

# **At the Door of Justice**

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**Published: 2015**

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## **Table of Contents**

### **Introduction**



**Part 1 ...**

**Part 2 ...**

**Part 3 ...**

**Hatred knows no Bound**

**Surprises at Sunrise Inn**

**Every men's Poison**

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## **Introduction**

This is the story of a chivalrous Swordsman and his friends. The story was set in the period of Song dynasty in China (AD 960-1279).

The weak Dynasty at that time was severely roiled by several attempts by its neighbours to invade its territory. The chaos had created much hardship for the people.

The weak and corrupted Dynasty was in decline, it no longer had the ability to govern effectively; the distracted Central government was in no position to protect its citizens. The people of the Empire were at the mercy of corrupted provincial powers and outlaws. At that time, justice was only available to the people who had the money to pay for it, the population was marginalized. Such injustices were the driving force behind the birth of the shadowy world of Wulin; a subculture of martial art practitioners called Wuxia.

These peoples were also called Swordsmen; this is the story of their devotion to the art of fighting and their dedication to seeking justice for the oppressed.

This subculture was not an organized movement; they pursued their own form of justice by their respective means. In the absence of law and order, the justice could only come from the blade of sword. The values of a Wuxia dictated that injustice must be fought at all times, even the threat of death must not deter him.

In order to carry out his duty, a Wuxia had to learn the ultimate fighting skills; he had to be better than the evil-doers. This dedication to justice led to the golden age of martial arts, this was the time of swordsmen wandering through the land looking for justice to uphold, evil-doers to be rid off, and new fighting skills to be learned.

The various adventures of Yan Ching had brought him into face to face with Grave robbers, Tribal Black Magic masters and fellow Wuxias' who possesses superhuman abilities. His devotion to justice was challenged at many levels. Through his adventures, Yan Ching learned the value of life and many alternative views. Eventually his core values were brought into question...

Three Cups of Wine...  
One Cup for Heaven  
One Cup for the Land  
And One Cup for Humanity

# Part 1

## Hatred knows no Bound

The word Wulin literally meant the forest of martial art skills; this forest was not a specific place, this forest was a mindset. The people that followed the practice of Wulin culture lived in a parallel world with sentiments very different from those of the contemporary society. The culture of Wulin emphasized the practice of martial arts and with these skills the practitioners were morally obligated to perform good deeds for the society, helping the underprivileged, fighting bullies and ridding the world of evil and wickedness.

It was the duty of any Wulin practitioner to even out the injustice in this world. These values might sound very similar to the values of our contemporary society, but the difference was that the Wuxia actually had the resolve and the capability to carry out his philosophy. Therefore when a Wuxia sees injustice, he would never turn a blind eye, he would even break the law in order to fight the injustice, he would risk his life. It was his duty.

And this is their story...

The practice of Wulin culture came about when the normal rule of law broke down, when the authorities were no longer able to protect the weak. In extreme environments, the authorities instead of protecting the people, they started to oppress them. When that happens, Wulin would collectively step forward to correct the injustice. The concept of Wulin would flourish during such times, when the weak dynastic rulers were not able to rule, the people had to take the law into their own hands.

People with the ability to protect the population were often welcomed to replace the incompetent authorities, impromptu justice were meted out to punish the corrupted magistrates and local thugs who had tormented the population.

But unfortunately Wulin was not a structured organization; they were not able to replace the administrative system totally, they were just playing the role of a corrective force to punish the wrong-doers. With them around, the evil-doers had to be wary of their undertakings, for you never know who was lurking in the shadows counting your wicked deeds.

Wulin was mainly made up of individuals who were independent and free minded, they did not answer to anyone and they conducted their affairs quietly without much fanfare. When such a Wuxia came across injustice he would met out his summary punishment to the perpetrators according to his own judgment. Very often after punishing the evil-doers, he would disappear without even acknowledging his deeds.

Evil outlaws, corrupted magistrates or local bullies often got beaten up or even killed by such stealthy Wuxias'. Usually such evil-doers would receive a warning first before drastic actions were taken. Many magistrates had their eye brown shaved off by this Wuxias' as a public warning. But if the warning was not heeded, their wicked deeds would be repaid ten times over.

Sometimes a few close friends could combine their capabilities and form a group, such groups usually made up of 'blood brothers' who had sworn an oath. This oath of eternal loyalty tied the destiny of the sworn brothers together forever. Whoever harms one of the brothers would be revenged to the fullest of their capability.

The biggest organization in Wulin were the Sects, most of these Sects were associated with a certain type of martial art (Example Shaolin, Wudang Ermei etc.). Such Sects also operated as a school teaching its brand of martial art, this industrious method of producing students turned these Sects into very powerful organizations in Wulin with very broad member base.

Sects like Shaolin, Wudang and Ermei attracted many students into their school of martial art. This new recruits upon joining a Sects would immediately enjoy the protection of the organization. They would be taught the martial art related to the Sects. Every student's dream was to be admitted to the inner circle of the Sect, this selected group of talented individuals would be taught the ultimate martial art of the school. These selected few were known as the 'in chamber' disciples of the grand master/teacher himself, the senior person of this entourage would be in line to be the next leader of the Sect.

Sadly most of the students would not make it to this stage as the teachers would only have time for a few selected students. But such big enterprises were not the only avenue to learn special fighting skills; there were many extremely powerful individuals who did not belong to a Sect, these were free spirited characters that did not care for the glory and detest the headaches that came with running a big organization. Such a person was not inferior in any way; they just did things differently.

My teacher was one such individual; he was very accomplished in his technique of fighting with a simple saber. His martial art was called the Lightning Saber, it focused on speed and swift changes to the attack style. He was also renowned for his unarmed fist fighting techniques called the Thunder fist, this technique was derived from a Shaolin fist fighting technique which he learned when he was in Shaolin.

During his younger days he was a disciple in Shaolin for a few years, he did acquire much knowledge from this famous school, but due to his care-free nature he was expelled from the Temple. He bore no grudge against the Temple school, but as an expelled student, ethically he was not allowed to practice the martial art he learned there, so he invented his own.

By the time I met him, he was already a well known person in Wulin, he was known as the Godly Fist Hong Er. Hong Er was his name; Er meaning two as he was a second son in the Hong family. My teacher did not intend to have a student; he was too much of a wanderer to settle in any one place for long, he was always looking for new places to go to, new adventures to experience... and new fights to fight.

He met me under very peculiar circumstances; my village was ransacked by bandits, my whole family was killed and as a young man of twelve I was trying to avenge my family. I trailed the bandits for three days and three nights waiting for the opportunity to revenge my family. It was obviously a futile attempt as I was not trained in any martial art and there was no way I could have defeated them.

Banditry was common at that time as there was a famine in the region, as Imperial authorities were weak and corrupted; no attempts were made to help the population. Many of the famine victims turned to robbing each other to survive.

Bandits existed in various forms, some did it for sheer survival; some did it because it was easy to rob the starving villages and some of them robbed the rich to feed the poor. The group of bandits that rob my village was the lowest kind of bandits; they specialized in robbing the poorest village as they were the ones that would put up the least resistance. The worst was that they would kill the entire village to cover their tracks. I swore that I will revenge my family, even if it costs me my life.

At that time Godly Fist was in the region, he was wounded in a fight with another group of bandits. When he saw me trailing my group of bandits he knew what I was trying to do.

Godly Fist could not bear to see me throwing my life away, so he took me along with his travel and taught me all I need to know about the shadowy world of Wulin and he taught me all his fighting skills.

It took me six long agonizing years before my teacher was satisfied that I was ready to take my revenge. These bunch of bandits were the first people I killed, I was eighteen years of age. When my family's death was finally avenged, Godly Fist told me that his duty had been discharged. We went our separate ways and he instructed me not to mention him as my teacher, because he did not want to tie his name to anybody. The reason was simple, he led a dangerous life; he did not want to drag me into it.

The next time I met him a few years later, even though I treated him with utmost respect, Godly Fist treated me like an equal; a friend.

But unknown to him I had already decided to follow his footsteps; I wanted to practice the values of Wulin; to help the oppressed and punish the evil. Just like him.

Ever since that day, I had wandered through the entire Middle Kingdom's Central Plains (the region in China between the Yangzhi River and the Yellow River), I had acquired a small reputation for myself and most important of all I had acquired many like-minded friends. We were a bunch of well intentioned youngsters travelling the region helping the local population to fight against local bullies, bandits and sometime even corrupted officials.

The Imperial Court was weak; they could not help the population, the people were under the tyranny of both the local magistrates and bandits, very often the local authorities and the bandits worked as one entity.

We were the underground movement that stealthily helped the population by getting rid of these people. Those were glorious times, and we had acquired our reputation among the Wulin people as capable skillful fighters. We were invited to many gatherings and banquets to celebrate our achievements and were looked upon as heroes of Wulin. We were much respected.

But this reputation was also the cause of all our eventual difficulties; as our reputation grew; the stories told about us began to evolve into ridiculous tales. Such unintended claims (not made by us) aroused the curiosity and jealousy of the other martial art practitioners. People started to seek us out and challenge us

to duels, instead of fighting bandits and corrupted officials we spent most of our time fighting people who were supposed to be on our side.

There was a darker side to Wulin, while everybody was talking about upholding justice they were also very concerned about the glory, fame and wealth that was involved. Such priorities thought usually unspoken were actually quite important for those Wuxias'. These people believed that the short cut to fame was to defeat someone famous, such engagements were 'title fight'; it had nothing to do with the upholding of justice. After a while we could not tell the 'chivalrous Wuxias' from the evil bandits we were supposed to fight.

These challengers could have furthered their reputations by fighting injustice; but instead they chose the fast track way of fighting us. In the beginning it was fascinating to have people from all over wanting to 'test' our fighting skills, but after a while we began to realize that it was not that simple. All these people were not our admirers wanting to befriend us, they were more interested in defeating us and have our names added to their 'losers' list.

After some time we found that they were spending more time in defending our 'title' than we did on promoting justice. And it was a never ending story, after defeating someone, he would call in his 'brothers' and friends to seek revenge on us. As we fight off a few challengers our reputation were even more tempting for the next few to try us. Soon the entire Wulin seemed to be obsessed with defeating us, we only managed to survive this period through sheer luck.

And we also realized that the really skillful martial art experts were not the ones coming to fight us, these people did not need the shortcut to glory; they were already there. The people coming to challenge us were the wanabees; the real Wuxias' were humbler folks who carried the true values of Wulin.

There were many noble Wuxia's around, but these people chose to stay away from all the pettiness and hypocrisy of Wulin, many of them like my teacher did not even show their identity to the world. They travelled incognito, they did not like to declare their names and when they needed to eliminate bandits or kill a corrupted magistrate they did it quietly.

Sometimes, a corrupted magistrate would be beaten up or robbed, but nobody would know who did it. The humiliated magistrate would quietly attribute the crime to some bandits, and sweep the whole event under the carpet. People like Hong Er did not need any celebration or banquets; he did it for the people.

I began to see the wisdom of my teacher's ways.

After spent months fighting off numerous challengers, finally, we were all totally disgusted at the situation. We had our first experience with the pettiness of Wulin, it did not took us long to decide that we no longer want any more of this. We decided to disband and went our separate ways, hoping that this would get us off the limelight. We went back to our respective hometowns, and began our new life as commoners in the common world.

Transition to a commoner's life was not easy, other than martial arts I had no skills, and even though I wanted to distance myself from Wulin, I realized that it was not possible. Furthermore, I did not want to abandon my guiding principles of doing good and upholding justice, therefore I set myself the task of finding an employer who had the same values as me. I had also accepted the fact that I would not be able to stay away from Wulin, not for long.

It did not take me long to find such a person, he was the biggest philanthropist in the city of Luoyang, every year he spent a big fortune helping the poor, building schools and providing free medical care. I was glad to work for him; I believed a person who was so generous to the poor people could not possibly be evil. His values fit perfectly into mine.

My job was neither difficult nor simple; it was the senior position of a 'guardian of the mansion' in his household in Luoyang city. 'Guardian of the Mansion' was not the post of a security guard; I was in charge of security of the entire household plus the security of the vast business empire.

My employer's name was Kuan Ling; he had a huge household consisting of three wives, two sons and one daughter and a number of brothers, sisters, in-laws, cousins all staying in his huge mansion. The Kuan clan was very rich; they had businesses in rice, tea, and shipping, they owned land and properties in various big cities all over the Middle Kingdom.

To Mister Kuan, money was not an issue, he just wanted security for all his clan and he gave me a free hand in performing this task; I had a small army working for me. I was given huge budget.

But my job was not as straight forward as it seemed, Mister Kuan's immense wealth had attracted much unwanted attention. Mister Kuan Ling knew that his entire family was being watched greedily by all the outlaws in the land.

I was employed for my reputation; Kuan Ling knew that even though he could employ an army to protect his family, but that would make little difference to determine skillful fighters who was attracted by his money. He needed my connection in the underworld of Wulin to give him additional protection; he knew my reputation in Wulin would be an added deterrent to anybody seeking to cash in on him.

In my budget, I had a huge sum of money that I could hand out to anyone for information and help; I had built a network of informants telling me what was going on in Wulin, any suspicious Wuxia or outlaws coming into the city would be made known to me even before they checked into an inn. My intelligence network in the city was even better than that of the local Governor, because I had a bigger budget.

Very often I passed information to the local authorities to get rid of some outlaws coming into town, they were always very grateful to me for that, as some outlaws had a heavy prize on their head. If needed, I even helped them to capture the outlaw because some of these criminals were very good fighters and the local constables were useless at real combat, they were only good at bullying the peasants.

But most of the time my job consisted of engaging these outlaws, I would call on them to let them know that I was aware of their presence. It was also to let them know of my presence. It was always best to prevent a crime rather than to fight it, most of the time a subtle hint from me plus a small gift of silver pieces would be enough to send them on their way. I only resorted to violence when these outlaws became too greedy or they decided not to give me the due respect.

Another part of my job was to protect Mister Kuan Ling's business interests, his vast empire had brought him many enemies, and these enemies were powerful people, and they too had money to throw.

This was the part of the job which was most challenging as it often dragged me back into the world of Wulin; once again I had to face the pettiness that came with it. So far, nobody had been foolish enough to challenge the combination of Mister Kuan's wealth and my reputation. Such a challenge would be defended very bitterly and the resulting fight would be bloody, whoever starts such a conflict had better know what he was in for.

But we knew such attempts will be made one day, Mister Kuan's wealth was just too tempting, and there were many rich merchants out there who would love to get their hands on the Kuan clan's business empire. These rich merchants might not be as wealthy as the Kuans', but they were wealthy enough to buy them plenty of muscles. The only deterrent I could show them was the consequences of trying... absolute destruction.

When I made my rounds with the local gentries and their respectively retainers, I quietly made it known to them that I treated Mister Kuan Ling as my brother, his family as my own. The subsequent reasoning would be very simple; harm anyone of the Kuans' would bring upon the perpetrator the wrath of the Little Thunder Fist, me; Yan Ching.

This warning was meant for the greedy merchants and for anyone thinking to cash in on the Kuans, it was better to deter people from trying before they make their attempt. I would not be able to prevent a desperate attempt on the Kuans, especially if it was carried out by highly skilled fighters, but with my knowledge and connections I would be able to find out who the perpetrators was.

Anyone making this attempt knew that I would not rest till they are dead, that was the only way to deal with your enemies. They must realize that they would not have the chance to enjoy their wealth; they would realize that they did not want me as an enemy. The moment you cross my path, there is no turning back...

### **The Jade Statue**

It was approaching spring, a very beautiful day, the city was alive with the festivities, everybody was preparing for the Lunar New Year celebration. The first day of the Lunar New Year was one of the most important days in the Chinese calendar.

After a year of roaring trade, the Kuan clan was spending much money in the preparation for the coming event; the entire household knew that Mister Kuan Ling being a generous person would be handing out big bonuses to everybody. Everyone was in high spirit.

All this household preparation did not involve me; I was in my study planning the security arrangement for the numerous banquets when my guards informed me that an important official from the Province of Fujian had arrived and had been shown to Mister Kuan.

My job usually did not involve entertaining such official as I had made known to Mister Kuan that I detested such corrupted officials (as they usually were), and my manners and words would do more harm than good for Mister Kuan. But this time I was requested by Mister Kuan to attend the meeting at the main hall, I was curious.



The main hall was at the inner courtyard of the mansion; its main purpose was to welcome important visitors. By the time I arrived, the place was filled with servant running up and down the pathways bringing tea and dim sum to serve to the guests.

This visitor had brought along many guards, in fact a small army was stationed right outside the main hall, I was told by the door man that a bigger army was outside the Mansion and had surrounded it. The roads leading to the mansion had been blocked off. This must be an important visitor indeed.

As I walked into the hall, I could see that Mister Kuan was very humbled by the visitor, his faced was flustered and he kept bowing to the man. I was introduced to the visitor, he was the governor of Zhejiang Province, and he was the General in Command of the entire southern imperial army. He was indeed a big shot.

It turned out that his visit was totally unexpected, and Mister Kuan was embarrassed for being totally unprepared for this important guest. But up till now I still did not understand why I was requested to the meeting, I was useless at small talks with Imperial Officers, as to preparing the household for his stay the housekeeper would be the more appropriate person. Why did Mister Kuan want my presence for?

It was soon explained as General Zhen asked Mister Kuan to dismiss the servants from the main hall, only three of us and two of his lieutenants remained behind, after slowly sipping his tea he turned to us and said, "Dear Mister Kuan, please allow me to apologize for this unannounced visit, I regret that I have to disturb your harmony during this festive season."

Kuan Ling mumbled some polite word.

The General explained further, "I had been ordered by the Emperor to carry out an important task; I had no choice but to travel to Luoyang quietly unannounced.

As you would have heard the Empress Dowager (Emperor's mother) is a devoted Buddhist, she heard of a precious Jade Statue of the Goddess of Mercy in the southern region of Fujian, she wanted to acquire it for her shrine in the palace. The Emperor had secretly purchased the Statue, for a high price. My job was to deliver it to the Imperial Palace on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the Lunar New Year.

While there are still many days before the 15<sup>th</sup>, I would like to rest my troops in Luoyang before going on to the Palace; while I am here I want to keep this statue in a secure place, and I heard in Luoyang there is nowhere safer than your huge mansion. I also heard that your vault is the safest place in the world. I would like to keep the statue in your vault for a few days... if you would oblige."

I knew Mister Kuan would not be able to turn down this request, I saw his face turning through several shades of green while humbly nodding his head and mumbling his agreement. It was quite prestigious to have Imperial treasures locked in his vault, but it was also a heavy responsibility and at the same time this also meant he had to open the vault to an outsider to view. It was well known he was rich, but nobody really knew how rich he was, if this General turned out to be a greedy official this might mean big trouble.

The vault of the Kuan clan was situated in the middle of the huge mansion; it was built underground with only one entrance which was guarded day and night. Being an extremely well constructed fortress it was impenetrable; the iron doors were two feet thick and the locks were made by the same locksmiths that had

constructed the locks for the Imperial treasury. No one could open it without a key, no one had ever tried, and no one had bothered to try.

The vault was so secretive that even I had never been inside before; the only two persons holding the keys were Mister Kuan himself and his eldest son Kuan Ting. And furthermore, the two keys must be used together to open the doors, and the doors were seldom opened as the Kuan clan had another smaller vault in the mansion that hold a large enough amount of gold and silver pieces for the day to day operation of the business.

Their daily cash flow was supplied by the smaller vault; the main vault was only opened during the half yearly accounting period when profit from the previous year would be sent inside. The Kuan clan's business was very successful, therefore gold and silver pieces were usually flowing into the main vault for storage, never out.

The main vault was also used to store the precious treasure pieces that the clan had acquired over the years. Jade pieces, golden statues and famous paintings were stored inside, once a year during the stock taking; experts would be called in to examine the painting and carving to ensure that they were in good condition. All this would be done under the watchful eyes of Mister Kuan and his son, nothing was left to chance.

The eldest son Kuan Ting was hurriedly summoned to the main hall as we needed his key to open the vault. We proceeded to the back garden where the vault was located. I noticed that one of the General's lieutenants was carrying an embroidered box roughly four feet by four feet with a depth of two feet. This must be the jade statue.

As Mister Kuan and his son unlocked the doors, I was checking out the surrounding areas to make sure that nobody was watching lurking in the shadows; less people knows about this the better. I did not want any of the servants to see this and start telling the whole city about it.

And I was hoping that I would not be called into the vault, I did not want to know what was inside and I certainly did not want to see the jade statue belonging to the Emperor. The less one knew was better for one's wellbeing.

But it was not to be so; soon Kuan Ting came out of the vault and told me that my presence was requested. As I went inside I saw stacks upon stacks gold and silver ingots arranged in an orderly manner in four corners of the room. The far end of the room was stacked with boxes of presumably precious treasures, urns containing pearls and precious stones were carelessly left on the floor. I was in the presence of extreme wealth; a small portion of the carelessly exposed urns would have made anyone a very rich man.

I could see that the General and his Lieutenants were equally stunned by the display; it was with some effort that they managed to keep their jaws from dropping to the ground. Mister Kuan and his son were on the other hand rather embarrassed by their opulent display of wealth, this was never the image they had wanted for themselves.

After a long silence, Mister Kuan said, "Dear General, I have a humble request if you would permit me Sir."

The General threw him a questioning look without saying anything.

Mister Kuan continued, "Dear Sir, I humbly beg you to allow this humble peasant to have a glance at the precious Jade statue. If you grant me this honour, it would glorify my entire clan for generations to come."

The General was slightly taken aback, but after some careful consideration he realized what the smart Mister Kuan was up to. As to me, I would have been very surprised if Mister Kuan did not request to inspect the merchandise.

As a sharp business man, Mister Kuan would never allow anything to be placed in his vault without checking the content first, it would be disastrous if the General placed a worthless piece of junk in the vault and later claimed that Mister Kuan had stolen the precious statue and had replaced it with a piece of junk.

Having dealt with officials all his life, Mister Kuan had the perfect manners to convey the message and yet at the same time not let anybody lose face. And being a keen collector of art works, he was also curious about this piece of Imperial treasure. Such an art piece; once it enters the palace seldom comes back to the outside world again.

We found a nice table top, and the General ordered his Lieutenant to unveil the statue. It did not disappoint, it was indeed a beautiful piece of jadeite, carved into the figure of the thousand hands Guanyin (Goddess of Mercy), both the quality of the jade and the high standard of the craftsmanship was unmatched. But the priceless aspect of the piece was its size, to find a flawless piece of jade of that size was very difficult, this piece of art work was a one in a million.

After admiring the art work, the Lieutenant packed up the piece and we placed it into a cushioned container and left it on the table top. It will be removed in three days time so there was no need to store it away. With the impenetrable vault, and the unbreakable locked doors...what could go wrong? In three days time when the General leaves with the Jade statue, it would be the happiest day of Mister Kuan's life... and mine too.

The General requested that his Lieutenants and some of his troops to be allowed to guard the entrance to the vault, this precaution was agreeable to both parties as it would put the General's mind to rest and at the same time nobody could accuse the Kuans' of stealing the Statue as the General's troops would be co-guarding the vault. What could go wrong?

With everybody's mind at rest, the General settled into the mansion and was provided with the best luxury money could buy. Mister Kuan was anxious to secure his friendship as this General was now the only one in the Imperial court who knew how rich he was, a strong friendship along with much precious gifts might help the General keep his silent.

Immense wealth brings along many complications.

The Lieutenants and the soldiers were well treated; they were served the best cuisines they have ever eaten in their life. I believe they would be talking about it for the rest of their life.

I got to know the Lieutenants well as both had some Wulin background before they were serving the General, we had some mutual friends in the Wulin and they had heard of my exploits in my younger days. We got along very well.

**Shock**

Three days went by very quickly; it was time to send the General on his way with his precious cargo and finally we would be able to breathe a sigh of relief. While walking to the vault Mister Kuan was in a cheery mood. He was inviting the General to visit again and for a longer stay the next time. I too was bidding my new friends farewell and exchanging contact addresses, promising to visit each other in the future. All of us were in high spirit, Mister Kuan and I were glad to be rid of the General and the statue and the General was happy to be on his way to fulfill his task.

Mister Kuan and his son unlocked the doors to the vault, as they pushed the doors aside I could see that something was wrong, the cushioned container was on the floor and the embroidered box containing the Jade Statue was wide open! All of us rushed into the chamber, the box was laying wide open and empty, and all our faces turned pale, none of us could utter a word. The impossible had happened, the statue had been stolen, and the impenetrable vault had been broken into.

The General was the first to speak, "Kuan Ling, how dare you?"

Mister Kuan was too shocked to reply, he tried to utter something but nothing came out of his mouth.

By now I had recovered enough to think carefully and put up some logical argument for my employer, "Dear General, please keep your calm."

I quietly went to close the doors to the vault so that nobody could hear us.

I said, "Dear General, please consider carefully, Mister Kuan would not be stupid enough to steal the Imperial treasure entrusted to him, in his own vault. Furthermore, you had your soldiers guarding this vault, how could we have done anything without you knowing?"

By now the General had calmed down, "Kuan Ling, this Statue was lost in your vault, you find it back, I will give you ten days, which would be the latest date that I can leave in order to report to the Emperor in time, with or without the Statue.

Let me remind you, if I go the His Royal Highness without the Jade Statue, both you and I will have hell to pay."

There was no need to remind us; this failure could never be explained away, no matter how we argue it would not make a difference, we would be made the co-perpetrator of the crime. I would not be surprised the punishment would be to confiscate the entire clan's wealth and exile the entire household, men, women and children. Including servants and footman...including me. And my past association with the shadowy Wulin would make me the prime suspect of this crime. My past history will be scrutinized and all my long forgotten deeds will be looked upon in different lights.

I said, "Dear General, I appreciate your generous ten days, I will find the perpetrator and I will clear our name. I begged for your cooperation in a few matters, firstly, we will inform the entire household that you have fallen ill and had delayed your departure. There are only a few guards who saw us coming into the vault, I will seal their lips, and I want the thieves to believe that the theft had not been discovered. Secondly, I might need the use of your army and your authority to track down the thieves. Now the first thing I need you to do is to seal

up the whole city, just tell the local authorities that you are tracking down smugglers.”

The General readily agreed to my requests as he was totally stunned by the event, and I dismissed the guards with a stern warning to keep their mouth shut. I placed a fresh batch of guards to guard the vault, they consisted of my most trusted people, I was confident that not a word would be leaked from them.

I needed this arrangement as for the next few days I have to examine the place inside out, for I had concluded that there must be a hidden entrance inside the huge chamber. There was no way that the thieves could have entered from the main entrance. That way was guarded by my trusted people, the General's soldiers and the two keys carried by the Kuans father and son, it was impossible that these three group of people had conspired to commit this theft.

### **My findings**

I set to work immediately; two of my trusted men and me examined the chamber from top to bottom, it did not take us long to find the hidden entrance at the wall at the far end of the room. This entrance was well made; you would never find it unless you were looking for it. It was crafted nicely into the stone wall, it was definitely not a job that was done in the last three days, this job was years of work.

The stone door was built into the wall and it was fitted beautifully with excellent craftsmanship, it was built for long term usage; it was not for a one-time robbery. That means that the thieves had access to this wealthy vault for a long time; they could have carried away the entire load of gold and silver as they would have plenty of time to do so, but they did not. (The vault was only opened once every six months) Clearly this theft was planned months or even years ago.

As we entered the tunnel, it was obvious that some fresh digging was done recently to enlarge the passage way, this was probably to accommodate to jade statue. We followed the tunnel to exit at empty shop at the east end of the city three miles away, the shop was obviously empty... The birds had flown.

Immediately I realized the importance of this discovery, it was even more important to keep this finding quiet. After peeking out of the window of the shop house and ascertained our location, we crawled back into the tunnel and went back to the exit at Mister Kuan's mansion. From there we made our way across the city back to the shop house and quietly started making our enquiries around the neighborhood. We pretended to be wine merchants looking for a shop house.

When we checked with the neighbour, we were told that the shop had been empty for years, but according to the landlord of the place, rent was paid to him every year by courier from another Province, he had never seen the tenant before. As the rent paid was handsomely high he had never question about the business of the shop he was just happy to have rented out this property at such a good price... dead end.

As I slowly prodded deeper into the mystery, I began to see a profile of the person or persons I was dealing with. I knew that these thieves were not in for the

money as they could have gotten away with a King's ransom had they wanted to, the entire wealth of the Kuan clan was in their hand.

Such a person could only be doing this for revenge; they wanted to bring destruction to the Kuan household. Taking their entire wealth was not enough for them, they wanted total annihilated, nothing less. But they did not have to power to fight the Kuans' in an open battle, especially when the Kuans' were so well protected, so they waited for their opportunity.

With the General's arrival to borrow the use of the vault to keep an Imperial treasure, they realized their opportunity had arrived. Using the Emperor's wrath to bring total destruction and shame to the Kuans' clan was indeed an ingenious plot.

When borrowing someone else's knife to kill ones' foe, whose knife would be better and sharper than that of the Emperor's?

The next thing I noticed about the plot was that it involved some rare expertise, the digging was done professionally. It was extremely difficult to tunnel through three miles of the city and accurately entered a specific area; to do that undetected would be impossible, unless you are a professional. Grave robbers!

These thieves must have engaged the help of grave robbers to do the job; I would have to check on that angle. When I checked through the rental record of the empty shop with the landlord, I realized that this tunnel was built not long after I had arrived on the Kuans' household, all this digging was done right under my nose!

### **Grave Robbers**

Grave robbers had existed since the earliest dynasty; this group of professionals was very secretive in their job as they were considered the worst of criminals. Robbing somebody's ancestral grave was a terrible crime; furthermore these grave robbers usually targeted the Imperial graves which were the richest targets. These skills were usually passed from father to sons seldom outside the family; they usually work in small team of two to three persons and always at night.

The strategy of the grave robbers were very ingenious, they would never dig up the grave as that would attract too much attention, instead they would tunnel to the grave from a distance away. This would leave the exterior of the grave intact and nobody would know that the burial chamber inside had been emptied. Very often the descendents of the deceased would not even realize that their ancestors' grave had been robbed.

The grave robbers exist as secretive groups; their identities were not known to anyone outside their immediate group. Thus making it extremely difficult to engage the service of one of them, furthermore, their expertise were very rarely needed by an average person. Such experts if you could find one would usually come at a very high price.

This specialized expertise were rarely needed, it was only required for three main purposes; first and foremost was buried treasure, second was when a specific item was desired by somebody outside the family of the deceased. The

third reason would be less obvious, robbing the grave could be a way to destroy the feng shui of the deceased's family.

Rich Chinese clans placed a strong emphasis on the feng shui layout of the ancestral graves; they believe that having good feng shui for the ancestral tomb would ensure the continuity of the clan's prosperity. Political or business rivals seeking to change this prosperity could resort to robbing and desecrating the graves to disrupt the flow of good fortune.

The unique expertise of the grave robbers was perfect for this purpose as they do not disturb the exterior of the grave, the descendants would not even realize they their feng shui had been destroyed until it was too late.

### **Mister Kuan's story**

By late morning I had done all the investigating I could do, I went back to the Kuans' mansion to report my findings. Usually I did not have to report anything to Mister Kuan, but this instance was different, he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. At the same time I also need to find out from him which of his enemy would fit into my profile of the thieves.

This bunch of thieves had a deep hatred for the Kuan family; this hatred was clearly beyond straight forward business rivalry. This plot to discredit the Kuan clan was not for financial gain at all; they did not steal a single piece of gold or silver. Clearly the objective was to destroy the entire Kuan clan...with the help of the Emperor's wrath.

As I enter the study of Mister Kuan, I found that both Mister Kuan and General Zhen seemed to have aged twenty years since this morning; both their faces had shrunken with worries.

One who was the owner of unimaginable wealth and the other the proud commander of a hundred thousand troops had been transformed into two frail old men in that short span of time. They were facing the life and death situation of their entire family, and both of them were helplessly lost.

They knew that they could not report the theft to the local magistrates; neither could they report this to the Imperial authority. Once this new gets out, the situation would be irreversible; the first reaction from the Emperor would be the harshest punishment imaginable. Their heads will be chopped off regardless of whether the statue could be recovered eventually.

When they saw me, both of them got to their feet and started asking me thousands of questions, I calmed them down and slowly began to explain my findings to them. As they listened they began to realize that their trust in me was well placed, as I explained my analysis of the theft they knew I was the best person to handle the case. They had no better candidate to pursue the case for them; my contacts and my experience in the Wulin would be the best bet they had at the moment.

I said to Mister Kuan, "Dear Mister Kuan, as I had explained earlier this was no ordinary theft, they did not want money or gold or any of your precious treasure. Their objective was to destroy your clan; can you think of someone who harboured such deep hatred for your family?"

I continued, "I do not think this was the work of your business or political rival, this person and the Kuan family had deep differences, probably family feud involving blood. Have you killed anyone? This dispute might even be something that had happened in the previous generations?"

I added, "Has your family done any great injustice to someone in the past? Some big rivalry? Have you or your ancestors made some enemies that fit into this profile?"

After some careful consideration, Mister Kuan hesitantly said, "I believe I know who was behind this, but this was a long time ago, I was a mere baby at that time, I am not really clear what actually happened. The only person alive who knew the whole story would be Old Wang; my retired housekeeper. He was the housekeeper for my grandfather. Old Wang is over a hundred years old now, after his retirement I had kept him in the household. Let me sent for him."

The old man was brought before us, he was so old that he was immobile and blind, but his mind was still clear. Old Wang greeted his master respectfully and waited for our questions.

Mister Kuan started his narrative of the story, "As I was very young when this event happened, everything that I knew was told to me by my late father and uncles. Let me tell you what I know and Old Wang will fill in the details.

When my grandfather started off his business in Luoyang, we were only operating a small rice trading business; we were not rich like we are now. As our business grew, we got richer and one of my grand aunties was married to the local governor's son. This connection got us even richer; my grandfather was trying to muscle his way into the tea trade. But at that time there was another business family who was already established in the tea trade. No matter how hard my grandfather tried he was not able to dominate the tea market.

Eventually, he resorted to drastic means to win over his business rival; he conspired with the local Governor who was his relative and accused the rival business family of treason, they accused them of passing military secret to our enemies in the north.

At that time our dynasty's relationship with the Kingdom of Liao was very tense, when the Imperial Court heard about these accusations they did not even bother to investigate. The Imperial Legal department just took the local Governor's word for it and sentenced the entire family of our business rival to execution. The women and children were exiled to the northern frontier."

Exile at that time meant being sent to a prison camp in the far north region with no chance of returning. Such prison camps were meant to be the graveyard of the prisoners; conditions were so harsh that nobody was expected to survive long. With such camps around, the Imperial Legal department did not have to sentence women and children to execution, the harsh environment did the job for them.

He continued, "My grandfather regretted this act very much; he was a broken man soon after the incident and most of our family members did not know of this shameful act. Soon after the incident, my grandfather committed suicide and my father took over the business, my grandfather's suicide was covered up.

Before his death, my grandfather told my father that we must do more philanthropy to make up for our past deeds, we had carried out his instruction ever since. Every year we had contributed much gold and silver to help to poor,



but looks like it was not enough. The rival family had come back to seek their revenge.”

He paused; the General and I looked at each other, clearly thinking of the same thing. After visiting Mister Kuan’s vault, it was quite obvious that he did not do enough of charity; such dastardly act was something I despised and such greedy merchants and corrupted officials were exactly the kind of people I would have punished during my younger days as a roving Wuxia.

But unfortunately my fate had been intertwined with this despicable family; I had to save his life in order to save mine. The General was probably thinking of his terrible luck to have entrusted his Jade statue to this Kuan family, walking himself into this disastrous situation. The safest vault in the world turned out to be the darkest vipers’ pit that will soon consume all of us.

While Mister Kuan was narrating, I noticed Old Wang had tears streaming down his cheek, the old man must have been involved in the plot; just like his master, and he had been regretting ever since.

I asked Old Wang, “Old Wang, can you tell me something about the family that we had wronged.”

In his feeble voice Old Wang began his narrative, “The family was surname Yang, their ancestral home was from Sichuan, and they had tea plantations in the Sichuan and Yunnan, their tea leaves was of the highest grade. When they moved their trading operation to Luoyang it was to facilitate the transportation of the tea to the north. With their high grade tea leaves and their infrastructure we were no match for them. Our Old master had invested a huge portion of our wealth into this tea business, but time and again we were outwitted and outclassed by them. We were on the verge of total ruin; we had no choice but to resort to this underhanded means.”

He continued, “It was a very drastic move, but as they were richer and better connected than us and we were not able to bring them down with other smaller or less severe accusation. Before this incident, we tried to implicate the Yangs’ in a smuggling deal, but with their wealth and connection they were able to quickly buy their way out of trouble.

Old Master was desperate; he decided to accuse them of the worst crime possible. At that time, with the tension across the border, it was easy to convince the Imperial Court that this rich merchant family was committing treason. Once the Imperial edict was announced nobody would dare to help the traitor for fear of being implicated, no matter how much money they were willing to pay, no officials dared to stick their neck out for them.”

Old Wang paused for breath and continued, “Old Master was shocked by the misery he had caused to the Yang family, he regretted it, but there was no turning back.

Old Master told me to secretly follow the exiled family members (women and children) to the northern frontier, and find out where they would settle. I was instructed to find out if there was anything I could do to help them. The Old Master said there nothing we can do to help the male members of the family as they were all executed, but maybe we could help the women and children in exile. That was the only way he could think of to try and undo his terrible mistake.”

He continued, "I quietly followed the contingent of soldiers escorting this group of women and children to the north; there were 146 of them, many of them died on the way. When we reached the northern frontier, I realized that my Old Master's effort was futile, the living conditions in that region was near impossible, the land was frozen most of the year, the winter temperature was beyond freezing. Nothing grows there, only the hardiest tribesmen could survive this condition. The Yang family was sent there to die. I came back and reported this to Old Master, he killed himself soon after. Before Old Master died, he was half-crazy with guilt, in one of his demented outburst he said that the Yang family's ghost will come back for revenge."

I asked Old Wang, "Did you go back to northern frontier after that? Do you know what had happened to the women and children of the Yangs?"

Old Wang replied, "I went back once, about ten years after the first visit, the village that they had settled in was deserted, I was not able to locate any survivors. When I reported this back to Second Master (Kuan Ling's father), we assumed that they had all died in the harsh weather and they could have perished in the fighting between us and the Kingdom of Liao."

There were nothing much else we could get out of Old Wang; he had told us everything that he knew, we ordered the servants to carry him back to his chambers.

I could tell that Mister Kuan was very embarrassed by the account of his family's shameful past; General Zhen was quietly condemning him with his cold stare. However we had more pressing issues at hand, it was not the time to argue about the rights and wrongs of the past generation. I had to set my network in motion to capture the thieves and retrieve the Jade statue; I had no time to lose.

I turned to Mister Kuan and said, "Dear Sir, I would have to make use of my Wulin resources to track down the Yang family, as time is pressing I would to use an expensive network to communicate with my sources. Sir, I need to spend a huge sum of money."

Mister Kuan looked at me as though I had said something really stupid, he said, "Yan Ching, do whatever is necessary, spend whatever you need to spend. Money is the furthest thing from my mind now, please go do it. I will place all my resources at your disposal."

He summoned his son and instructed the young man to follow all my instructions, and placed ten thousand taels of gold pieces at my disposal. This amount of money was enough to pay for a good size army, but at this moment an army would not help me. What I needed at that moment was expert help; I need people to do my investigation for me on the ground. The problem was who to use and how to find them.

### **I called on the Swallows**

I had three leads to work on; all of them were a vast distance from Luoyang, the first lead that I could pursue was the courier service that paid the rent of the shop house. Secondly was the grave robbing syndicates and the third was the northern frontier settlement of the Yang family. I had to work on all the three leads at the

same time; I believe if they were to produce results, they would surely lead back to Luoyang.

To operate the investigation of three different areas from a vast distance, I had to acquire the services of the respective local experts, and I had to gain access to the most efficient communication systems available... The Swallows Syndicate.

The Swallows was the name of a secret communication network, it was operated by a group of Wulin figures who were formerly serving the Imperial spy network. After some political upheaval this group of Imperial officials was expelled from the civil service and was outlawed, they then went underground into the shadowy world of Wulin and were never heard of again. But some well connected people (like me) in Wulin would know that they were still in operation, and their operation had gotten even bigger and more efficient.

Now the network instead of serving the Emperor had transformed itself into a commercial operation, they sent important urgent messages for the rich merchant family for a fee. Such operations were very important to both the businesses of the merchants and also served the Wulin people like me, whenever I needed urgent help from my brothers, I would use this service to summon them.

The Swallows had built a vast network of courier pigeons, fast horses to carry messages across long distance, this service being the fastest network in the Middle Kingdom also comes with a heavy price tag. With Mister Kuan's financial backing I had no worries in that area.

The Swallows were also an ultra secretive network; all messages were sent in coded writing, whoever intercepting the messages would not be able to understand a word of it. As the masterminds behind the operation were all outlawed Imperial officials, as a precaution they would not take in casual customers, anybody who wanted to use the service would have to be screened carefully and have the right references.

As a former well-known figure in Wulin, I had no problem gaining their trust; I had established connection with them when I had first arrived at the Kuans' household, I knew I might need the service one day.

The contact person for this secret network was a fortune teller in the main street of Luoyang; my pass was a wooden pendant with some carving of a tiger's head on it. When I showed this to the fortune teller, he summoned a boy and told me to follow the young boy. I was led through a back street and then into some quiet alley and finally into an ordinary textile shop, the proprietor of the shop led me to the back of the shop house.

