Er Yuehong’s expression changed. “Are you sure?”

“I’m absolutely positive. Moreover, she’s even made a bun.” The housekeeper wiped the water off of his face. “She’s definitely going to cook noodles.”

Er Yuehong looked at the heavy rain outside the window, his face indifferent but solemn.

“Er Ye, you need to talk to your wife. We can’t keep eating noodles. We’ve been eating them for almost a whole season. That’s three months now. Whenever we hold a feast to treat our guests now, Fo Ye, Ba Ye, and Jiuye won’t come. Even Master Five, who isn’t picky about food and loves free meals, avoids us. Er Ye, please.” The housekeeper’s eyes suddenly became watery. “Last time, I brought your wife’s noodles to Master Six and he flipped his bowl upside down so that I wouldn’t be able to put the noodles in it.”

Er Yuehong turned his head and glanced at the housekeeper coldly.

The housekeeper had obviously thrown caution to the wind. “Er Ye, you pamper your wife too much. The country had a great harvest this year. Hubei, Hunan, Guangdong, and Guangxi have various foods this year, so we can eat everything we want. We’re a wealthy household in Changshan. We can’t eat plain soup and noodles every day. This isn’t good for the underlings’ health.”

“There are people from the north who love eating noodles.<sup>97</sup> Is it that difficult for you to eat them?” Er Yuehong took a bite of the orange. “My wife usually only cooks noodles for me. She sees that you’re all working so hard and wants to cook for you. Her noodles were famous among the elders in Changsha back in the day. Those who didn’t know her well wouldn’t even get to eat her noodles. You’ve only eaten the noodles for three months. It’s not like you’re eating them every day. There’s nothing to complain about.”

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<sup>97</sup> Chinese noodles are generally made from wheat flour. Geographically speaking, the lands of northern China are suitable for growing wheat while the lands in southern China are suitable for growing rice. Therefore, wheat noodles are more commonly produced and consumed in northern China. That’s why Er Ye said people from the north loved eating noodles.

The housekeeper nodded and sighed. “Then I’ll go and buy more sauces. Er Ye, are you coming with me?”

Er Yuehong turned his head away. “No. I’m going to eat at Fo Ye’s house! They’re eating dumplings today,” he said coldly without looking at the housekeeper.

The housekeeper’s eyes widened and he swallowed his saliva upon hearing the word “dumplings”. He watched Er Yuehong open his oil-paper umbrella and go downstairs.

Er Yuehong didn’t actually know if the people in Zhang Qishan’s household were having dumplings today. But he knew that it wasn’t easy to enter the other eight households most of the time, so he couldn’t possibly bother them just because he didn’t want to eat noodles.

He wandered along the street beside the Xiang River. When he made it to where there were lights by the river, he was finally starting to feel a little hungry. He walked to a stall that sold butter tea<sup>98</sup> and whose owner was from the northwest.

After Er Yuehong sat down, he noticed that all of his underlings were there. Everyone looked awkward.

“Why aren’t you eating at home?” Er Yuehong asked.

The housekeeper brought a bowl of butter milk over and put it in front of Er Yuehong. “Er Ye, why ask this question when you know the answer?”

Er Yuehong raised his hand, took a sip of the butter tea, and then suddenly smiled. “You guys are clever. When we were young and went into the mountains, we used to have butter tea from the northwest since it would make us really full. After we went underground, the butter tea kept us from

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<sup>98</sup> Traditionally, butter tea is made from tea leaves, yak butter, water, and salt. Wiki link [here](#).

feeling hungry. I didn't expect that I would be able to have it after so many years have passed."

The housekeeper gave him a thumbs up. "You knew what it was as soon as you drank it. You're definitely an expert. You began drinking less butter tea after you got married. Back in those days, we also lived off of butter tea for several months. Is it better than your wife's noodles?"

Er Yuehong rolled his eyes at the housekeeper and then suddenly thought of something. "Since you're not at home, what's my wife going to do?"

The housekeeper said, "Your wife realized we were gone, so she's taken the noodles to Fo Ye's house to find you."

Er Yuehong frowned and spit out the butter tea before immediately standing up and heading to Zhang Qishan's house.

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End of The Mystic Nine Extras