I was led into the living quarters, passing a grandmother feeding her grandchildren lunch. Anybody walking into this house would have no clue that this was actually a branch of the Swallows' secret network.

The Swallows were a non-violence organization; they did not have any form of protection, their only protection was their secretiveness and their layering of the operation.

Next I was shown into a room to write my messages; the room looked exactly like any bedroom in Luoyang city. I was given pen and paper and was told to write my message. The proprietor of the textile shop said he will be back in a while. He would collect my messages and I had to pay him upfront; in gold pieces. Nothing is for free.

## **I called in the Experts**

I had been formulating my strategy the entire morning, I had many friends that I could call upon to help me, I decided that I had to rely on those that were close to the location that I needed to do the investigation; there was no time to waste on travelling.

My first message was to a close friend in the neighbouring province of Hubei, as the rent for the shop house was paid by courier from a goldsmith shop in the city of Wuchang (The capital of Hubei province); perhaps we could get some information from the goldsmith. This friend was one of the brothers in my group of roving Wuxia during my younger days, ever since we went our separate ways; he had chosen to settle in Wuchang close to his ancestral home.

Wuchang was a city on the edge of the civilized world of the time; it was on the banks of the Yangzhi River which was the southern perimeter of the Middle Kingdom. It was a prosperous city as much of the lands' commerce flowed through its river ports. My friend Zhang Liu Chun nicknamed the Little River Ghost had made a name for himself among the river traders; he was employed by rich river merchants to protect their shipping interest.

Little River Ghost grew up along the river thus making him the best swimmer among our group of brothers; he was also quick with his dagger, often killing his enemies with swift powerful strikes even before the enemy could react. His small build made him very dangerous in close quarter fights; his short stature exposes his opponents' lower body to his vicious dagger strikes. Usually his enemies were killed by cuts to the inner thighs; the femoral artery.

Little River Ghost would have the ability and the connection to force the goldsmith to reveal the identity of the person sending the rent remittance; that is if the goldsmith knew anything. I added in my message that this task was of the utmost importance, if a little hard persuasion was needed he would have to use it.

My next message was to be sent to Chang'an, this was the active region of the grave robbers. This was because Xian (Chang'an) was the ancient capital of various dynasties, therefore it had many rich ancient Royal tombs, and many had yet to be discovered.

The grave robbing business had been striving there for hundreds of years. It was said that the first Emperor of the land (Qingshihuang) was buried around that region, many of the grave robbing families and clans had spent centuries there trying to strike the big prize. Generations of these robbers had been digging in the region but so far the richest tomb in history had not been found.

My contact in Chang'an was nicknamed the Night Owl; his name was Li Si Niu which literally meant Li family's fourth buffalo. He was an orphan like me, his entire family and village was destroyed by a devastating flood on the Yangzhi River. He was a beggar boy when he was taken in by a famous burglar named the Night Fox; Si Niu was trained by his teacher in the fine art of burglary, and some basic fighting skill.

His teacher Night Fox was not an ordinary burglar, he was also connected to the Wulin and he operated his craft following the values of the Wuxia. He had always

stolen from the rich and gave half the loot to help the poor. Thus both the teacher and the disciple were very well respected figures in the region.

Night Fox had since retired from his philanthropic activities while Night Owl had started his own smuggling enterprise, once in a while he still carries out his burglary activities to punish some corrupted officials and greedy merchants. His reputation as a burglar and a smuggler was only known to a very small circle in Chang'an as smuggling was a capital offense, but his connections with the Wulin in Chang'an would help us to find out more about the grave robbing business.

He would have his contacts, and I had sent by courier a large amount of gold pieces to him because I believe he would need to pay a high price for some information. Grave robbers were very secretive people; to get information from them we might have to pry their mouth open with gold.

The third location of the northern frontier (the place where the Yang family was exiled to) was the most difficult problem to tackle. The northern frontier was very far away, a very remote region where I did not know anybody. But I remembered that a friend of mine was travelling in that direction, I hope that he is now near that region.

This friend's nickname was the White Fan Scholar; his name was Shen Yi Cao. White Fan Scholar was the only person in my roving group that did not practice martial art, he was useless as a fighter, but he was very knowledgeable and a very good strategist. He could come up with a plan even in the tightest of situations; his wits had gotten us out of many difficult spots.

I wished I had him here with me now, but if he was anywhere near the northern border it would be even better as this investigation would need plenty of brain power as it was more complicated than the rest. According to Old Wang the Yang family in the north had disappeared almost seventy years ago, to follow such a cold trail I would need an intelligent person like White Fan.

White Fan was from a rich family in Shanxi; his family was famous in goldsmithing and money remittance business, I believe his family might be as wealthy as my employer Mister Kuan. When he was with my roving group, he was actually running away from his family who was forcing him to take over the Business Empire, but White Fan then had other plans, he wanted adventure.

But eventually when he returned home he found that his father had decided to sell off the entire family business because he believed that the northern Kingdom of Liao (Song dynasty's arch enemy) was getting too aggressive, there will be war in Shanxi soon.

After selling off all their assets, the entire clan moved south to the region of Jiangsu, the rich family adopted a low profile as not to attract unwanted attention, they were no longer engage in any form of business.

Meanwhile White Fan spent most of his time travelling around the country visiting old friends like me. Six months ago he passed through Luoyang and had spent some time with me catching up on old times. He told me that he was planning to visit some monasteries in Changbai Mountains (in Liaodong); he wanted to see the harvesting of Ginseng. (Ginseng was a special root that was very precious in Chinese Medicine)

White Fan's carefree travel had given me an added difficulty; he could be difficult to locate as he was on the move. But in the world of Wulin, there was always a solution as long as you have enough gold pieces to pay for it.

There exist a sister enterprise to the Swallows, it was called the Shadows. Shadows specialized in locating people, no matter whom and where, this network of stealthy trackers will hunt down the person, as long as you could tell them his name, his look and his general location or direction of travel.

The Shadows were not trackers with sniffing dogs running after the target; instead they depended on a network of Innkeepers, river boat man, carriage drivers, and restaurant servers. At the same time some local authorities were also under the payroll of this secret organization.

Anyone walking into a city or town would be noted, when the Shadows headquarters issue a name or a description, the records would be carefully matched, a huge bonus would be paid to the observer who could locate the target. Such an extensive network was very costly to maintain, therefore anyone wishing to use the service had better have the gold pieces to pay. This was the same reason I had sent gold pieces to Night Owl as I believe he might need the help of the Shadows in Chang'an to locate the grave robbers.

After writing these three lengthy notes, I waited for the proprietor of the textile shop to come back to me. He was back before long; I paid him 50 pieces of gold each for the two messages to Wuchang and Chang'an as they were straightforward delivery, the message to White Fan which involved the Shadows cost me 200 gold pieces. I did not even bother to negotiate the price as I knew this money was a very small issue to Mister Kuan. I decided to place another 500 pieces of gold for deposit so that my contacts in the various cities could correspond with me without having to pay.

After looking at the addresses the proprietor assured me that the messages to Wuchang and Chang'an being simple straight forward delivery would reach within a day. But the message to the northern frontier having no address would take longer; it would depend on how soon the Shadows could locate White Fan. And all fees were not refundable, regardless of success.

I was absolutely confident that the Shadows and the Swallows could do the job. Such organization strived on their reputation; they charged an astronomical price, but they provided top quality service.

Now that I had delegated my task to the respective parties, there was nothing much I could do other than wait for their results.

### **Little River Ghost in Wuchang (His account)**

A Swallow flew into my home today; bringing a message from my old friend Yan Ching, of course it was not really a swallow; it was a little boy who brought the message. Along with the message, the Swallows organization had sent a note informing me how to make a reply to this message; all subsequent correspondents would be paid by Yan Ching.

After reading the message, I realized my friend was in deep trouble, I immediately dropped everything I was doing. The first person I consulted was my advisor Old Li who was a wise old man; he had been in Wuchang all his life and he knew everybody in the city and knew everything that was going on. He would surely know something about the goldsmith shop in question; after being in Wulin for so many years, I had learned that before approaching somebody, it was wise to know as much as possible about that person first.

Old Li amazed me with his extensive knowledge of the goldsmith shop, he started his recital, "This goldsmith you mentioned is owned by Mister Jin, the business had been in his family for two generations. Besides selling gold jewelries Mister Jin also do remittance services, quietly received deposits and is also involved in money lending. Even though his shop was not authorized to issue receipts of deposit he had been doing it under the table, his money lending activities undoubtedly is illegal.

He had been able to conduct all this activities because he had the backing of a Magistrate in the city, but in his defense, he is not the only one doing such things, many goldsmiths are doing the same. Everyone would have their own backers. To get information from such a person could be difficult, unless you have a grip on him." He paused while he sipped his tea.

I asked, "What is the background of Mister Jin? Is he a Wulin person?"

Old Li continued, "He does not have a Wulin background, but he has a few sworn brothers who are well connected in the Wulin, the three He (surname pronounced as Her) brothers of the Four Seas protection agency are his sworn brothers. That is why even though Mister Jin does not know martial art he would not be easily taken in by intimidation."

I had heard of the He brothers, He Hu, He Pao and He Xiong, these three brothers operates a protection agencies specializing in inter-city transportation of precious cargo for merchants. They were known for their fighting skills and were very well connected in all aspects of Wulin; they have friends on both side of the law.

But they have a bad reputation of being greedy and unscrupulous in their conduct, they were bad examples of a Wuxia. They were respected because they are rich and powerful, not because of their characters.

I asked Old Li, "Can you think of a way that I can twist the arm of this Mister Jin? I do not think that he would willingly offer his information. Is there a weakness in him that I can exploit?"

Old Li was deep in thought for a moment, finally he said, "Sir, I understand your urgency, please allow me the time of one joss stick, I need to consult somebody before I can offer you my plan." I agreed and he hurried off on his mission.

One joss stick of time meant the duration that it took to burn off one joss stick, which was around 30 to 40 minutes.

When Old Li returned, he brought a young man with him; he introduced the young lad as his nephew. He explained his plan to me, "Sir, you might wonder why I knew so much about the operation of Mister Jin, the reason was that my nephew here works for him. He had been a junior clerk for Mister Jin for two years, he had been very unhappy with his employer ever since he worked there.

Mister Jin treated his employees very harshly and unfairly, and with his backings nobody in his employment could leave, those that tried to leave were either thrown in jail by the Magistrate for some crime they did not commit or they end up being beaten up by the He brothers' thugs. It was because of this that I was reluctant to involve my nephew in the beginning. But now I have a plan to force Mister Jin into cooperation with us." I was delighted.

Old Li continued, "I observed that we are dealing with a group of greedy people; Mister Jin, the He brothers, and the corrupted Magistrate. To deal with such characters, we must break them down one by one with self-interest, when they start having conflicting interests this grouping of greedy people will breakdown, then Mister Jin will be isolated." Old Li was indeed a good strategist.

Old Li continued, "We have to tackle two different sets of relationships here, first is that of Mister Jin and his business partner the Magistrate, this is a financial relationship, this would be easily broken. Second is the relationship between Mister Jin and his sworn brothers, the He's. This relationship is based on Wulin values, we must handle with care."

He continued, "I believe we can leverage on the first relationship to twist Mister Jin's arm, which is where my nephew comes in. He had discovered that Mister Jin had been cheating the Magistrate off his share of the business; Mister Jin kept two sets of accounts, one which he shows to his business partner, while the other was his real cash flow.

My nephew would be able to steal a copy of the real account for last year; if we present it to the Magistrate he would have Mister Jin's head chopped off. With this accounts in our hands, we could easily get Mister Jin to do anything for us. But after helping us, my nephew's life will be in danger; I hope you can arrange something for him."

I said, "It is a brilliant plan, do not worry about your nephew, after this is over he can choose to work for me or work for my friend in Luoyang. He and his family will be under our protection; even with the He brothers' backing Mister Jin would not be able to do anything. He would not dare to touch us."

Old Li added, "Sir, I believe in dealing with Wulin characters, we should do it according to the rules of the Wulin."

I said, "You mean I should first approach this Mister Jin for help before I take drastic measures?"

Old Li replied, "Yes Sir, that is the proper way, we can even offer him money, if he is arrogant and turn us down then he will have nothing to complain when we hit him. The moment that happens, the He brothers will come to his help and we will have every right to show them what we are made of. Nobody in the Wulin can say that we were bullying the weak."

I said, "Yes, I agreed, we should do it the proper way."

Meanwhile, I instructed my lieutenants to activate all my fighters; I hope I do not have to use them.

### **My visit to Mister Jin (River Ghost's account)**



Early next morning I paid a visit to Mister Jin at his goldsmith shop. He received me with basic courtesy and brought me to the back of the shop. I went straight to the point, I explained to him that I need some information on the rental remittance made a year ago to a shop in Luoyang; he was able to recollect the exact transaction immediately.

But instead of offering help, he started to ask me probing questions on why I need this information; I told him that I was in no position to reveal the reasons. I humbly begged him again for his help, and I hinted that I was willing to pay for the information. He kept making excuses while indirectly enquire how much money I was willing to pay. I knew this greedy merchant was trying to squeeze money out of me, I knew that if I show too much anxiety he will ask for the sky.

But I also knew that my friend in Luoyang was anxiously waiting for my information, so I went straight to the point and asked, "Dear Mister Jin, how much money would you want to sell me this information?"

He smiled his greedily; he took his time and sipped his tea before he replied, "Dear River Ghost, I am not in the business of selling my customer's information, if you insist that I break this rule, you will have to compensate me well for it."

I knew this was nonsense, an unscrupulous person like Mister Jin had very few rules that he was not willing to break, he just want to play with me and squeeze more money out of me. He was beginning to irritate me very much, if it was under other circumstances I would have exploded, but for the sake of my friend I humbly asked again, "How much?"

He said, "I had always been interested in your business of shipping, if you would make me the majority partner of your enterprise, I would happily provide you with the information."

If he had asked for ten thousand gold pieces I would have been less upset, this cunning old fox wanted my shipping operation. That was the limit, I did not want to negotiate anymore, and I want to punish this greedy man, I will have him begging for mercy by tomorrow evening.

When I left his goldsmith shop, I saw him smiling triumphantly at the door, he was confident that I will go back to beg him. He was also confident that with the backing of the local Magistrate and the He brothers I would not dare to touch him. But he did not know that soon I will have a triumph card in my hand which would make the Magistrate obsolete and to me the He brothers were rubbish.

On the way back to my house, Old Li informed me that he had already told his nephew to go ahead with the theft of the accounts book; this good advisor had read my mind.

I am the River Ghost of Wuchang; I will not be intimidated by some greedy merchant, if he wanted trouble, I shall give it to him. I had everything prepared for this confrontation, I will win it.

### **Mister Jin Regretted his Greed (River Ghost's account)**

Old Li's nephew brought the old accounts book to us in the late afternoon; he got it easily as Mister Jin was celebrating his coming windfall with his favourite

mistress. Mister Jin told everyone that I will be back the next day begging him. This greedy fool had no idea.

I looked through the accounts book and torn a page out of it and sent it to Mister Jin, with the instruction that it was important that he read it right away. According to Old Li's nephew, when he left Mister Jin's mansion, the man was already half drunk with his mistress. This page from his accounts book would surely sober him up.

By late evening, Mister Jin had sent a reply requesting that I meet him tomorrow at a deserted warehouse outside the city. The fight is on, I shall teach them a lesson or two. I doubt Mister Jin will be having much sleep tonight. I ordered my fighters to be on alert in case of a sneak attack, while I sharpened my daggers for tomorrow's meeting.

As a protector of my employer's shipping interest, I was required to build an army of fighters, my agency's ships passes through many cities along the Yangzhi River; they also sail through remote parts where there was no Imperial control. My duty was to protect these ships wherever they are, most of the time we do so without the help from the local authorities. My group of fighters had fought bandits, local thugs and fighters from other business rivals, they were experienced mercenaries. If Mister Jin thought that I would be intimidated by the He brothers' bunch of bullies, he would be in for a surprise.

Not many people knew about the actual size of my army, I had taken care to hid this fact, I did not want the local authorities to get worry and I did not want my business rivals to try and build an army to match mine. I had usually kept my forces dispersed over cities along the river so that at any one time my headcount in Wuchang would not be alarming, but for this occasion, I had gathered many of my forces.

### **The Fight (River Ghost's account)**

Bright sunny day. Good day for a fight. Good day to punish the evils of the world.

We arrived at the warehouse slightly early to find that Mister Jin and the He brothers were already there. I brought with me only ten of my best fighters; I had another two hundred waiting nearby. I was very confident of my advantage in this conflict, I wanted to see the reaction of the He brothers when I brought only a small number, I would like to see if they would take advantage of my smaller number. If they were the bullies that I thought they were, then I would teach them a good lesson.

They had laid out tables and chairs in the middle of the warehouse; in keeping with the tradition of Wulin they had prepared the place for the meeting (as they were the ones who initiated this meeting). Even though the undertone was hostile, we still spent time on some polite words before we got to the point.

The host Mister Jin finally spoke, "River Ghost, we had never intruded into each other's territory, we had never poke our noses into each other's affair. Yesterday you had broken this harmony by stealing my..." He paused for a moment trying to

find the right words; I believe he did not want the rest to know that what I had taken was just an accounts book. He was trying to hide the fact that he was cheating his business partner (the Magistrate); I believe he might be cheating many others, including the He brothers.

He continued, "My documents. Such action was very unbecoming of a Wulin person. What have you got to say for yourself?"

I replied, "Mister Jin, you are nothing but a greedy fool, so do not speak to me about the practice of Wulin. When I needed your help yesterday, I was begging you for some information, but you had taken advantage of my need and you had tried to "rob me when my house was on fire" (this phrase means taking advantage of someone's predicament). You had the nerve to ask me for my shipping business, how dare you. Your greediness had left me no choice but to resort to such unconventional means, you brought this upon yourself."

The humiliated Mister Jin defended himself, "I was just trying to negotiate the best deal, what was wrong with that? You have insulted me, therefore insulted my brothers here, you have bitten off more than you could swallow."

This cunning old fox was trying his best to draw the He brothers in; he wanted them to back up his argument. The He brothers had no choice; brotherly convention requires them to support Mister Jin regardless of circumstances. Even if the He brothers disagreed with Mister Jin they had to fight this fight first and then resolve their brotherly disagreement later.

He Hu, the eldest of the three came forward and addressed me, "River Ghost, we are all practitioner of the Wulin values; we know the right and wrongs. I have every respect for your fighting skills, but at the same time you must not undermine ours. I advise you to return the documents and we shall let it pass. You have to pay me and Mister Jin 500 silver pieces for all the trouble you had caused."

Another greedy fool!

I smirked at him and said, "He Hu, what makes you think that I am afraid of you and your brothers? You have heard my account of what happened when I went to beg from your brother Mister Jin, do you think he was righteous to take advantage of my predicament? Was that what you meant by rights and wrongs of Wulin's value?"

I continued, "He Hu, I do not think we are discussing rights and wrongs here, I think your only interest was the amount of gold you can gain from this occasion. I do not want to waste any more time with you, if you want a fight I will honour you with one."

I turned to Mister Jin, "If you do not provide me with the information this morning, I will have the 'document' sent to the relevant party. I am sure you know what I meant." Mister Jin face turned pale.

He Hu was furious at my casual dismissal of his threat, he said, "River Ghost, you have only ten fighters against my forty, what makes you think that you can walk out of here alive. You are a fool."

I replied, "This ten here are just my servants, I have another two hundred outside, I left them there because this warehouse was too small. If that is not enough, within ten miles radius I can raise another five hundred fighters, 50 miles

radius I can have another 2000, in a hundred miles radius I will have 5000 fighters.”

Old Li my trusted advisor as usual had read my mind; he signaled for the 200 fighters to come forward, they crowded the entire warehouse; many of them were not able to step in at all.

The look on my opponents' faces was hilarious, now I had the upper hand to the situation. I did not want to kill them, but I wanted to break their spirit.

I said, “He Hu, I do not intend to win you all by sheer number, which is not the Wulin way, let's have a one on one, you and me. We will settle our differences, if I lose, I will return the document to Mister Jin and never bother him again. If you lose, Mister Jin will give me the information and I want your assurance that you will never seek revenge on anybody who had helped me in this incident.”

It was impossible for He Hu to turn down this offer without losing face; he knew it was better to fight me alone than to take on my whole army, he had to agree. Everybody moved aside to make space for the fight.

He Hu was a heavily built; his weapon of choice was the long stabbing spear, this weapon was very effective for fighting a group of opponent. Long spears were usually used in the army because they gave a tactical advantage when deployed in number; a number of spears facing the opponent were like a wall of death. But its disadvantage was at close quarters fighting, the moment the opponent was able to get up close, the spear was quite useless.

I had encounter opponents with spears before; I knew exactly how to deal with them, I had fought a hundred battles in my life, a person like He Hu did not worry me. He Hu was nothing but a big bully; he was big which would be very menacing for an inexperienced fighter, but to me he was just a big chunk of meat.

I held daggers in both hands as we circled each other; finally he attacked with a stabbing thrust, he had put his entire body weight behind this move, which showed me how foolish he was. I easily sidestepped his spear.

He followed up with numerous stabs and swipes hoping to catch me off balance. As I avoided his strikes, I was watching for an opening to get inside. Finally the opening came when he was trying to stab my left shoulder, I turned my body to avoid the tip of the spear while I laid my dagger on the spear and slide them along the entire length of the spear quickly towards his grip.

As he was caught wrong footed by my speed, he could not move back in time, as my daggers slide towards his fingers holding the spear he had no choice but to let go of his weapon to avoid having his fingers being sliced off. As he stumbled backwards his spear fell to the ground, I followed up my momentum and made a small cut on his face, he tried to block with his hand and I cut them as well. Even before he could fall to the ground, I had already made three cuts on him.

As he tumbled to the ground, I made another in-step into his space and pointed my dagger to his face. Even with his face covered in blood I could see the fear in his eyes. His youngest brother He Xiong tried to rush forward to help his brother, but the second brother He Pao restrained him; he knew that if they were to ambush me from behind they were all dead. Instead He Pao who obviously was the wisest of the lot shouted to me begging for mercy for his brother.

I had no intention of killing anyone here; I just wanted to teach them a lesson. Slowly I turned and walked away from the humiliated fighter; the brothers rushed

forward and helped their brother to his feet. Without looking at them, I said, "Now get out of here before I change my mind, it would be wise if you lead a humble life in the future, if hear any of your bullying acts again I would not be so merciful the next time."

By now Mister Jin was on his knees as his trembling legs could no longer support him, he knew he was the cause of all this trouble. With his shaky voice he begged, "Dear Hero River Ghost, please have mercy on me, I am just a foolish old man trying to make a living, I will give you all the information you want. Please spare this worthless life."

He replied, "You are right, you are a worthless greedy fool, your stupidity had wasted much of my time, if my friend in Luoyang end up in trouble because of this one day's delay, I will come back for you. Now go to your shop and get me the details of the transaction, I will come to you right away."

As his legs were still too weak to walk, he crawled out of the warehouse, and I could see a trail of urine behind him.

After dismissing my fighters, I rushed to Mister Jin's goldsmith shop, this time my reception was much warmer than the previous time. He respectfully bowed before me in the presence of the entire household; I had no time for that, I told him to dismiss everyone and we went to his office to look at his transaction records.

The first rental remittance was done slightly more than three years ago, and then followed by annual renewal. Mister Jin remembered clearly it was always the same middle age man whom came to him and the man paid in cash, the instruction was to remit the money to Luoyang to pay for the rental of the shop house. He added that the man spoke with a Luoyang accent, Mister Jin was quite wary as he wondered why the man being from Luoyang did not pay the rent himself, instead he had spent remittance fees to have someone else paying for him.

If was by sheer coincidence that he saw the same gentleman in Luoyang one time when Mister Jin went there on a business trip, he knew that the man lives in the eastern part of the city. But he was not able to recall the exact location as he was not really familiar with the city. The name stated on the transaction was Mister Shao; it was probably a fake name.

I believe that was all Mister Jin could provide, after the humiliating defeat I doubt he would dare to hide anything from me. I sent all this information to my good friend in Luoyang; I hope it would help him. On my own initiative I decided to bring Mister Jin to Luoyang to, with some luck he might be able to spot the man in the city, or at least he could tell us where he saw the man last. I told him to prepare to set off immediately, it would be a two days' trip on a fast horse.

### **Chang'an (Night Owl's account)**

Yan Ching's message was delivered to me by a beggar, it must be a Swallows message; they never show themselves unnecessarily. The message was clear; my

friend was in trouble, he needed me to find out about grave robbers, specifically the group that did a job in Luoyang....three years ago.

I had some knowledge about the grave robbers business, because as a smuggler, I too work in the night. Occasionally we come across each other, but as a rule we did not acknowledge one another as we were both on the wrong side of the law.

Grave robbers groups were a secretive; they did not like to mix around with people outside their circles, not only were they outlaws, but they were also despised by the society as their job was deemed dirty and inauspicious. Thus these professionals do not display their trade openly; they usually have a separate life during the day.

For convenience, they usually disguised themselves as farmers during the day to do subsistence farming while at night they would conduct their more lucrative activities. As a farmer, they were also able to explain the digging equipment in their house.

I had come across several groups of these robbers, I had seen their activities and I had a good idea which family was involved in this trade. I had never attempted to approach them as I was not interested in that business, and I was rather superstitious about this unconventional trade. But this time, for the sake of my friend, I had to dismiss the taboo and approach them.

I had a friend who had some contact with this people; in fact his ancestors were in the grave robbing business. But ever since his grandfather days, the clan had moved away from this trade as it was believed that this trade had brought much bad luck to the family. I shall find out from him how to go about my investigation. His name was Liu Kun.

I explained my problem to Liu Kun; he was reluctant to reveal the grave robbers identity as it was ethically wrong for him to do so. He was also worried that my investigation would bring in the authorities and he would be responsible for the trouble that would befall the grave robbing syndicate. I assured him that I would not involve the local authorities and the robber's identities would remain a secret, and the robbers would be handsomely compensated for their trouble. He reluctantly agreed.

A meeting was set up for me to meet a clan that was in the business, this clan of grave robbers was a relatively big group as it consisted of three generations working together. I would be meeting the leader of the clan and this elder was very knowledgeable about the activities of many other groups in the area.

No name was given, and I was to meet him after midnight at a cemetery outside the city, I was told not to try and learn the identity of this gentleman, he will not show his face to me. I had to attend the meeting alone.

That night I made my way to the cemetery, alone. It was a cold winter night, when I entered the quiet cemetery I could hear the wild dogs howling in the distance, in the darkness I had only a single lantern to show me the way.

At the fringe of the darkness, I thought I saw some shadowy figures flashing by, but they were clothed in all black attire making them hardly detectable in the darkness of the night. I reached the appointed spot which was a big tomb in the middle of the cemetery. Further down from where I stood was the mass graveyard which was the burial ground for the poor, these people had no money to bury their

dead in a proper grave, and thus they were buried in simple shallow graves and sometimes the cremated ashes were put in an urn by the road side.

Often unidentified dead bodies were also buried in these grounds as there was nobody to pay for the burial; traditionally these mass graves were said to be haunted by unhappy spirits who did not have the chance to move on after their death. All this eeriness added to the coldness of the night.

I wait for a long time; I could feel many pairs of eyes watching me as I sat there. Eventually, a voice spoke up from the darkness beyond, "Night Owl, do not move, do not turn your head, if you do I will disappear and you will never see me again. Is that clear?"

I nodded.

The voice continued, "I understand from Liu Kun that you wanted to know about a job in Luoyang three years back. A job that did not involve robbing a grave; it was to dig a tunnel of about three miles from a shop to a location underneath a rich man's mansion. Is that correct?"

I nodded again.

The voice, "I had to clarify that to make sure we are talking about the same job. I heard of this job from one of my contacts in the business, it was not done by my clan, it was a tragic event."

He continued, "This job was taken by the Zhang family who lived in the village of Lu Po, three of them went on the job; the father and two sons, they were paid handsomely in advance. But at the last stage of the dig, right before they broke into the chamber, their hirer tried to kill them; only the youngest son came back alive. The father and the elder brother were murdered by this unscrupulous people. Such treacherous act were common in our business, because most of the time the hirers were afraid that the grave robbers would leak information about them."

He continued, "Therefore grave robbers had to protect ourselves by finding out about the hirers before we took the contract, we had our ways. But this time the Zhang's were too careless and they paid the price. The youngest Zhang who managed to escape had brought his family to the hills to hide from this people. He is anxious to seek revenge; perhaps you can help him to achieve his goal."

I assured him that I will help the Zhang family.

He said, "I had agreed to Liu Kun to see you not because I wanted your money, I just wanted to see that justice is done for the Zhang family, as fellow professionals I felt I could not allow such injustice to go unpunished. Unfortunately grave robbers are not skilled in martial art, we could not fight them. I will not collect a single piece of gold from you for this information, I just wanted justice."

I respected this gentleman, even though he was not a Wulin person, he certainly carried some of the values better than many so-called Wuxia.

I said, "Dear Sir, I have the utmost respect for your chivalrous character, I promise you that you shall have your revenge for the Zhang family. Please tell me where I can find this Zhang young man; I need to find out more information from him."

The voice said, "He is here."

Slowly a dark figure emerged from the shadow, as he edged forward I was able to see that he was a young man of about twenty, he was dressed in black from

head to toe. He was slightly built but his steps showed his firmness and strength, he was the perfect specimen of a grave robber, slimness and strength. The slimness was an important factor as the grave robbers were often working in confined space; the strength was a prerequisite for the hard work he had to endure.

I said, "Dear Sir, I thank you for all the trouble." But there was no reply; the owner of the voice had melted away into the night. To a professional like him, there was no need for a 'thank you'.

The young man stood before me and stared at me for a while. Finally I said, "You are Master Zhang?"

He nodded and said, "Yes, my name is Zhang Xi Lu, my family had been in this business for three generations."

I said, "Please tell me something about the job in Luoyang."

Zhang Xi Lu replied, "My family worked in a small unit of three, my father, my brother and I. We were the highest category in our profession; there were several categories of grave robbers. The lowest were those that rob the grave by fast and brutal digging, digging up the grave from the front, these people were unskilled robbers; they finish their job in one single night and destroy everything in their path.

The second category were tunneling experts, they will dig a tunnel from a distance away to enter the grave from underneath. This stealthy way will preserve the external of the tomb therefore nobody will know that the grave had already been emptied. But these tunneling experts lack skills which we possessed; direction. Very often they will end up in the wrong tomb and they will have to dig another tunnel adjusting the direction until they get it right. This was a waste of time and usually ends up destroying more than they intended to.

My family had a special technique using a direction finding device which I cannot reveal to you, it's my family heirloom. With this device we could accurately dig a tunnel to a specific location 3-5 miles away. Therefore we were most suitable for the job in Luoyang; this expertise had brought us to this disastrous job."

He continued, "We were offered the job by an unknown intermediary, he came to us one day and seems to know a lot about our operation. He offered us a huge amount of gold for the job; it was irresistible both financially and professionally for my father. The money was good and equally important my father wanted to test our digging technique in the city environment, no grave robber had ever done that before. We were thrilled by the challenge."

His eyes began to tear up as he talks about his father, he said, "Arrangements were made for us to travel to Luoyang; we were secretly surveying the city for days, finally my father decided on the direction of East to West approach. We quietly conducted another survey of the buildings and the soil condition of the approach route, after one month of studying he decided on a shop house in the east side of Luoyang as our start point of the dig.

The hirer rented the shop house for us to conduct our operation. This operation was very different from our normal grave robbing activities as the city was a very noisy place, we were able to do our digging in broad daylight in the privacy of our little shop house.



In the city nobody really cares when there was a loud bang or a tremble underground, city folks were simply too busy with their own life. Nobody bothered us. Every day, two of us will dig, and the remaining one will quietly carry the soil and rocks to the other parts of the city to be discarded. The shop remained closed all the while; we had built a doorway leading to the alley behind so that nobody will see us coming in and out of the place. Nobody knew we were there at all.

It took us more than a year to complete the job; it was a perfect execution, we hit within one foot and two inches of the intended target. At the last moment before we could break in to the target chamber, my father went to seek instruction for the final penetration; he was instructed to do so. We were told that the break through must be coordinated from someone inside, but now I know that to be untrue, they wanted to eliminate us when the job was done.

We were told to rest for two days before we make the final break, my father was suspicious, and he sent me away to another part of the city. I was told to keep in contact with him every three days at a teahouse, I was reluctant to go but my father told me that it was important that people would know the truth if anything should happen to them. He did not show up at the next meeting, I went to the inn they were staying I was told that they were killed by bandits the night before.

I knew that I was up against some powerful people who did not hesitate to kill, I could not fight them, and I did not even know who they were. Before my father sent me away, his last instruction was that if anything happened to him, I was to come back home and take the family to safety. With my father and elder brother dead, I was then the head of the family; I was responsible for their safety.

As I was hiding from these people, I did not even dare to collect the remains of my father and brother. I only dare to watch from a distance as the local authorities buried them in a shallow grave in the outskirts of the city. I had failed them, I did not even give them a proper burial." He was weeping.

He continued, "I wanted revenge, but I could not stay in Luoyang for too long, I had to come back to Chang'an to my village to move my family to safety. I came back and settled my family in the hills, as soon as they were settled safely; I went back to Luoyang and kept watch on the shop house. I wanted to find out who these people were.

I kept watch for months on the shop, I saw a variety of people going in to the shop house; I believe a carpenter was sent in at some stage. I could tell as he was carrying his equipment, I believe they were building a door at the far end of the tunnel.

I followed some of these people to see where they lived, but they seem to be of a very diverse background, there was a physician, an innkeeper, a constable, a monk and even a butcher. They did not seem to know each other, and they did not acknowledge each other when they meet in the street. I believe they were working for someone behind the scene; this master-mind controlled these people individually. I am quite sure they did not have knowledge of each other."

He continued, "After watching them for months, I began to realize a pattern, every few days every one of them would visit the Guan Yu temple on the east of Luoyang, they visit the temple at different days, different times, I believe they receive their instruction from there.

After some time, I realized I did not have the power to seek revenge on this big organization. And I had the responsibility of the family; I had three younger brothers and my mother to care for. I came back and told my story to one of the elders in my village, he told me to take care of my family first, one day when the opportunity arise, then I will have my revenge. I hope this is the day Sir.”

By now dawn was breaking, I was very saddened by this young man’s tragic story. I promised him that I will help him to the best of my ability; I told him that I would need him to travel to Luoyang with me. I might be able to right the wrongs done to him.

I brought him back to my house, after sending a message to Yan Ching about my findings and informing him that I was bringing the young man to Luoyang we set off for the city. It would take us two to three days to reach Luoyang; I had messages sent ahead at different interval to have fresh horses prepared for us so that we would not be delayed.

### **Back in Luoyang (Yan Ching’s account)**

While I waited for the results from my friends, I kept the shop house under surveillance just in case the thieves make the mistake of coming back. Meanwhile the city was sealed up like a cocoon by the General’s army; Luoyang city had a population of 500,000, it was impossible to do a closer search of the city without arousing suspicion. I just hope that the thieves were still unaware that we had discovered the theft; I hope they were still waiting to see our reaction.

I believe when a person is seeking revenge in such an elaborate manner, he would definitely want to see the result of his years of work; he would not leave the city yet. He was probably waiting for us to discover the theft. He might not bring the Jade Statue out of the city yet as he would like to enjoy his handiwork and watch the devastation he brought to us.

If I did not read his mind wrongly, he might even be waiting for us to get to him, he would want to watch Mister Kuan kneel down before him and beg for mercy. Such a person surely craved for the satisfaction of the revenge, he would not want to hear it for a third party; he would want to see it himself.

Such a person was unpredictable; the hatred was just too great, normal logic did not apply to such an individual.

On the third day, I got a reply from River Ghost, as I had expected the goldsmith shop did not yield much information. The only important clue was that the rental was from someone in Luoyang, I had expected that. Now he was bringing the goldsmith proprietor to the city, hopefully he could identify someone here... but with a city of 500,000 there was little chance.

By evening, the reply from Night Owl came, there were more information here. The people Master Zhang had seen and followed were described in detail, immediately I went to the Shadows Syndicate to have this few people under surveillance and to find out whom they were. I will have some results by tomorrow.

I knew this group of people was just low level operative for this organization; I must wait for more details to emerge before I make the next move. My main objective was not the thieves; it was the recovery of the Jade Statue...intact. The people behind this plot could be dealt with later. The entire Kuan clan's lives were on the line; the only thing that could save them was the Jade Statue, not the thieves. The psychologies of the mind behind this theft were clearly resourceful, and determine, if I spooked them by arresting the few people, they might just destroy the Statue. If the statue was destroyed the game would be over, whether we could catch the thieves after that would not matter anymore.

I had to wait for White Fan; the northern settlement should provide some clues to the identity of this people. The Shadows Syndicate had informed me that they were already on the trail of White Fan. By tomorrow, I would have some information on the people we were watching in Luoyang. And the Guan Yu temple...

### **Yan Ching in Luoyang (Yan Ching's account)**

5<sup>th</sup> day

Night Owl and River Ghost had arrived in Luoyang this morning after a mad dash over a vast distance. With the Shadows network we had been able to arrange fresh horses for them at every stop; they travelled without rest for the past one and a half days. I have yet to receive news from White Fan.

I went to Mister Kuan's study to report my finding; they were anxiously waiting for it. I smiled and told Mister Kuan, "The bad news is that your thousand gold pieces had been spent."

He just waved me on and said, "Tell me the important information, what have you came up with?"

I said, "As I had expected, it all leads back to Luoyang, as of now, we know who dug the tunnels, but we do not know the person behind it. We know the person who rented the shop house was from Luoyang, but we do not have his identity yet. We have the identity of several people who had been to the shop house, and we are having them followed.

But we have an important clue here as we suspect the communication centers in Guan Yu temple, we will check that out. My friends had arrived, one of them specializes in burglary, and he would be able to check on the temple tonight. They had travelled a vast distance without rest; I want them to rest first."

The General said, "A burglar?"

I replied, "Yes, you do have a problem with that?"

He said, "No, no, I was just curious. Do whatever you need to do, just get the statue back."

He added, "If you need my army to round up everybody in the temple I could do it. Do you need it? Do you need more manpower? If you do just say so, I have another brigade of five thousand just outside the city walls."

I replied, "I thank you Sir for this offer, I do not need them at the moment, we cannot afford to alert the enemy before we safely retrieve the statue, if they destroy

it, it all over for us. I am anxiously waiting for one more source of information before I can take decisive action. We pray that the information reaches us in time.”

I added, “I will give it another day or two, if my northern source yields no result, then we think about storming the temple.”

I left the two worried old men to their misery while I went to check on the Guan Yu temple myself. I sat opposite the temple in a tea shop; I sent two of my top men inside (pretending to be worshippers) and check out the surrounding. I could not go in personally because being the head of security for the Kuans I was probably easily recognized.

Guan Yu temple was a medium size temple, it was operated by a few Taoist priests and the temple was quite popular among the locals of Luoyang. It was probably fifty to a hundred years old; such temples were common all over the Kingdom.

Meanwhile I had the Shadow Syndicate working on two groups of people; the few Taoist priests in the temple and the few people that the young Master Zhang (the grave robber’s son) had spotted coming out of the shop house. I should be getting some information soon. For now, I watch...

### **The Shadows’ Report**

By mid afternoon, the Shadows had handed in their findings on the two groups of people, they were as followed;

The Taoist priests—there was eight priests in the temple, most of them were not locals of Luoyang, they were mainly from Zhengzhou and Kaifeng, two cities neighbouring Luoyang. Only the head priest was from Luoyang, upon further investigation, they found that his name was Cheng Xin Ren before he decided to become a priest. He had been a priest for the past forty years. The Shadows were still investigating their respective family background; the report would be in tomorrow.

The group of people who was seen visiting the shop house; one was a physician by the surname of Xie, the butcher also surname Xie and the carpenter by the surname Cheng. A pattern seems to be forming, they seem to be related, same surname, even though they do not acknowledge each other in the street, but I believe they were related. How were these families connected to the Yangs? Why were they working for the Yangs? Were they paid agents to perform a task just like the Zhang family (grave robbers)?

I do not have answers to these questions yet. Tonight when Night Owl enters the temple, we might find out more.

### **The Owl enters the Temple (Night Owl’s account)**

After a nice long nap, I got up and looked for Yan Ching, found him in his study. He updated me on the case, combining the information from me and River Ghost we were almost certain that we were on the right track. The only thing we could do

now was to break into the temple's private quarters and see if we could find out more. I was obviously the best candidate for the job. We wait for night fall.

It was not necessary to wait for midnight as this area of town was quite deserted after sundown; I made my way in through the back walls. It was easy.

The temple was built over quite a big area, as most of the halls and shrines were public area, they were already covered by Yan Ching's men this morning. I decided to focus on the priests' living quarters and a shrine that was cordoned off. This shrine was discovered by Yan Ching's men when they secretly surveyed the temple this morning, worshippers were not allowed into this shrine, and nobody seems to know what it was for.

As I stealthily made my way through the corridors, I could hear laughter's coming from the priests' living quarters. I climbed up to the roof with ease; my cloth-sole shoes did not make a sound. I slowly removed a piece of the tiles from the roof and looked inside and saw the priests' having their dinner, they were drinking wine and were having an extraordinarily sumptuous feast. That was unusual; Taoist priests were normally very conservative people, even though some of them do drink wine and eat meat, they usually do not over indulge.

I believe these bunch of priests were pretenders, they were facilitating the communication for the syndicate. During the day they pretend to be priests, but they could not bear to live the austere lifestyle at night, so they stuffed themselves with good food during the night.

I opened a few more tiles so that I could get inside the roof, it did not take me long to get to the cross beam directly on top of the dinner party. I laid there quietly listen to the conversation, as they drank more and more wine, they started to talk more.

I got bits and pieces of the conversation, most of the time the older priest was complaining about how wrong it was to drink and eat so much. He kept reminding everyone that Old Granny will be very angry if she finds out what they were doing. I believe the *Old Granny* was the name of their superior, or may even be the Mastermind.

The younger priests were consoling him that nobody would find out about this dinner. As they babbled through the night, I was about to leave when the older priest said something that captured my interest. He said, "Xiao Yuan, tomorrow when you goes back to visit Granny, make sure you do not smell of wine, if not we will all be in trouble." The young priest Xiao Yuan dismissed his concern with a wave of his hand.

This was the break through that would lead us to this Old Granny, with some luck this would be the end of our quest.

I left the priests to their dinner and went to the secretive shrine; the locked door presented no challenge to me. Behind the door was a well kept sanctuary, it was paneled on three sides with steps, and on the layered wooden steps were row and rows of ancestral tablets (Ancestral tablets were wooden pieces with names of deceased ancestors' name written on it, it's used for remembrance and worship). I looked through the names on them, none of them were Yangs; they were the ancestors from three families, Cheng, Xie and Li. But the top rows of the panels were tablets that had no names on them!

I left the temple and reported back to Yan Ching, it was not even midnight.

## **Yan Ching began to see the Light**

When Night Owl came to me with his finding, I began to see the light; I knew we were getting closer. The doctor and butcher were surnamed Xie, the carpenter and the head priest were surnamed Cheng, it was no coincidence; they must be from the same family. These two families together with the third family were somehow related to the Yangs, and they were behind the theft of the Jade Statue. I just need to figure out the relationship and we would be closer to solving the mystery.

The most promising lead was that the young priest Xiao Yuan was going to visit the 'granny' tomorrow, he would lead us to deeper into the organization. I will have Night Owl and River Ghost led the tracking of this young priest, we were getting close.

I needed more information; I hope White Fan could deliver something enlightening to me.

### **In the North (White Fan's account)**

The north was very cold and remote, but somehow they managed to find me, the message was delivered by a stranger to my room. Before I could ask him anything he was gone.

After reading through the message carefully, I realized that the message had taken a long time to reach me as the message was dated more than three days ago. I knew I had to drop all my travel plans and go to the settlement. I checked with the innkeeper on the location of this exile settlement, fortunately it was not far away.

Along with the message, I was given 3 pigeons, if I needed to send a reply to Yan Ching, I could use them to send it to the nearest Swallows branch. I set off immediately; I hired the innkeeper's helper as a guide.

After half a day of ridding in the frozen landscape, we arrived at the remote settlement. I was a miserable place, the ground was frozen, and the trees were frozen, even the small stream running through it was frozen. I wondered how people could survive in such extreme environment.

As I walk through the little village, I realized that I was no longer in the Song Empire; this place was now occupied by the Kingdom of Liao. The villagers were mainly Liao tribesmen. The Kingdom of Song (A Chinese dynasty) and the Kingdom of Liao (Northern Kingdom) had been at war for decades, the border between them oscillates with the times.

After sometime, I managed to find a villager in Song dressing, I said, "Mister, I am foreign to this land in the north; I believe you are of Song origin, can you help me?"

He looked at me curiously and replied, "Yes, I am of Song origin. What can I do for you?"

I said, "Firstly I am looking for a Song exiled prisoners' settlement here, am I in the right place?"

He replied, "Yes, this place was a Song Dynasty exiled settlement, but it was abandoned years ago due to war between the two countries. My grandfather was the last exiled prisoner here; he decided not to go back to the Middle Kingdom, he married my grandmother who was a Liao lady, my clan had lived here ever since. About twenty years ago, the Liao army invaded this land, now we are citizen of Da Liao." He said proudly.

He added, "My grandfather told me that the Song rulers were very corrupted, he was sentenced by some evil officials unfairly and was sent here, he had no intention of going back. After the invasion, we were treated fairly by the Liao rulers; we were just like one of their own."

I asked him if he could bring me to his grandfather, but unfortunately he had passed away ten years ago, but his father who was second generation of the clan was here. I was brought before the father of this young man.

The family was surnamed Su, Mister Su (the father was about sixty years of age). He was happy to see a Song traveler, the family received me warmly. After some greeting I asked the old man, "Dear Mister Su, I am here to look for a family that was exiled here about eighty to ninety years ago. Can you help me?"

Old Mister Li nodded and said, "My father was the last prisoner in this exiled settlement, I was born even before he was pardoned by an Imperial Edict. At that time the rule was very lax here, even as a prisoner, he was allowed to married my mother who was a Liao woman. By the time he was pardoned, there were not many prisoners still in the camp, they stopped sending prisoners here long before that. I do not remember any family here."

He continued, "However, I was only a little boy at that time, so I might not remember too clearly, but there is one person who would surely know. That was the Magistrate who was in charge of this settlement; he might not be around anymore, but his son who was the Magistrate after him might have some records."

I was delighted, "Dear Mister Su, where can I find this Magistrate?"

Mister Su replied, "Their surname was Yuan, just like us they did not go back to the Middle Kingdom after the settlement was abandoned, they lived in the city half a day's ride from here, the city of Lingzhou, that place is still under Song sovereignty. You will have no problem finding the family as they are the richest family in Lingzhou."

The old man went on to mumble, "When the rulers are corrupted and weak, it is better to stay in a frozen place like this, you can wear warm clothing to protect yourself against the cold, but nothing can protect you against the evil of this world."

I truly believe that he was quite right; there is no protection against human evilness. I thanked the family and set off immediately for the city of Lingzhou.

I rode through the night and arrived at Lingzhou after midnight, the whole city was asleep. I managed to find an inn and checked with the innkeeper where the rich Yuan family lived.

Against all common courtesy, I went to call on the former-Magistrates' mansion at midnight. As I knocked on the door, I knew I had to do a lot of explaining to convince the sleepy Magistrate to talk to me.

Two sleepy servants opened the door for me; before they could say anything I put a piece of silver into each of their hands. I told them if they could convince their master to see me, I would give them another two pieces each. Their jaws dropped to the floor, they bowed to me profusely and showed me into the main hall. Getting through the servants was the first step, now I needed these two servants to be able to convince Mister Yuan to wake up and listen to me.

The drowsy Mister Yuan (Former Magistrate) was half dragged, half persuaded out of bed, reluctantly he came to the main hall and sat down. His eyes were so droopy that he did not even notice when I passed the silver pieces to the servant.

It was after a cup of nice hot tea that he finally woke up; he sat up and rudely demanded what I wanted.

I said, "Dear Mister Yuan, I am conducting an investigation of utmost importance, I am conducting this investigation on behalf of someone in Luoyang. Please listen to me." These few words caught his attention; I could see the sparkle in his eyes.

As a former Magistrate I believe Mister Yuan would be interested in what investigation I was conducting. There were two points that I found questionable about this Magistrate. Firstly, his family was the richest in the city, which would surely mean corruption; however it was not uncommon to have a corrupted magistrate, especially in such remote place. Therefore, when I mentioned investigation, Mister Yuan was curious.

The second point was that the family did not go back to the Middle Kingdom; they had chosen to stay in this godforsaken part of the world, I believe they were hiding from something.

When Mister Yuan sat up and listened, I knew I was on to something, I just did not know if his secret had anything to do with Yang family.

I decided to test him straightaway, "Dear Sir, my investigation involves a family that was exiled here long ago, the Yang family."

I watched him closely and I saw him swallow a few times. I was sure I was right on target, with sheer luck I had stumbled upon the right person in his weakest moment, he was ill-prepared for these questions, and I literally caught him half asleep.

I followed up quickly and said, "I believe your father was the Magistrate in charge when they arrived, they set off from Luoyang with 146 family members, all women and children. Do you recall the incident?"

He swallowed again and said, "No Sir, I was not the Magistrate at that time, I have no recollection of the family. If you want the records, I can show it to you, but it will take a few days, and I need to see your identity. Who are you working for?"

I decided to frighten him further, I said, "Mister Yuan, you do not want to know who I am, the day I show you my identity it will be an official visit, by then it will be too late for you."

It was common for an investigating officer to make an 'unofficial' visit to the subject first before the official investigation starts, this was to give the subject an opportunity to bribe him.

He almost collapses to the floor.



I continued my attack, "Mister Yuan, I believe you know something about that case, I had checked on many things before I came to you. Recently in the Imperial Capital, something had happened that might have involved this Yang family, the Emperor himself is interested at this case."

He fainted.

The two servants rushed forward and helped him back on the chair. Hot towels and incense were used to revive him. After some time he was resuscitated, as he opened his eyes and he saw me, he let out a sigh of anguish and fainted again.

The servants carried him back to his room, by now the entire household was awakened; everybody was staring at me who was still sitting in the main hall. When the eldest son approached me, I told him that I was an old friend of his father and I had very important news for him and that I must see him as soon as he wakes up.

Soon I was requested by Mister Yuan into his bedroom, he was laying there looking very sick. As I sat down by his bed, he dismissed everybody except me and the eldest son.

First he said to his son, "Dear son, what I am about to tell you was a family secret that I wish I did not have to tell you. I thought it was all over, I thought after my generation, this thing would have passed. But unfortunately it had come back to haunt us."

Then he looked at me, "Dear Sir, I want to emphasis to you that all this had nothing to do with my sons, and both my father and I were not bad people, we just wanted to help those poor souls. Yes, we took the money and became rich, that was the crime we had committed." He began to believe that I was an Imperial investigator; I just kept quiet and played along.

He was in tears, he continued, "Out of the 146 that left Luoyang, only 41 made it to here, three women and the rest were children. The children were ranged from thirteen years old to infants, my father knew that at least half of them will not survive to the next year.

But as the Magistrate of this poor place he was powerless to do anything. It happened all the time, this was a place for people to die, the Emperor did not want to sentence these women and children to death as it would be bad for his karma, he sent them here so that the land will do his dirty work.

But the Yang family was well connected; they had a friend in Yunnan who was prepared to spent a lot of money to purchase their release, the amount was huge. My father who was the Magistrate of this miserable place and was paid only fifty silver pieces annually, this friend of the Yang's was willing to pay two thousand gold pieces for the entire family.

My father was tempted. My father devised a plan to let the Yangs go without anybody knowing, he made use of the war between Song and Liao to cover up the escape.

He told their Yunnan friend to arrange the escape route from the neighbouring village, and we waited for a border war between the two armies. At that time the border conflicts between the two armies happened on a regular basis. Sometimes they just fought at the border; sometimes the fighting could push all the way to our settlement.

So he waited for a battle to happen and reported that the Liao army had come to our settlement and had killed all the women and children. That was what we reported to the Imperial war department, but in actual fact we released them to their Yunnanese friend and they had made their way back to the Middle Kingdom.

Because of the war between Song and Liao, the Imperial war department and the Imperial Legal administration had no time to bother with us, a few prisoners killed or taken by the Liao troops was not important. Nobody investigated this report. As they were only women and children we did not brand them, so today they would be the same as everyone else.”

Branding was sometimes practiced on exiled prisoners, the words ‘Imperial Prisoner’ would be burned onto the forehead of the victim. With this permanent mark the prisoner would never be able to go back to normal society.

My father was very worried about them betraying us, so with some of the gold pieces he hired a few of the former constables in our service to follow the family. And we had them under surveillance for a long time; two thousand gold pieces could do wonders. We had them tracked on and off for twenty years, we saw them slowly settled back into the society under different names and we were quite confident that they had forgotten their past. Up till recently, I just had received a report on them.

How did this come back to haunt us? I really could not understand.”

I was delighted; I had found the trail of the Yang family.

I asked him, “You said you had them under surveillance for twenty years? How did you and your father managed to do that?”

The former Magistrate replied, “At that time my father had ten constables under his command, to release the Yang family, he roped in the cooperation of all the constables. They had to be in it together, it was a capital offense to release Imperial exiles, and my father was the leader of the group. My father knew he must get everybody involved in the plot, it was all or nothing.

He split the gold pieces according to their ranks, and he appointed five of the constables to follow the Yang family to their respective settlement, these five were given a bigger share. It also worked well for them as they had wanted to return to the south too. These five constables kept track of the Yang family; they quietly followed this family to various cities as they settled to their new life.

This task was passed from generation to generation, in the beginning the progress report was sent to my father, and then it was sent to me when my father passed away. We maintained this contact through the years while we too settled into our new life. All the five constables had since passed away, now I am communicating with the second generation (the constables’ sons), the father (the constables) will tell the eldest son what had happened and why it was important to maintain contact. We all knew that if this was discovered, all of us will be sentenced to death, we could not take any chances.

But after years of observing the Yangs’, we became convinced that the worst was behind us, we believe the descendants of the Yang family had let go of their past and had gotten on with their new life and new identities. Gradually we wined down our surveillance on them, about ten years back we decided that we could stop doing it all together.

Last year, out of curiosity I sent someone to check on the respectively Yang family and found them to be quite normal, some of them were prosperous, some of them were not. The Yang descendants were spread across the entire Central Plains of the dynasty, there were so many of them now, they might not even know each other.

When they left here, they had taken up three different surnames as there were three women; I believe they were the daughter-in-law of the family. These three branches of the Yang family settled in different parts of the country, I believe after two or three generations, they did not even know each other.”

I asked him, “What were the surnames that they had taken, and where are they now?”

Mister Yuan told his son to take open his cupboard and retrieved a pile of letters, slowly he looked through them and he replied, “The Li’s were in Zhengzhou, the Xie’s were in Kaifeng and Cheng’s settled in Luoyang. They did not settle in these places in the beginning, slowly as the years went by they moved and these few places were the last destination as reported one year ago.”

The two other cities were one to two days journey from Luoyang.

I asked, “May I take a look at these letters?”

As I looked through the letters dating back to almost seventy years, I noticed the pattern of migration for the three different families; they were slowly drifting in the direction of the Luoyang region. It seems like the migration was coordinated to finally return home. They might have deceived Mister Yuan and his constables that the Yangs had forgotten their past, but they did not deceive me, I saw a hidden hand behind these migrations.

I carefully noted down all the names and addresses of the three families, and recorded their migration sequence through the years. By the time I was done, it was already dawn. After studying the letters and writing it down; I had greater insight into the three families.

From the 41 members that survived the trip to the north, there were three women, as Mister Yuan had pointed out they were probably the daughters or daughter-in-laws of the Yang family. These three women were probably married to the sons or nephews of the Yangs, when all the male members were executed, they became widows.

The children that survived the ordeal were sons and daughters of these three ladies or nephews as many of the other mothers died on the way to the north. As I slowly prodded deeper into the history of this family, I could feel the bitterness and despair of these three women at the exile settlement. They were left with no husbands, no brothers or father to protect them; they were left with a bunch of helpless children to care for. The environment in the north was impossible for adults, leave alone children.

It took me till late morning to compose my findings; I sent it off in one of the pigeons provided by the Shadows.

I also told Yan Ching that even if he had reasons to suspect these families’ involvement in the theft; he had to be careful about his approach. He had to find the master-mind first in order to find the statue, if he spooked them, the whole thing could be disastrous.

I pointed to him a fact I had discovered while going through the letters and studying the family tree, I noticed that the Cheng family in Luoyang had got an old great grandmother in the household, and she was one of the original three ladies that came out of the northern settlement, the other two women had since passed away. She was his best bet.

### **Yan Ching's account**

As Night Owl and River Ghost set off to follow the young priest Xiao Yuan, the Swallows Syndicate delivered the message from White Fan. The brilliant White Fan had almost single-handedly solved the entire mystery. Now we had clarified the relationship between the three families (Xie, Cheng and Li) and the exiled Yang family. They were the same people; they had changed their surnames because they were escaped convicts and they had lived among us for three generations. And they had not forgotten the crime committed against their ancestor, they still wanted their revenge.

It was remarkable that these three families had kept this mindset for three generations. After such a long time they still had the resolve to execute this theft which might lead to the death of their entire clan if discovered, they were still committed to this gamble. They were still so well organized that they were able to pull off such a complicated heist, it was so well orchestrated that they had almost gotten away with it...

Even with all this information, I was still far from recovering the Statue; they could still destroy it at any time. Now it's up to Owl and Ghost to find a way to recover the Statue safely before it's too late.

But now, at least we knew who we were up against.

### **So near and yet so far (Owl's account)**

River Ghost and I waited outside the temple for the young priest to depart for his 'granny', the streets were busy; we would have no problem in following him.

As soon as the young priest came out, River Ghost and I followed from a discreet distance and the young priest's tumbling foot step showed us the amount of wine he drank last night. His stumbling steps took us to the other end of the city; this was a quieter part of town.

This part of Luoyang was mainly occupied by middle class merchants; the houses were not too big and were not over ostentatious. This was indeed a good place to disappear in the city.

The priest entered a plain looking house; this house looked similar to many of the other houses along in this area. A stranger walking into this place might easily get lost in this maze of uniform buildings with identical front doors. We posted two lookouts at the front and back of the house. It was very difficult to remain undetected in this place because the whole street was deserted; anyone standing around at the front of the house would stick out like a sore thumb.

After some time, I decided to venture into house in broad daylight; it would take all my burgling skills to enter a house in broad daylight. I easily made it over the wall on the west side of the house, I decided to hide in the store room and observe the household through a window. I spent the entire morning there, by noon I had concluded that the house was not guarded, there were only a few servants.

I decided to venture into the main building; there were many rooms, as I went from one room to another I heard some noises. I followed the noises. It led me to a room which seems to be bigger than the rest, I listened outside the window, there were four to five voices coming from there. Among them I recognized the young monk's voice and another voice which sounded feeble and old... I believe I had found Old Granny.

I decided to leave it at that and come back tonight to have a more thorough reconnaissance.

When I went back to Ghost and our team, Yan Ching was already there, he was very relieved to see me safely back, and he showed me the message from White Fan. I realized we had hit the vipers' den.

### **Owl found the Jade Statue**

Night came, moon rise, cold winter night.

I made my way quietly along the corridors that I had passed this morning, when I reached the big hall it was brightly lighted up with candles and lantern. And the room was full of people. I noticed that even though the room was filled with almost a hundred men, women and children, it was absolutely silent. They were all looking towards the back of the room; there sat an old lady, she was lying on a reclined chair with her eyes closed. Behind this old lady was the beautiful Jade Statue!!!

A middle age man approached her side and whispered something to her ear; she opened her eyes and looked around at the faces. Her eyes were alert and sparkling; she sat up from her reclined seat and was helped to a big wooden arm chair. Despite her age, she was still nimble on her feet.

When she had settled into the chair, the entire household knelt down and greeted her respectfully. Finally she spoke up, her voice was sharp and clear, "My children, my family, we have arrived at our final destination. Our objective will be achieved soon. But Cheng Ting here had brought me some unfortunate news." She pointed to the middle age man.

She continued, "Our plot had been discovered, a small mistake I made eighty years ago had allowed them to trace this back to us, they will be on to us soon. I have decided to destroy the statue tonight, and you will all disappear from Luoyang. Houses and money and new identity had been prepared for your escape, you will go to the new cities and towns assigned to you and start your new life. All this had been briefed to you before, you should know what to do."

She continued, "I will not be going with any of you, I had gotten what I had lived for, I had my revenge for Yang family. I have discharged my duty. Cheng Ting will take over as the head of the family; he will organize your escape, please follow his instructions.

Wherever you are going to, whoever your new identity is, I order you not to forget your original surname was Yang, you will tell that to your eldest son and he will do likewise. We must not forget our ancestors.”

By now I had made my way to the wooden beams on the roof, I could hear the conversation clearly and I could see the Jade Statue. But I could not reach the statue without risking damaging it, the statue was placed on a delicate stand and it was guarded by three young men (probably the grandsons) who obviously had some martial art training. For them to destroy the Jade statue was very easy, for me to snatch the Statue from them was near impossible.

The middle age man, Cheng Ting said, “Grandmother. We will never forget our ancestry, I will organize a system to keep in contact after we disperse, we will come back together again just like the last time. But Granny, I beg you to come with us, we could not just leave you behind.”

Granny said, “Dear Grandson, I am old, I am tired, I have pains all over my body, I no longer want to suffer another day of this pain. I had forced myself to live through these past twenty to thirty years because I want to see the evil Kuan family destroyed and I was afraid that without me around you all might not have the determination to push for this ending. Now my job is done, I am ready to go, please let me be.”

Many of the family members started sobbing, quietly. But most of them were staring blankly at the Granny; they were like a battalion of well trained soldiers.

Granny turned to the statue and said, “It is such a pity to destroy this piece of beautiful jade, unfortunately it’s the only way to bring the wrath of the Emperor upon the Kuans... Cheng Ting, you do it.”

Cheng Ting said, “Yes, Granny.”

I was shocked; they were going to destroy the Jade statue right now. The moment it is broken, everything would be over for the Kuan clan, the General and maybe even my friend Yan Ching. And these three families unknowingly were also bringing death upon themselves because the moment the statue is gone, nothing would stop the General from launching his army to kill the entire household.

I had to do something; I had to stop this madness. I had no choice but to reveal myself, I came down from the cross beam and landed smoothly in the middle of room. I did not dare to land too close to the group of young men protecting the statue as it might cause them to do something stupid.

The whole room was shocked, the men moved forward to form a circle around me while others stood in front of Granny to protect her. I could see that the few men around the statue already had their hands on the statue. They were about to smash it.

I spoke calmly to defuse the tension, “Please calm down, I meant no harm, I am not here to punish anybody, and I just want to avert a disaster.”

Cheng Ting spoke up, “Are you working for the Kuans?”

I replied, “No, I am helping my friend who was the head of security of for the Kuans.”

Cheng Ting, “You are helping the evil Kuans to avert a disaster? You are too late.”

I said, “Dear Sir, the disaster is not only for the Kuan clan, it is also a disaster for your family as well. We had traced everything back to here, the simple fact that

I am here now proves that we know everything. The moment you destroy the Statue, General Zhen will launch his army against you, he will kill everybody. He is a military man, he does not hold back, the moment the army enters the city, and many innocent people will die. Your entire clan will not escape.”

His face turned pale, up till now the entire clan had always believed that they would escape. They had meticulously plotted their escape route through the years; they even had different identities and different life established in other cities. They had money stashed away to rebuild their businesses in their new lives, everything was taken care of. But now suddenly everything came crashing down, their dreams of a new life was shattered.

Granny’s face was sheet white; she was facing the prospect of having the entire family annihilated once again, she knew what it was like the last time; she had no more strength to go through it again.

I knew I had hit the right spot, I continued, “Dear Mister Cheng. I had said before, I am here to resolve the situation; I do not want to see any more bloodshed. Please give me one gong of time (about 2 hours); I will try to work something out for you.”

Cheng Ting was hesitant and turned to look at his Grandmother. By now Granny had closed her eyes and had lay back to her armed chair. Without opening her eyes she said, “I want to see the head of the Kuan clan, bring the General as well, one gong of time, if I did not see you after that time, I will personally smash the Statue.”

No reply was necessary; I left the house through the front door. My team was shocked to see me walking out of the house, the look on my face told them something was up.

We rushed back to the Kuans’ mansion, to save time, I told Yan Ching that it was better that I update everybody all at once. I was brought to the study where everybody was present. No one made a sound as I recounted the event tonight, Mister Kuan’s face went through various colour and finally settled in green. The General was shaking his head helplessly.

### **Yan Ching’s account**

It was fortunate that Night Owl had stopped them from smashing the Statue, now we might be able to negotiate for a settlement. They had the Statue, we had the General’s army that could destroy them, and the Yangs should know that if they destroy the statue, both the General and I will not rest until we get them. Even if we could not do it, the Imperial Authorities will be after them.

I believe I could convince the General to let them live if they hand back the Statue, he will have to agree to the deal; there was no other way out.

I believe I could get us out of the situation; it depended on one important factor; did the Yangs want to live? Or were they suicidal...

Meanwhile everybody was in a state of panic; I knew I had to hold them together, at this crucial moment I could not allow anybody to do something stupid. Looking at the General I could tell that he was about to unleash his army on the

Yang's mansion, I must not allow that to happen. A sudden attack on the Yang's would surely destroy the statue and along with it our only hope for salvation.

Mister Kuan on the other hand had totally buckled under the pressure, the last few days of immense strain had taken a toll on him, and he was on the verge of total breakdown. That must not happen, I needed him to face the Old Granny tonight, without his presence no compromise could ever be reach.

And I knew I must convince the bull-headed General to compromise.

I tried to lift everybody's spirit by saying, "Things are not as bad as it seemed." The whole room turned to me, trying hard to believe that what I said was true, but I could see the uncertainty in their faces.

I turned to the General, "Dear General Zhen, I know you could not wait to get your hands on these thieves, you are convinced that they deserve to die for this crime. But I beg you to consider carefully, there is no way to snatch the statue from them without risking the statue. We must compromise."

General Zhen replied indignantly, "And let them go? If this gets out, the Emperor will chop my head off for this act of weakness. How can we succumb to this? Are they not afraid of death? They are challenging the authority of the Emperor, how can we let them off?"

I knew he wanted a tough solution; after all he was a soldier at heart, to him all obstacles must be removed by force and then deal with the fallout later; probably with more force.

I reasoned with him, "General, if we charge into the house, there is a high chance that the statue will be destroyed, the Emperor will have your head any way. It does not change the outcome. I advise you to allow me to negotiate for a settlement, we might get the statue back and I assure you no one will ever talk about this incident again because we are all in it together. If words ever get out, the Kuan family, the Yang family, you and I will all be dead, who would dare to leak a word?"

The General subconsciously put his hands on his neck, knowing full well that if the statue was destroyed, this neck of his will be chopped. He reluctantly agreed to let me negotiate with the Yang family; he knew he had no choice.

But despite agreeing to a compromise, the General sent one of his lieutenant to mobilize his army, they were ordered to the city gate. The General wanted to have his military options at his finger tip; one wrong move from the Yang's would send the five thousand strong brigade into the city.

Traditionally, armies were not allowed into cities unless for the purposes of defending it. The reason was very simple, battle hardened troops were meant for fighting enemies in the battle field, they were not trained to reason, they do not stop and ask questions. They just kill. Therefore, when such killers were unleashed in the city, many innocent will die.

Now I pray that the Yang family did not have a death wish, I hope they were not so blinded by their hatred that they were willing to die. I would have to convince them that life was worth living, that it was time to let go of the past. The fact that they had planned escape routes and their new lives proved that they wanted to live; I believe the only one that wanted to die was Granny!!!



### **The Kuans meet the Yangs (Yan Ching's account)**

When we reach the Yang's residence, the place was brightly lighted as though they were celebrating a major festival. As we entered the main door, a voice spoke up, "Be careful what you do, do not attempt to snatch the Statue, we are prepared."

Everybody was shocked, this voice was not transmitted through normal vocal mean; it was transmitted through a vibration on the ground we were walking on. This person's internal strength must be supernatural; his martial art skill would be above anyone of us present, maybe higher than us combined. This was a warning to us that they too had highly skilled people among them; it would be futile for us to try anything.

The servants showed us into the main hall, the family was lined up on two sides with Granny sitting in the middle at the far end. Granny had a red rope tied to her hand; the other end of the rope was tied to the Jade Statue, one move of the hand would send the Statue crashing to the floor in pieces.

We went before Granny and bowed to her respectfully; slowly she opened her eyes and took a long look at us, finally her stare stop at Mister Kuan. I could feel Mister Kuan trembling beside me. She turned to her grandson and said, "Cheng Ting, bring me my tonic, I am tired, but I think I will have to be up all night tonight."

Cheng Ting protested, "Granny, you must not take too much of that tonic, it can kill you."

Granny said, "Grandson, I had started all this, I have to end it, we might all be dead after tonight. Just do it." As she spoke her voice was getting softer, she was indeed very weak. The tonic was brought to her, after drinking it she closed her eyes again. The whole hall filled with more than a hundred person stood and waited while she slept, nobody uttered a sound, even the crickets out in the garden were quiet.

### **Granny speaks**

After about one joss stick of time, she slowly opened her eyes, she sat up looking revitalized and she looked at Mister Kuan and said, "You are Kuan Ling? Grandson of Kuan Su?" Her voice was sharp and piercing, there was no attempt to hide her hostility.

Mister Kuan humbly nodded and said, "Yes Madam Yang, I am Kuan Ling."

Granny said, "Did you know what your grand father did to my family?"

Mister Kuan, "I was only a little baby at the time, my father told me the incident later on."

Granny said, "Your father being an evil son of the Kuan family might not have told you the truth, I shall tell you the true story now.

I am now hundred and eight years old, I was married into the Yang family at the age of fifteen. The Yang family had four sons and three daughters; I was married

to the second son of the family. We had two sons and one daughter, my father-in-law was very happy with us.

Our family was very prosperous, we were the leader in the tea market and we were much respected in the community. The Yang family was originally from Yunnan region, we monopolized the tea planting business there, thus our supply of tea leaves were unmatched, we moved to Luoyang to improve our distribution aspect of the business. My father-in-law also wanted to have some of his sons and grandsons to enter the Imperial Service, so Luoyang was an ideal location to settle in. He left his tea plantation to his sworn brother in Yunnan.

I was twenty three years old when your grandfather conspired with the evil Magistrate accused us of treason; it was all fabricated lies, your evil grandfather wanted to take over our business. Your evil grandfather...”

She paused as tears were rolling down her eyes.

Mister Kuan humbly said, “Madam Yang, I am aware that my grandfather had wronged the Yang family terribly, he regretted it very much after that, and he even tried to find the exiled family to help you. But he just did not know how to make up for the terrible act he had done. He eventually died a broken man. His guilt drove him crazy in the end. He had suffered greatly for his sins.”

Granny was furious; she said sharply, “Suffered greatly? You call that suffer? Did he see his own family dragged off to the execution ground? Did he watch as his own children freeze to death? Did he watch his own brothers and sisters starved to death? Did he have to hide his own surname from people for generations?”

The well-meaning comment from Mister Kuan had infuriated the bitter old lady; she had waited all her life for this moment, after all that she had gone through no suffering could be worse than that.

Mister Kuan realizing his mistake was quick to apologize, “Madam I did not mean that my grandfather had in anyway made up for his action, no Madam. I would like to sincerely apologize for my grandfather’s action, if there is anything I can do to repair the damage...”

Granny’s eyes were sparkling, “Are you willing to give your life to satisfy me?”

Mister Kuan was squirming like a worm beside me. He had nothing to say.

She continued, “After all the men were executed, the women and children were sent to the north, the journey took us four months by foot, we were paraded through the city before we left. It was winter. By the end of the first month all our shoes were worn out, none of us had shoes. Our clothing was falling off our bodies, the first to die was my little nephew, he was three years old, and he was the son of the third brother. After that I lost count, every other day someone died, first the young and the weakest, then the weaker adults.

In the beginning we make the mistake of burying the corpse with their clothing, later we learned, all dead relatives were stripped naked before we buried them, the living would have to put on the clothing of the dead to stay warm. There was no question of dignity, only survival. Through my own stupidity I saw my own son freeze to death, if I had taken the clothing from his dead cousins he might have survived.”

Her voice trail off to some place in the far north where her son was buried in a shallow grave, her eyes stared into empty space. The hall was quiet.

Mister Kuan was humbly bowing his head to the lady, not only was he sorry for his grandfather's action, he was also overwhelmed by the suffering. He had grown up with the knowledge of the atrocity, but he probably did not give too much thought to it as it was such a distanced event. But now he was forced to confront the reality of the event, now the victims were standing before him. Now he was face to face with the victims of his grandfather's action.

Granny continued, "We reached the exile settlement on the fifth day of the lunar new year, had it been back in Luoyang, there would have been big celebration. The settlement had nothing, we were given a little rice and vegetable for a start, but we will have to find the rest on our own. The river was frozen, the land was frozen. There was no way we could survive the land.

The Magistrate in charge of the settlement was a simple man; he did not bother much with the running of the place, he did not run it like a prison. The place was open, there was no worry about prisoners escaping, there was not where to escape to. The prisoners were allowed to stay in the little village among the villagers; there were even some marriages among them.

By this time, our families were reduced to three women and many children; there was me, I was wife of the second son. The other women were the wife of a cousin, and the third one was the second daughter of the household, she was sixteen years old and unmarried. Three of us had to dig the frozen land for roots to feed the family, but no matter how hard we worked we could not find enough to feed the family. Eventually some of the children died..."

Another long pause as she remembered the long dead children.

She continued, "Fortunately, before we all starved to death, my father-in-law's friend in Yunnan came. He had sold off all his valuable tea plantations to raise the money to save us. He paid the Magistrate to secure our release; he spent the rest of his money to bring us back to the south and settled us down. After doing all this for us, he was penniless; but he had discharged his duty to his sworn brother, he died a broken man soon after.

On the first mid autumn festival we celebrated outside captivity, the three women of the family kneeled down before heaven and earth and we sworn that we will avenge our family. I was the eldest among them, I was chosen as leader of the family. We told all the children how our family had been wronged by the Kuan; the children were told the stories over and over again to ensure that they did not forget.

One month later we moved out of the city, we changed our surnames, we split into three families and we went our separate ways. But we kept in constant contact, and we knew we would come back to Luoyang again.

As the years went by, our families grew bigger, and our collective wealth grew into a sizeable amount. After moving through several cities, my branch of the family finally moved into Luoyang, I had slowly sent my sons and nephews one by one into Luoyang to establish their separate life and identity. They became a normal citizen of Luoyang again, the other two families moved to Zhengzhou and Kaifeng, we used our collectively wealth to build a powerful business. When we had the money, we plotted for your downfall."

She looked at Mister Kuan with daggers flying out from her eyes.

She continued, "Unfortunately, no matter how much money we made, we could not match your wealth; we knew we could not bring you down with money alone.

Finally one of my grandsons came up with a plan to ruin you; that was when we dug the tunnel. But we did not rob all the gold and silver in the vault because we knew that would not be enough to bring you down, you had your wealth spread across the land. We were planning something else; we were looking for something else to ruin you. We waited... and then the General came along.

We knew everything that happened in your household; I had a nephew and a niece working there" Two people stepped forward; they were servants in the Kuan household.

Her voice was getting softer as the stress of narrating this story was taking a toll on her. She closed her eyes as the whole room waited.

She continued as though there was no pause, "We did not harm anyone, we did not want to bring upon anybody the horror that was done to us; we only wanted justice."

At the back of the room a young voice spoke up, "That was not true, what about my father and brother that you had murdered?" It was the young grave robber, Master Zhang.

Granny's eyes were blinking, trying to understand the young man, she asked, "Who are you? "

Master Zhang said, "I am the son of the grave robber family that you had murdered. We dug the tunnel for you and you decided to murder us. You had done the same as what was done to you."

Granny was speechless for a moment. There was a long awkward silence.

It was quite clear that Granny did not know about the murder of the grave robbers.

### **Granny's awakening**

Two young men from the Yang family stepped forward, they were both in their twenties, one of them spoke, "We were the ones that had murdered your father and brother; we had wronged your family." With that they took out a dagger and stabbed themselves in the heart.

The entire room was shocked. The more shocking part was that there was no attempt from the Yang family to stop these two young men, there was total silence. As their bodies crumbled to the floor, a middle age man stepped forward and squatted beside them.

After checking that they were actually dead, he looked up at Master Zhang and said, "This two were my sons, I was the one who gave the order to them for the killing; I think I should be held responsible as well for your family's death."

He too took out a dagger, but before he could stab himself, Master Zhang shouted, "No, No, No more. I do not want any more blood." And he ran out of the room. The madness of the situation had shaken everyone in my group, even the battle hardened General was looking sick. Needless to say Mister Kuan was close fainting.

But the entire Yang family was expressionless, their faces were blank, there were neither sadness nor grief. The only person who displayed some emotion was Granny; tears were flowing down her cheeks, as she slowly turned her head to look at her family.

She suddenly realized she had failed the ancestors of the Yang family terribly.

Over the years of bitterness, combined with her strong will, Granny Yang did not notice that she had turned her family into emotionless zombies. She had taught them to hate from a very young age and they were taught to perform their respective task to perfection regardless of consequences. She had taught them to uphold the family's honour no matter what the cost; she had made them into perfect Yang family's avenging agents.

This group of men and women had grown up under the indoctrination of three bitter old women whom had only taught them how to hate, they had learned from a young age that they had only one mission in life...revenge. They had also learned that for the ultimate goal of revenge, anything else was dispensable, including one's own life.

Granny Yang having witnessed her two great grandsons committing suicide in front of her with the entire family looking on. It had brought to her the sudden realization that she had been fatally mistaken. Perhaps her ancestors' greatest wish was for her to bring up the family to be happy productive people, not vengeful walking dead.

Her quiet sobbing turned into loud wails of heartbrokenness.

The Yang family seems uncertain about the sudden change in their Granny; such open display of emotion was uncommon to them. All the Yang family members were trained from a young age to hide any emotion; they had always focused their entire existence on their one mission in life. They had never wasted their time on love, grief or joy, all these were alien to them.

Through the suicide of her two great grandsons, Granny had suddenly realized that her eighty years of bitterness had deprived the entire family of a normal human existence. It was when she finally approaching her goal of revenge that she realized that she had dragged this family along with her on this road of misery. Now in her dying days, she suddenly remembered the day when the father-in-law was dragged to the execution ground, his last words were, "Take care of the Children." ...he did not say anything about revenge.

It suddenly dawned on her that she had failed the Yang ancestors miserably, she had turned their sons and daughters into hundreds of bitter souls. Now the worst had happened, they were heading for total destruction again, if she smashes the jade statue; the entire Yang clan will be decimated by the General's army. What had she done?

For eighty years she was not able to shake off the notion of anguish and revenge, but at this moment suddenly all her bitterness evaporated into thin air. As she looked at her sons, daughters and their children and grandchildren, she no longer sees a group of hardened avengers seeking justice; instead she saw a bunch of helpless children. She knew she does not have much time left; she must reverse the things that she had done for the past eighty years, she needs to restore the lives of her dear family. At the moment, nothing was more important.

But first she had to resolve the present situation; the theft of the Jade Statue had to be dealt with, she had to convince the General to let the family go. She knew she must not display any weakness, she must find a solution so that her family will survive. She had plotted and schemed all her life, she was always a good judge of personalities, she knew the best person to deal with was Yan Ching.

Yan Ching had a Wulin background; he would be more flexible and compassionate on his judgment, on the other hand the General would be hard headed like most military men were.

Granny looked up at the Kuan's entourage with teary eyes, she said, "You have seen the resolve of the Yang family, it was unfortunate that we had been discovered. But we are still having the Statue; I suggest we resolve this without further bloodshed."

The Yang family looked at their Granny in astonishment; throughout their life revenge for the family was never a compromise. Every one of them was prepared to destroy the Statue and eventually be killed by the General's army; compromise did not cross their mind at all.

Seizing the opportunity, Yan Ching said, "Yes, Madam Yang, I totally agree that it is time to bring this suffering to an end, enough time had been wasted on this meaningless road to revenge. Three generations had past, the perpetrators of the crime had since past away, the new generations had tried their best to make up for the ancestors error. Perhaps more could have been done, and I believe more will be done in the future." Yan Ching looked at Mister Kuan and he nodded his head in agreement.

Yan Ching continued, "The death of the grave robbing family had been resolved with the suicide of these two young men, whether they deserved death or not I do not judge. But the victims' family Master Zhang had been satisfied, let these two brave young men be the last to die for this tragic episode."

Granny said, "Let this be over, what about my family?"

Yan Ching, "We have agreed that as soon as we get back the Statue unharmed, we will leave everybody unharmed, I suggest that you leave Luoyang and start your lives elsewhere."

Yan Ching turned to the General, seeking an agreement. The General had by now enough of this madness; he wanted no part of it, he just wanted to get back the Statue and leave Luoyang. Without replying he just turned and left the room.

Granny said to the family, "After this night, we will start our new life; we shall forget about revenge, we had wasted too much time, let's hope it's not too late. I had failed the Yang ancestors; I had guided you all on a path of hatred and misery. I want all that to change from now on, I want you all to lead a good happy life; that was what my father-in-law had told me to do. But in my bitterness I had forgotten all that for the past eighty years. Dear children, I am truly sorry."

It was very difficult for a hundred and eight years old granny to admit to her three generations of descendants that she was wrong for the past eighty years, but Granny was never one that lacks courage. And Granny knew that she did not have much time to undo the damages that all this hatred had done to the family, she knew that she was the only who can reverse that.

## **The Final Settlement**

The entire Yang clan was again displaying a blank expression; they were trained from an early age to take orders from the Granny without questions. No matter how extraordinary the order seemed to be, there was no question of not obeying it.

The only one of them showed some sign of hesitation was Cheng Ting, the eldest grandson, he was shaking his head in disbelief and he said, "My dearest Granny, how can we abandon our revenge now? My great grandfather was executed because of this evil people, my family had lived in shame ever since. My family did not dare to use our surname because of them; we could not even put my ancestors' name on the ancestral tablet in the temple... all because of them. How can you let them go?"

With tears flowing down her cheeks, Granny said, "Yes my dear grandson, I know it sounded unfair, I know it is against all that I had been preaching in the past. But now I want you all to live, to carry on your lives, to carry on the Yang clan. I do not want my family to go through what I went through; you are now the head of the household, you have the duty to lead them out alive.

I have a plan to protect the Yang clan; I have a plan to ensure that these people will not go back on their words after we hand back the Statue. Grandson, show them your power."

Cheng Ting reluctantly obeyed, "Yes Granny."

He moved to the entrance of the main hall, he took a spear from the weapons rack beside the door way. The spear was about nine feet long, wooden shaft with a metal tip. Cheng Ting held the spear upside down pointing it to the ground and he leaped almost fifteen feet into the air, as he came down he brought the spear tip down thrusting it into the floor.

Such a thrust would normally break the wooden shaft of the spear, but he had focused his entire body's energy onto the tip of the spear. When the spear tip hit the floor, it penetrated the ground like tofu; the spear went in the floor by almost two feet.

This was a powerful display of his internal energy; he was so skilled at it that he was able to channel his energy into the spear, pushing it through two feet of the concrete floor. His power was clearly beyond anyone present, had he chosen to rebel against his Granny's wishes, there was no one present who could stop him.

Granny said, "Now I shall hand the Statue back to you, if you go back on your words and harm anyone in my family, this is what you can expect in return."

She continued, "My family might not be able to fight the General's army, but any one of my grandsons is more than capable of taking out anyone of you individually."

## **Yan Ching's Account**

In the world of Wulin, there are surprises everywhere; you can never tell who the most powerful fighter is. As the saying goes; there is always a higher mountain out there. The power of Cheng Ting was obviously beyond any of us, but even he

would not be able to defeat the General's army of five thousand, therefore if there was a fight, many will die, but for sure the Yangs will never win.

On the other hand; the five-thousand-strong-army could not be certain that they could kill or capture a person like Cheng Ting; they certainly could not guaranty the safety of the Statue. It was a win-win solution for everybody to let it go, to resolve the issue right there, but Granny's main concern was after handing the Statue over, will the General renege on his promise. That was why she told Cheng Ting to display his skill; a person with such high level of martial art was unstoppable on an individual basis. If the General were to go back on his words, Cheng Ting could easily take revenge on him any time.

The General was watching the display from a distance; he knew that to cross a person like Cheng Ting would not be to his advantage. He knew that would mean he will be watching over his shoulder for the rest of his life. He wisely decided that it would be better to reconcile the problem now. He sent his Lieutenant over to me with the message that he was withdrawing the army; I had a free hand to resolve the situation.

I turned to Granny and said, "Dear Madam Yang, the General had agreed to withdraw his army, and had agreed that he will not pursue the theft of the Statue anymore. All we want now is the safe return of the Statue."

Granny said, "I trust you and the General to live up to your promises, I believe you are fully aware what we are capable of. Please leave my family alone from now on."

Then she turned to Mister Kuan and said, "I could not say that I have forgiven your family, but things are clearer now, I hope you will try to make up for your ancestors past. I am aware that you did not commit the act personally, but you must realize that your wealth came from this evil act. I leave it up to you to decide what is right and what is wrong."

Slowly she turned to look at the family, "Dear children, I do not wish to see any more bloodshed, but at the same time do not want to impose my will on any of you. I had done enough of that for the past decades. Just like the Kuan family, I will leave it up to you to decide the rights and wrongs of life."

By now Cheng Ting was already by her side, he said, "Dear Granny, we will abide by your wish, however..." He turned to Mister Kuan and said, "You had better watching your every move; I will be watching you, if you plot anything against my family I will repay you ten times. If you commit any evil act against the population, I will punish you. Do not give me any reason to change my mind."

Mister Kuan had by now came to terms with his past, and he was fully aware of his present predicament. With an enemy like Cheng Ting, all the gold in his vault would not be enough to buy him protection for his family. He had to satisfy the Yang family by his action; he had to do whatever he could to make up for his ancestor, he said, "I had decided that I will spend the rest of my life working towards philanthropy. I will devote my life to helping the poor; I will let you see that I am really remorseful for my grandfather's deed. On top of it all, I will tell all my sons and daughters and their children about our family's shameful past, I want them to learn this lesson. I will order them to past the story down for the next ten generations. That is all I could think of at the moment."



Granny quietly said, "Children, it's time we leave this place and start our new life, everything else is no longer important."

She got up; with Cheng Ting by her side she walked out of the hall, followed by her sons, daughters, nephews and their children and their children's children. This family was taking their first steps into their new life, a life that was quite alien to them, a life without hatred, and a life without revenge.

Hopefully a life of happiness.

## **Part 2**

### **Surprises at the Sunset Inn**

Jiang wu literally meant rivers and lakes; this term was used to describe the turbulence of an existence in the world of Wulin. Sometimes Wulin was also known as Jiang wu. However there was a subtle difference to the two, Wulin had always been closely related to martial arts, but Jiang wu was a more encompassing expression describing every walk of life. Jiang wu become an expression loosely used to associate with individualistic existence outside of contemporary society. For example a physician would have a Jiang Wu of his own circle of physicians and a goldsmith would likewise have his own Jiang Wu among his peers in the trade.

Due to the darker side of Wulin; the greed, pettiness and jealousy that came with human nature, many Wulin figures chose to remain hidden from the world. Many of the top martial art experts chose to remain anonymous; some of them even deliberately hide in secluded place far from human existence. People with such high level of skills were usually unorthodox in their behaviors; they were hard to spot and usually turn up at the most unlikely of places.

This is the story of our strange encounter with some of the top martial art experts during an unexpected twist of fate.

This was what happened.

#### **I left the Kuans (Yan Ching's account)**

After recovering the Jade Statue for Mister Kuan (Please refer to the previous story), I decided to leave the Kuan family. I could no longer accept the family's history; I could not accept their ill-gotten wealth. But at the same time, I was also conscious of the fact that this sin was committed three generations ago, should I be judging them? I did not have a good answer, so I left.

I hope that Mister Kuan would make good the promises he made to the Yang family, if not, all the gold in the world would not be able to protect him and his family. I knew I was no match for Cheng Ting if he came back for revenge. The only way Mister Kuan could safeguard his family was by carrying out the reforms he had promised. Should he decide otherwise, I had no intention to fight on his side.

After one month's notice to tie up the loose ends, I left Luoyang. I had not decided what I wanted to do next; I had plenty of time on my side. Mister Kuan despite being unhappy about me leaving had rewarded me handsomely for my success in resolving the Jade Statue crisis. I have enough gold pieces to last me for a long time.

Right after resolving the Jade Statue crisis, my two friends (Night Owl and River Ghost) and I had spent days catching up on old times, we spent three days and three nights in the finest restaurant in Luoyang utterly drunk. During that time, we made plans to take a break from our work and travel to the west to visit some old comrades of ours.

The choice of west was very simple, the beautiful mountains and open plains in the west was far away from all this hatred and bitterness so common in the city. The encounter with the Yang family and their tragic history had provoked our self-examination, we did not want to follow the footsteps of Old Granny Yang. We did not want to wake up one morning eighty years later to find that we had wasted our lives on some meaningless chase. We felt that we needed a break from it all, we went west.

We chose the region of Shu, where the Central Plains culture was not strong, and the mountainous landscape was renowned. This region was originally the home of non-Han tribes, but it was later conquered by the Han dynasty (about a thousand years back). Ever since then many people from the Middle Kingdom had slowly come to settle here, this region had eventually become one of the richest region in the empire.

We will visit our old friend Xiao Miao who was of the Miao tribe; he was one of us during our younger day when we roamed the Central Plains looking for adventure. He had since gone back to his homeland in the Shu Mountains. Xiao Miao was his nickname, but none of us knew his real name. Xiao Miao literally meant the small Miao boy.

### **Xiao Miao (Yan Ching narrates)**

We took a leisure route to the Shu region, passing many beautiful scenic landscapes along the way. As we travelled deeper into the region, the people we met on the way became less and less Sinicized, the culture and language were very different from the Central Plains'.

Finally we reach the mountain village of Xiao Miao, it was situated high up in the mountains, and the scenery was breath-taking. The village survived on subsistent farming, they grew rice and vegetables and kept many live stocks. The mountain range they were on stretched for hundreds of miles around, I was indeed far from the noises of the city.

We were delighted to see our old friend again; Xiao Miao was still the same care free person he was years ago. He brought us around the region visiting many interesting place, after spending many days sightseeing, we were worn out and decided to find a nice place to rest for a few days.

### **Sunrise Inn (Yan Ching narrates)**

We settled on a little inn built along the mountain path, the inn must have been there to service the travelers along the route deeper into the mountains, as the season was approaching winter there was very little traffic. We took a room each telling the innkeeper that we will be staying for four days, the innkeeper was happy to have us for this low season. The inn was called Sunrise Inn.

The innkeeper told us that he had another few guests staying there at the moment and he warned us that we must leave the other guests alone as they did not like to mix around. Even though it was a strange request, we did not think too much about it as we had no intention to bother anybody. We spent the day minding our own business, exploring the area nearby, drinking the surprisingly fine wine and eating the excellent cuisine served from the kitchen.

We were pleasantly surprised by the level of food and wine available at this small little inn, normally such small establishment would not be able to provide exquisite cuisines of such quality. Such small inns were usually meant for travelers who were just passing through; they were not expected to come up with exceptional cuisines. But they did. So with my gold pieces from Mister Kuan I was able to buy the best wine and best food for all my friends.

It was on the second night we were there that we got our first glimpse of our fellow guests at the inn. We were having our dinner when the first of them walked in. He was an old man with flowing white hair and beard and he was dressed in a farmer's outfit. He did not look at us at all and went straight to a table and sat down. He quietly ordered his food and sat down to read a book totally absorbed in his own world.

Next came another old man carrying a few fishes in a basket, he sat down at another table and ordered the servers to cook the fishes for him. He told the server that he had caught the fishes at the nearby stream and to cook it delicately as they were very fresh. He too took out a book and started reading.

Soon two men came in, they look like travelers passing through, they were carrying a heavy box and the way they were carrying it indicated that it was something precious. They were nervously eyeing everybody as they sat down; they chose a table at the far corner of the dining hall to be away from all of us. They were obviously very wary of all of us as they must be carrying something valuable.

As the kitchen started serving dinner, a young man walked in, he was dressed in luxurious clothing, and carried an expensive looking sword. He seems to know the innkeeper very well, as he sat down by a big table; the innkeeper was serving him personally. He placed a piece of gold on the table and told the innkeeper to serve him the best available. The innkeeper was bowing to him and promising the best food available while greedily grabbing the piece of gold. Now I understood why this small little inn had such expensive cuisines available, they had very rich customers.

Soon the kitchen was cooking up course after course of elegant dishes for him, freshly steamed fish, roasted whole lamb, fragrance soups, fried deer meat and countless many others. The young man picked a little morsel from every dish and left the rest alone; it was a painful waste of food. The expensive wine he drank was so robust and fragrant that we could smell it from our table. The entire service staff of the place was devoted to serving the young man; the rest of us quietly ate our own humble meals while hungrily eyeing the young man's leftovers.

I had never seen such extravagance before, even my former employer Mister Kuan who was very rich did not behave this way. There must be a reason behind this behavior.

The young man was giving the impression that he was eating his last meal. He had spent a lot of money on this banquet, but ironically, he did not seem to be able to enjoy the excellent food laid out before him. His mind seemed to have drifted off to somewhere far away; he just sat there staring straight ahead into empty space, eating the food without tasting it.

Before we could finish our dinner, another group of travelers walked in, there were six of them. They were fierce looking and all of them were carrying weapons, sabers, swords and the leader among them carried a heavy saber.

The heavy blade saber was a heavy weapon, it usually weighted sixty to eighty jins (One kilogram =two jins). To use such a weapon, the user must be very strong, especially the wrist. If used effectively, the opponent would have a hard time defending as it was very difficult to block or parry a blow from such a weapon.

I noticed that from the moment they entered the restaurant their eyes were on the two travelers who were carrying the box. These six men totally ignored the rest of the people; they were just starring at the two. And I notice that that the two men knew they were in trouble, the moment these six came in the two men had stopped eating their dinner, and both of them had laid their hand on the box beside them in an unconscious effort to protect their precious cargo.

As the six men were served their dinner, a horse drawn carriage drew up to the road outside the inn, but nobody got off the carriage. It just stood there in the dark...

Soon dinner was over, even the young man's elaborate dishes were cleared away; the two old men were quietly sipping their tea while the rest of us were drinking rice wine. It was a cold winter night; a charcoal brazier was placed in the middle to warm the room. Light snow was beginning to fall outside.

Despite all the wine being consumed, nobody was drunk; the room was quiet as a tomb. The two old men were reading quietly, the young man silently staring in front of him and the group of six was just staring at the two men. Even the four of us who were usually very chirpy were only softly whispering to each other. The atmosphere was very tense; we all knew something was about to explode. The two men carrying the box were looking very nervous.

It was quite obvious that the gang of six was interested in the two men carrying the box; clearly the target would be the precious cargo in the box. As righteous Wuxias', we could not allow this to happen, but at the same time we had to determine the basis of this conflict. If it was an outright robbery, the solution would be simple; we will defend the weak.

We had no wish for trouble, especially so since we were in unknown territory, and we had no knowledge of the rivalries in this region. Some localized tuft rivalries could be very complicated, some extending for generations. Sometimes such discord lasted so long that the people fighting it no longer remember how it had started in the first place. If this fight was anything to do with such tuft war we had no intention to get involved... such things never end.

But, as outsiders it would be wise to clarify first before we take drastic action...we waited.

Suddenly a voice spoke up, it came from the carriage outside; the voice was clear and powerful, it said, "Tu Gao, do not waste any more time, go take it."

The leader of the six got up and replied, "Yes master". Obviously he was Tu Gao.

He walked towards the two nervous men and said, "Please hand over the box; you will not be harmed. Please tell your master that the Ding family of Huang Long city had taken the box from you. If he wishes to pay us a visit we will pay him handsomely for the box, if he wishes to punish us for this act, we will take full responsibility. We will give him a settlement according to the rules of Wulin."

He continued, "Please tell your master that we humbly apologize for this ill-mannered way of buying his treasure, we had no choice, my young master is very sick. We are willing to bear all the consequences of this impertinence. Please hand it over, please do not make it difficult for me."

One of the two men said, "You cannot just take things that do not belong to you, my master has the right to sell or not sell to the Ding family. There are laws in this land, how can you threaten me just..." He was both scared and indignant; however it was quite clear that there was no law in this small little inn that would protect them from these robbers.

The two old men and the young swordsman did not seem to have heard this conversation at all. The old men were deeply engrossed in their books while the young man was staring intently into empty space; the innkeeper had remained behind his counter while his servants were still running around serving tea and wine. Nobody had given them a second look... it was up to the four of us.

As I got up, the remaining five men of the group shot up from their chairs and stood before me with their weapons drawn. I was unarmed as I had left my saber by my table; I walked towards the group and said, "Dear gentlemen, I know I had no right to interfere as I have no idea what is going on. But if you are robbing these two gentlemen right before my eyes, I cannot just stand back and watch."

I continued, "As a person skilled in martial art it is a shame to use our skills to bully the weak, dear brother, please let them be."

The leader Tu Gao replied without turning his head, "Dear brother of the Wulin, I respect your chivalry, but I suggest that you step back and do not interfere with this. I am a Wulin practitioner, I am a proud Wuxia. I do not like what I am doing today but I have no choice."

He continued, "I am Tu Gao, I work for the Ding family in Huang Long City, I do not intend to hide my action. I am responsible for this act; I will bear all consequences for this event. Please let me fulfill my duty tonight, if you want to challenge me in the future, you can come to Huang Long City to look for me. Tonight I must have the box."

I replied, "No, I cannot let you rob them."

He turned around and said, "In that case, please allow me to apologize for my subsequent action."

One of his men brought his heavy saber to him, and he swung it around with ease, the rest of his men moved aside to let him engage me. By now, all my three friends came to my side, I told them, "Please let me entertain Mister Tu Gao alone." I picked up my saber and moved toward Tu Gao.

I knew I had no choice but to fight Tu Gao to prevent the robbery; I believed we were evenly matched in term of skills; he would have a slight advantage of

strength. I had utmost respect for this gentleman as he was clearly reluctant to carry out his duty; I believe he was forced by circumstances to commit this robbery. He had been conducting himself honourably by doing this openly and he did not try to hide his own identity. I was curious to the reasons forcing him to commit this unpalatable act of robbery.

Tu Gao did not hold back his attack; he went straight for the kill. It was unusual that two strangers engaging for the first time would want to commit so fully the fight. Fighters normally use some time to figure out the opponent's strength and weaknesses before adopting a strategy. Tu Gao did not bother with that, he seemed to be in a hurry.

By doing this he was taking unnecessary risk as he had exposed himself to my counter offensive. He seems to be willingly trading his own life for speed.

As my saber was a much lighter weapon, I could not block his swift strokes of his heavy saber; I could only dodge him by my nimble footwork. Whenever there was an opening I would try to get closer into his space to neutralize the advantage of the heavy weapon.

Having fought numerous engagements in my life, I had learned that when fighting an opponent using a heavy weapon, one must always try to close in to the opponent. At a distance of two to three feet, the heavy weapon is as good as useless. On the other hand at that distance my razor sharp saber would be deadly.

Tu Gao was also aware of what I was doing; he cautiously tightened his strike patterns and movements to push me away. Every time I manage to get into his space, he positioned his heavy saber close to his body with the blunt side of the saber sliding almost next to his body. In that move his huge saber was used like body armour to protect him from my slicing strikes.

Time and again I was push back again by his explosive movements. As I had predicted we were evenly matched, we fought back and fore for a long time without any one gaining an upper hand.

While all this was going on, the two old men and the lone young man were still reading their books and staring into empty space. They were totally uninterested in the fight. The strangest of all was that the innkeeper and the servants were equally clam about the events around them.

The innkeeper was at his counter counting his money on his abacus, and the servants continued serving wine and pouring tea. This was a bizarre situation as any normal innkeeper and his servants would never react so calmly to a fight in their inn. This inn was getting more mysterious by the moment.

After a fruitless long fight, both of us were closed to exhaustion. Suddenly a shadow of a figure burst fore from the darkness of the carriage outside with lightning speed. The figure said, "We have wasted too much time, Tu Gao stand back."

At a blink of an eye, a frail old man stood in between me and Tu Gao, he was dressed like a servant of a rich household, similar to my former employer Mister Kuan's servants...a senior servant, probably the position of a chief servant. At his command, Tu Gao respectful stepped back.

I knew this new arrival was a formidable opponent; the speed that he had moved from the carriage into the dining hall was surreal. He moved like a flash of lightning, had he wanted to ambush me from behind he could have done it easily

as my back was to the entrance of the dining hall. The frailty of his looks belied a highly skilled martial art expert; I realized that I was no match for him.

He turned to me and said respectfully, "Dear Wuxia, I respect your brave act of defending the weak, but we are on an urgent task, we have no choice but to resort to this shamefully mean. I am Yang Su; I work for the Ding family of Huang Long City. I do not intend to fight you tonight, but if you insist I will kill you." His threat was spoken in a casual manner.

He continued, "Dear Sir, we do not have the time to explain our situation; it is a matter of life and death. If you let us leave with the box tonight, you can come to Huang Long city another day and I will then provide you with an explanation, by then, if you think our reasons were not sufficient, you can take any of our lives. I promise you, I will not defend myself."

I replied, "Mister Yang, I am aware that I am no match to you in martial art, but that does not mitigate my responsibility to fight this injustice, I might not be able to match you, but I have three friends here who do not mind getting killed in the pursue of justice. We do not possess much in this world except our honour, if we let this injustice go, we would not be able to justify our own existence anymore."

Yang Su lowered his head and said, "Yes, I understand. Please pardon my action." He slowly moved into a stance of attack, he was going to fight me empty handed.

Suddenly a voice spoke up, "Stop! Dear Wuxia, please do not get killed because of us, it is not worth it. I do not know who you are, but we truly appreciate your effort. Thank you. I will hand them the box, and get it over with." It was spoken by one of the man protecting the box.

Before I could protest he tossed the box to Tu Gao and said, "You should be ashamed of yourselves, this disgraceful act will not go unpunished. Unfortunately we are not trained in martial art; we will leave it up to the heaven to deal with you. My teacher the Apologetic Priest (nickname) had taught us to treasure life, to forgive and to apologize even if our opponents were in the wrong."

Reluctantly he carried out his teacher's instruction, he turned to Yang Su and said, "Mister Yang, I apologize for not handing you the box earlier, it had caused you much trouble, and please accept my humble apology." He bowed respectfully. This unexpected turn of event had caught me off guard; I did not know how to deal with this hilarious situation, the victim of the robbery had suddenly turned around and apologized to the robbers. What was I to do?

I had heard of the Apologetic Priest, he was a Taoist priest living in a monastery high up in Er Mei Mountains; he preaches a strong philosophy of non-violence. He does not teach any form of martial art in his monastery and he taught all his disciples to apologize to everybody under all circumstances, even if the person is in the wrong. He strongly believed that a humble apology would defuse any tension; it was always the quarrelsome nature of human that had created all the troubles in the world.

This strange Priest practiced his own teachings; I heard that whenever he meets someone, his first comment would be, "Please accept my apology for not meeting you earlier..."

When his disciples commits an error, he would say, "Please forgive me for not teaching you the proper way..."



This Apologetic Priest was very well respected in Wulin even though he did not possess any martial art skills; he was often called upon to defuse tension between enemies in the world of Wulin. I had never met him in person, but I had heard many stories of his deeds. And I knew he had many friends in Wulin, the Ding family of Huang Long City would regret crossing a person like the Apologetic Priest. The friends of the Priest would be seeking justice for him even without his consent; the Ding family of Huang Long would be very busy soon.

To cross a person like the Apologetic Priest was like crossing the Emperor, everyone in Wulin would consider you an enemy.

Had Yang Su and Tu Gao been unscrupulous bandits, they would have silenced everyone in the inn to keep this event quiet, but they were not such character. They were upright Wuxia's who were willing to standing up to their action. Admirable...

With the box in hand, the group prepared to leave to dining hall, but before they could step out two chopsticks flew from the back of the room and hit Tu Gao on the back of his knee. The chopsticks did not pierce him but it hit an acupuncture point that made his legs turned to jelly, he tumbled to the ground.

Yang Su who was walking in front stopped on his tracks but he did not turn around. He said, "I did not know that such a small little inn would have such a highly skilled expert staying here. If it was any other day, I would be happy to make your acquaintance, but tonight I am on an urgent task. Please allow me to go, you can come and find me another day."

He slowly turned and looked at the first old man, but the old man was still reading his book! My three friends and I were absolutely puzzled; we had no clue as to who had fired the chopsticks. But from the trajectory, we knew it must have come from one of the old man sitting there.

The distance from the old man to Tu Gao was about twenty foot, to fire a light bamboo chopstick and hit someone with sufficient force to trigger an acupuncture point would have required tremendous amount of strength. The accuracy of the hit was also phenomenon. It seems like we were in the presence of an exceptional martial art expert.

Yang Su walked towards to old man and said, "Tu Gao, we must not be delayed, you bring the box back to young Master, I will take care of things here."

By now Tu Gao had been helped to his feet by his men, they tried to help him out to the carriage. But before they could take another step, the first old man had in a flash move to the doorway of the dining hall, blocking the exit. But he was still sitting on a chair reading his book, except that he was now sitting at the doorway!! How he had moved across the hall, nobody knew. The move was so swift that the eyes did not capture the movement in between. One moment I saw him sitting at the table, but the next moment he was sitting at the doorway.

Yang Su knew he had been out classed, but he had a duty to his master, without any warning, he charged forward with his palm extended. The old man without looking up from his book countered Yang Su's attack with a wave of his left hand. I was standing about ten feet away, but I could feel the power of this casual wave of his hand. I felt the shock wave of this strike; it was not the power of physical energy, it was something beyond that. It was an invisible force, it was

internal energy. Such power did not come from the muscles of the limbs; it came from the entire body.

Yang Su was tossed by this incredible stream of force; it propelled him several feet back. It took him several stumbling steps to steady himself. His already frail look had turned deadly pale; he brushed aside the helping hands from his men and sat down on the floor. He closed his eyes and rested, I could tell that he had sustained severe internal injuries. Slowly blood began to flow out from the corner of his mouth.

After a while, he opened his eyes and said, "Looks like we would not be able to fulfill our duties to our Master today. Tu Gao, you all do not need to die unnecessarily, return the box and report back to Master what had happened."

He added, "I would not be able to go with you, rush back, and let Master have the chance to make other plans. I shall die here."

While all this fighting was going on, the other old man, the young man and the innkeeper were still totally detached from the events around them. But the moment Yang Su spoke about him dying there, the innkeeper looked up and shouted, "No, no, no, you must not die here, it will affect my business. Nobody ever die here, if you die you must go outside first. Please do not ruin me; I am just a poor man trying to make a living."

Then he turned to the old man sitting at the doorway, "Look what you have done, this is not our agreement, and you are not supposed to kill anyone inside here. You old fool, you are ruining my business."

Next he turned to the other old man (the one that brought the fish in) sitting further in and said, "You, what are you waiting for? Do your job."

The old man looked up from his book and said, "Is the fight over? Do they want to fight some more?"

The innkeeper said, "As far as I am concern it is over, anyone dare to fight in my restaurant again today will have to answer to me." He looked around angrily at every one of us.

The old man came forward and looked at Yang Su, and he said, "Dear Sir, I am a physician, let me check your injury."

Yang Su replied, "Dear Sir, I appreciate your help, but I know myself, I am badly injured, I do not believe you can be of any help. No need to waste your time."

The old man laughed out loudly, and said, "Dear Sir, he had never inflicted an injury that I could not cure." He was pointing at the other old man sitting at the doorway.

He continued, "Please trust me, I can help you, you might not have heard of us; our names are not important. He and I are the opposite spectrum of this evil world; he likes to inflict injury, and I like to heal his victims."

He continued, "Even though we were from the same teacher, but we had learned different lessons. That is why we had not sat at the table for the past fifty years; we only talk to each other once a year, which is during the tomb sweeping day when we go to our teacher's tomb." While he explained all this, he was smiling; he was an extreme contrast to the other old man who was quiet and indifferent.

He took Yang Su's hand and felt for the pulse, after a while he said, "Your foundation is strong; I will have no problem saving your life."

He put his right hand on Yang Su's head and closed his eyes; soon the colour started flowing back into Yang Su's face. He checks the pulse again, and started working on Yang Su's back, before long Yang Su was able to sit up on a chair.

It was miraculous; this old man had brought Yang Su back from the gates of hell. He was using internal energy to heal Yang Su, from the look of it; his power was not below that of the old man at the doorway. But unlike his fellow disciple, his power was used to heal.

The innkeeper turned to the old man sitting at the doorway and said, "Why are you blocking the way? They have agreed to return the box. Let them leave. I do not want anybody to die in my inn, it is bad luck."

Surprisingly the old man got up and walked away holding his hands behind as if he was taking a casual stroll. He seems to obey every instruction from the innkeeper. With his extraordinary power, he rightfully did not need to heed anyone, but when it comes to the innkeeper, he was behaving like a little boy getting told off by his father.

The old doctor told Yang Su, "You are in no condition to travel yet, send your men to pass the message to your master. Rest here for a couple of days. I will have you back to normal in two days."

Yang Su thanked the doctor, after some instruction from Yang Su; Tu Gao left the inn to rush back to inform the Ding family of their failure.

The innkeeper said, "Good. Good. Now all go to your room and rest, no more fighting tonight."

The young man who was silent the whole evening finally spoke up, "How about me? What do you mean no more fighting?" He picked up his sword and was about to draw the weapon out. But before the sword was unsheathed, the innkeeper shot a copper coin through the air and hit him on his wrist. The young man's hands turned to jelly and with one quick swift movement the innkeeper was standing in front of him and shaft the sword roughly back into the sheath.

Innkeeper said, "Young fool, I said no more fighting. If you draw that sword again I will break it into two."

My three friends and I were watching with our jaws hanging to the floor, we just realized that the humble, calculative and greedy innkeeper was also a martial art expert!!

Now I understand why he was so calm during the fight, the innkeeper had everything under control. All our fighting did not impressed or scared him at all; had he chosen to he could have stop Tu Gao and I and held us by our ears. The two old men and the innkeeper were clearly very highly skilled in martial art experts, but they had carefully hidden their capability. Some martial art experts of such high level did not like to display their skills unnecessarily, they did not want to be known to the world.

I believe the suddenly involvement of the old man had something to do with the mention of the Apologetic Priest; he was probably a friend of the Priest. If not for this he would probably had stayed out and let the robbery went unpunished. To these people, they did not want to be drawn into the world of Wulin; they just want to be left alone. It was only young hotheaded fools like us who insisted on being drawn into the fight.

I was still puzzled by the connection between the two old men, the innkeeper and the young man. But I was in no position to ask any questions, I will try to find out tomorrow.

We helped Yang Su to his room and helped him to his bed; the old doctor followed us to check on Yang Su. As he checked Yang Su's pulse the four of us stood by and watched, once again he used his internal energy on the patient, very soon Yang Su fell into a deep slumber.

He turned around and looked at the four of us and said, "I admire your bravery in defending weak, but I have to say it was foolish, the four of you might not be a match for him. You could have died...young man, I assure you there is nothing more precious than life, all these talk about honour, Wulin values are all nonsense. If you are dead you will not be able to help anyone."

He ran his fingers through his long white beard and said, "After tonight's incident, I am sure you all have many questions in your mind. While we watch the patient, I shall tell you the story of the people in this inn."

### **The Old Man tells a story**

"My name is Liu Ching Feng, my disciple elder brother's (the other old man) name is Ouyang Hao, we are from the Chang Mountains. Both of us learned our martial art skills from the same teacher, I shall not mention HIS name; I want him to rest in peace. My teacher was very little known in Wulin as he detested the pettiness, jealousy and glory-seeking self centered people there. Even as a highly skilled martial art expert, he did not mix around with them. Had he chosen otherwise, he could have been a very famous personality.

But he chose to hide in the mountains, but at the same time he could not detach himself from martial arts because that was his passion. While in the mountains, he practiced and researched to refine his skills; by the time he was fifty years old he had already invented his own style of fighting and he had mastered the skill of controlling his internal energy. You saw what my disciple elder brother was capable of; my teacher was ten times that.

The power of internal energy was limitless, but it was not easy to acquire, the skill of controlling it was a secret, my teacher made us promise to be very careful to teach this extreme skill to anybody. The reason was that internal energy could only be controlled by two extreme of this world, extreme evilness or extreme serenity. If this martial art skill falls into the wrong hands it would be disastrous for humanity."

River ghost shot off his foul mouth, "Does that mean your disciple elder brother is the extreme evilness?"

Liu Ching Feng looked at us and smiled, "Young man, you had been deceived, my disciple elder brother is a very compassionate man, every injury he inflicted was always limited to what I can heal. He had his reasons for doing what he did; he had not killed a single person all his life. The only times we killed people was by not saving them, for example tonight. If it was not for the turn of event, we would not have interfered and the four of you would have been killed by Yang Su. We would have been indirectly responsible for your death."

Yan Ching asked him, "Why you would not interfered? Was it not the values of the Wulin to defend the weak? Was it not our duty as a Wuxia to uphold the course of justice?" Yan Ching was getting emotional on the issue.

Liu Ching Feng replied, "Yes, that was what we believed many years ago, but we had since learned that there were many things in this world that we did not understand. Tonight was a good example, Yang Su and Tu Gao...do you think they were evil people?"

All of us shook our heads.

Liu Ching Feng continued, "If the four of you decide to fight them, and defeat them, there might be a few deaths...and in the end, what have you accomplished? Other than feeling good for having done a seemingly 'good deed' you have accomplished nothing else. When Yang Su wakes up, we might check with him why he was robbing the two priests, and then you may find that you had done something really silly."

Yan Ching asked, "What made your disciple elder brother change his mind at the last moment?"

Liu Ching Feng replied, "I did not ask him, I believe it was because we suddenly realized that the two priests were disciples of Apologetic Priest. We knew Apologetic Priest very well, we knew him to be a good person. Anyway, we might still be wrong... we are human."

He continued, "I had drifted off... about my teacher. When my teacher took us in as students, he taught us everything that he knew, that was unusual as very often teachers were wary of their disciples. Most teachers would teach the disciples most of their skills but hold back the most important part, they would only impart these skills on their death bed. Unfortunately that was human nature, suspicion.

My teacher was not like that at all, he taught us everything that we could learn, but unfortunately, both me and my disciple elder brother was limited in our talent, we could only absorb a fraction of his knowledge."

He stopped talking and went over to check on Yang Su, when he was satisfied he continued, "Despite the little we had acquired from our great teacher, we had become very powerful martial art experts. My teacher in his wisdom had warned us about the world of Wulin, he told us that our powerful skills would bring us more trouble than joy... we did not believe him. When he passed away we decided to leave Chang Mountain and we went to the Central Plains to do our Wuxia duties and practice our Wulin values. That was many years ago, you might not have heard of us, we were unbeatable, the Central Plains had never seen such martial art skills and they did not like it.

We were young and innocent; we did not know that by displaying our abilities we were actually upsetting many people. These people were the most respected in the entire Wulin before we came along, now suddenly the limelight was shifted to us, they were very unhappy.

Soon rumours were spread about us being from an evil sect in the Miao Mountains, that we use Black Magic to defeat our enemies. Anyway, soon the entire Wulin turned against us, but even their combined comfort was not enough to defeat us..."

He laughed out at the past, he continued, “But after defeating those people, we were disillusioned, we decided to come back to our Mountains in the west. We went back to Chang Mountains; we devoted our time to learning more of our teacher’s skills and refining them. We no longer want to be involved in the Wulin. As we spent more time in the region, we began to realize that there were many martial art experts in this region, just like us. This group of people had the same experience as us; they too were disillusioned and had decided to come to these mountains.

One of them was the innkeepers that you saw tonight; his skill might not be much below that of my disciple elder brother, but he chose to hide it. Every day he pretended to be a greedy, calculative proprietor and he enjoyed it more than spending his life looking over his shoulders not knowing when you would be betrayed.”

The four young Wuxia nodded their heads as they listen, they knew the pain of having the Wulin community turn against you. (Refer to the Case of the Jade statue) They were able to see the wisdom of hiding your capability from the jealous community; they had experienced the hypocrisy of the ‘Wuxia’s’. But did it mean that the whole concept of doing good in ones community was wrong? Did it mean that they should abandon the values of the Wulin and leave it to the pretenders? By extension abandon the people of the land?

Yan Ching asked the Old Man, “Dear Master Liu, by hiding up here in the mountains, do you think you are failing the people of the land? You have abandoned the values of the Wulin; you are no longer bounded by its rule of helping the weak...” Yan Ching was not able to continue the question as it was getting too personal. It might get too offensive.

Liu Ching Feng was not upset, he said, “Let me finish the question for you, you were probably asking why I bother to learn all this martial art for if we did not want to help anybody with it, if we did not intend to put it to good use. First, my passion for martial art had driven me to greater heights, not my passion to defeat my opponent. We were more interested in the art, not what the art could bring. As to the moral obligation of a martial arts practitioner, I have no answer; you will have to find your own answers.”

River Ghost was bored by the talk about morality and obligations, he decided to move the conversation back to the inn, he asked, “Master Liu, how about the young man? Who was he?”

Liu Ching Feng laughed and said, “That young fool, he was a challenger, he had arranged to challenge my disciple elder brother Ouyang Hao to a fight. The innkeeper arranges such things for us occasionally; it benefits his inn as the challenger was always advised by him to have an expensive last meal before they fight my disciple elder brother. Even though we had left the Wulin long ago, there are still many people looking for us, they all want to test our ability.

The perception was that if you defeat the Two Old Man from Chang Mountain, you will right away become the hero of Wulin. Every year we will select four people out of the hundreds who want to challenge us, the innkeeper will arrange everything. It’s an entertainment for us and good revenue for his rundown inn. We insist that the fight to be in this inn as we do not want these fools to go to Chang Mountain to look for us and disturb our harmony.

The arrangement between me and my disciple elder brother was that he would defeat them, but the injuries must be within my ability to heal. Through the years we had defeated and healed many Wuxia's from the Central Plains, but we never kill anyone.

This young fool that came today would never stand a chance against my disciple elder brother, I just could not understand why he was chosen; I suspect he might have bought the greedy innkeeper to be allowed into the challenge. That greedy fool!" He chuckled and shook his head at the greediness of the innkeeper; he was more amused than upset.

After a while, he added, "Did you know that the entire inn was full of martial art experts? The servants, the cook and even the old lady serving you tea were highly skilled in martial arts; they had all chosen to work in the inn as they were bored with the fighting and glory-seeking of the so-called Wuxia's. And it amuses them to see young bucks like the four of you having your adventures; it reminded them of their younger days."

He chuckled and looked at us, "Did you know even the old tea lady could easily defeat the four of you? She was an accomplished martial art expert a long time ago, she and her husband were famous sword fighters; the two of them combined were unbeatable. They had their glorious days until their only son was poisoned by an unscrupulous opponent...they were heartbroken, they knew that no matter what revenge they could inflict on the killer, it would never bring the son back. They decided to leave the Wulin world and came here to lead a normal life, but unfortunately, they could not have any more children. The husband worked as the cook and the wife was the serving lady. Nobody could tell that they were the 'Two Swords from Jiangnan', that was their nickname."

River Ghost asked the next question, "How about the Ding family of Huang Long City?"

Liu Ching Feng stroked his beard and replied, "I did not know them personally, but I have heard of them, Huang Long City is about fifty miles east of here, it is not a big city, but it is rich. The city's wealth mainly came from the tea trade and the rice trade. The Ding family is the most famous family of the city, maybe the most powerful family for a few hundred miles around.

They were famous not only because of their wealth, but also because they were very well connected, the head of the family was an old grandmother, she had seven sons and five daughters. All the sons were accomplished in martial art and they were either running reputable trading businesses or serving in high ranking position in the Imperial court. All her daughters were married to very established families, and these girls were also taught martial art by the late father."

He continued, "In this region, nobody dares to cross them, but I understand the Matriarch of the family was an honourable person, she follows the values of the Wulin strictly. The entire Ding family was held to very high moral standards, this act of robbery was very uncharacteristic of them. The entire household was very loyal to the old lady; people like Yang Su and Tu Gao were probably servants of the household. As you can see even the servants are highly skilled and very honourable people. It puzzles me why they were behaving like this... we will have an answer when Yang Su wakes up. I think you four should retire for the night, tomorrow will be interesting."

We left the old doctor to look after his patient and went to our rooms.

### **Yan Ching's reflection on the night**

“It was certainly an interesting evening; I had never ever seen such display of high level martial arts. I had never imagined that so many talented martial art experts would be hiding in this tiny little inn. These people must have suffered some traumatic events to give them the resolve to detach themselves from the world. In this little corner of the world, they were insulated from the ugliness of human kind; they no longer have to deal with darkness of the human heart.

Is that a good solution? What about the values of the Wulin? What about helping the weak, standing up for injustice?

Even Liu Ching Feng had no answers...”

### **The Day After (Yan Ching's account)**

The day started with a mighty crash!

Someone was shouting and screaming; I got up and rushed to the courtyard expecting trouble. It turned out that it was just the young man from the night before; he was all dressed up waving his sword around demanding to see the innkeeper.

He was demanding a fight, he shouted, “I had paid much money to have a duel with the Chang Mountain Old man, where is he, I want to defeat him and show the world what I am made of.”

While he shouted, one of the servants was staring at him blankly; the servant was holding a broom. When he demanded an answer from the servant, the servant just bowed to him and continued sweeping the floor. As more servants came by and went about their chores ignoring the frustrated young man, he got desperate. He grabbed the servant sweeping the floor by the collar and demanded to be shown to the innkeeper's room.

The servant was an old man, about sixty years of age, he gently gripped the young man's wrist and twisted it outwards. The young man's arm was instantly paralyzed, the young man tried to unlock the grip with a swing of the sword he was holding in his other hand. But his sword was brushed aside by a flick of the old servant's finger; this flick on the sword's blade was so powerful that the vibration caused his fingers to loosen its grip; the sword fell to the ground.

As the old servant gently let go of the shocked young swordsman, he picked up the sword with the tip of his foot and with one swift movement he took the sword and thrust it into a tree in the courtyard. The tree was about three feet thick; this powerful thrust penetrated the entire body of the tree with the tip of the sword protruding one foot on the other side.

The young man was shocked beyond words; the servant picked up his broom and continued sweeping the floor as though nothing had happened. The entire episode was so fast that the young man being right in the middle of it could not



fully comprehend what had happened. All he saw was that his sword fell to the ground and next moment the sword was firmly tucked inside the tree trunk.

The young man quietly went to the tree and tried to pull the sword out from the tree trunk, but the sword was firmly stuck. No matter how hard he tried, the sword would not budge. I was standing at the top of the stairs but I could hear merry laughter coming from the kitchen. This bunch of martial art experts was having some fun at the expense of this young fool. The embarrassed young man quietly retreated to his room; I doubt he would want to challenge anyone to a fight any time soon.

I went to check on Yang Su, and found that Liu Ching Feng was still by the bed looking after him. Yang Su had recovered considerably, and he was able to sit up and was having some light soup for nourishment. After some polite greeting, our conversation drifted to the events last night. He was very apologetic about his action, he begged us to be allowed to explain his reasons.

### **Yang Su's story**

Yang Su said, "Dear Wuxia, I am very glad that I did not harm you and your friends, I knew we were going against all the values of Wulin, but we had no choice. This is our reasons; the Ding family of Huang Long City was the most respected family in this region, as this region was very far from the Imperial Court, the population in this region looked to us for leadership.

The Imperial Court was corrupted and in recent years they had been busy with their wars with the Liao in the northeast. So they had totally ignored us, we had petitioned again and again for a strong defense force to be sent here to help us, but we were ignored. Unknown to them, the west of the Empire is also facing a big threat, but to the Imperial War department, the threat did not exist."

Yan Ching asked, "Who was the threat you are talking about?"

Yang Su replied, "Initially we did not have a definite idea, they attack our remote town and villages in the northwestern borders and they were a collection of various tribes. They do not represent any single tribe, they were small groups taken from many tribes and combined into a single army.

They did not have a single base that we could identify, after every attack; they just disappeared into the desert. Or maybe the small groups just go back to their respective tribes to wait for orders for the next raid. Therefore, the Imperial War department claimed that they did not exist, but the attacks were conducted by thousands of horsemen, our small defense force here simply could not deal with the numbers."

Yang Su continued, "One years ago, the Ding family decided to take matters into our own hands, we started to organize our own defense force; we even paid for all the expenses. The General in charge of defending this region was the third son of the Ding family; he managed to incorporate these new resources into the small army provided by the Imperial Court.

We were beginning to score some successes against the enemy; we captured a few of the raiders and we were having clues as to who was behind all this attacks... we realized that it was the Kingdom of Xi Xia in the northwest who was

paying for these tribesmen to attack us. They had even sent military experts to plan and organize the attacks, and they had paid spies to infiltrate our garrisons to provide them with information on our deployment. That was why their raids were always hitting us on our weakest points.”

Yan Ching said, “So with this information did you go back to the War department?”

Yang Su said, “It was no use, they accused us of fabricating this information, they told us that Xi Xia was a friendly Kingdom, they had no reason to do this.”

Yang Su shook his head sadly and continued, “The Grand lady of the Ding family was determine, she knew that if we did not step in, the people in the region will suffer badly. When the Imperial Court did not want to help the people, it was up to the strongest in the society to step in. These attacks not only concerned the people of this region, it will affect the integrity of the entire Empire. We could not detach ourselves from this.”

Yang Su continued, “We had convinced the other rich families in the region to contribute to the defense force, the Ding family had spent a lot of our wealth on this task, it was no secret that the entire clan was on the verge of bankrupt. But we did not mind at all, the Grand Lady said that we had gotten wealthy because of the people, now we are just giving it back to them.

The people of the region were also very supportive of us; all our creditors even though they knew we were bankrupt did not come and chase us for money. People were showing up every day at our doorstep offering us help, the farmer and merchants around the region had been providing us and the army food without collecting any money in return. We had the heart of the people.” Yang Su spoke with pride.

He continued, “As we were about to get the situation under control, my young master the General was inflicted with a strange disease, he fell asleep one night ten days ago and had not wakened up ever since, we engaged many doctors to treat him but it was no use. All the doctors had never seen such a case before; they had no clue how to go about healing him. Finally we resorted to the tribal doctors in the region. One tribal witchdoctor told us that our young master was bitten by a rare snake in the forest; the only cure was a rare flower that blooms once in a hundred years. The last time it bloomed was 60 years ago, and the only available specimen was kept by the Apologetic Priest!!!

We went to the Apologetic Priest seeking his help, but he was away in the mountains and his disciples told us that the rare flower was requested by the Imperial household a few days ago, and they had dispatched two priests to bring the flower to the Imperial capital.”

Yang Su looked at us and said, “Now you understand why we had to rob the two priests, we had no choice, if words get out that the General is dying, the entire defense force will fall apart. Already we had reliable information that many tribesmen had been gathering in the northern plains, they are getting ready for the next attack. The moment the General dies, the defense army would disintegrate, I believe this time the attack will not be limited to the border towns; they would go all the way Chang’an.”

Yan Ching who was always the sharper mind asked Yang Su, “Mister Yang, the witchdoctor said that the only cure was a rare flower kept by the Apologetic Priest

and at the same time the flower was requested by the Imperial household just a few days before that.

That flower had been there for the past 60 years; nobody bothered about it, but just as your young master needed it to save his life the Emperor wanted it as well. Do you not realize that this was too much of a coincidence?"

Yan Ching added, "I believe that there was a plot to discredit the Ding family, the conspirators were forcing the Ding family to commit a crime against Imperial interest; you were doing exactly that last night when you tried to rob the two priests. Had you been successful with the robbery, the Emperor would be furious, the entire Ding household would be held accountable; there would not be any Ding family to defend the borders."

Yang Su looked at Yan Ching in shock and said, "In our anxiety to save the young master we did not realize that point. I am sure the Grand Lady did not see that too. But how do we save the young master?"

Yan Ching replied, "Dear Mister Yang, this is a matter of great importance, as a citizen of the Song dynasty I will help you and the Ding family to fight this evil. I will discuss with my friends and see how we can help."

The old doctor Liu Ching Feng who had been quiet all this while added, "If there is anything that I could do, I would help too. I would be happy to look at your young master, but I doubt I can be of any help. I suspect the one who could help would be one of your friends, the Miao boy..."

Right away Yan Ching understood what the old doctor meant; the young master General was not sick, he was attacked by black magic!!!

### **The Black Magic of Gu**

The black magic that was practiced in the Miao region was known as Gu, it was a form of dark sorcery which had been around for a long time. Due to its evil nature, the practice was banned by Imperial decree, but it was still practiced by some of the hill tribes. Most of the time this sorcery was used as a form of medical care for the Miao tribe, few people actually used the darker aspect of it. But there were still a few witchdoctors who used the art for evil gains.

Gu had several forms, most of them involved some kind of poison that was distilled from various poisonous plants and insects; the essence of this distillate was then put into the food or drink of the victim. The victim would then experience a slow painful death, but the highest form of the art allowed the witchdoctor to introduce the poison from a vast distance away. Often casting the spell from the safety of his own home shrine, the victim would never know who had poisoned him.

This way of introducing the poison would involve two elements, the poison itself and the carrier of the poison, the carrier of the poison was said to be a spirit of a diseased witchdoctor. The reason was because the practice of Gu was deemed evil, therefore when a Gu practitioner dies, his spirit could never be accepted in the afterlife, and such wondering spirits would be easily captured and enslaved by a highly skilled witchdoctor. The captured spirit would be a slave to the witchdoctor forever. The witchdoctor would have to possess a piece of the victim's body part;

hair and nail clipping were usually used. With this item he would then direct the slaved spirit to the victim.

The other forms of Gu were milder in nature; they could be used to cure sickness or used to cast off bad luck. One form of Gu can make the victim fall in love with a certain person, thus many Miao women actually administered such concoction to their husband or husband to be...

### **Yan Ching Organize his Friends (Yan Ching Narrative)**

There was no time to lose, I gathered my friends and told them what had happened, and told them the story of Yang Su. We all agreed that we should help the Ding family.

This plot had obviously involved the help of someone in the Imperial Court who had advised the Emperor to request for the flower, this person had somehow aroused the Emperor's interest in this rare flower. At the same time the witchdoctor who had examined the General must have been bought as well, he had made the Ding family believe that the only way to save the General was the flower; these two events had been orchestrated to put the Ding family on the collision course with the Emperor. With the Ding family discredited, the western border would be opened for the attacking tribesmen.

Now the crucial task was to save the General's life, and the person who would have some knowledge of Gu was Xiao Miao. We begged him to tell us everything he knew about this dark art of Gu.

Xiao Miao said, "Gu had been in the Miao culture for hundreds of years, this practice was initially intended as a medical discipline, but somehow through the years a dark branch of the science was developed. But ever since the Miao tribal land was conquered by the Han (Chinese) people, the practice was banned. In the beginning, this Gu technique was incorporated into warfare against the conquerors, but as the Han people hated this practice so much that the reprisal was extraordinarily harsh. Many Gu practitioners were exterminated, slowly the Miao people stop practicing it all together for fear of the harsh reprisal.

However, there were still a few villages up in the mountains that harbour witchdoctors who practice the Black art. They were very difficult to find, especially those that had the skill to cast the poison from a distance was not hear of in recent years. I can check with my village elders for you, but I have my dilemma as you can understand..."

I fully understand Xiao Miao's predicament, he belonged to the Miao tribe whose land had been conquered by my Han ancestor hundreds of years ago. The Miao people had been slowly pushed to the less fertile land up in the mountains, while many of the hill tribes had been Sinicized into the cities there were still many starving tribesmen up in the cold mountains. Through the years there had been rebellions followed by harsh repression, hatred ran deep between the two cultures. For him to go to his elders and seek help for us might look rather ridiculous and unexplainable.

It was an unfortunate part of history; I had no answer to the question, there was only one thing I could say to him, "Xiao Miao, I understand your dilemma, I could only point out to you that if we allow the Xi Xia Kingdom to conquer this land; they would probably be worse than the Song dynasty. At least under the Song dynasty, you and your people knew what the devil looks like, with Xi Xia, you do not know."

After some considerations, Xiao Miao agreed to approach some of his elders; these elders might have some knowledge on who was still practicing Gu. As Xiao Miao had mentioned there were not many witchdoctor had the power to cast the spell from a distance, that would narrow down the number of candidates for us. To show our sincerity, we offered to talk to any Miao tribe elders who were willing to talk to us. Xiao Miao set off on his mission.

The next thing I wanted to tackle was the two priests carrying the rare flower; they were still in the inn. I would like to find out from them more about this rare flower and hopefully we could find out who was involved in this plot to discredit the Ding family.

Meanwhile Liu Ching Feng had offered to escort Yang Su back to Huang Long City, he would take a look at the condition of the sleeping General and see if he could do anything about it. With his power, he should be able to at least keep the General alive for a while longer, while we wait for help from the Miao people. They set off immediately for Huang Long City; we agreed to meet there as soon as we hear from Xiao Miao.

### **The Hundred Years Bloom (Yan Ching's account)**

My friends and I went to knock on the door of the two priests who were escorting the rare flower. When they saw that it was us, they respectfully invited us into the room. The two priests introduced themselves as Qian Si and Qian Wei; they were disciples of Apologetic Priest, they did not dress as a priest last night as they did not want to attract attention on the road.

They had decided to stay in the inn for another day because they were worried that the Ding family would be waiting for them further down the road. We assured them that the issue had been resolved; the Ding family would not need the flower any more. We also explained the Ding family's predicament to them; they were saddened by the news of the sleeping General.

Qian Si said, "We have heard of the General and the Ding family's love of the people, which was why we were so surprise when they were trying to rob us. Now I wish I could give them the flower, but unfortunately this same flower was requested by the Emperor..."

I consoled them that the flower was used as a plot by evil people in the Imperial Court; it was not their fault that they could not hand the flower to the Dings. Then I asked them to help us by telling us all they knew about the Hundred Year Bloom.

Qian Si said, "The rare flower blooms once every hundred years, the plant grows only high up in the mountains in the Shu region. Even when it blooms, it only flowers for a day or two, so specimens of such flowers were very rare. After the last

blooming that happened sixty years ago, there were about twenty collected by various people, but through the years they were either lost or used up as medicine, now there is only one left in the world. This is the one.”

He opened the box and showed me the dried up remains of what looked like a multi-petal flower.

Qian Si continued, “Even though many people claimed that this flower had special medicinal properties my teacher had never use it on anyone. It was because this flower is so rare that it was not available for proper studies and experiments so he doubted that anyone actually knew its characteristic. It is very dangerous to use it when it is not properly tested.

Initially he was very reluctant to send it to the Emperor, but after repeated requests from the Imperial Medical department he gave in. He sent them a letter warning of the potential danger of using this flower in any herbal combination; that was all he could do.”

Yan Ching asked, “So it was the Imperial physicians who had requested for this flower?”

Qian Si replied, “Yes, it was the Chief Physician who personally sent the request.”

Now I got a clearer picture of who might have been involved in the plot to discredit the Ding family, the Chief Physician might have been bought. If we want to pursue this link in the future, this physician would be a good starting point.

We thanked the two priests and told them that it would be safe to travel the Imperial Capital, and that they must not delay further. For additional safety, I asked River Ghost to escort them on the way; nothing must happen to the flower, otherwise it would be blamed on the Ding family.

### **Xiao Miao hooked us up (Yan Ching’s account)**

Xiao Miao sent us a message to meet him at a mountain village; he informed us that he had established contact with a Gu expert. We set off immediately for the village, it was not far off.

The village was like most other Miao village, subsistent farming and some small scale tea trading was the main life line of the community. The entire village consisted of Miao people; it was a closed community, usually such communities usually kept to themselves, outsiders were not welcomed.

There we met up with Xiao Miao who was with an middle age man who was his uncle, this uncle of his had left Xiao Miao’s village many years ago; he was married into this village.

That was a special arranged marriage because his father-in-law had only one daughter, therefore the marriage was on the condition that the groom would move in with the bride’s family. And his father-in-law was a powerful man in the community; he was the chief witchdoctor of the region. Traditionally, Xiao Miao’s uncle would eventually take over the position of the father-in-law; meanwhile he would have to learn the Gu skills from the old man.

When the uncle saw us, he did not display any welcome or hostility; as a Miao tribesman he had little reasons to be friendly towards us, but as friends of Xiao Miao he also had no grounds to be hostile. After centuries of suspicion and misunderstanding, the two cultures had settled into an uneasy compromise of generally ignoring each other.

I believe Xiao Miao had a hard time convincing the uncle and his father-in-law to meet us. I was very grateful to Xiao Miao.

We were brought to a wooden house at the end of the village; this house was bigger than the others in the village, this was a symbol of status. As we enter the house, we were told to be silent as the Grandmaster was meditating; the room was dark and crowded with many jars and boxes on one side, on the other side of the room was an altar filled with little clay figurines. We sat on the floor and waited patiently for the Grandmaster.

Before long the Grandmaster came out from the inner chamber, he was dressed in traditional Miao outfit, he worn a fur hat with a peacock feather sticking out in the back. He was about seventy years of age.

He sat down before us and stared; he did not return our greetings and bows, again there was the neutral expression which was neither hostility nor fondness. After some time, he suddenly refocused his eyes as though he was coming out from a trance. Some signs of recollection started to creep into his face and he smiled and said, "When I was a young man, I used to have many Han people friends, I used to hunt with the boys, we stole chicken from the farmers... we had much fun." He looked at us and thought for a while.

Finally he continued, "Things had gotten tougher in recent years, much had changed. But that is not what you came for; I understand from Little Cricket (his name for Xiao Miao) that you needed to find out about a Gu master that can perform a dark spell from a distance."

He took a sip of the tea beside him and continued, "I was initially reluctant to help; I did not see any reason why I should help the very same people who had oppressed my tribe. Little Cricket presented me with your argument about the advantage of knowing devil you are dealing with, I agreed. We are simple folks; we do not have fancy arguments to justify our ways, I like your argument."

He continued, "The practice of Gu had evolved much since your ancestors arrived in our land, now, there are not many Gu practitioners in the community, for highly skilled ones, even less. Even those that practiced the medical aspects of the art had reduced in number, many of the Miao people had become Sinicized and they preferred the medicine from the Central Plains.

As far as I knew, there are only around a handful Gu masters that could fit into your description, these people had been secretly learning and practicing this art in their hideout up in the mountains. This was part of our culture, Gu could be used for good or evil, unfortunately the Han people did not understand the art; they had forced us to abandon this practice. It was very foolish of them. The Culture is in our blood."

He said, "This group of secret practitioner of the art had gone through much hardship to keep up with the practice, every year, they leave the comfort of their home and family and they hide up in the mountains for months in order to

practice Gu. Most of them had done it to keep the culture alive; to serve the community, but some had turned to the dark side.

Out of the group of highly skilled Gu master, I believe I know which one you are looking for; he was from a village ten miles from here, he had perfected his skills three years ago. After perfecting his skill, he had killed his teacher and he enslaved his teacher's spirit. This man is evil. His name is Black Bear."

He reflected for a moment and said, "In my trance, I could feel his power, I could detect his intense energy about ten to fifteen days ago, I believe he was conducting a dark ritual around these mountains. He was intensifying his power during the last full moon, which would be twelve days back. I believe that would be the day your General was hit by the sleeping sickness."

He was absolutely right on the date, now I need to find out how to counter this Gu attack.

I asked him, "Dear grandmaster, you had been right on the date, can you enlighten me on how to counteract this Gu attack?"

He replied, "Black Bear had for some unknown reason used a very mild attack on your General, the sleeping Gu poison was the mildest form of offensive. Had he used the other more potent poison, your General would have been dead the next day.

I guess he was worry that a blatant attack with a strong Gu poison would make it very obvious that a Miao Gu master was behind the attack. If the Imperial authorities became involved, the situation might be complicated for him. Therefore he had chosen a mild, slow attack on the General.

This sleeping Gu actually does not kill the victim, it just make them sleep and sleep, eventually starving to death. Very often this Gu attack would be diagnosed by the traditional Han doctor as a problem of the heart; nobody would think it was the work of black magic. I believe this was the way Black Bear wanted to disguise his attack.

But this sleeping Gu had one major setback; the Gu master who cast the spell must continuously casting the spell to keep the victim asleep. It is a very exhausting process. That was why this form of attack was seldom used for prolong period."He paused for a while to collect his thoughts before he answer my question about the remedy.

He continued, "Young man, I cannot answer your question about remedies without explaining further about Gu. Please bear with me. In recent few hundred years, the practice of Gu had split into two branches; this was when the dark side was developed. The Imperial ban on the art had driven both branches underground; the two branches were the Enlightened Gu and the Dark Gu. The Enlightened branch of the art, which was the original form of the art, was mainly used for medical purposes; it was a form of medical care for the poor people in the tribal village up in the mountains where they had no access to the city facilities. There is another purpose for the Enlightened Gu, but I will come to it later.

The Dark branch of the art was for harming people; revenge, jealousy, murder and so on. The harming of other people was indiscriminate, as long as you have enough money to pay the Gu Master, he would harm anyone for you. These practices were in no way reflective of the Miao culture, but unfortunately the



Imperial authorities do not understand the difference between the two, they had banned both branches of the art.

I am a Grandmaster of the Enlightened Gu, I had learned and practiced it since I was a little boy, and I am also in charge of educating the next generation of Gu masters of the Enlightened branch. In our training, we also have to learn the practices of the Dark Gu, because one of the most important aspects of our duty was to fight the Dark side. We had to know how they did it in order to protect my people from it.

The basic concept behind the practice of Gu was to make use of the energy of nature, we harmonized with nature and channel its energy to perform task for us. These energies could be used to heal a person, at times it could also use to harm a person. These energies that I talk about were not visible to the eyes, during our training we were taught how to detect them in the environment, it is in the trees, the rocks, the mountains and even the animals. But just like most powers in the world, it could be used for good and it could be used for evil purposes.

The Dark Gu masters had perfected the skill of tapping the dark energies that existed around us; we on the other hand were trained to avoid such energies. Let me explain further; the energy from a healthy tall tree is good energy, but if the tree was deliberately damaged and the tree began to die, it would start emitting bad energy. The Dark Gu master would then capture such energy from the dying tree and store it and transmit it when they wanted to harm someone with it.”

He paused for a drink of tea from this long narrative, “Evil energy did not come about in nature, nature is the creator of goodness and pureness and serenity; bad energies were created by us when we did something bad to our environment. When we did not harmonize with nature; that was when the ugly side of nature appeared.

The Dark Gu Master is an expert in creating such negative forces; one of the ways was to pour poison onto a healthy tree and wait for it to wither, they would then perform a ritual to capture the pain, suffering and anguish emitting from the dying tree. Sometimes they when they needed an abundance of evil energy they would torture animals to make them generate the evil energy. Animals being a more conscious being than plants were capable of producing more intense and darker form of evilness. At the most extreme, human being could be used as well.”

I asked, “Does that mean when we cut down a tree to build a house we are creating evilness in our world?”

The Grandmaster replied, “Plants and animals accept their fate when they are killed for a good purpose, nature in its wisdom had catered for a balance. When a person cuts down a healthy tree for his family’s shelter, the goodness in him would emit a positive energy to balance off the negative energy emitted by the dying tree. In the Enlightened Miao tradition, we pay respect to the animal or tree before taking their life, and we do not take more than we need. On top of that, before we consume the slaughtered animal, we thank them for their existence. A dead tree used to build a warm shelter for a happy family would again emit more positive energy, but when the house is abandoned, the rotting house would start emitting negative energy.

Do you not notice the difference when you enter a happily occupied home and an abandoned house? A happily occupied home would give you warmth even in

the coldest winter; on the other hand an abandoned house would give you the shivers even in the height of summer.”

I was very stirred by the wisdom of the Grandmaster; the differences between the two cultures had created many misunderstanding and misconception about the Miao people. The general perception from the Central Plain was that the Miao tribes were evil and uncivilized, but this conversation had showed that they had a clear and insightful philosophy of life. They had learned to live with the environment, with nature, they had encoded this concept in the form of energies and spirits. They had treated their environment with respect, to them nature was a partner in their survival, not a slave to be exploited.

But unfortunately a minority in the Miao community had also learned to harness the dark energies and made use of it for evil gains. This minority had discredited the entire community.

I asked the Grandmaster, “How about the carrier of the poison? How does Black Bear control the spirit and how do we counter it?”

The Grand Master said, “The spirit that Black Bear commanded was his teacher, his name was Green Snake. Green Snake was not an evil man, but he was weak in personality. He had been practicing the Enlightened Gu when Black Bear joined him as a student, after some time, the student; Black Bear managed to convince him to practice the dark side of the art. The entire village community was shocked that the student had converted the teacher to the dark side, the village threw the two out, they had been living in the mountains ever since.

I was aware when Green Snake died, his spirit came to me during my meditation, and he told me that he was murdered by his student Black Bear and he had regretted his stupidity. Soon after that, I could feel that his spirit was captured by his former student. And in order to energize the slave spirit Black Bear had been forcing dark energy onto the spirit of Green Snake.

Now, every time his spirit passes through our village on his way to perform an evil task for his master, I could feel his powerful dark energy, Green Snake was no longer Green Snake. The spirit of Green Snake had turned into a powerful spirit full of hatred and evilness and all this negativity was forced onto him by his former-student Black Bear. It saddens me to witness all this.”

He stroke his chin deep in thoughts as we sat there waiting for the Grand Master to come up with a strategy to counter the powerful evil. Finally he looked up and said, “I do not have the power to fight him right now, because he had gotten too strong, Black Bear and his slave spirit are unbeatable. I need something to weaken the dark energy surrounding him before we could enter his territory safely. I need a massive surge of good energy to neutralize his power.”

He continued, “The only way to do so quickly is to get the people of Huang Long city to refrain from killing animals and be vegetarian for the immediate future, and the entire population to be mobilized to plant trees in the surrounding hillside. I will conduct a ritual to harness this collective surge of goodness, and I will channel it into Black Bear’s territory, this should break the protective evil aura surrounding him. This might even give the spirit of Green Snake enough good energy to turn back to the Enlightened side. When his defense is broken, we will move in and destroy him.”

I was delighted at the solution, with the Ding family's reputation; they should have no problem mobilizing the population to help them. I sent Night Owl ahead with this information to the Ding family, the Grand Master and the rest will travel to Huang Long city the following day.

### **Huang Long city (Yan Ching's account)**

When we reached Huang Long city, we were immediately brought to the Ding family's mansion. The Grand Lady of the family received us with warm fondness; she was grateful to us for helping her avert a disaster by preventing the robbery of the Hundred Years Bloom. She respectfully invited the Miao Grand Master to sit at the senior seat of the household. (In Chinese customs, the seat facing the main door of the house was reserved for the most senior person in the household, this seat was seldom offered to anybody outside the family. Anybody offered that seat would have to be very revered, it was equivalent to offering the service of the entire household to that person.)

The Grand Master humbly turned down the offer and he said, "Dear Madam Ding, I am very honoured to be offered such privilege position, the act itself was enough to convince me that I am helping the right people. The seat is not necessary; please let me have the humble seat by your side."

The Grand Lady replied, "I shall not force it on you, please be comfortable. I had received your instructions and I had prepared everything, my sons and daughters had been going to all the households in Huang Long City to beg them to refrain from killing and they will not be eating meat for the next few days. We had also organized thousands of the people of Huang Long to plant trees on the mountain side."

The Grand Master replied, "Yes I know, as I travelled here, I had detected a very intense stream of goodness coming from all around. This had been positive, the willingness of the people to help you shows that the Ding family are righteous people. My effort had not been misplaced."

He continued, "I will start gathering the good energies immediately, with this huge number of people involved I believe we would be ready in no time at all. There was a saying that goes 'Evilness can never win Righteousness', I am confident that this point would be proven soon."

We left the Ding mansion and went to a hillside nearby. The Grand Master set up his altar and went about gathering the good energy that was being generated by the goodness of the Huang Long residents. He continued doing it till night fall.

### **The clash of the Masters**

We stayed on the hillside that night as it made no sense to travel back and fore from the city. There was very little moon that night, it was pitch dark after night fall. We decided to start a small bonfire for warmth and light, as we sat down to

discuss the day's work, a light wind started blowing. After a while the wind picked up strength and before long it was like a storm.

The Grand Master said, "He is here."

I asked, "Who? You mean Black Bear?"

Grand Master replied, "Not him, he sent his slaved spirit, Green Snake. Do not worry, I am here. "

By now the bonfire had been scattered by the strong wind, I could hardly see beyond five feet in the darkness. I could feel the intensity of the storm blowing around us, but beyond the rushing wind, I felt a presence, the presence of acute hatred and extreme anger.

The intensity of these emotions had overtaken all my other sensations, my anger and hatred was exploding, it was directed at the Miao people. I did not know why suddenly I was filled with hatred for the Miao people. At that moment, I did not need an explanation; I wanted to kill the two Miao person on the hill top, Xiao Miao and the Grand Master.

I was reaching for my saber when the Grand Master calmly gripped me by the wrist and splashed some water on my face. Suddenly all the anger was gone, my legs gave way and I sat down on the ground. I realized that my emotion was briefly taken over by the dark side; I had been turned into their instrument to kill. If not for the timely intervention of the Grand Master, Black Bear would have succeeded in eliminating the one person who could counter him.

This was the first time I had experienced the power of the Evil Gu, I realized that I was powerless against it. I could understand now why it had been so feared by the people who had seen it in action. I understand now why the Han Imperial authorities had decided to ban this art altogether; right from the beginning. Even after the Grand Master had taken me out its evil grip I could still feel the lingering sensation of emptiness. It took much conscious effort for me to hold on to my earthly existence, my entire awareness was swinging from acute emotion to total blackness.

My head was spinning, I sat down on the ground, Xiao Miao was told by the Grand Master to watch me closely. Being a Xiao person, Xiao Miao was less affected by the Gu, and he was more exposed this dark science. It was quite clear that I was the target of this attack; everybody else was not so affected by the dark energy. Black Bear had seen me as the leader and organizer of this resistance group, and I was the priority on his list.

Soon the spinning environment twisted into a vortex and the space around us became deadly calm but a few feet beyond us the air was still spinning!! I realized that the Grand Master had created a protective cocoon for our group. The Grand Master was dancing around beating his wooden drum and chanting in the Miao language. His dancing and drum beat were executed at a furious pace, he seems to be fighting a battle, except that this battle was not fought with solid weapons, this battle was fought with unseen forces. Forces stronger than any knives or spears I had ever seen.

The fringe of our protective domain was pulsating like a living membrane; it was the push of the darkness against the shield the Grand Master had created for us. This canopy of darkness was trying to engulf us, our weapons and fighting skills

were useless against this evil force; the Grand Master was the only one with the knowledge and skill to fight this battle.

By now I was back on my feet, I suggested to Xiao Miao that perhaps we could stab the darkness with our sabers and spears. He told me solemnly that such action would only enhance the dark energy, because our weapons were meant for killing, they were full of negative energy. The dark forces feed on such negativity.

Soon an equilibrant was reached between the dark forces and the Grand Master's protective aura, darkness outside began to lighten. We began to be able to see the trees and hills beyond the darkness.

With us safely inside the cocoon, the Grand Master lowered his drum and changed a slow calming rhythm; the storm outside our cocoon began to die down a little. Next the Grand Master started chanting a soothing melody; Xiao Miao who was standing next to me explained that the Grand Master was appealing to the spirit of the forest to help us neutralize the darkness of Green Snake's presence. At the same time, he was persuading Green Snake to reject the evilness and come over to our side.

The Grand Master was betting that Green Snake's spirit being an unwilling accomplice of Black Bear could be persuaded to change sides. Even though his spirit was captured and enslaved by Black Bear; now being a vast distance away Green Snake might be able to break free if he had the resolve. In addition, the dark energy that Black Bear had forced onto Green Snake was slowly being neutralized by the goodness, and positive energy that Grand Master had collected today.

Initially the collected energy was intended for fighting Black Bear, but now that Black Bear had sent his slave spirit to attack us, Grand Master had decided to use this force to neutralize this immediate threat. If he was able to neutralize Green Snake, it would be a big step forward in breaking down Black Bear's defenses.

The Grand Master intensified the rhythm of drum beats and stepped forward to the edge of our protective cocoon. Soon we saw the entire spinning vortex shrunk into a single entity, slowly the single entity stopped spinning all together. In the darkness I saw a wisp of vapour suspended in the air, this vapour had no form or shape and the night breeze did not scatter it, it just hang there.

The Grand Master said in the Miao Language and Xiao Miao beside me translated the conversation, "My old friend Green Snake, please come to my side, I will protect you from the darkness."

After a long while, a soft voice replied, "My old friend, I had taken the evil path, I am paying for my mistakes, I am tormented every moment of my existence. I am suffering unimaginable pain and anguish. I could not control my action, I am sorry."

Grand Master said, "It's not too late to turn back, you must accept your fate as a Dark Gu Master, your spirit would have to spend the next hundred years in meditation to resolve your sins, you should start doing that now. If you continue serving the darkness, your sins will never be resolved. Come to me, I will help you settle in a comfortable place for you to meditate. Your evilness was forced onto you by your evil student Black Bear, you must use your own goodness to overcome them; I will help you by injecting bright energy into your environment. Come into this urn, it would protect you from Black Bear's power."

He placed an urn on the ground and stepped back, the cloud of vapour hovered above the urn for a long time. I believe it was a tough decision for Green Snake, the Grand Master explained the consequences to me after the whole event.

As Green Snake was practicing the Dark Gu before he was murdered by his student, his spirit was not accepted in the afterlife. To rid himself of the dark energy surrounding his spirit, the spirit had to meditate and suffer physical pain for a long time. Alternatively, he could continue being the slave-spirit of the evil Black Bear.

Being a slave spirit was not a straight forward affair; the Dark Gu Masters controlling the spirit often introduce more and more dark energy onto the slave to make it more powerful. Such inputs were in the form of hatred, anger, violence and destruction. When such emotions were forced onto a spirit, the sensation was worse than physical pain. That was the price one had to pay for practicing this evil art.

Slowly the vapour cloud drifted to the top of the urn, even without shape and form, the cloud was conveying a feeling of hesitation. A hundred years of seclusion and meditation or continue walking on the dark side? It was not an easy choice.

Suddenly with a burst of determination, the vapour slipped into the urn, and the night turned deadly still and silent, even the crickets knew they were witnessing a spectacular event. After a breath-taking pause, the cheery night sound came back, even the little night creatures were cheering the triumph of goodness over evil.

The Grand Master went forward and sealed the urn with a piece of yellow talisman, finally the night breathed a collective sigh of relief. I asked him, "What will happen to Green Snake's spirit now?"

He said, "I will protect him until I destroy Black Bear, because even now, Black Bear still have some control over him. After that, I will find a suitable place to plant his spirit in, a place where he can meditate and resolve his sins. To resolve one's sins, it would be up to the person, no one else could help. If he is strong and determine, I believe he will be freed in a few decades."

He continued, "Young man, this world has a cosmic record keeper, all your sins and good deeds will be recorded, in your final days the gods will give you a fair treatment, nobody can cheat that. Not even the Emperor."

I asked him, "Now what do we do next?"

The Grand master said, "Now that we have captured Green snake's spirit, we have weakened Black Bear considerably, soon we would be able to block his bad energy from reaching the General. That will render him powerless. Then we move in to destroy him, we cannot allow such an evil person to remain in this world. I do not like to kill, but this time I had no other options. If I allow him to get more powerful, the entire humanity might suffer.

He continued, "I believe Black Bear is no longer himself; he had been taken over by extreme evilness. Sometimes in the course of training a Gu master could push his own boundaries beyond his own capability, he might have push his progress too fast.

Such mistakes could lead to the Gu master losing control of his own being; he became taken over by darkness, this process is irreversible. His body had become a magnet for evil bad energy, which is the first stage; later the body will start

generating more and more bad energy on its own. By the time he reaches that stage, even I would not be able to defeat him; I would take the collective effort from the entire humanity and it would lead to much suffering.”

In the course of history, there were personalities that personified extreme evilness; they deviated from the normal spectrum of human behaviors. Such persons' actions defied normal explanations, and they even possessed the ability to influence the people around them to evilness.

Very often such characters caused upheavals in the society, sometime even the entire humanity became embroiled in such misery. It could only be reversed by the intervention of the entire humanity, wars would be fought, and many people would be killed before normality could be established.

Eventually goodness will always triumph over evil, but the price would be huge. This is the balance of our cosmic world; goodness always overwhelmed evilness, but occasionally evilness could distort the balance for a while. This philosophy could fit into our daily life, we had always fought evil, but an individual's capability was limited. The world of Wulin had always played the role of uniting humanity against such evilness; no matter how greedy or self-centered a Wuxia was, when confronted with such evilness he would always fight it.

### **The General recovers**

After clipping the wings of Black bear by capturing his slave spirit Green Snake, the General began to show signs of recovery. He woke up from his long sleep and was able to take in some mild nourishment; with Liu Ching Feng's help (the old doctor) he was making speedy recovery. Now we had to focus on defending him against further attacks and continue to neutralize the dark energy of Black Bear, soon we would be ready to pay Black Bear a visit.

The Grand master and the citizens of Huang Long city continued their effort at creating positive energy; more and more trees were planted in the hill sides. The barren hills of the surrounding countryside were slowly being transformed. The livelihoods of the volunteers were compensated by the rich merchant's families of the city, they knew the entire region's survival was at stake, and there was a sense of goodness all around.

Even the normally detached minority tribes began to join in the effort; they were informed of this imminent disaster by Xiao Miao and his tribesmen. They knew that an invasion by the Kingdom of Xi Xia would be equally disastrous for them, and they had no wish to live under the rules of a person like Black Bear.

Soon the Grand Master informed me that we were ready to confront Black Bear, and we had to do it before Black Bear get too powerful. The Grand Master through his meditation and his communication with the spirit of Green Snake had been able to detect the general location of Black Bear's hideout. And through his paranormal communication with the spirit of Green Snake he found out that Black Bear's location was guarded by soldiers from Xi Xia.

This discovery had presented us with a problem, ever since the Gu attack on the General, the entire army had become very fearful of Black Bear's power. The soldiers were unwilling to come with us to attack Black Bear, the soldiers were not

cowards, they were willing to fight any invading army, but comes to black Gu they were scared stiff.

We knew we had to get rid of Black Bear before the army could function properly, we managed to gather an assault force of around twenty volunteers consisting of me and my friends, a few Miao tribesmen, and a small team from the Ding family led by Tu Gao.

We would have to make do with this small number; we simply could not find anyone else willing to face the big bad Black Bear.

Without us knowing, we were given some extra help, from an unlikely source...

### **We went to the Bear's den**

We set off immediately for the mountains, along the way the Grand Master would stop and meditate to feel for Black Bear's evil presence. By this *feel* he was able to guide our party to the evil hideout. Our small party was led by the Grand Master, but unfortunately he was not skilled in martial art, therefore it was up to us to protect him. But as the story unfolded, his skills were worth more than the ten of us combined.

Soon we reached the mountain where Black Bear was located; the Grand Master could detect the strong presence of evil, he told the group to stay hidden in a cave while he created a protective cocoon for us. We could rest there without worrying about Black Bear attacking us. After that he left on his mission to find the exactly location of Black Bear, I decided to go along to protect him.

We quietly walked through dense vegetation listening for the sound of human, the forest was strangely quiet; it was as though even the little insects and animals were afraid of Black Bear. I could feel the sense of evilness hanging in the air, we came across many trees that were poisoned and rotting; this could only be the work of Black Bear.

These rotting trees had an iron stake driven into the trunk, with a black cloth tied to it. The Grand Master told me that this was the way Dark Gu Masters' stakeout their victims and enslave the tree, by doing that, they would harvest every single ounce of the dark energy emitted by the dying tree.

As we went along, we tried to remove as many of the stakes as possible. But we both knew that it was a futile attempt to save the trees as they were already poisoned and there was little we could do about that. Furthermore, we were jeopardizing our mission by doing that because by removing the stakes, we might be exposing our presence to the evil Black Bear. The powerful Black Bear might be able to sense the change in the flow of dark energy going to him. But both the Old Master and I could not bear to see the suffering of these grand old trees.

Nature had provided us with these wonderful plants to help us survive better in the world; all this living trees had devoted their existence to the service of humanity. They were created out of the best and purest of intention, but one evil man had turned this goodness into darkest of evil. It was saddening to see destruction and misery in such wicked form.

Unfortunately, as we went deeper into the forest we saw something even more gruesome. We came across cages upon cages of animals trapped in very small



enclosures; they were deliberately physically wounded to create the intended suffering. Some limbs were cut off; some were just stabbed or slashed leaving behind opened infested wounds. They were starved and purposely placed in uncomfortable positions, but... they was not killed.

The Grand Master explained to me that this method was intended to create the maximum suffering so that the dark energy emitted by this caged animals would be at the maximum efficiency. These caged animals had suffered so much that all of them had gone out of their mind; they had banged repeatedly at the enclosure so that every bit of their body were bleeding.

Such treatment had turned normally docile animals like deer into a demented wild beast. All this anguish, suffering and hatred were what Black Bear was harvesting to enhance his power. I went around the cages and put my knife to the poor animals, they were beyond help; I could see the look of gratitude when I put them out of misery.

Soon we reached a clearing closed to the top of the hill; from there we could see the altar Black Bear had erected for his rituals. The area was heavily guarded by soldiers; there was a garrison of about a hundred. From our vantage point, we could also see a huge army deployment about five miles away; I believe it was the Xi Xia invasion forces!!

By evening the Grand Master and I returned from our survey of the area, he briefed us on his intended course of action. He emphasized that we had no time to lose, Black Bear had harnessed too much dark energy; was very powerful. Soon he would be beyond destruction. In addition, the huge Xi Xia army hidden in the mountains were preparing for the invasion of the Song Empire.

The Kingdom of Xi Xia was located in the Northwest of Song dynasty China (present day Gansu region); they had been eyeing the northwestern part of the empire for a long time. With the Kingdom of Liao threatening the Song Empire's northeast, it was a good opportunity for Xi Xia to invade.

They had made used of the distracted Imperial Court and Black Bear's evil magic to weaken the defenses along the northwestern borders. If the General (The sleeping General) were to be incapacitated for a longer duration, their invasion plans might have been successful.

The Grand Master began to outline his plan to us, he said, "Black Bear had built an altar on the mountain top to summon the evil energy of the surrounding hills, he was protected by about a hundred soldiers from the Kingdom of Xi Xia. We would have to breach the defenses to get to him; it would not be easy as we have so few fighters with us. We will have to create a diversion."

Night Owl volunteered, "I can set fire to the camp while the rest of you move in and capture Black bear."

Night Owl was an expert burglar; he could move about freely in the night, if he could set fire and create chaos in the deployment, we might stand a chance.

We waited for night fall.

### **The Attack on Black Bear Hideout**

We hid at the fringe of the encampment as we waited for Night Owl to create his diversion; there was a light night breeze that would help him to fan the fire. We could see that Black Bear's altar was guarded by Xi Xia's soldiers, there were too many of them for us to take on, we hope that the fire would divert at least half the soldiers away from the area.

The soldiers' tent where located a distance from the altar, it was down a gentle slope closer to the valley below. Night Owl's plan was to start the fire there so that the soldiers would have to go down the hill to fight the fire. Even though it sounded like a good plan, but still the risk involved were huge as the numbers were not in our favour.

We had an only a short span of time to accomplish our task, as soon as the soldiers realize our attack, they will rush back to reinforce their comrades. The fire might even attract the attention of the huge army stationed a few miles away, this army consisted of tens of thousands of battle harden fighter, if they come to the aid of Black Bear we would be in serious trouble.

From where we were hiding in the shadows, we could see Night Owl darting around in the darkness. Soon we saw a small fire started in the far end of the camp, but very quickly there were several fires being started simultaneously all over the camp, we were puzzled as to how did Night Owl manage to start so many fires at the same time. But at that moment; it was not important, we did not think too much about it.

Soon the whole encampment was on fire, the night breeze was fanning the flame. The soldiers guarding Black Bear's altar was rushing down to fight the fire, only a hand full was remaining behind to guard the place. By now Night Owl had rushed back to join our assault, he said to me breathlessly, "I do not understand, I did not start most of the fire, how could I have started such a big fire so quickly? Someone else was doing it."

I replied, "No time to ask questions. Let's go."

I led the team into the altar area; the few soldiers guarding the place were surprised by our sudden appearance, we overpowered them easily. As we approach the big platform housing the altar, we saw Black Bear standing on the edge looking at us. He was watching our approach calmly as if he had expected us. Slowly he raised his hands to the heavens and started to chant, immediately an intense storm began to form around us, our surrounding space began to turn into an empty dark void, darker than darkness itself. Flashes of lightning were rolling out from nowhere striking randomly onto us, our advance was held back.

The Grand Master stepped forward, he took out an earthen urn that he had collected the positive energy for the past few days; he tossed it to the ground smashing the urn. A stream of green vapour came from the shattered urn and began to mingle with the darkness surrounding us. The darkness slowly turned lighter, the green vapour penetrated the dark void and started to flow towards Black Bear.

As the pureness of the green vapour began to filter into the environment, we could hear the forest coming back to life, the sounds of little insects were cheering the triumph of goodness over evil.

But it was not over; Black Bear was not defeated, he turned and ran towards the altar, he took a jar from the altar a smashed it to the ground in front of us.

From the broken urn out came many huge centipedes, these were not normal centipedes, they were almost one foot in length and they were orange in colour. This army of centipedes crawled towards us as if they knew we were the enemy, they were no doubt controlled by Black Bear.

Dark Gu masters uses many method to attack their victims, one way was the use of poisonous insects and reptiles. Centipedes, scorpions and poisonous snakes were kept in earthen urns; they were fed with other poisonous insects along with special potions to increase their deadliness. An occasional diet of human flesh would be introduced to let them acquire the taste of it. This rare diet and exceptional care would make these assailants grow to extraordinary size; they would also be exceptionally aggressive in nature. And they had a taste for human flesh.

These insects could be controlled by the Gu Master with his drum beats; the direction of the vibration of the drum would dictate the direction of the insect's movement. The insects were taught to move away from the drum beat; therefore the Gu Master could herd the centipedes in the desired direction.

Black Bear held his long wooden drum close to his torso, the lower end of the drum was firmly held to the ground to ensure the vibration of the drum would be channeled to the ground. His was directing the sound wave of the drum to guide the centipedes towards us, there were hundreds of the creature jumping over each other to get to us. We were beaten back for the moment; one bite from these creatures could be fatal. These centipedes were fast and dangerous, and they had acquired the ability to leap a distance of several foot.

Black Bear was performing a dance while he beat the drum, he was moving to the rhythm of the drum beat, and he was laughing the laugh of a victor. He knew that as long as he could delay us long enough for the soldiers to come back and reinforce him, our attack was doomed.

In addition to that, the huge army that was deployed further away would have gotten the signal of an attack; they too would be sending reinforcement to the area. Our attack looked like doomed to failure.

I was contemplating a retreat, when suddenly a white shadowy figure dashed forward from the darkness, at lightning speed. The white figure glided like a ghost over the army of centipedes to land a few yards in front of Black Bear.

The shocked Black Bear's starred at the old man with his mouth hanging open, before he could make a move the white figure shot a pebble from where he stood. The powerful flick of the finger delivered the pebble like an arrow straight into Black Bear's opened mouth; the shot was so powerful that the pebble after smashing his jaw bone went straight through the head and came out the other side. It was Ouyang Hao, the old man from Sunrise Inn... he killed his first man.

Black Bear was dead before he hit the ground, our old savior Ouyang Hao walked off without acknowledging us as though we were not there. He walked off with his hands behind his back looking up in the air as if taking a casual stroll. Before we could call out to him, he had disappeared into the darkness of the night. All of a sudden with the arrival of Ouyang Hao the situation had turned in our favour, at least for the moment.

Meanwhile the Grand Master was dealing with the centipedes with his talisman fire that he had carried in a jar. Talisman fire was created from alcohol spitted out

from his mouth; this stream of alcohol was shot through a small flame he held in front of him, the alcohol would be ignited. The projectile of flaming alcohol would then set fire to the advancing army of centipedes. It was an effective way to destroy the poisonous centipedes.

After clearing the centipedes the Grand Master told us that we must destroy the altar to thoroughly destroy the power of Black Bear, and we must hold off the reinforcement and give him some time to capture Black Bear's spirit. If the spirit was left wondering two things could happen, the extreme evilness of Black Bear might give him the ability to 'infect' other Gu masters or his wondering spirit might be captured by another Gu master who could then possess this terrible power.

While the Grand Master set off on his task of capturing the spirit, I sent two of the Miao men to set fire to the altar. The rest of us watch over the path leading to the lower encampment; we knew the reinforcement could be coming any time. It would be disastrous if we were caught by the hundred Xi Xia soldiers, we would have a hard time fighting against that number. By now Ouyang Hao was nowhere to be seen, I knew we could not depend on this eccentric old man to protect us; he was unpredictable.

Soon we saw the Xi Xia soldiers approaching the slope leading to our position; they were about a hundred of them, I turned to look at the Grand Master who was still conducting his 'spirit capturing' ritual.

It seems like we would not be able to escape in time, we knew from the moment we had volunteered for this mission that it was dangerous. We had done our duty to the people of the Empire, now that the General is awakened and Black Bear was destroyed, the Xi Xia invasion could be stopped.

We were prepared to make our last stand against the enemy; we had to give the Grand Master time to thoroughly destroy Black Bear. If we accomplish that, all our sacrifices would have been worth it...even our lives. This was the ultimate duty of a Wuxia. My only wish was that the Grand Master could destroy Black Bear's evil spirit before the Xi Xia soldiers could capture us, if not all our effort would have gone to waste.

I organized the few fighters we had, we fanned out to block the path leading to the altar. As the contingent of soldiers led by their commander charged up the slope we braced ourselves for the onslaught, none of us ran, we all knew the importance of our mission.

As they crashed onto our thin line of defense, we managed to take out the first few soldiers, but it was not easy as all of them were wearing light armour. We had a clear disadvantage as we were unprotected; when we strike them we had to hit their faces, lower arm and legs, those were the only parts of their body unprotected. This situation emboldened the soldiers, they knew we could not injure them easily; our sharp blades were useless on their armour.

The experienced fighters among us were able to hold our ground; we focused on striking the soldiers at their unprotected areas. But the rest of the Miao tribesmen were in deep trouble, they were being pushed back. We would be overrun soon; we desperately tried to hold the line to buy more time for the Grand Master to finish his task.

Soon two of my Miao tribesmen were injured and fell to the ground; two Xi Xia soldiers went forward for the final kill. I was unable to help them as I was tied down by three enemy soldiers. As the enemy soldiers were about to plunge their sabers into the fallen Miao tribesmen, a projectile was shot from the darkness. The projectile looks like a copper coin, it smashed into the unprotected kneecaps of the Xi Xia soldiers crippling them. The soldiers fell to the ground holding their legs in pain; they would not be walking for a long time. Shooting copper coins were the trademark of the innkeeper at Sunrise Inn, I realised our help had arrived.

Soon we saw more and more Xi Xia soldiers falling to the ground in pain. Meanwhile shadowy figures were dashing among the contingent of soldiers creating chaos, they were moving around the soldiers at incredible speed. Every soldier was given a small cut on the face or a stab on the buttock as a warning. These injuries would not kill them, but it certainly showed them what they were up against.

I counted five to six dark figures attacking the Xi Xia soldiers, they were moving extremely fast and they were using ordinary kitchen tools as weapons. I could see one of them using a butcher's knife, spatulas and other kitchen tools. The speed that they were moving around made them seem more like ghost than human.

The Xi Xia's assault had been stopped, the remaining soldiers stared warily into the darkness. They had no idea what had hit them. By now the dark figures that had attacked them had disappeared into the dark forest, I could hear familiar laughs coming from beyond the tree line. The same laughter I heard on the day the young man (The challenger) was being made a fool of in Sunrise Inn. I was quite sure it was the innkeeper and his service crew who had saved our lives.

This group of recluse martial art experts had saved our lives, they did not show themselves, but I knew it was them. Even though they had decided to detach themselves from Wulin, they had not forgotten their duty to the people of the land. The old man Ouyang Hao and the entire crew of Sunrise Inn had come to the rescue of the Empire, but I believe their action was in no way for the love of the Emperor or the Empire, they did it for the people. And they had their fun...

The Xi Xia soldiers were totally spooked by the shadowy figures, they could not see their attackers; they only hear laughter in the darkness. After being around Black Bear for the last few days, they were convinced that they were witnessing some other form of evil spirit.

As the Xi Xia soldiers started to retreat down the slope, the bunch of old Wuxias and their laughter melted into the night. By now the Grand Master had completed his ritual to capture Black Bear's spirit; he sealed the spirit in an earthen urn. He told us that this evil spirit was beyond redemption, it had to be destroyed; he would have to conduct a more elaborate ceremony to ensure its total destruction.

Now we had to direct our attention to the ten-thousand-strong Xi Xia army deployed in the mountains. Even though we had spoiled part of their plan by destroying Black Bear; that did not mean that they would not invade us. The enemy's number was still way superior to the small defense force put up by the Ding family. We had still got to find a way to fight these invaders, the Imperial Capital was too far away; they would not be able to reach us in time.

We decide to leave the mountains and head back to Huang Long city to help the Ding family in the defense of the city. We could not afford to wait as the General had to be informed of the secret army hidden in the mountains.

And we had no intention to stay around for the Xi Xia soldiers to regain their confidence and regroup, one more determine attack would surely break our defense. And we had no idea if the innkeeper and his crew would be around to help us again. We retreated...

### **Back to Huang Long city (Yan Ching's account)**

I sent two Miao tribesmen ahead to warn the General, while we slowly made our way back to Huang Long. We had to accommodate the old Grand Master as he could not walk as fast as the rest of the party.

By the time we reached Huang Long city, preparation was well underway for the invaders; the entire city was mobilized for the defense. Every citizen of the city knew that if we allowed the Xi Xia Kingdom to enter the city, the consequences would be unimaginable. And we knew we were on our own, the weak and corrupted Imperial Court would not be able to come to our help.

Cities walls were fortified; food and water were moved into the city, every single bit of harvest-able grain were taken in. All able-bodied young men were pressed into service. Little did we know that all these preparations were unnecessary; as soon we were presented with a pleasant surprise...

### **Sunrise Inn gave us a present**

Early one morning we were awoken by the servants of the Ding household, we were told that there was a message for me at the front door. When we approach the main door a huge crowd was already gathered there, the General was there as well. In front of him kneed three person, they were tied up like a Chinese dumpling. They seem to be some prisoners captured by the General.

The General turned to me and said, "Mister Yan, I apologize to have disturbed you so early."

I replied, "That is fine, are these people your prisoners?"

The General smiled and said, "No Sir, it looks like they are your prisoners." After that he handed me a piece of paper.

He continued, "This piece of paper was pinned on them when they were delivered here this morning. Nobody saw who had dumped them at our front door step, just read the note and you will understand."

I was very puzzled as I read the note; it said, "To Mister Yan Ching, here are the three Generals commanding the Xi Xia army, they are a small present from us."

No name was mentioned in the note, but I knew very well who had done this great deed for the citizens of Huang Long city. It must be the Innkeeper and his gang. This gift had saved the city from a painful battle with the Xi Xia army, now we could use these three captured Generals to force the Xi Xia troops to withdraw,

that would buy us time to persuade the Imperial Court to take the threat seriously. With these prisoners, the Ding family finally had the proof they needed to show to the Emperor that Xi Xia was indeed plotting to invade us.

The three captured General sheepishly agreed to write a letter to their junior officers to have them withdraw the Xi Xia army fifty miles back into their territory. Meanwhile the General sent messengers to the Imperial Court to inform them of this Xi Xia's invasion attempt, we requested the Imperial Court to send inspectors to Huang Long city to interrogate the captured Generals.

It would be a long drawn process to convince the Court that there was indeed an invasion attempt. I think it was not that they did not believe that there was such an attempt, rather the Imperial War department did not have the resources to deal with it; therefore they would choose to ignore it. And I believe someone high up in the hierarchy had been bought by the Kingdom of Xi Xia, this person had manipulated the Court's decision repeatedly; he would certainly block it again this time.

At times like this, it was up to the People of the land to take over the responsibility of defending our home; the authorities were no longer in charge. The corrupted officials and the weak Emperor had failed us; they had allowed people like Black Bear to decide our future, if we had failed to stop him, now the life of the people of Huang Long city would be unthinkable. The fate of the people under Black Bear might be similar to the many caged animals I found inside the mountains.

When I considered the plight of the ordinary people of the land, I was very much saddened by the picture before me. The ruling elite had absolutely no interest in the welfare of the population, while they engaged in their courtly politics; everything else was expendable...

Such were the times when the Wulin must step forward to help the People of Land. We might not be able to fight the huge Xi Xia army in the long run, but we might be able to help in our small ways. This time we were fortunate to be able to force the army to retreat, but we all knew that they will be back, bigger and stronger. The next time they are back, the Innkeeper and his gang might not be around to help us...

## Part 3

### Every Man's Poison

News travel very fast in the world of Wulin, tales of any act of bravery or a glorious fight between two famous personalities would be told and retold all over the land. Groups of idle travelers in isolated inn and taverns would be swapping stories on the latest exploits of famous Wuxia's across the land.

When these travelers reached the cities they would again spread these tales in the city's busy inns and restaurants. Some of these tales were exaggerations and some were outright fabrications, but some were true eyewitness account of the event. Our adventure at Sunrise Inn all the way to Huang Long city was the hot topic for a long while in all the inns and taverns across the land.

If you were an eye-witness to such a colourful event, you might find yourself invited to banquets specially organized for the re-telling of the stories. Many famous personalities in the Wulin world would be falling over each other to get to you to hear the firsthand account of the event. It was sometimes hilarious to watch many respectable figures sitting there listening to some tall-tales and being taken in like little children.

The accounts of our adventures in Sunrise Inn was spread in part by the silly young man (the young swordsman who was at Sunrise Inn) and the rest was told by the people of Huang Long City. Very often such stories by the time they reach the big cities back in the Central Plains would have already been magnified many folds. Many people would have been told that we had single handedly defeated a Xi Xia army of hundreds of thousands.

Such unwanted attention was beyond our control, the only thing we could do was not to add to the fire of gossips by adding to the already outrageous accounts. We had an agreement among us to deny everything when we were asked about it.

While these stories were spreading across the Central Plains we decided to stay back in Huang Long City to help the Ding family and the General to organize his city to defend against future invasion. We were also reluctant to return to the Central Plains when the stories of our exploits were still on everybody's lips.

We spent much of our times up in the mountains to try and undo the harm that Black Bear had done to the environment. With the help of the Ding family we continued the tree planting program in a smaller scale and we cleared the poisoned trees from the forest to make way for new ones. The Grandmaster of the Enlightened Gu had taught us the formula of a potion that was able to neutralize the poison that was introduced to the ground. We were not able to save the poisoned trees but we were able to clear the soil for new trees to survive.

The Grandmaster also performed many cleansing rituals for the forest to invite positive energy back into the vicinity. These rituals were also a form of atonement on behalf of the entire humanity, we were asking nature to forgive us for the sins that Black Bear had committed. Having allowed Black Bear to do what he did, we were instrumental in the crime.



After months of work on this restoration program, we began to notice the forest coming back to life. Animals and plants started to thrive in the new healthy environment, even the sun seems to shine brighter than before. The air was fresher and the leaves were greener, the dark sickly overcast that once enveloped the forest was replaced by a new crisp freshness.

It was incomprehensible that one single evil individual had been allowed to do so much harm to our environment and nobody had stood up to him before. I believe the reason was because such malicious practices were carried out in a slow and gradual process, the people around was slowly being acclimatized to the darkness. We tend to get use to subtle changes in our environment, as more and more gentle disruptions were introduced we would not even remember what it was before.

I quietly reminded myself that I have to be forever vigilant about the living environment around me. I had never been very conscious of it before, I had always taken for granted that nature would always be there for us. This little episode with Black Bear had shown me that we could do much to the balance of nature, we could harm it and we could help it flourish.

After our forest restoration program, we returned to Huang Long City and we were told the disappointing news that the Imperial Court had once again dismissed the invasion of Xi Xia as a misunderstanding. The General was ordered to release the captured prisoners and to humbly apologize for the mistake.

The Imperial document also questioned the Ding family about them forming their own militias; hinting that private armies points to rebellious intents. This development was very demoralizing for the Ding family and the people of Huang Long, the Imperial authority clearly did not care about the city and its people.

When we met up with the Grand Old Lady of the Ding family, I could see the strain on her face. However she was not deterred by the news, she told me, "Dear Mister Yan, the Ding family was here to help the people of Huang Long City; nothing will stop us from doing that. As long as our intentions are clear, and we have a pure heart, nothing can stop us. We will continue to do what we need to do, as long as there is one member of the Ding family is around the city will be defended. Meanwhile we hope the Emperor will be able to see through the cloud of deceit surrounding him soon, if not our Empire is finished."

The Ding family ignored the Imperial orders and continued organizing the militias in anticipation of the Xi Xia threat. They did all this at the risk of infuriating the authorities; they had put their personal wellbeing aside to care for the people of the land, it was indeed a noble act.

My intention was to stay in Huang Long city as long as possible to help the Ding family, but events took a sudden turn to make it impossible for me to remain in the city...

**The Bad News Arrives  
(Yan Ching's narrative)**

I received a message via the Swallow syndicate (Please refer to the Case of the Jade Statue). It was a short message, but it drove a stake through my heart; it said,

“Your teacher Godly Fist Hong Er was murdered in Suzhou. Go to Ching Long monastery in the south of Suzhou city for more information.

A Friend—

I was devastated; I had not seen my teacher for the past three years and now I would never see him again. He had saved me from certain death and had taught me my fighting skills and had taught me the value of Wulin. He was my dearest person in the world.

But I was having doubts about the message, it was anonymous and the city of Suzhou was on the other end of the Empire, could this be a ploy to lure me away from Huang Long City? It would take me at least fifteen days of travel without rest to reach Suzhou, would I be falling into a trap if I rush off just because of this message?

I decided to use the Swallow network to do the initial investigation for me; I sent a message via them to Ching Long monastery in Suzhou asking for information about my teacher. I spent the next four anxious days waiting for the answer...

The reply from Ching Long Monastery arrived in the evening of the fourth day, it was from the head of the monastery, and his name was Priest White Crane. His message said,

“Dear Mister Yan, I knew your teacher well, he was a guest at my humble monastery during winter for two months. He left after the spring festival; he came back twenty days later, he was badly injured. We treated him for his injuries; he was recovering when he was brutally murdered on the second day of the third month. He was killed by an assassin who had come into our monastery. As all my disciples and I were not skilled in martial art we were not able to defend your teacher. I am sorry.

Even though I had known your teacher for many years, he did not tell me about his family or disciples. We did not know who to inform when he was dead, thus we did a simple ceremony and had him buried in our monastery grounds. He had some belongings which we can hand over to you if you wish.

I hope you would come to us soon, I had some information that I want to give you personally.

Priest White Crane”

I wept bitterly for my beloved teacher, next day I went to the General to explain my situation, he was sad that I had to leave. My three friends River Ghost, Night Owl and Xiao Miao decided to stay behind to help Huang Long city. We agreed that I would go to Suzhou by myself, if I needed them, I would send for them.

My teacher’s murder in Suzhou was still unclear, could mean many things; the killer might be an ordinary robber or he could be from an enemy organization. I had to be there to investigate it myself before I make any conclusion. If it was a petty criminal, I would have no problem finding the culprit, but if it was an

organized professional's work, it would more difficult to find the murderer. But whatever it was, my teacher's death would be revenged.

I set off the following day, and I sent a message to an old friend in Suzhou informing him of my visit and I requested him to check on my teacher's activities in Suzhou before his death. His name was Li Yi Bao which meant the treasure of the Li family; his nickname was the Iron Abacus. He was native of Suzhou city; his family runs a small but successful trading business there.

Iron Abacus was a multi-talented person; he was skilled in martial art and at the same time a very sharp business man. During his younger days Iron Abacus had joined us for our youthful adventures, he left us reluctantly when his elder brother died from smallpox and he had to take over the responsibility of the family's business.

### **I arrived in Suzhou**

My mad dash to Suzhou was accomplished in record time; twelve days, without a pause I rode to the Ching Long Monastery. It was night fall when I was shown to the Head of the Monastery, Priest White Crane.

White Crane was an old man in his eighties; I was shown into his personal quarters as instructed by him. This was unusual as visitors were traditionally received at the main hall; only close intimate friends were admitted to personal quarters. I believe he had something important to tell me.

After serving me tea and some light food, the Priest dismissed all the disciples and closed the door and windows. He closed his eyes and listened for a long time before he was satisfied that we were indeed alone. He said, "I did not want to put too much information in the letter to you as I was not familiar with the Swallow organization, I did not want anybody to learn what I am about to tell you."

He continued, "I had known your teacher Hong Er for a long time, even though I am not a martial art person and I had never involve myself in the matter of the Wulin, your teacher had confided in me certain very important information.

During his first stay here in winter, he told me that he came to Suzhou because he had heard of a strange plot by someone who was trying to control some important people in the Wulin. And this plot had worked very well, this group of famous personalities in Wulin had indeed became the agent of this secret organization; doing their dirty work for them."

I was puzzled, as I knew from experience that most Wulin individuals were proud people, and they do not readily submit themselves to any authorities, not even the Emperor. How did this 'secret organization' control them? Most Wuxias' would rather fight to their death than to be subjugated by someone and furthermore who would be powerful enough to threaten a whole group of this skilled martial art fighter?

I asked the Priest, "Master White Crane, who is this organization? And how did they manage to control this proud people?"

White Crane replied, "Hong Er did not tell me who they were, but he had noticed a pattern. In recent years, Wulin had this mysterious invitation letter in circulation, this invitation were delivered from an unknown party.

The invitation claimed that the guest will be brought to an island of paradise, the best food, finest wine, most beautiful women would be provided for the guest's entertainment. And all the guests would be given the best herbal tonic to improve their martial art skill and internal strength. The promise of wine, food and women was not the appealing factor as most of the Wuxia's were righteous people, but the promise of improving their martial art skills and internal energy was very tempting.

In the beginning, most people thought this invitation was a hoax or an elaborate scam, but a few of the invitees took up the invitation and came back to confirm the existence of this island. They claimed that everything mentioned in the invitation was true and indeed they were tested by others and found to have vastly improved in their martial arts. They were much more powerful than they were before they went on the trip. The trip took them only fifteen days."

I said, "How could that be possible? Martial art and internal strength could only be attained through training and hard work. How did they attain such improvement within such a short period?"

White Crane agreed, "That was the same question that your teacher was asking. But he felt that was not important as there are many things in this world that we did not understand, they might have some special techniques or herbs that could achieve that. Your teacher felt that he did not have the right to question the moral of that."

He took a sip of tea and continued, "Soon the entire Wulin in the region was captivated by this Special Invitation, everybody was talking about it and everybody was hoping that he would be invited next. But the Invitations were very secretive; all those that received it were instructed to keep mum about it. It was until these people suddenly left and reappear fifteen to twenty days later that the people around them knew that they went on the trip.

Everybody who came back would not tell where the island was and they refused to talk about their experience on the island, but one thing was for sure, their fighting skills improved tremendously. There were some stories that they were brought onto a ship and the ship was totally sealed up on all sides, therefore they were not able to see where they were sailing to."

He continued, "But all this was not what your teacher was concerned with, he was alarmed only when these returnees started behaving strangely. That was when he suspected that there was plot to subjugate these people.

Let me give you one example. The head of the biggest shipping network along the Yangtze River was a righteous Wuxia, his name was Wang Liang; he was famous for his fighting skill and navigation knowledge. He was a much respected member of the Wulin community in the region; he was loyal to the Song Empire and its people. Wang Liang had refused to serve any merchant who had business dealing with the Liao Kingdom in our northern frontier. Even the Emperor of Song dynasty did not dare to openly declare this but Wang Liang did.

As you would know our Song dynasty and the Liao Kingdom had been fighting along our border for decades, but the trade between the two still flourishes, they were dependent on us for many commodities. Our Emperor did not dare to cut off the trade for fear of infuriating the Liao further and he was also worry that it would hurt our merchants. Wang Liang declared his personal war against the Liao

kingdom and refused to serve the merchant trading there. He was a hero and a righteous man. But all this changed after he accepted the invitation.

Wang Liang was one of those who went on this Special Invitation, when he came back he seemed normal, but within days he started to reverse his policy of not serving ships bound for the north. He even allocated a big portion of his shipping assets to exclusively serve the enemy. When his business partner who was also his sworn brother voiced his disapproval about the change there was a big argument and there was a fight and Wang Liang killed his sworn brother. These two men had been friends and later business partner since their childhood, they were closer than family. This killing was very uncharacteristic of Wang Liang. This was just one example; there were many others.”

I asked, “Could it be that he was bought off by the Liao merchants?”

White Crane replied, “No, Wang Liang would never be bought by money, the merchants had tried to buy him before, it did not work. It must be something more than money, it must be a strangle hold on him that he had no choice but to submit to it. There were a few other cases that your teacher told me about that upright characters in the Wulin had turned to unscrupulous and uncharacteristic crimes.

There was this case of the two brothers in Dragon Gate protection agency turning on their fellow agencies by robbing their cargo, ruining several businesses. These two brothers from Dragon Gate agency were much respected in Wulin; they were the head of their guild. They had often helped the fellow protection agencies when they were in trouble.

But since they came back from their trip to the island, they had been quietly robbing the other agencies of the cargo under their protection. So far nobody had been able to prove that they were the robbers, but there were eye-witnessed account of their deeds, but the eye witnesses were too scared to come forward.

Too much of what happened recently had been unexplainable, and this group of returnees simply refused to tell anything about the island. They denied totally that they were working for someone behind the scene, and when they were pressed for answers they tend to become very violent.”

I asked, “Did my teacher talk to any of them?”

White Crane replied, “Yes, he went to several that he knew personally, but all of them refused to give any answers. And two of them committed suicide after his visit. He noticed that all these people that he had talked to looked very normal on the surface, but he could detect a certain anxiety in them, and they were very irritable and distracted, there was something different about them.”

White Crane continued, “He did not have the chance to talk to Wang Liang and the two brothers from Dragon Gate Agency, these two were very senior people in Wulin and they had refused to meet your teacher who was relatively unknown in this region.”

I asked, “So can I conclude that this Special Invitation organization was behind the murder of my teacher?”

White Crane closed his eyes and thought for a moment, finally he said, “Your teacher had passed away too suddenly, he did not leave me any guidance as to what he wishes to be done. I believe this organization is made up of very dangerous people; I do not want to see you ending up dead like your teacher. I

have heard stories of your brave deeds in the Shu region, I know you will seek revenge for your teacher, and I know that there is nothing I can say to stop you.

Finally I shall answer your question; Yes, I believe the Special Invitation was behind your teacher Hong Er's murder, if you intend to seek revenge, I will pray for your safety, but I believe you alone would not be able to accomplish much against such a vast organization, I believe it is better off leaving it to the Imperial authority to deal with it."

I appreciate his predicament; on one hand he was duty-bound to reveal the truth to me, but on the other hand he knew that by telling me the truth it would send me on the path to seek revenge against this mysterious group. White Crane would inevitably hold himself responsible for my death.

I consoled him, "Dear Master, you are right that I will seek revenge for my teacher's death, it is my duty to seek justice for my beloved teacher. On top of it all, I also have the responsibility to protect the people from such evilness, I have to stand up and expose the plot. I must not allow more ignorant Wuxia's to go on this trip to the paradise island and end up working for the enemy.

All this decision are mine to make, you are in no way responsible for what happen to me after this. You had done your duty as a friend to my teacher to tell me all this. You had done this at great personal risk, I am sure my teacher would be eternally grateful to you.

Dear Master, there is one last thing I request of you. Please give me a list of the people my teacher had spoken to before he was murdered, I will conduct my investigation from there."

He gave me a list of five names and addresses. He told his disciples to bring my teacher's belonging to me; it consisted of some clothing and a few jars of medicine. I thank them and went on my way.

### **I met up with Iron Abacus**

The next morning I sent a message to Iron Abacus to have him meet me at a quiet tavern near the inn I was staying; I did not want to visit his home as I did not want to implicate him in this investigation. This was a dangerous task; it would not be long before I would be under surveillance, I did not want to drag my friend and his family into this mess.

When he stepped into the tavern the first thing he said was, "Yan Ching, do you treat me as a friend? I knew you did not come to my home was because you were worried about implicating me and my family in this affair. Let me tell you this, you had nothing to worry about, first of all we are friends who had been through much together, and we are duty-bounded as Wuxia to stand up against such evilness. Finally, my family had been drawn into this even before you had sent me the message about your teacher Hong Er's murder." I was surprised that he knew about my investigation, it must be something that he had discovered while checking on my teacher's activities before he was murdered.

He gulped down a glass of wine before he continued, "My uncle who was in the iron casting business was one of those who was invited by this Special Invitation. He ignored the Invitation and he was mysteriously killed in a fire in his iron

casting factory, the factory was burned to the ground under suspicious circumstances.

When you asked me to check on your teacher's activities before his murder, I came across evidence that he was checking on the Special Invitation case too, therefore I knew right away that we had a common enemy."

I said, "I am sorry to hear about your uncle, but I have to warn you that we are up against a powerful and unscrupulous organization, they are capable of anything."

Iron Abacus replied, "I am prepared for any eventuality, as a precaution I had moved my entire family to the south to my wife's maiden home. They will be safe there. Now let's cut this nonsense and tell me what information you have got."

Iron Abacus was a man of few words, once he had decided on something it would not be easy to change his mind. I told him what Priest White Crane had told me, he thought for a while and told me what he had found out.

He said, "Yes, what White Crane said was generally what the outsiders knew about the Special Invitation. I happened to have some additional personal knowledge as my uncle had gotten the invitation twice and he had turned it down. His reason for turning it down was because he had spoken to a close friend who had taken the trip, this friend of his quietly advised him not to go without giving any reasons.

The last time he saw this friend was right before the friend committed suicide, at that time the friend was already in a delirious state. He seemed to be suffering from acute pain and his state of mind was totally gone. He mumbled something to my uncle about some magic powder and he said something about rather die than betray his friend."

Soon after that incident, the friend committed suicide and the second invitation for my uncle arrived. He was so angry that he publicly denounced the invitation and threw the invitation card into the furnace in his workshop. I guess that act had enraged the people behind the organization; they decided to have him killed."

Abacus continued, "I think my uncle's friend death had something to do with him advising my uncle not to go on the trip, I believe he was tasked to entice my uncle to go on the trip, but he had refused to betray his friend. They had somehow forced him to commit suicide."

I said, "I believe we have to speak to the few people that my teacher had spoken to before he was murdered. I have the list from Priest White Crane. Among them are some prominent people in this region. I do not know what my teacher had gotten out of them; maybe we could start from there."

I read out the list to him, "First name was Zhao Li Tian of Green dragon Agency, Zhang Kai Ching of Five Flag Union. These two are protection agencies specializing in transporting precious cargo for merchants in the area. Next we have Ma Hao Min who is the biggest rice traders in the region. The other two would not be of any use as they had committed suicide.

I suggest we pay them a visit."

Abacus agreed.

As we got up from our table, I noticed a familiar face sitting across the tavern; it was a face that I had seen recently, just moments ago. I believe I was being followed.

Before I could walk up to this person, he got up quickly and dashed out of the tavern, his movement was swift and powerful. He was clearly highly skilled in martial art, especially in the art of dodging.

This special skill of swift movement at lightning speed had always been a highly specialized skill. This form of training enables a person to move fast and nimble, they were trained to twist and turn in tight situations. The training also builds up special muscles and stamina for long distance endeavors. Those who had attained the highest form of this skill could leap over high walls and jump over seemingly impossible distance. (One such example was the Old Man, Ouyang Hao from Chang Shan, he gliding over the poisonous centipedes and killed Black Bear; please refer to the Case of the Sunrise Inn)

I dashed out of the tavern after him; by the time I reached the main street I saw only a glimpse of his green overcoat at the far end of the street. I grab the puzzled Iron Abacus and ran after him; every time we turn a corner we would be just in time to see him disappearing round another corner. It was like chasing a ghost.

After chasing him for a long while, I had noticed something peculiar; he seemed to be purposely allowing us to catch up with him. I estimated that with his skill, he could have shaken us off easily, but he had deliberately slowed down to wait for us.

I was wary of following him into an ambush, but I casted my worries aside as I was anxious to find out who he was. He might be the best lead we could have. The two of us should be able to handle anything that came our way. We dashed through the streets of Suzhou.

Soon the chase led us to the outskirts of the city; we were going into open farmland and fish ponds, at the edge of a tea plantation we suddenly lost track of him. We back tracked and search the surrounding farms carefully but we found no trace him.

By midday we finally gave up the search and tried to find our way back to the city, after walking a short distance we saw him sitting on a rock by the road. He was smiling and slowly fanning himself. I was furious at my own shortcoming, I knew we were no match for him, but I did not expect to be so out-classed.

As I sheepishly walked up to him, I realized that not only have I seen him in Suzhou, I had knew him even before that, but I just could not recall where. He got up and said, "Do you two not recognize me?"

Both Abacus and I was stunned, slowly it dawned on me that if the two of us should know him, he must be one of the old friends from our roving days. Slowly it came to me; his name was Peng Fei, nicknamed Dragonfly. He had joined us briefly, and suddenly without warning he disappeared, that was the reason why we did not recall him immediately. When he left us suddenly, we speculated that he was spying on us; we believe he was working for the Imperial authority. His background did not bother us as we were not outlaws; we were upright Wuxia's.

I said, "Yes, now I remember you, Dragonfly. Why did you follow me around, why did you lead us here?"

Dragonfly replied, "I had been watching the Ching Long Monastery for a long time, I knew you would come because I was the one who sent you the message."

He smiled at me and continued, "There is no need to thank me, I did it for personal interest; I needed you to come to Suzhou to help me."



I was curious, “Help you? What can I help you with? I thought you work for the Imperial Court; you had every resource at your disposal, why would you need me? What makes you think that I would help the agent of this corrupted Imperial Court?”

He was not upset by my remarks, he smiled and said, “I am aware that most Wuxia’s do not like to work with the Imperial authority, and I can understand why. I am conscious of the terrible reputation of our Imperial agencies. I have also heard of your experiences in Huang Long City. The Court had indeed let the people down; all the petty politics inside the Palace had caused a lot of problems for the people. To that I have no answers. Other than assuring you that I am on the good side of this struggle I have nothing to add.”

I kept quiet; I knew he had more to tell me.

Dragonfly finally said, “Let me explain a little about the politics that is being played out in the Palace now. There are several factions; most of them are useless and stupid, they pose no threat to the Emperor or the Empire. The main threat to the Emperor is the fraction consisting of the third prince and the minister of war; they were the ones that had caused you much trouble Huang Long City, they had blocked several attempts by the Emperor to send troops to aid the region’s defense.”

I said, “How could they have blocked the Emperor? Was the Emperor not the most powerful man in the Empire?”

He laughed and said, “That is what everybody thinks, and that is what it should be. But unfortunately this present Emperor got a weak mandate from his father, the late Emperor entrusted a lot of the royal authorities to the court officials. The Army had been divided and handed to several Generals; morally speaking they had to take orders from the present Emperor, but in practice they had used all sorts of excuses to contravene the Emperor. Our Emperor is a weak scholarly person, he is not good at confrontation; therefore he had chosen to hide himself behind art and poetry while the Empire is falling apart.”

He continued, “We are in a sad situation, as you would know our enemies had taken advantage of this internal rift to further their course. Provincial authorities are beginning to ignore the Courts edicts; Generals no longer have the determination to defend our borders.

My dear friend, what do you suggest I should do? Abandon the Emperor and the Empire? Give up on the people of the land? Let the Kingdom of Liao and Xi Xia invade us? No, we could not do that, we can only hope that the Emperor will wake up and step up to the fight. Meanwhile, we have to preserve whatever authority and influence that he had remaining.

I am working for the Second Prince, he is very loyal to his brother who is the Emperor; we are doing whatever we can to protect his interest. Dear Friend, you must believe me, preserving this Empire and the Emperor is the best and only option available for the people of the land. Any other alternative is unthinkable.”

I was taken aback by his sincerity; he did not speak like a Court official, he spoke the truth. As he speaks, I could see the strain showing on his face, I began to feel sorry for this loyal subject of the weak and useless Emperor. And I agreed with him that the only viable option for the people was this useless Emperor, it

was unfortunate but it was true, any other way would mean terrible wars and suffering across the land.

### **Dragonfly explained his Purpose**

Dragonfly continued, "Dear Friend, I am sure you are very curious why I am here in Suzhou, and why I had led you here. Please give me a little time, I will explain everything."

He continued, "I had been working for the Second prince ever since I was a young man, I believe you would have suspected that when I joined you and your friends many years ago; my purpose then was to spy on you and report it back to the Prince.

I gave a good report to the Prince regarding your activities, which was why the Imperial authorities had left you all alone."

He grinned and said, "There is no need to thank me. Through the years I had risen in rank, I am holding a senior position in the external department of the Imperial Guards. Our department was responsible for checking on suspicious activities outside the Imperial Palace, we do not wear uniform and we do not report to any local authority. We do not inform the local authorities of our presence. We report directly to the Second Prince who reports directly to the Emperor."

Dragonfly continued, "The Second Prince had heard of this plot involving the Special Invitation one year ago, he had sent me here to investigate. This plot is threatening the stability of the entire Jiangnan region; the Imperial Court was very concerned.

We believe that this was part of a scheme to weaken the economy and to destabilize this region, but we had yet to confirm who was behind this. And we had no clue as to how the scheme works. We failed because my entire organization and I were too obvious; most people in the Wulin were able to tell that we were Imperial agents. They refused to help us in any way; they would not even talk to us. That was why I thought of enlisting the help of people from Wulin.

In the course of my investigation, I came across Godly Fist Hong Er whom I remember to be your teacher. I noticed that he was also investigating the same plot as me; I had tried several times to enlist his help. But just like the other Wulin characters, he did not want to be involved with the authority.

We crossed path many times during our enquiries, both of us were checking on the same people and we were breaking into the same houses. But we were not hostile to each other; we had an unspoken gentleman practice of not getting into each other's way. There were a couple of times when I broke into a house and found him already inside, I quietly left and let him finish his job, he also did the same for me; we were on rather friendly terms.

In fact the night that he was injured, I was in the vicinity, he was breaking into the Dragon Gate agency; he was discovered and he had a fight with the people guarding the agency. I reached there in time to create a diversion for him to escape. I knew that he will go to Ching Long monastery to recuperate, I believe he was safe there, but I was wrong. I am sorry; I had failed to protect him.

I was very surprised that someone had managed to find out this isolated hiding place, and had been ruthless enough to enter this holy place to commit murder. But I believe he did manage to steal something from Dragon Gate agency that night, I hope you can check with Priest White Crane if he had left anything behind, it might help us with our investigation.”

I did not want to interrupt him to tell him that I had my teacher’s belonging in my inn. I did not realize the importance of this few pieces of clothing and the few jars of medicine.

Dragonfly continued, “I believe we can help each other if we work together, I have many resources at my disposal and you have your Wulin connection which would open doors for you easily. And if you promise to work with me, I will show you a way that you can talk to anybody that you want to. With my strategy, you would be welcome into any household in the city.” He flashed his knowing smile at me, and he challenged me.

He said, “At this very moment, do you have a plan to get to talk to the people that you want? Do you have a plan to open the doors of Dragon Gate Agency?”

I had to admit that I did not have any plans yet, I had no contacts with the Wulin people in this region before, and Abacus was rather low profile ever since he came back to Suzhou. Even my teacher who was a much more respected personality than me was denied entry. Other than bluffing my way in I could not think of anything else.

I looked at Abacus and he nodded his head, after which he said to Dragonfly, “The last time we worked together you were spying on us, for this instance we are putting our trust in you again, I hope you will not betray us, if you do, I will seek revenge on you. I promise you that. This case concerns Yan Ching’s teacher and my uncle; we had committed our life to it. If you betray us, even your position as an Imperial agent will not protect you.”

Dragonfly calmly replied with a smile, “I know that, I promise you it will not happen, this time we are working on the same side; we are seeking the same result. We all want to have the Special Invitation syndicate destroyed. We shall work well together.”

Dragonfly continued, “Now that we had agreed to work together, I shall tell you a little of what I know about the enemies. After carefully studying the profile of the people being invited to the paradise island, I concluded that this organization wanted to control the key people in our economy, trade, and military... and weapon production. That was why Abacus, your uncle was a person they were very anxious to get on board. I had checked; your uncle had some contracts with the military to manufacture weapons for them. Was that right?”

Abacus was suddenly awakened to the reason why his uncle was so important to the plot; they wanted his expertise on weapon making, he was one of the best iron casting masters in region.

And I immediately saw the wisdom of working with Dragonfly, he was knowledgeable and intelligent, without him we would have taken days to figure out the various links in the whole plot.

I asked him, “Do you have any speculation as to who was the mastermind behind this plot?”

Dragonfly looked at me for a while and said, “Yan Ching, you are a smart person, by now you should be able to guess who benefits the most from this plot.”

I said, “The Kingdom of Liao...”

### **Yan Ching analyzes the Situation**

Now things are beginning to clear up, I began to see the purpose and framework of the Special invitation plot. It was not a surprise that the Liao Kingdom to our north was the mastermind behind these wicked schemes.

The Kingdom of Liao lay to the northeast of our Song Empire; they had been trying to invade our northern territories for a long time. Our army had been putting up strong resistance to their aggression; the border war had been going on and off for decades without much significant results for both sides.

Our Song Empire being the bigger and stronger of the two should have dominated the conflict, but due to our internal weaknesses and betrayal we had been unable to operate at our true potential. Meanwhile, the enemy had been actively encouraging and outright supporting rebellious elements in our administration; they had used their proxies in the Song regime to create disharmony.

It was generally speculated that many of our Court officials had been bought by the Liao enemy. Plans to attack the Liao Kingdom were blocked by high officials claiming that we had no resources to fight the war, instead pacification strategies were implemented. Supplies sent to our border army were diverted to other areas causing discontent among the troops. The Kingdom of Liao seems to have their fingers into every aspect of our administration.

This Special Invitation plot fitted right into their profile and purpose, controlling the key figures behind various crucial sectors in the economy would be very useful to them in future. With these these important sectors under their control, they could paralyze our entire economy whenever they choose to. But our question then was how did this scheme exert so much control over the people involved?

Now my task is not only for revenge of my teacher’s murder, I am also fighting for the survival of the Song Empire, the wellbeing of the people is at stake. It reinforced my reasons to work with Dragonfly.

### **We act**

I decided to share my information with Dragonfly, “I understand the urgency of this conspiracy, now I shall commit wholeheartedly to our cooperation. First, we will go back to my inn and check on my teacher’s belonging that Priest White crane had handed to me yesterday, I did not take a proper look at it.”

We left for the inn.

The heirloom of my teacher consisted of three pieces of clothing and two bottles of medicine powder. The clothing was nothing out of the ordinary; out of the two bottles of medicine I could easily identify one as a powder for knife wounds, the other contained some unknown white powder.

The powder was odourless, but we dare not taste it in case it was poisonous, we decided to send it to a medical hall to have it tested. Abacus went on the task.

I asked Dragonfly, "You told me that you had a plan that would get us into any door and talk to anyone. Can you tell me what your plan is?"

Dragonfly gave me his usual smile and said, "Yan Ching, my plan was very simple, you would have thought of it eventually, but your mind had been so cluttered the past few days that it did not occur to you.

Ever since your adventure in Huang Long City, you had become the celebrity of the entire Empire, everybody would be happy to be your friend. Everyone was waiting for your story; all you have to do is announce your name and you will be welcomed."

He laughed out loud while my face turned red; I was ashamed to have missed out this obvious fact. He was right; I had been too caught up with my teacher's death that I was only focused on finding the murderer and revenge. I reminded myself that I have to calm down and gather my wits; I have a dangerous mission ahead of me. I will need every single ounce of wisdom and intelligence to solve this case.

Soon Abacus came back from the medical hall and informed to us that the doctor at the medical hall had never seen this powder before, he had taken some of it for further study; it will take two days.

### **We pay our first visit**

That evening we decided to pay a visit to the first name on the list that Priest White Crane had given me. Zhao Yi Tian of the Green Dragon Agency...

Such Agencies were actually armed escorts for merchants carrying precious cargos, this business thrived during period of turbulence. As the Central Government became weak, the economy suffers, more and more people were forced into banditry. The highways used for transporting goods and people were no longer safe and the weak authorities had no means fight this bandits, thus creating the demand for private protection.

Such agencies were mainly operated by famous Wulin personalities, owners of protection agencies usually organized their own network or guild to look out for each other. Every region would have they own organization to either fight the bandits or negotiate a peaceful passage fee, both of these avenues would need some form of Wulin connection.

The Green Dragon Agency was a medium size outfit in their third generation of operation; Zhao Yi Tian had been brought up in a family of Wulin insiders. He had followed his father and grandfather's tradition of strict adherence to Wulin values and culture. He was much respected in the society and also trusted by both side of the law, he was a typical Wuxia.

In accordance to Wulin practice, I sent a calling card to the Green Dragon Agency before I called on them. This practice was to save face for both parties so that nobody would be taken by surprise. The host would have the chance to prepare for the visitor and the visitor would get a chance to be turned down

politely instead of being rejected at the door. I hope that my name would ring a bell for Zhao Yi Tian.

We were delighted when Zhao Yi Tian immediately sent a reply to invite us to after dinner tea. We waited till night fall, and we set off for the Agency.

The mansion was brightly lighted up to welcome us, Dragonfly had been right again, I was in popular demand.

It was fortunate that I had sent the visit request just two gongs' of time ago (Four hours), even with that short notice, Zhao Yi Tian had already informed a few of his friends to attend the meeting. If I had sent the request a few days ahead I am sure the entire Suzhou would turn up for the event.

My relationship with my late teacher Hong Er was never well known in the Wulin community, after teaching me all his skills my teacher had advised me to keep our relationship a secret. This was because of the dangerous life we both led; he did not want to implicate me on any of his activities. For this same reason, even when he was badly injured he did not send for me to come to his aid, even his close friend Priest White Crane did not know of my existence. This arrangement had worked out well because if Zhao Yi Tian had known about my relationship with my teacher he would have become suspicious, I might not have been so well received.

As we entered the main hall of the mansion, all the Wuxias' came forward and greeted us; I introduced Abacus as my friend and Dragonfly was introduced as my servant. He had put on some mild disguise.

Before I could sit down everyone was throwing questions to me about my adventures at the Sunrise Inn and Huang Long City. When I told my story, everybody was listening attentively and questions were asked, minute points were examined and debated over.

Some of the Wuxias' present had heard of the Two Old Man from Chang Shan, but none of them had ever met them.

Just like any other competitive fraternity, every Wuxia in Wulin constantly dream of learning the ultimate, unbeatable fighting skills. Even if one could not acquire the skill, witnessing it would have been a privilege; even listening to it second-hand was also a pleasure.

The martial art of the Chang Shan Old Man Ouyang Hao was definitely in a league that not many people had ever witnessed before. There had always been myths and speculations about the certain people in Wulin having attained a very high level of martial art or internal energy. The Chief Abbot of Shaolin or the leaders of Wudang were always surmised to be very highly skilled in their respective martial art skills, but nobody had actually seen them in action before.

Lengthy discussions were debated over how would the Wulin leaders in the Central Plains compared to the Old Man, finer points were raised and argued over and over again. For numerous times I was politely requested to re-tell certain part of the account so that these martial art enthusiasts could settle an argument. I was requested repeatedly to describe the exact stroke or fighting pattern for them to dissect the wisdom.

As the night wore on, I was getting impatient with this discussion; I did not come for this pointless debate, after pretending to stifle a few yawns the host Zhao

Yi Tian got my message. He politely told his friends that it was getting late and it was time to leave.

The group of Wuxias' sheepishly bid farewell to the host and agreed to go to a tavern to continue their discussion, I was sure it would be a long night for them. And I have no doubt that my presence in Suzhou would be known throughout the city by dawn.

When we did not leave along with the rest of the guest, Zhao Yi Tian was a little apprehensive, he must be quite happy to have me all to himself but at the same time he must be wondering what my intention was. But he was too polite to question my intention, instead he ordered the servant to bring a fresh pot of tea, but his guards were already up.

Zhao Yi Tian must have wondered why I had chosen him to call upon first as he was definitely not the most prominent person in Suzhou. I did not have any relation with him and we did not have any common friends that he knew of.

He would have thought about that when he first received my calling card, but my reputation was just too tempting for him to resist. To be called upon by the man who had 'single handedly repelled the Xi Xia army' was just too great an honour for him to turn down. He became even more suspicious when I stay behind when the rest of the guests left.

After sipping our fresh tea, we were silent for a long while; he was looking at me expectantly while wearing his plastic smile. I could feel that he was getting extremely uncomfortable, and I was happy to let him stew in his own juice for a while longer before I shock him with what I had to say.

Finally I said, "Mister Zhao, you must be wondering why I had called on you so suddenly, and why I had stayed behind while the rest of your guest left."

He politely mumbled something about me being welcomed in his home as long as I wanted; he was still wearing the plastic smile.

I continued, "I thank you for your hospitality, but what I am about to tell you might change your mind about that."

His face began to show some signs of hostility, as he gripped his chair's arms he asked, "Mister Yan, what do you want of me? If you are in need of money I can help you with a loan, just tell me."

I said, "No, I do not need money, I need information."

He face turned deadly pale.

I continued, "I want information of the Special Invitation, I know you had receive the Invitation and you had gone on the trip. I want to know what this plot was all about."

He was close to panic, but as an experienced old timer of the Wulin he controlled his fear.

He said, "Mister Yan, you must be mistaken, I did not receive any invitation and I had no knowledge of the trip. You must have gotten the wrong name."

I said, "But that was not what you told my teacher." I was bluffing.

He quickly asked, "Who is your teacher?"

I replied, "My teacher was your friend Godly Fist Hong Er, he came to you before he was brutally murdered, I want to know why."

His lips were trembling; he got up and dismissed all the servants, as he walked shakily back to his chair his head was bowed in deep thoughts. He sat there and pondered for a long time, when he looked up; there were tears in his eyes.

He said, "Young man, your teacher was a dear friend of mine, his death saddened me a lot. But there was nothing I could do for him, I warned him to stay away from this business, but he refused to listen to me.

Young man, I can tell you were lying, your teacher did not tell you anything, because I did not tell him anything. It is for your own good, please stay away. As far as I am concerned, I did not get any invitation and I certainly did not go on any trip."

I said, "What are you hiding from? I had checked on you, you were an upright Wuxia; you had always been loyal to your country and its people. You had stood up for righteousness many times in your career, your grandfather and father had always been honourable people. This is not you, what is it that they had over you that had sealed your lips so tight? Did you betray my teacher? Were you the one that sneaked into the Monastery and murdered him?"

I begged him, "I beg you to come to your senses; you are helping the enemy to bring destruction to our people. As an insider to the plot, it must be quite obvious to you what they were trying to do, why are you protecting them?"

He was staring into space, but I believe he heard every word I said. He was not defending himself but at the same time he did not seem to be giving in. We sat there in silence for a long time; I could see his emotions tearing him apart.

Zhao Yi Tian was not an evil person, for him to stand on the side of the enemy against all that he loved was killing him. But he was resolute, he stood his ground and finally looked up and said, "I had been much honoured by your presence, it is getting late, it is time you leave."

He added, "My last advice to you, leave this alone, you do not have the ability to fight against them. And as a good friend of Hong Er I will not say anything about this conversation, but please do not approach anyone else, not everybody is as merciful as me."

I said, "Do you think I will let my teacher's death go unquestioned? Mister Zhao, I will fight the enemy all the way to the end, even if it kills me."

Next he said something which I could not understand, he said, "Young Man, there is nothing to fight, if you get yourself tangled into this mess, the only person to fight with would be yourself..."

I asked, "What do you mean?"

He bowed and closed his door in my face.

After meeting Zhao Yi Tian, I safely concluded that he was not evil; he was keeping quiet for his own reasons and he had no choice. I could not imagine how anybody could have forced a person like Zhao Yi Tian to do something against his will. Zhao Yi Tian was of the class of Wuxias' who would readily give his life for the honour of living it. It was puzzling...

### **I became the Celebrity of the Town**



By sunrise, the entire Suzhou was talking about my call on Green Dragon Agency. The people who were present at the gathering had become minor celebrities, many taverns and restaurants had breakfast banquets organized to invite them to tell the story. But the ultimate honour was to be able to invite the main source of the story to such gatherings; that would be me.

My presence was dearly sought after, when I came out of my room, the innkeeper handed me a huge stack of invitation cards. Without looking through them I took them to along to meet up with Dragonfly and Abacus.

As I walked by the restaurant on my way out, I noticed the entire restaurant was packed to capacity, patrons were sitting there staring at me as I walked pass. Fingers were discreetly pointed at me; polite chins were pointed in my direction. I learned later that tea servers were heavily tipped by rich patrons to have me pointed out to them, the innkeeper were heavily bribed by rich families to have their invitation card placed on the top of the pile.

As I made my way to the quiet tavern to meet my friends I was discreetly followed by a small entourage of secret admirers. My friends and I had to book a private room for our morning breakfast.

After breakfast, we divided the stack of invitation cards to check on the names of the people wanting our presence; I suspected that among this mountain of invitations would contain some of the names that we had gotten from White Crane.

As I had expected, both the Five Flag Union Agency and the rich rice merchant Ma Hao Min had both invited us to their home. We were delighted, and we decided to pay a visit to the Five Flag Union Agency, the head of the Agency was Zhang Kai Ching.

### **Abacus told us about Five Flag Union**

Abacus being a native of Suzhou was able to tell us something about the Five Flag Union Agency and the people behind it, he said, "The Union was made up of five small agencies, this practice was common among protection agencies. This was because of the nature of such businesses, they were usually family operated; fathers will pass the operation to the sons. Thus the expansions of such businesses were limited by the size of the household. Being a dangerous and violent business, sometimes the sons did not survive the father, and there were instances when the head of the household did not have a son to continue the business. Therefore intermarriages were arranged and business unions were formed.

The Zhang family was the dominant partner of the union; Zhang Kai Ching was running a very successful agency of his own when the union was formed, so naturally he became the head of the newly minted agency. Zhang Kai Ching was well known for his generous personality, he was a true blue Wuxia in every aspect.

Zhang Kai Ching was also known for his fighting skills; just like most people in the protection escort business his weapon of choice was the ordinary spear. However, his spear was especially heavy; it was about three times the weight of the ordinary spear.

The reason why the spear was a weapon of choice was because armed escorts very often fought and move in military formation. And the long stabbing spear was the most effective weapon to defend in number; they were usually deployed similar to soldiers in the battle field.

Zhang Kai Ching was said to have fought off a small army of bandits single handedly, his heavy spear crushed so many enemy's skull that the bandits gave up and let him pass. This brave act was not the story that had made him famous and respect; it was what he did after defeating the bandits that had shot his name to prominence.

After he defeated the bandits, he helped and treated some of the bandits who were injured by him; these injured fighters were abandoned and left to die by their comrades. Eventually he took these ex-bandits into his service and now they are among his most loyal retainers. Zhang Kai Ching's name was famous in the region, even though Five Flag Union was not the biggest Agency in the region but he was certainly one of the most respected figures in the trade.

And I would like to point out to you that this invitation was not sent by Zhang Kai Ching, it was sent by his son Zhang Zhen Dong. I do not know what that means, but it is strange that the head of the household did not extend the invitation instead it was the son's name that was used."

After Abacus's narrative of the Five Flag Union, we decided to arrange the meeting this evening; meanwhile, we will call on the medical hall and see if there was any outcome on the white powder.

We got the tavern owner to send the message for us to the Five Flag Union and we set off for the medical hall.

### **The White Powder**

Xin Yang Hall was the biggest medical establishment in Suzhou, the chief physician there knew Abacus well. Partly out of professionally curiosity and partly out of friendship he had put in much effort to investigate the nature of the powder.

When we met him, he looked tired and worn out, he had probably worked through the night to check on the powder. After some polite introduction, he brought us to his study.

He closed the doors and windows and instructed his servants that he was not to be disturbed. He looked at us warily and said, "Dear Yi Bao (Abacus's name), I had known you a long time, I trust that you are an upright person. I do not know how you got hold of this white powder but I am almost certain that it will bring you trouble.

After checking and analyzing this powder the whole night, I had eliminated all other possibilities; I believe it could only be Dragon Mist powder!! Have you ever heard of it?"

All of us shook our heads.

He continued, "Dragon Mist powder was introduced to our land more than a hundred years ago by silk merchants. I believe it originated from a Kingdom to the west of our Great Song Empire. I heard the plant that was used to manufacture

this substance was also being grown in some part of the extreme south of our Empire.

When it was introduced a hundred years ago, it was sold as a medicine; it was supposed to cure all sorts of sickness and it could revitalize the body, it could improve the health of anyone. Even those on the verge of death could be temporarily be revived by it. I was a miracle powder.

But very soon, many doctors realize that it was not as good as it seemed to be, it was very addictive; anyone who had consumed it would be forever dependent on it. They could never leave its evil grasp. The doctors' guild immediately reported this to the Imperial Authority who quickly banned the import, sales and possession of this substance.

The Imperial Chief Physician was a very wise man; he acted very quickly and strongly, if not for his decisive action I could not imagine what would have become of us.

Even after just a long time, the ban on this substance is still in place; possession of this powder is a capital offense. I do not know where you had gotten hold of this powder, but I strongly advise you not to consume it and immediately dispose of it before you get into very serious trouble.

My Dear Yi Bao, as a Physician, it is my duty to report this to the Imperial Authority; I will try my best not to implicate you. I am sorry. It is my duty to the people of the land. I cannot allow this substance to exist in our society.”

I consoled the honest doctor, “Dear Doctor, I am stirred by your honesty and your dedication. But you do not need to report this to the Imperial Authority because they will be informed by us, this person here is Peng Fei (Dragonfly's name), and he is an Imperial Special Constable, we are investigating this white powder. You can help us further by telling us more about this powder and the effect it has on the person who consumes it.”

The Doctor was delighted when Dragonfly came forward and showed the doctor his Imperial badge. The relieved Physician told us to follow him to the backyard. He explained, “The final test I could do to confirm that this powder is Dragon Mist is to feed it to a dog, the react would be conclusive.

As this substance was last seen in our land a hundred years ago, no Physicians in the present had ever seen its functions and how the human body response to it. However the wise Chief Imperial Physician of that time had cleverly documented everything about this powder for future generations' reference. He even conducted a test on a dog and recorded the response in detail. Now we shall do the same and compare our results to the ancient texts.”

A dog was brought to us and a mixture of the white powder and meat fed to the poor animal. The response was almost instantaneous; the dog became very lively, its strength was extraordinary, and it was running round in circles in the backyard. We observed it for a long time, it seems to have unlimited energy, it kept running and running...

We left the dog to its misery and went back to the study; the three of us sat there quietly while the doctor was lost in his medical journals. After a long pause, he looked up and said, “I can now confirm absolutely that this powder is in fact the Dragon Mist. Now I shall tell you a little more about this powder.

According to the record written by the Chief Imperial Physician one hundred years ago, Dragon Mist when consumed in the appropriate quantity would give the person a great powerful feeling. The white powder had the ability to double the energy level of anybody; the effective duration of the powder was about two gong of time (Four hours). For a martial art fighter, he would find that his reflexes, strength and internal strength improved tremendously, but it's only for that duration. That was the reason why it was so well received initially as a medicine, but slowly the side effects started emerging.

According to the records, people who had used the Dragon Mist for more than five consecutive days would have developed an addiction. If the dosage was withdrawn after five days, the victim would experience extreme pain in the abdomen and migraine. This feeling would increase in intensity over time; it would not go away, victims usually die after three days of withdrawal suffering."

After this brief introduction to Dragon Mist by the doctor, the three of us looked at each other and silently concluded that we had discovered the root of the Special Invitation scheme. We thank the doctor and cautioned the doctor to keep this to himself for his own safety.

### **We joined the pieces together**

We returned to my inn to discuss what we had learned so far. All of us were deep in thoughts as we walked back, the discovery of this Dragon Mist powder had throw much light on to the mystery.

It had answered the question of how the participants of the Special Invitation had suddenly improved tremendously on their martial arts and strength. It also explained why everyone of the victim was reluctant to talk about what happened on the trip to Paradise island, and it explained the strangle hold this sinister organization had on its victim; they were all addicted to this Dragon mist powder!!!

After closing the door to my room, Dragonfly was the first to speak, "I believe we are much closer to solving the mystery, what we need now is the confirmation from one of the victim and we have to convince him to tell us how the powder was administered to them and who is behind this plot."

I said, "I will bring this powder to the Five Flag Union Agency tonight, and we will find an opportunity to challenge Zhang Kai Ching with it. Perhaps we can corner him into telling us the truth, even if he does not reveal the truth, it would be interesting to watch his reaction."

Dragonfly said, "To eradicate this organization, we must find the source of this powder; find out where is it coming from. The moment we stop the supply, the whole plot will collapse. I believe eventually, we would have to pay this Paradise Island a visit."

I agreed, "Yes, for that we need to find out how to get there, when the next shipload of ignorant Wuxias' are leaving for the Island. We need an insider."

Abacus said, "Leave that to me, I will check around with my contacts in Suzhou and see who had recently received the Special Invitation."

Dragonfly said, "Good, in that case we will split up and make our respective preparations and we meet again tonight for our visit to Five Flag Union. I have to

prepare something for tonight, I had a strong feeling that something will happen tonight.”

They left on their mission as I stayed back in the inn to rest for the long night we have ahead of us.

### **Five Flag Union Agency**

The Five Flag Union Agency was a bigger outfit than Green Dragon Agency that we had visited last night, and the crowd that was waiting for us was infinitely bigger. The entire main hall of the mansion was packed; there were no more sitting places left, the lesser guests were left standing almost to the entrance. The richer and more prominent members of the society were seated tightly in order to accommodate extra chairs.

We were welcomed at the main door by the host Zhang Zhen Dong, after introducing ourselves we were escorted to the main hall where everybody was gathered. Zhang Zhen Dong apologized on his father's behalf for his absence as he was down with a slight fever... I was getting suspicious.

From the main entrance to the hall, I could hear a hundred excited voices speaking at the same time, it was noisiest of gathering I had ever been to. As we entered the hall everybody fell silent and all turned to stare at the three of us.

In accordance with Wulin's rules for such a gathering, Zhang Zhen Dong had to introduce us to his guests one by one, after the tenth person, I had already lost track of the names. As there were just too many people present, I was only introduced to those who had a chair to sit on, the 'standers' were ignored.

After the introduction, as a host Zhang Zhen Dong was expected to give a short speech of welcome while everybody impatiently waited for the storytelling to start.

Zhang Zhen Dong was very polite in his behavior. Being the eldest son of Zhang Kai Ching he was in line to inherit the Five Flag Union Agency from his father, therefore naturally he was much respected by the society.

Zhang Zhen Dong was a young man of thirty with charismatic personality and a natural leadership bearing. Having been brought up in a Wulin environment he moved comfortably among his peers and commanded much respect. Beside him stood his younger brother Zhang Zhen Nan, this moody young man was very different from his elder brother. When introduced to us, he had not made any effort to hide his hostility; I did not understand his unhappiness towards us, but I reminded myself to be wary of this young man.

Before long, I was requested to narrate my account of my adventure of Sunrise inn...

The hall was silent while I spoke, even though it was very monotonous for me to repeat the story after last night, I tried my best to keep the story exciting. But I did not have to put too much effort to get things going, the mere mention of the Two Old man from Chang Shan was enough to make every pair of eye glinting with excitement. I tried my best to speak up for those standing near the entrance but I could see many of them straining and leaning forward to catch every single word from my account. It was very amusing.

After my account, just like the previous night the whole place exploded into a barrage of questions and excited discussion. I spent a long time entertaining the various request of clarifications and demonstrations. Before long the gathering broke up into many smaller discussion groups, some groups even went out to the courtyard to try and re-enact the fights. Numerous chopsticks were being thrown all over the place to imitate to Old Man from Changshan.

Zhang Zhen Dong took this opportunity to pull me aside and said, "Dear Mister Yan, my father had a small request, he hope that you could honour him with your presence in his room." I was delighted; I told him that I would be honoured. Finally I got to meet the person I came to see.

I was brought to the bedroom of the patriarch of the family; the big bedroom had all its windows shuttled and the air was stale; it had the smell of death. I was seated at a marble table slightly beyond the sleeping area, from where I sat; I was separated from the bed by a thin curtain.

Zhang Zhen Dong spoken to the curtain and said, "Father, Mister Yan is here."

A voice spoke from behind the curtain, "Dear Mister Yan, I apologize for not seeing you in person, and I apologize for bringing you in to my sick chamber. I have my reasons, I will explain later."

I replied, "Dear Mister Zhang, it is my honour to be in your presence, there is no need to apologize. I wish you a speedy recovery from your sickness."

I added, "Please excuse my rudeness, may I know what sickness you are suffering from?"

Zhang Kai Ching replied, "Ha Ha Ha... you are indeed a wise young man, you should know by now what sickness I am suffering from."

I did not reply.

He continued, "Your intentions had been very obvious to me, you were the most talked about Wuxia in Suzhou this past few months, everyone wanted to have you in their home. When my son told me that you had first called on Zhao Yi Tian last night, I asked myself, why of all people you had chosen to called on Zhao Yi Tian who was definitely not the most prominent person in Suzhou. Then I asked myself; did they have a friendship? But I had known Yi Tian for a long time; he had never mentioned your name to me.

Therefore to confirm my suspicion, I told my son to send an invitation to you, and as I had expected, you accepted our invitation. You had chosen the small humble Five Flag Union over all the other bigger, stronger and richer patrons. Let me guess Mister Yan, will you be calling on the rice merchant Ma Hao Min tomorrow night? Ha Ha Ha..."

This old master was indeed clear-sighted and intelligent, he had seen through my purpose from the confine of his sick bed. But I decided to play dumb for a while longer.

I said, "Dear Sir, what do you think my intention was?"

He replied without hesitation, "I believe you are in some ways related to Godly Fist Hong Er, you are checking on his death."

I had no choice but to come clean, I said, "I am truly impressed by your experience and insight, I confess that I did not expect to be discovered so soon. I knew you were a friend of my teacher. Are you now a friend or an enemy?"

There was a long pause from beyond the curtain.

Finally he spoke up, "I had always been a friend, but I was weak, I could not pull myself together, I regretted it ever since."

After another pause, "When your teacher came to me, I was already very much in the grasp of this organization, I was too weak to tear away. Hong Er begged me to join him, but I had too many considerations.

Firstly I was physically incapable to break myself away...the pain was just too much to bear....secondly I had to consider for my entire household and the Five Flag Union, I had close to three hundred men, women and children dependent on me for a livelihood. How can I let them down? I was willing to die, to kill myself; I knew many of the victims did, but with me dead what good does it do for my people?

Mister Yan, I am sorry that I did not assist your teacher in any way, I was too afraid."

I said, "Mister Zhang, please do not blame yourself, I can see your predicament, but it is not too late to make up for your past doings. You can help us revenge my teacher's death and destroy this organization. The Imperial Authorities are looking into this plot and I am working with them. I hope you can tell me what you know about the plot."

He said, "Yes... yes... it is not too late. Good, there is still time to change things." He was mumbling to himself.

### **Zhang Kai Ching's Story**

"It was about a year ago that the Special Invitation came to me, this was the third or fourth batch of Wuxias' that was invited. The previous few groups that came back had leaked out stories that it was an amazing experience, the food, the wine, the women...but what enticed us the most was the amazing ways to improve our martial art skills to some incredible level.

We got our invitations at the same time, Zhao Yi Tian, Ma Hao Min and I. We were very curious; we decided to visit another good friend of ours Li Tong who had sailed on the previous trip. We found that Li Tong's martial art, reflexes and strength were way beyond the level he was before the trip. We were very surprised and we were envious of his achievements, we also wanted to improve our fighting skills.

And Li Tong was so pleased with the trip that he kept urging us to go. Now on retrospect, I can see that he was too eager to sell the idea to us; we should have been suspicious...anyway, by the time we came back from the trip, Li Tong had already killed himself; I guess he regretted his betrayal. He had sold us to the devil...

We went on the trip, we were brought to a place outside the city, and then we were transferred river boat, and finally transferred to a bigger ship and sailed to the sea. This ship was enclosed on all side; it was only ventilated by many twisted air ducts, these ducts were twisted so that nobody could see outside the ship; not even the sky.

But as soon as we boarded the ship, nobody was interested in the outside world anymore. As soon as the first banquet was consumed, we turned into a different

person; we spent the whole day drinking and eating and frolicking with the women on board. The three of us were normally very conservative, but they had turned us into shameless animals...do you know why?"

I replied, "I believe it had something to do with this?"

I handed the jar of Dragon Mist to the Zhang Zhen Dong and he took it to beyond the curtain to hand it to the father.

After a while, the voice from beyond the curtain said, "Mister Yan, I am impressed with your ability, you had found the root of this organization. I believe this was fed to us on our first cup of tea, ever since then we were no longer ourselves. As we sailed on the ship we were constantly fed with this poison, I do not know how many days we were on the ship. We were in a constant state of intoxication; we were drifting between pure ecstasy and deep peaceful slumber for the next few days.

The day we reached Paradise Island, we were in for a shock, it was a barren island with a small fishermen's village. We were allocated some huts to stay in, but in our dazed and confused state we submitted to them. We were told some silly reasons why we had ended up on a remote island, but none of us were in any condition to think or argue with them.

We went to our huts and slept... we slept for a long time. I believe it was after a day of sleeping when we were woken one by one; the thing that woke us was the extreme pain in our stomach and the side of our head. It was like all our internal organs were being pulled together, some of us even threw up bile water.

As we screamed for help, the people who had served us like kings for the past few days just stood there and laughed. We knew we had been tricked, we knew we were finished.

After one day of pain, one man came forward and told us if we wanted something to relieve the pain, we all were on our knees begging him for it. He gave us each a small packet of this white powder and told us to swallow it. The pain immediately went away; it was replaced with the wonderful feeling of strength and ecstasy again.

We were put through pain and ecstasy for the next five days to wear us down, soon everybody submitted to them. After all the ecstasy and pain, submitting was very easy; it seemed like the logical thing to do. Out of the thirty people there none put up a fight."

He paused, as we waited, I could hear quiet sobbing from behind the curtain. I could imagine this group of proud Wuxias' being slowly turned into a few broken beggars. The constant state of high had twisted the mind of the victims. Under ordinary circumstances; these people would have rather fight to their death than submit.

A Wuxia placed a lot of pride on his choice of existence; this was because ones existence was his ultimate identity. Every person that carried a sword had the right to be respected; this was regardless of the individual's capability. A Wuxia could be defeated in a fight, he could even be killed in a fight, but he would never become a slave. That was the rule of the game. Winning or losing a fight was part of life of a Wuxia, but he would never be enslaved by anyone.

When one puts on a sword, he carried with him the duty of a Wuxia; which was to defend the weak and fight the evil. When confronted with such challenges, one



must never step back, even if the odds were not in your favour. (Our stand against the numerous Xi Xia soldiers was a good example—In the Surprise at Sunrise Inn) When a Wuxia stood up against evil, even if he was defeated, or even killed; he would not be looked upon as a loser, he would be honoured as someone who had done his Wulin duty against all odds. He would be a hero.

Zhang Kai Ching continued, “After we submitted we were told the rules of this organization; they told us we would be sent back to our homes and will be given our daily dose of the powder... as long as we obey all the instructions sent to us. When a job needed to be done, a message would be sent to us, if we carry out the instruction obediently we would be rewarded with more of this evil powder. If we fail, we would be punished and the supply would be cut.

Both Yi Tian and I were tasked to ready our entire household for a revolt when the time comes; I believe we were chosen for this task was because as armed escort agencies we had many experienced fighters in our employment. And these fighters are absolutely loyal to us; they will do whatever we tell them to do.

Mister Yan, in Suzhou alone there were ten thousand fighters working in various armed escort agencies. If we all were to rise up at the same time the Imperial garrison stationed outside the city would be overwhelmed. This uprising would be coordinated with rice merchants like Ma Hao Min who would be ordered by the organization to stop his rice supply to the city and the army... there will be chaos. This organization controlled many people in various part of the society, when they launch all these ‘hidden agents’ the whole city would fall apart.”

I had some ideas about the plot, but having someone telling me the entire scheme seemed more real and more frightening. Now I could see the hands of the mastermind in all aspects of the society. As more and more shiploads of prominent personalities got caught in the trap, the extent of their control became more solid.

Zhang Kai Ching continued his narrative, “When your teacher came to me, I was already severely addicted; I was totally beholden to the organization. But I told my secret to your teacher, I begged him to leave it alone, I was weak and frightened; I did not know what I was doing. When your teacher left me, I began to think about what I had done; my own conscience was tormenting me.

After many sleepless nights, I decided to do the right thing and I knew I had to start by ridding myself off this addiction, if I die in the process at least I would have died honourably. I began to reduce the amount of the white powder I consume every day, as I reduced the amount, I began to suffer more and more pain every day. I had been taking the reduced dosage for the past two months, the pain did not diminish; in fact it had increased. Now I am on only one third of the normal dose, I could not reduce it any further, I believe I would not be long in this world.

I deserved this fate, I was greedy and weak, and I had succumbed to the temptation of a shortcut to success, but I do not want my family to be tarnished with the name of a traitor to the Empire. I want to break away from this evil organization. My son will take over Five Flag Union when I die; he had been given instruction to fight this evil in every way.

I wanted to rebel against the organization, I wanted to...but there was nobody to turn to, almost everyone in the Wulin was in their grasp. I am glad that you had come along. Mister Yan, I advise you not to trust anyone, everybody is working for

them in one way or the other. Few people would dare to go against them; the last one was your teacher.”

I felt very sorry for the old master, he was caught in the trap; he could not rid himself off the addiction but at the same time he could not bear to live the life of a slave. For him, this existence was worse than death itself. He could have killed himself, but I believe the old master had a plan of his own.

Zhang Kai Ching continued, “I had been waiting for someone to come along and take this burden from me, now that I had told you everything I knew I can leave in peace.

Mister Yan, I do not know your capability and I do not know what you represent, but from the stories about your adventure in Huang Long City, I believe you are a righteous hero. I leave it to you to deal with this organization; I am no longer useful to anybody.”

I asked him, “Dear Elderly Master, do you have any idea how the organization works? I believe this plot had something to do with the Kingdom of Liao, but they must have a local group of agents working for them, they could not have operated this entire scheme from across the border. The next thing I need to know is the source of this powder, who is the one supplying it to all the victims.”

The Old Master answered, “Yes, the network had a local agent, every five days someone from this agent will deliver the supply of the powder to us. And I had done some checking on that agent, but we had not been successful as the delivery person was very skilled in his swift-dodging skill, he moved at lightning speed, we had tried to tail him several times but failed. Tomorrow is the fifteenth, perhaps we can try again.”

I replied, “Old Master, the person I am working with is one of the most skilled swift-dodger I had ever seen, I will have him tail this person for you. All you have to do is arrange to have him pointed out to us.”

Zhang Zhen Dong nodded and said, “That will be arranged, the servant will be escorting him out of the main door, he will signal to your friend.”

I asked, “Old Master, how about the source of this powder, how do they bring it into the city?”

Zhang Kai Ching replied, “The supply needed is very small, this powder is not bulky, I believe a small shipment will last them a long time. I would not be surprised at all if one of the protection agencies was doing the transportation for them, it is impossible to check. I am certain if you can follow the delivery person back to the source, you could probably find the supply. Just cut the supply, the plot will collapse.”

By now the voice behind the curtain was getting weaker; I could not bear to see the brave old man suffering further, I bid my farewell and asked to be excused.

The voice spoke up, “Mister Yan, one last thing I request of you.”

I said, “Please name it, it will be done.”

He said, “Zhen Dong (his son), pull the curtain back, I want Mister Yan to see what this poison had done to me.”

Zhang Zhen Dong protested, “But Father, you do not have to do that, you are not well. I am sure Mister Yan has no wish to disturb you...”

With a sharp voice Zhang Kai Ching reprimanded his son, “Just do it, I want the world to know that I had tried my best to fight this evil, I had fought it in my own way.”

The son reluctantly pulled the curtain back, what I was about to see shocked me to the core. What was left of the Old Master was little more than skin wrapped tightly around a skeleton. His eyes were bloodshot and protruding out of the socket, all his hair had all fallen off, the skin had turned yellow. As he opened his mouth to speak, I realized all his teeth had fallen off and his gums and tongue were blood red and bleeding.

With tears flowing down his wrinkled cheek he said, “Dear Mister Yan, this is the consequences of fighting this evil powder. This fate awaits all the victims of the Special Invitation. I beg you to revenge our suffering, I had ordered my son to support you in every way he could. My entire household had arranged for all the women and children to be sent off to the south tonight for safety, all the men will be ready to fight for you.

I had forced myself to survive all this while despite the suffering was because I was waiting for someone to come and lead us to fight this evil. I want you to be the one, with your reputation you are the only one who stood a chance to win this fight.”

Zhang Zhen Dong dashed forward with tears in his eyes and said, “Yes Father, I will follow your instructions.”

I humbly bowed to the Old Master and left the brave man with his son. I did not want to look at the broken man any further; I did not want to humiliate him further with my gawking stare which I could not help. When I walked out of the room, I quietly told myself that I had witnessed a brave man who had stood up to evil against all odds; his action was braver than any Wuxia I had ever seen. I shall avenge him...

### **The Unexpected attack**

I went back to the main hall and looked for my friends; they were left sitting alone. As soon as the excited Wuxias’ realised that they were not present in my adventure at Sunrise Inn no one paid any attention to them. These people were too engrossed in their discussion to notice my presence; I quietly signal to my friends to slip out of the mansion before I was caught by one of the excited Wuxias’. I was really not in the mood to entertain any more silly questions about the Old man from Chang Shan.

I was quiet as we walked down the dark streets towards my inn; I told Dragonfly and Abacus that I will tell them what happened tomorrow, they could see that I was much traumatized. They held back their questions.

As we turned a dark corner, suddenly dark figures emerged from the darkness blocking our way. They were all masked in black hoods and were all dressed in black outfit, and all of them were armed to the teeth...most of them were carrying iron tipped spears...protection agency fighters!!!

We were grossly out-numbered; fortunately, Dragonfly had a bad feeling about tonight, he had therefore insisted that we carry our weapons. I was carrying my

saber; Abacus carried his sword and Dragonfly was armed with his military issued heavy saber.

Military issued sabers were heavier and broader than the normal saber that I use. This heavy saber was widely used in the military as it was more effective against long weapons like spears and pikes, and for close quarter fights the heavy blade was more effective against light armour, whereas my light saber was practically useless against even the lightest of armour. (Refer to my fight against the Xi Xia soldiers in Surprise at Sunrise Inn)

The assailants encircled us very quickly forcing the three of us to turn our backs to each other and face to enemies outwards. The speed that the dark figures had locked us in was clear indication that they were not ordinary street hoodlums, they were well trained fighters. And there were no demands for our belongings; they did not come to rob us, they had come to kill us.

I knew we would not last long if we continue to be surrounded; especially so when the enemies were armed with long weapons. We must find a way to punch through the weakest part of the encirclement and drive the enemies to one side. Only then would we stand a chance. I told my friends to follow my lead and with a sudden explosive charge we punched through the circle injuring two of the assailants.

With this move we had pushed the enemies to one side, now we had to prevent them from circling behind us; but that was easier said than done. We were outnumbered six to one. But to the frustration of the enemies, we were able to hold our ground and we managed to injure another two of them. We were beginning to gain some confidence.

At the signal of a sharp whistle, the assailants fell back and at a clap of a hand those carrying the long weapons were formed into a unit. They slowly mowed towards us in a tight formation while swiping and thrusting their spears. Those carrying the shorter weapons were positioned to the side thus boxing us in. Slowly we were pushed to the wall and there was nowhere to run.

At this critical moment, a group of armed men appeared from the opposite alley and charged into our attackers, at a flash of an eye the entire group was either killed or injured by this group.

I was too stunned for words when Dragonfly shouted to the new arrivals, "Where have you been... leave me a few live ones."

The leader of the group came forward and bowed to Dragonfly, he humbly said, "I apologize for being late Sire, we were at the other end of the street."

Dragonfly gave him a severe glare, brushed him aside and turned to me and Abacus, "This was the bunch of fools I had arranged to protect us; I had this bad feeling about tonight. These incompetent fools almost had us killed."

I finally realized that our rescuers were undercover Imperial agents arranged to protect us, Dragonfly's intuition had saved our lives.

We turned to the captured attackers, most of them were injured; one by one we pulled off the black cloth concealing their faces but we could not recognize any of them.

I asked them, "Who do you work for? Why do you want us dead?"

All of them lowered their heads and kept quiet, looked like they would rather die than to betray their master. I was quite sure they were fighters from a protection

agency, this people do not fear death, in their job they faced death every day. The experienced fighters in a protection agency would have fought in numerous battles in their life, this people do not fear death. Death was part of the job.

After taking a closer look at the unmasked assailant, I realized that among them was the younger son of the Zhang Kai Ching. He was badly injured on his left arm and was grabbing his wound in an effort to stifle the bleeding. I was shocked to discover that the Five Flag union had sent their fighters to ambush us. I asked the young man, "Who sent you to attack us? Why are you doing this?"

He bit his lips and turned away.

I was expecting something sinister from this young man, ever since I laid eyes on him; I had detected some form of hostility coming from him. But I was still unable to figure out the motive of this attack.

Dragonfly said, "He would not last long in this condition, my men will bring all the prisoners back to our base. We will use our interrogation methods and I am certain we will get something out of them."

As they dragged the poor man to his feet, a familiar voice spoke up from the far end of the street, "Please do not hurt my brother."

It was Zhang Zhen Dong, the young master of Five Flag Union.

He came forward quickly and squatted down beside the injured man, he looked at us with tears streaming down his cheek. He dressed up his brother's wound carefully and turned to us, he looked me in the eye and said, "Please let them go, I will explain everything. In a way I am responsible for this silly event."

Zhang Zhen Dong humbly begged us to let him treat the rest of the injured fighters; we helped him carry the casualties to a nearby medical facility.

### **The other side of the Coin**

The physicians at the medical hall was used to treating fighters from various Protection Agencies, they did not ask any questions. When all necessary treatment had been administered, the doctor left the room.

By now, the younger brother Zhang Zhen Nan had recovered considerably and he was sitting up starring moodily at us. The elder brother on the other hand was sitting beside him with his head bowed low. I went to them and asked, "Why did you ambush us?" The elder brother looked up but did not reply, instead the younger brother did.

He proudly replied, "I wanted to protect my family, I did not agree with my father's decision that we should assist you to fight this organization. This had nothing to do with us; I wish my father would just let it be. I am proud that at least I had done the right thing; unfortunately it did not work out. If you want to kill me, it is fine. It was I who decide to ambush you; it had nothing to do with my brother."

He continued, "First your teacher came, that meeting had humiliated my father so much that he decided to kill himself by not taking the powder. It was I who had leaked the where about of your teacher to Dragon Gate Agency, I believe they carried out the assassination. I thought that was the end of it...then you came, as

you started to poke your nose around, you instigated my father to join you in your madcap scheme to challenge the organization.

I hate you, why did you come to us? You and your silly Wuxia duties and noble values... do you not realize that some people just want to lead a normal life? I do not want to fight any evil; I want to see my children grow up, I want to see my brothers and sisters and their children grow up and have a good life. Is that too much to ask? Why did you and your teacher come along and disturb the harmony in my home?"

Zhang Zhen Nan was no coward; he was just different; his family's wellbeing was above anything else. And as an orphan, I had no way of judging; if I had a family would I risk my entire family for the sake of justice? I had no answer...

He was protecting his family, was that not the predominant duty of a man? He loved his father, but the old man was in a demented state of mind, he had in his death bed decided the fate of the entire family... again I had no answers.

My teacher and later I had come along and sowed the ideas of duty and righteousness to a broken addict whose mind was so twisted by Dragon Mist. Was that right? ... no answers.

I had never been confronted with an argument against fighting for injustice; from a very young age I had been brought up with the notion that the noble ideal of upholding justice was the only thing that matters in the world. As an orphan, I had grown up without the concern for the safety of a family as I had none; I had always decided my own fate.

Now I am facing a man who had decided not to oppose evil for the sake of his family, was that so wrong? He wanted to protect the family by eliminating the people whom he viewed as bringing destruction to the family. His action might be drastic, but his motive was pure, how was I to fault such a person?

I had no answer.

After this outburst, the elder brother raised his head and looked at us; he was torn between brotherly love and his duty to his father and the duty as a Wuxia, he said, "Mister Yan, I hope you will understand my young brother's intention, he is not evil, he loved the family and he loved and respect my father very much. He is too young to understand the values of Wulin; he did not understand the duty of a Wuxia. I hope you would forgive him."

He continued, "All of us in the family had been told of my father's addiction, and his account of the Special Invitation had been made known to all of us. We were very worried about confronting this powerful organization, many of us including my mother wanted to just move away from Suzhou to avoid them.

But my father was determined that we be part of the resistance to fight this evil, he was just waiting for someone brave enough to come along and take up the challenge. Before you came along, the rest of the family had decided that as soon as my father dies, we will quietly leave the city and start our lives somewhere else."

Then he looked down and mumbled, "But you came along, this had changed everything, my father had ordered us to join you. As the heir to the household, I had no choice but to obey his orders, but I am worry about the family, the three hundred men, women and children depending on us."

I was deeply touched by these brothers; they were truly in a dilemma.

This turn of event had put me on the defensive; initially I thought I was the one who would be screaming accusations at Zhang Zhen Nan for his treacherous ambush. But now it seems like I was the one who had to put up some explanations. All of us were speechless.

Dragonfly, Abacus and I looked at each other for a long while, finally, Dragonfly said, "Yan Ching, you had met the Old master Zhang Kai Ching, you are in a better position to decide on this issue. I trust you to do the right thing." Abacus nodded in agreement.

My decision was very simple; we would not force anybody to join us against their will. I proposed to Zhang Zhen Dong, "I do not intend to force you to join us against you will, but I will need one last favour from you. I need you to point out the person delivering the white powder tomorrow; my friend Dragonfly here will follow him. In return for this favour, Peng Fei will send his Imperial Agents to escort you out of the city tomorrow night or whatever date you choose.

And I will forget about this ambush and the betrayal of my teacher. Are you willing to assist us on this?"

After a brief discussion the two brothers agreed to the deal.

It was as good a settlement as I could think of; it was pointless to enlist the help of someone whose ideals were not in line with ours. From this experience, I had learned one important truth, not everybody had the same objective in life. No matter how noble or righteous your ideal was, it did not mean it was the universal truth.

The Zhang brothers had every right to be concerned about the wellbeing of their family, but did it mean that they had the right to abandon the people of the Empire? Did it mean that they could just walk away and let chaos take over the city? Where is the line between responsibility to the Empire and the family?

Perhaps this apathy was due to the sorry state of the Empire, the weak Emperor plus the corrupted administration had made the people of the land more concerned with themselves rather than the Empire.

I was becoming rather disillusioned when I suddenly remembered the Ding family of Huang Long City; they did not abandon the people even at the darkest times. They had spent their entire family fortune to finance the militias to protect the city, with this thought I was optimistic again; I knew I was on the right path.

### **We Tailed the Delivery Man (Yan Ching's Account)**

We arrived at the street outside the Five Flag Union early; we had a good view of the main door from our table inside a restaurant. By mid morning we saw a man knocking at the door, after he was admitted into the house, a servant came out and hanged up red lantern. That was the signal; that was the man delivering the powder for Zhang Kai Ching.

From the brief look at him, I could tell that this man was an expert in swift dodging martial art; his skill might even be higher than that of Dragonfly. The lightness of his step belied an exceptional swiftness of the feet, the extraordinary ability to move faster than the eye could see.

But the biggest challenge for Dragonfly was not only to catch up with him; it was to follow him without being detected. To accomplish this, Dragonfly was dressed in the commonest of outfit.

I knew my speed was nowhere near this person; there was no point in me tailing him, therefore I decided to take a gamble because I believed I knew where he was going to... Dragon Gate Protection Agency, the biggest agency in Suzhou.

All the evidence pointed to this agency being the local agent for the Liao's Special Invitation plot. I decided to go to the agency's mansion and wait for him there instead of tailing him; I will leave the tailing attempt to Dragonfly, if he fails, I might still succeed. I brought Abacus along so that we could watch the front and the back entrance. And for further precaution, Dragonfly had several of his Imperial agents doing the same at other locations in the city.

The moment we had a good glimpse of this person, we went to our various addresses to see which one he returns to. We could not cover the whole city, we could only bet on the calculated guesses we made. We all left Dragonfly to his mission of tailing.

### **Dragonfly on the tail (Dragonfly's account)**

The moment he stepped out of the front door, I was already positioned as an innocent passerby in the busy street. He was a suspicious and cautious person; he stood at the front door observing a while before he made a move.

I was on his trail instantly, dressed as a servant I was able to merge into the busy street. He was walking casually and slowly, but I knew he was constantly checking his back; he glanced in my direction several times. Fortunately I was prepared; I had worn several layers of different clothing, after several corners, I would discard something from my outfit so that when he turned to look, I seemed like a different person.

At times I was holding a big white handkerchief to my face, at other times I was wearing a hat. He was totally unaware of me following him; therefore he did not exercise his swift skills... yet.

After a while, we were approaching the city center where the crowd was denser, I became less conspicuous. He was still moving at a leisurely pace as though he was taking a stroll in the garden. But I did not slacken in my vigilant; I knew I was up against an experienced and skillful adversary.

It did not take long before my skills were tested to the limit as he suddenly dashed into a back alley; I quickly followed only to see him leaping over a six foot wall. I had no doubt that I had been discovered; I had no choice but to follow. I kept tight on his trail as he went from back alleys to main streets and then back to alleys.

We cruised through crowded streets leaving passersby blinking in astonishment at the blinding speed we were moving at. It was indeed a pleasure to be up against such a formidable opponent, but I was slowly being out class by his superior ability. The distance between us was widening and I was in real danger of losing him.



Our chase brought us to the west side of the city; by now I was barely in view of his fast diminishing trail. After another corner, I had lost sight of him altogether; it was no wonder that the people from Five Flag union had never been able to tail him. But I was not disheartened; this part of town was where Dragon Gate Agency was located, I believe Yan Ching's gamble had paid off. I believe he had gone into Dragon Gate Agency, I just hope that Yan Ching or Abacus could confirm that for me.

After circling the area for a while, I saw Yan Ching and Abacus and they gave me the good news that they had indeed saw the delivery man going into the Dragon Gate Agency. Now we know who the local agent of the Special Invitation's plot was. With some luck we might even be able to find they stash the evil powder Dragon Mist, as long as we destroy it, the whole plot will fall apart.

We were delighted to have identified the local conspirator to the plot; our next step would be to break into the Agency and find out more before we confront them. We decided to return to Yan Ching's inn to discuss our next course of action.

### **We had to act Fast (Yan Ching's account)**

We found Zhang Zhen Dong waiting for us at my inn, he was dressed in all-white; I feared the worst. White was the colour for mourning...

He told us that his father had passed away last night, he looked worn out and depressed, "Mister Yan, I am very grateful to you for giving my father some form of closure, he should had been dead days ago, but he just could not go in peace. You had given him the assurance that the wrongs and evil of this Special Invitation plot will be dealt with, he had always held himself responsible in a way. He was also very remorseful about failing your teacher Hong Er, the understanding and respect you had accorded him had given him the courage to move on. For that I thank you Sir." Before I could say anything he kneeled down before me.

I quickly helped him back to his feet and said, "Mister Zhang, you are too kind, I was just doing what I believed to be right. Your father was an honourable man; I have every respect for him. Please accept my condolences for your loss."

Zhang Zhen Dong said, "On his death bed, he again insisted that we support your resistance after his death, but my mother and brother had strongly resisted that. I am sorry Mister Yan; I would not be able to help."

I consoled him, "I do not fault you or your family for not wanting to join us; it is indeed a very dangerous task. I respect the decision that you and your brother had made, every man is entitled to have a different choice in life. There is no need to apologize for it. After the encounter with your brother, I had came to realize that my values were not necessary the absolute truth."

Zhang Zhen Dong thanked me for my understanding; he thought for a while and said, "I was hesitating if I should reveal this to you, but I know you to be a righteous man, I will risk this. Perhaps this is the last thing I could do for you... we had just received an invitation to Dragon Gate Agency tomorrow night. I had heard that all the Protection Agencies in the region had been invited; I believe they are going to launch the rebellion soon."

He continued, "My family would be leaving tonight, we want no part of this." He bowed his head low in embarrassment.

I had been expecting this to happen eventually, Abacus had been checking around for people who had been invited by the Special Invitation for the trip to Paradise Island, but he had found none. We had suspected that the organization had enough 'agents' working for them, they were ready for the next move. But we did not expect it to be so soon.

This new development had thrown new urgency into our course of action; we no longer had time on our side. As soon as they launch to rebellion, regardless of the outcome, many innocent people will be killed first. We must not allow that to happen.

I thanked Zhang Zhen Dong for the information and he bid us farewell.

The three of us sat down and discussed our situation.

### **We decided to risk it all**

Dragonfly was always the more forward thinking and resourceful among us, therefore both Abacus and I looked to him for direction. After some careful consideration he said, "The meeting at Dragon Gate Agency is tomorrow night, we have only tonight to check out the place if we can get in. As soon as they launch the rebellion, it would be very difficult to reverse the damages.

I suggest we use the quickest and surest method to try and identify the location of the powder storage. Fire!!

We will set a small fire to the mansion, and we observe how the security arrangements of Dragon Gate Agency react to the event. Logically, in the event of a fire, the security personnel would be rushed to the most important and most precious part of the household. From their action perhaps we would be able to find where the evil cargo is being hidden. This organization is supplying the evil powder to hundreds of people in the city; I believe the quantity in store would not be small. Therefore it would be stored in a proper facility.

I will go into the mansion and hide myself and observe the reaction while you two set fire to the place. Hopefully the enemy will reveal their secret to us.

Tomorrow night we will go in and disrupt the meeting and hopefully by then we would have located the storage, and destroyed it. Without Dragon Mist, this syndicate will have no control over the victims; we might stand a chance to convince some of the unwilling accomplices to come over to our side.

I have to point out to both of you that the situation is overwhelmingly against us, the gathering tomorrow will consist of hundreds of highly skilled fighters from various protection agencies. There are only three of us; I could raise another hundred Imperial agents who had been hidden in the city, but that is all. I had asked the Second Prince for more help, but I do not know if they will arrive in time.

As to the Imperial garrison stationed outside the city, they would be quite useless to us as I believe they had been compromised by this evil plot as well, we cannot rely on them. The General in charge of the garrison was also invited to the

Special invitation. Therefore in the event of a fight, we would be fighting one against ten. I felt that you should know what you are up against.”

I was aware of the odds against us, but Dragonfly had put it into clearer prospective. But another thing that was very clear to me was that I was standing up to the evil forces that was about to consume my people. There was nothing else to turn to, we were the only thin line of defend against this wicked plot. I owe it to the people, to my teacher and to heroes like Zhang Kai Ching who had stood up in their own respective ways against this plot.

In a way I was also inspired by Dragonfly who had pledged himself to this fight, he had committed himself and his hundred Imperial agents against the hundreds of highly skilled fighters. He did not consider the option of a retreat; he was loyal to the Emperor and the Second Prince, which were all the reasons he needed.

### **I see Dragonfly in Clearer Light**

It was normal to brand all Imperial officials as corrupted, greedy and cowardly, but this Imperial agent sitting before me was different. Despite knowing that the Emperor and the Court that he was serving was weak and corrupted, Dragonfly did not spend his time complaining; instead he had quietly carried out his duties. He had doggedly carried out the thankless tasks that were expected of him.

And serving as an Imperial Agent had ostracized him from the Wulin, even old friends like me had looked upon him with suspicion. Dragonfly’s post was a lonely one, the moment he started serving the Emperor, he had lost all his friends, and his life was constantly in danger. The worse was that he was repeatedly misunderstood as ‘one of those corrupted officials’.

Dragonfly had probably read what was on my mind; he smiled and calmly said, “Yan Ching I know what you are thinking. While you are committed to your Wuxia duties, you must be wondering what is in for me. Why am I committed to this weak and corrupted dynasty, let me explain; our objectives are quite similar, we love the people of the land.

I am fighting for stability for the Empire; I am serving this Emperor while I hope that his heir will come along and do a better job than him. Our Emperor is already old, he would not be around for long, the son that might that will take over the throne would be a better and more capable person. Therefore and the Second Prince and I were committed to preserving the integrity of the Empire for the next Emperor, that is the only way. If we all give up and abandon the Empire, the whole system will fall apart, ultimately the people will suffer.

Yan Ching, we can only hope for a better tomorrow.”

He continued, “Just like you, I am fully committed to fight this conspiracy, I am clear about the danger me and my men will be facing, but I could not bring myself to step away from it. I just want you and Abacus to have the chance to make an informed decision.”

Abacus and I looked at each other for a brief moment; that was all the time we needed to arrive at the decision. We fight...

## **The Dragon Gate Agency**

Dragonfly had done some checks on the Dragon Gate Agency; he shared his knowledge with us, he said, “The Dragon Gate Agency was the biggest protection agency in the city, compared to the Green Dragon Agency which had only three hundred fighters in their household; Dragon Gate had around four thousand.

The agency was headed by two brothers, Shen Piao and Shen Hung; they were the fifth generation in this business. Due to the turbulent times the agency had expanded their business tremendously during the past few decades. Their main business was escorting precious cargos from the Jiangnan region to various parts of the Empire including to the northern kingdom of Liao. They also had extensive ties with various big agencies in other cities, thus making them the agency of choice for many big merchants.

The Dragon Gate Agency was the only agency in the city that could boast about the capability of a southern route, deep into the Yue region in the south where the Imperial Authorities had little influence. The southern Yue region was semi-autonomous and semi barbaric, even the Imperial army was reluctant to go there.

No one outside the agency knew what ties the Shen brothers had in the south as the Yue region was made up of mainly tribes of many denominations. But the south had many products that were dear to the Central Plains’ inhabitants; therefore with this strangle hold on trade the Shen brothers had prospered.

Both the brothers were renowned for their fighting skills, both of them had military background, they had fought the Liao’s and the Xi Xia’s when they were serving in the Song Imperial army. This tradition was passed down from their forefathers who had always sent their sons into the military to be trained in their fighting skills. By the time they return home, the sons would have turned into an experienced and skillful fighter. This training prepared them for eventually taking over the helm of the business. But such on-the-job training came at a heavy price; serving the military in such turbulent times was rife with danger. The Shen family had sent five sons to the military... only two came back.

Just like most military men, both the Shen brothers’ preferred heavy weapons, Shen Piao uses the Crescent Blade while the younger brother Shen Hung uses the heavy spear with a jagged tip. Both the brothers were extraordinarily strong, their weapons were also specially tailored for their strength.

However, the strength of this two brothers were also their weakness, their fighting skills being of military origin were usually very rigid and structured. This had made them predictable in their patterns and strokes, but so far they had made up for this shortcoming with their great strength and aggressiveness, they had never been defeated for the past ten years. Now with the help of the Dragon Mist, their power would be close to super-human level.”

## **We took them on**

We were committed, our plan was very simple; we would try and locate the powder storage tonight and hopefully destroy the stash. If we could not accomplish that we would still disrupt the gathering and try to swing to

sentiments of the unwilling accomplices. It was clear to all of us that this course of action was full of danger, but with the imminent rebellion at hand, there was no other alternative.

We rested for the day to prepare for the long night ahead; Dragonfly spent the day with his group of undercover Imperial agent finalizing their plans. This group of agents had been planted in the city months before; they were hidden in various parts of the city disguised as normal residents. They were organized into cells and they could be activated at a short notice by their leader... Dragonfly. The group that had rescued us when we were ambushed by Zhang Zhen Nan was one of these cells.

All these agents were recruited from the Imperial Guards brigade, these were highly trained fighters; some of them were ex-military while some were martial art experts recruited from the Wulin. The one common trait among them was that they were selected because they were totally committed to the Dynasty.

This group that had been selected to infiltrate into Suzhou was selected for another criteria, none of them was a native of this region. This was important as we would be fighting a group of people who were born and bred in this City. We were not fighting external invaders; we might be fighting the man living next door.

We waited till after midnight before Dragonfly sneaked into the mansion of Dragon Gate Agency, he was most suited for the job as his swift movement made him undetectable. Abacus and I waited for a while before we started the fire at the back entrance to the compound. We started a big fire to attract the attention of the guards and then we moved back to a safe distance to wait for the reaction.

As we had suspected the Dragon Gate Agency was very well guarded, as soon as the fire alarm was raised, the entire compound was alive with hundreds of people. The fire was put out with well coordinated efficiency, and was followed by a thorough and well organized search of the area. This group of fighters guarding the mansion was no ordinary guards; they were well trained and disciplined. I suspect that besides being the Dragon Mist distributor for the organization, Dragon Gate Agency had more to hide than meets the eye.

There was nothing much else to do except to wait for Dragonfly to emerge from the compound, hopefully he had not been discovered and captured. His observation of the security arrangement in the mansion should provide a good indication of the whereabouts of the evil stash.

### **Dragonfly's Observation (Dragonfly's account)**

I climbed over a side wall into the vast compound of the Dragon Gate Agency; I was dressed as one of the Agency's fighters. I managed to sneak my way into back garden.

I looked for a high vantage point where I could observe the entire compound from. I settled for a tall tree in the middle of the vast compound, I had little problem scaling the tree. After reaching the top, I settled comfortably to wait for Yan Ching to start the fire. The fire would surely trigger their security

contingencies; the focus of such arrangement would indicate the importance of various sectors.

The fire was soon started and was quickly detected; the fire alarm was raised by a man beating repeatedly on a gong. I was shocked by the response, the number of people within the compound was many more than I had anticipated. Huge number of fighters was rushing out from every room, the response was almost instantaneous, the orderly and discipline manner that they had responded clearly indicate some form of military training. They were not ordinary protection agency fighters...they were trained soldiers.

The responders were organized in units; they knew exactly what they were doing, in a blink of an eye they had been deployed to various part of the compound. Fortunately I had some military training before; therefore I was able to identify the significance of these deployments. Some of the points they were guarding were choke points, their purpose was to guard against intruders. Some of the locations being guarded were strategic places, like some of the bedrooms that were occupied by important people.

I saw Shen Piao and Shen Hong (The brothers who were the head of the Agency) being escorted from their bedroom, as they moved to the main hall of the mansion they were heavily guarded all the way.

But I also noticed that they were not the only one who was heavily guarded, there was another young man who had emerged from another bedroom and he was also heavily guarded. When the three of them reached the main hall, the Shen brothers were bowing to this young man...

This important person must be the mastermind behind the plot. Who can it be?

The next thing I observed was the concentration of guard around the other end of the compound, unfortunately from my position I was not able to locate which building they were guarding. I was blocked by the main building in the middle. Therefore I was only able to identify the general location but not the specific structure that was focused on.

These two discoveries had made my mission a success, now we are better prepared for the confrontation tomorrow night.

While I sat on the tree top, I started formulating my plans for tomorrow. I decided that the confrontation was inevitable, that was our only chance to try and stop the rebellion. We will surprise the Shen brothers by calling on them unannounced, and insist on participating in the gathering. We might even sneak into the meeting unannounced and surprise them. One way or another we will force our way into the main meeting hall, this disruption would be the diversion needed for the attack on the powder storage area.

The destruction of the stash had to be spectacular; it must come with the intended impact, the shock would help us to swing their half-hearted supporters to our side. As we would be vastly outnumbered by the enemy, we must use some shock tactic to gain some advantage. I knew right away how to create this shock...fire medicine!!! (This was the Chinese name for gunpowder)

The entire Dragon Gate Agency was on high alert for over one gong of time (two hours); I quietly slipped down the tree and blended into the crowd. It was not too difficult as I was dressed in one of their outfit. When some units were ordered to

go outside the mansion for a search of the surrounding area, I simply followed them and slipped off into the night.

### **Dragonfly told us his plan (Yan Ching's account)**

We were delighted when Dragonfly came back to us unharmed, he updated us on his findings, he said, "As I could not confirm the specific building that the Dragon Mist was stored, we will destroy all the three building in that area."

Both Abacus and I was stunned as we had no idea how to destroy a building. Dragonfly went on to explain, "I had in my arsenal a new invention by our Imperial Physicians; this substance was known as the Fire Medicine. It was invented a few decades ago but it had been kept a secret. The military had been issued with it but they had yet to use it, therefore nobody in this world except for a few knew its awesome power.

I had brought along some of it as I thought I needed to sink a ship, but now I can use it to destroy the evil stash."

I asked, "What is this Fire Medicine?"

He replied, "Fire Medicine is a powder made from a secret formula, it was first tested and used in medicine, but soon the Imperial Physician saw the military use of such a substance. He promoted it to the military.

This Fire Medicine when ignited in a compact structure creates an immensely powerful explosion, it roars like thunder and the explosive force could tear down buildings. I had brought three of this Fire Medicine device with me.

My plan is to split up our group, Yan Ching and I will call on the Dragon Gate Agency unannounced and challenge the meeting, we will create as much trouble as possible. Meanwhile, Abacus with another team of my Imperial agents would attack the compound from the side entrance and this team would be in charge of destroying the buildings with the suspected Dragon Mist stash."

He continued, "As we had no way to confirm if we were right about the storage facility, everything we do would be pure gamble. There is no time to prepare, but I can assure you that the impact of the explosion would be very shocking. We might be able to use it to our advantage. We might get people to believe us just by the loudness of our explosion. That is our best bet."

### **The Confrontation (Yan Ching's account)**

The evening came very quickly just like most dreaded events usually do. There was no time to be worry, no time to consider the consequences. There was only time to die...

Abacus and his assault team went to hide in a nearby alley outside the mansion while Dragonfly and I along with thirty Imperial agents approach the main entrance to the Agency.

We walked into the mansion as though we were invited guests to the gathering. As there were many other groups of fighter from other agencies that were also going in at the same time, the guards at the entrance just waved everyone in. Quietly we followed the rest of the crowd into the main hall.

There were hundreds of people already gathered, and there were many more streaming in. The Shen brothers and his entourage were sitting at the far end of the room facing the entrance; the setting was very grand, both the brothers were dressed in a black and gold outfit. They each had an attendant carrying their heavy weapon standing by their side. Behind them stood many other heads of protection agencies, all of them were carrying their respective weapons. This arrangement was clearly to display their support for the Shen brothers.

I noticed that behind the Shen brothers sat a young man; his seat was more prestigious than that of the brothers as it was slightly raised. But he was blocked from my view by the brothers' entourage.

The Shen brothers were every inch a military man, they were both tall and heavily built. Their faces were tanned glossy black by the northern sun and their eyes were glinting with fierce fiery focus. Their heavy statue and silent glare combined with the grandeur setting had set the tone for this gathering... challengers were not welcomed.

It was very unconventional for the host of a meeting to be opening carrying their weapons; it was a clear sign of intimidation. Had it been under normal circumstances, such an insult would have brought on much protest. Such behavior would not be tolerated even by the smallest of the Wuxias' present. But the people attending this gathering were obviously not in a position to protest.

The Shen brothers were sitting on a slightly raised platform, differentiating them from the rest of the crowd. In accordance to the rules of Wulin, the Shen brothers should have been at the door welcoming the guests. Basic courtesy would at least require them to greet the guests when they walk into the hall, but the brothers were totally indifferent. They did not even acknowledge those that went forward to greet them, they were just scrutinizing at the crowd with their icy stare.

The crowd below them was on the other end of the spectrum of human dignity; the few hundred Wuxias' were either quietly staring into space or conversing in hush subdued tones. I had never seen a more miserable bunch of Wuxias'; these people had their dignity totally stripped off. What was left of them standing beside me was an empty shell, the soul was long gone. But these empty shells were once a proud and righteous person, a person who would stand up to injustice even at the risk of death.

My only chance to survive tonight was to restore these empty shells; I had to give them the reason to fight for justice one more time. It saddens me to know that all these shells would eventually end up like Zhang Kai Ching in his dying bed, a bag of bones... but Zhang Kai Ching had his soul with him, these people might not.

Soon all the guests had arrived, one of Shen brothers' attendant stepped forward and said, "Quiet!!" The tone was harsh and arrogant. The crowd was silent.

Shen Piao got off his seat and addressed the crowd, "I have ordered you all here tonight because we have decided to make our next move. But I have to deal with



an important matter before we announce our plans...we have an intruder among us.”

I knew our game was up, they had spotted us, and I was not really surprised, after all I was a famous person due to my adventure at Sunrise Inn.

Shen Piao slowly turned his icy stare to me and said, “I believe we had been honoured with the presence of the famous Yan Ching, the hero of Huang Long city. If this was another day, I would have welcomed you to my humble home, but this is not any other day. Mister Yan, why have you sneaked into my home uninvited? Are you a friend or a foe?”

Dragonfly and I calmly stepped forward, “Shen Piao, do not use the word sneak, this word is for describing thieves and bandits. I had walked in and nobody had challenged me. I am neither the thief nor the bandits in the room, I believe you are.”

Shen Piao smiled and said, “I assume your intention tonight was not to congratulate me on my success. What do you want?”

I replied, “I am here to stop your rebellion, I am here to stand up against you, to break your strangle hold on these miserable people. I am here to avenge my teacher Hong Er. I am here to punish you for selling the Song dynasty to the enemy.”

I continued, “Every son of the dynasty has the right to eliminate you, every Wuxia who holds dear his values has the duty to stand up against you.”

He laughed till his body was shaking, he said, “And how do you intend to stop me? Just the two of you? And the few useless fools you brought along?” He slowly walked down the platform towards us, the crowd parted for him.

His walk was full of arrogance and confidence; he knew we were badly outnumbered, and even if it was a fair fight, the combination of me and Dragonfly might not stand a chance against just Shen Piao alone. But I knew I had to keep up the rhetoric to distract him, I wanted to give Abacus and his assault team some diversion. As this exchange of words was going on, I noticed that more and more guards were rushed into the main hall. They were expecting trouble from me; this was exactly what I wanted.

I decided to play into his ego, I said, “Perhaps before you kill us you can explain to us your plot, maybe you can allow me to die in peace. How did you do it?”

Shen Piao was clearly an arrogant and egoistic person; such a person usually loves to talk about their accomplishments. He was delighted when I gave him the opportunity to show off.

He said, “Yes, perhaps I should tell you everything, at least when I break your neck you would know why. I do not want you to be a *lost ghost* not knowing why you died.”

He continued, “It was a simple plot, with the lure of fine wine and women plus the chance of learning super-human fighting skills all these fools were begging to be allowed on the ship. Everybody was hoping that they would be the next to be invited.” He casually referred to his victims as fools, it was truly insulting but the bunch of broken Wuxias’ standing before him just lowered their heads in shame, nobody dare say a word.

He glared at the *fools* around him and smirked, he continued, “With my connection in the south, I had purchased a huge supply of the Magic Powder

(Dragon Mist). I had no problem getting these fools addicted to it. I know the addictive power of this substance, because I had been using it for years.

The peculiar thing about this powder was that as long as you had a dose of it every day, it was really a miracle medicine. Look at me, am I weak? Am I suffering? I can kill the two of you right now... but if you stop using the powder, the suffering was unimaginable.

With this bunch of fools under my control, I contacted the Liao Kingdom; I offered them a deal that they could not refuse. I told them I would stage an uprising in Jiangnan, while they launch their invasion from the north. The entire Song Empire would be crushed.

In return I will be made King of the Jiangnan region; I will be given land and title. They were so impressed with my plot that they had sent the third Prince of the Liao Kingdom to me, the presence of the Prince was to guaranty their part of the bargain." He bowed to the young man sitting up on the platform.

He continued, "You talk about my rebellion, what rebellion? I am just conducting justice to this world. Why should I be loyal to this weak and useless Emperor? The court is so corrupted that I had bought all the Generals and their armies in Jiangnan, now they had all become slave to my Magic Powder. They would not raise a finger to stop my uprising, if I needed them to fight on my side all I had to do was to give the order."

He started laughing again, the laugh of a winner; he had everything under his control... even the army. Now I begin to understand the full extent of the plot, with the help of Dragon Mist, the Shen brothers had enslaved even the army of the entire region. His rebellion would have absolutely no resistance.

He continued happily, "Nobody can accuse me of failing the Dynasty, the Dynasty had failed me!!! The Shen family had sent five of its sons to serve in the Imperial army. We fought very hard to defend our Empire, but what did we get in the end? My three brothers were killed in battle, and the two of us were accused by the Commander of cowardice and were sentenced for execution. My late father had to spend a lot of money to buy our freedom."

He paused for a while, he was savoring the moment, and he said, "Cowardice? Me? Our commander was running away and we were left to die, my three elder brothers sacrificed their life so that my younger brothers and I could escape. When we went back and accused the Commander of deserting us, he twisted everything around with a bunch of lies." His eyes were glinting with anger at the mention of the Dynasty.

Slowly he walked back to the platform, as he walked up the few steps he turned and said, "I am not the usurper of the Dynasty, the Emperor had failed the people, I am just making use of these greedy fools to fulfill the people's wish."

Suddenly a feeble old voice spoke up, "I am an old fool to have fallen into your evil grasp, I had failed the people, and I had failed my ancestors."

The whole room was absolutely silent; nobody dared to look for the person who said this. All the heads were lowered... silence. For a long while everybody kept still, slowly humbly lowered head began to turn to look at the source of this outburst. It was an old man of about eighty years of age; he was so old that his back was bent and he was only standing with the assistance of a young man beside him.

As Shen Piao glared at the old man, the old man made his best attempt at straightening his posture to counter the glare. The whole room was deadly silent.

With the help of the young man, the old master walked forward, finally he said, "I am Tao Yang, the head of Tao Jia Protection Agency. I have suffered enough under you tyranny, I am ashamed that I did not stand up to you sooner, but tonight you had called me a fool one time too many.

Even though my Agency is only a small outfit, but I had always conducted my life and my business with dignity. I had led the life of a proud Wuxia for eighty years; I am from a Wulin family. My late father was Tao Shang famous for his double-butterfly sword, my late grandfather was Tao Zheng, and he was famous for Green Dragon Crescent Blade, the same weapon that the famous warrior Guan Yu used. We were proud people, even though we were never rich but we were well respected in the society."

It was touching to see the old man recounting his family history with pride; it was plain to everyone that he did not intend to walk out of here alive.

Tao Yang had broken free from the yoke, he no longer feared the suffering of withdrawal; he no longer feared death. He wanted to regain the dignity that his ancestors had bestowed upon him and he wants his descendents to be able to hold their heads high.

He continued, "Shen Piao, I am defying you now, I declare that I am no longer your *fool*. You can come and kill me right now and put me out of my misery."

Tao Yang turned to the young man and said, "Hand me my sword."

With teary eyes the young man unsheathed an old worn out sword and handed it to him. The long rusty blade was almost too heavy for the feeble old fingers to grasp; he held it with both hands.

As the old man slowly walked forward to meet his death, I could see that the crowd was slowly aroused. Lowered heads were slowly being raised, and subdued humbled spines were slowly straightened. This old master of the Tao family had inspired the bullied crowd into some resemblance of their former self. The crowd was getting restless; I knew it was time for me to do something to stir the sentiment further.

I walked forward beside the old man with Dragonfly beside me, I said, "Old Master Tao let me walk with you."

The old man turned his head and looked at me for a moment, "I have heard of you Mister Yan, I thank you for inspiring me to do this. If not for your presence, I might still be bowing my foolish head to this monster. I am walking my last few steps, I am ready to die, but I am happy to know that Wulin will have people like you to carry on our proud tradition."

He continued in a whisper, into my ears, "Mister Yan, please let me walk this walk alone, you need not die unnecessarily. I know what you are doing; you want to wake up this bunch of miserable *fools*. What better way to wake them up than having this monster kills a defenseless old man right before their eyes? Let me do my last bit for Wulin, I am finished anyway, please do not let my death go to waste."

I understand what he was doing; he was trying very hard to corner Shen Piao into killing him. Such an act of cruelty might be able to tip the crowd into a full-scale rebellion...

The old man stood a short distance from Shen Piao who was still standing midway up the platform. Shen Piao was clearly apprehensive on his next move; this situation was never in his plan at all. He knew he was trapped by Tao Yang's move, on one hand he could not let such defiance go unpunished, but to kill a defenseless old man would surely turn the crowd against him.

Shen Piao hesitated, but his brother Shen Hung did not. Shen Hung who was all this while sitting on the top of the platform suddenly grabbed the spear that his attendant was holding for him. In one swift move he stood up, took one step forward and thrust his spear toward Tao Yang. His spear was seven feet long, with his arm extended and with his body leaning forward he did not have to take another step to kill the Old Master. From his elevated position on the platform, his spear's jagged tip pierced into the Old man's forehead.

The crowd recoiled in shock; even though Wulin had always been associated with violence, but the Wulin conflicts had always been governed by a strict set of rules, such savagery was never part of it.

What followed next upset the crowd even more. Shen Hung's spear was stuck firmly onto the skull of the Old Man; he was unable to shake it loose as it was locked onto the bone. Shen Hung drew his spear back dragging the old frail body along and he stepped on the head and pulled his spear back. The lifeless body was left lying on the steps of the platform. It was a horrifying act even for the battle hardened fighters in the hall.

The two brothers looked up and smirked at the crowd, Shen Piao said, "Who else want to defy me, I welcome it."

He did not have to wait long, five middle age men step forward, the leader among them said, "We are from the Five Tigers protection agency, I am Lou Wei, this are my sworn brothers Gao Han, Tang Ching, Song De Cheng and Guo Hung Li. We declare that we defy you; we are no longer your slave. We challenge the two of you to a fight.

Just like Master Tao Yang we were honourable Wuxias until we fell into your trap. We had shamed our family, but today we will right the wrong. I know we will not walk out of here alive; I want all of you to witness this, the Five Tiger Agency had stood up to evil, we die as Wuxia."

The five of them dashed forward at the same time, but they were no match for the combined power of the Shen brothers. They were dispatched in a blink of an eye.

The Shen brothers went back up the platform and looked down to the crowd, their glare challenging anybody who dares to follow the Five Tigers. The crowd seems to have been subdued again; I knew I must not allow that to happen. I went forward; the entire room was looking at me, but before I could voice my challenge a loud explosion rocked the whole room.

Abacus and his team had struck!!!

None of us had ever witness the power of Fire Medicine before, even though I had be warned by Dragonfly about its stunting effect, I was not prepared for it. The explosion was about thirty yards away from the main hall, but the impact was still strong enough to throw most of us to the ground. Dragonfly and I were the first to recover; we looked up and saw the Shen brothers were slowly getting to their feet.

Before they could fully recovered from the shock, I shouted, "Shen Piao, my team had destroyed the building that you stored your Magic Powder (Dragon Mist) in. You have no more Magic Powder! You are finished."

This was the first time I saw fear creeping into Shen Piao's eyes, with the destruction of the Powder, he had not only lost control over the victims; he would also lost his own supply of the Powder. He knew very well what the consequences would be.

The crowd having heard what I said was in a state of panic, they too knew what that meant. No more powder meant slow death by extreme suffering but at the same time it also meant they no longer have to listen to Shen brothers. The crowd did not take to figure that out, one after another the Wuxias' dashed forward to attack the Shen brothers. These desperate Wuxias' had no more reasons to hold back, without the powder, they were as good as dead; they rather die quickly and honourably.

Dragonfly and I joined in the attack on the brothers; a few of their Agency's fighters came to help them. But the Shen brothers did not need any help; they were fighting ten to one each, their strength and stamina seems unlimited. The more they fought the stronger they became.

Shen Piao's Crescent Blade was utilized to the fullest, at time he held it close to the body and at time he swung it in a wide arc just holding the end of the shaft with his arms extended. This expanding and contracting of his striking arc had caught many of his attackers off guard. Being caught off guard by this heavy blade meant instant death.

Shen Hung on the other hand was deploying his relatively lighter weapon with lightning precision; his spear had a sharp point on both ends of the shaft. He seems to be able to fight on both ends at the same time. Before long the two brothers had killed or injured more than ten of the attackers. The angry crowd could not gain any advantage despite their numbers.

Both Dragonfly and I had sustained some injuries in the fight; we had survived better than the rest of the attackers not because we were more skillful. It was because we were more cautious, the rest of the Wuxias' involved in the attack had given up on their life; they fought like they had wanted to die... perhaps they did.

I tried several times to get close to Shen Piao as I was not able to effectively engage him with my saber from a distance, but my attempts had almost caused me my life. He was just too strong and nimble, the one time that I was able to step into his arm-length perimeter I was quickly ejected by an explosive thrust of his palm. He was well-versed in both his extended fight (engaging the opponent at weapon length) and his restrictive fight (engaging opponent at close quarters).

The crowd was beginning to lose appetite on the attack; some of the wounded Wuxias' were leaving the hall. Some were just standing there, staring in to space, lost in their own world; they were totally thrown off by the twist and turn of the night's event. After all the suffering they had gone through, they were finally release from their mental prison. But this relieve came at a heavy price, they would soon die of a very painful death.

Someone shouted, "Let's get the Prince of Liao."

One group of them charged up the platform straight into the group of fighters protecting the young Prince. The Prince's personal guards were all Liao soldiers in

disguise, they fought bravely. Dragonfly ordered his Imperial agents to join in the assault on the Prince's entourage; a bloody battle was fought on the platform.

By now Abacus and his assault team had fought their way to us; he immediately threw himself into the battle.

As the battle in the meeting hall was raging, I saw three men walked in from the main entrance. They were in their fifties and were dressed in simple peasant outfit, wearing straw hat and straw sandals. None of them were carrying any weapon. They stood at the entrance to the hall and scan the battle scene as though they were looking for someone. Finally their eyes rested on Dragonfly who was busy fighting Shen Piao, the leader of the group quickly walked over to Dragonfly.

Dragonfly was at that time was tightly locked up by Shen Piao's aggressive attack. With one swipe of his Crescent Blade Shen Piao had struck down Dragonfly's saber, with a follow up stroke he had forced Dragonfly to the ground. The next swipe of the Blade would surely hack Dragonfly into two. The middle age man quickened his steps and in a blink of an eye he was standing between Dragonfly and Shen Piao.

When Shen Piao's Crescent Blade came down, the man was right in the path of the murderous Blade. He took a small step forward and grabbed the weapon right below the sharp blade and effortlessly he push the heavy shaft back in Shen Piao's direction.

Shen Piao's super-human strength seems to be no match for his unceremonious push. Throughout the entire evening, I had not seen Shen Piao retreating once, but one tiny push from this man had sent Shen Piao stumbling back several steps. Everybody was shocked; the most shocked among them was Shen Piao himself, he said, "Who are you?"

The man did not reply, he turned to Dragonfly and said, "I apologize for the delay, we had set off immediately upon the orders from the Second Prince. We await your instructions."

The shaken Dragonfly nodded and said, "Take the Shen brothers... and the Prince from the Liao Kingdom... I needs them alive." Dragonfly breathlessly pointed his fingers at the targets.

The man said, "It will be done."

I helped Dragonfly to the side; in between breaths he explained to me, "These three men were the head of the inner brigade of the Emperor's guards; they were the top martial art experts in the Imperial Palace. These inner guards were the elite forces that provide close quarter protection for the Emperor. The Second Prince had borrowed them from the Emperor for this mission. Fortunately they made it in time, if not we would be dead."

The Head of the Imperial elite guards turned to Shen Piao; it was the first time that I noticed Shen Piao's tension, he licked his lips several times as he cautiously circled his opponent. Without taking his eyes off the man, he shouted to his brother, "Lao Wu, come over, we have someone worthy of our skills." *Lao Wu* meant fifth brother.

For the Shen brothers, this Imperial Guard presented a professional curiosity, as he had said it was a worthy opponent. The killing of tens of the mediocre fighters was a good workout but it did not present any challenge at all. This was different...

All the other surviving Wuxias' who were fighting the Shen brothers had suddenly turned into excited onlookers, they had temporarily forgotten their hatred and their imminent painful death; they had once again turned into a bunch of martial art enthusiasts. They were just like the bunch that I had met at Green Dragon Agency and Five Flag union. They just want to witness the display of extreme martial art. For now, nothing else matters.

That was the extent that martial art matters to a true Wuxias' life, to a Wuxia; martial art was more than life and death.

I asked Dragonfly, "Who is he? Can he take on the two brothers at once, should we help?"

Dragonfly gave me a sideways glance and said, "His official name was Ma Cheng Tian, I do not know his history, but I know that his martial art was based on internal strength. He was recruited by the Second Prince personally. He alone can take on five Shen brothers. There are only about a handful of such talent in the world, he is as powerful as your friends in Chang Shan."

He continued, "Such a person like him could have easily establish a reputation in Wulin, but he was little known outside the Imperial Palace. These people are all very weird in their behaviors, just like your friends from Chang Shan. But instead of hiding away, he chose to serve the Empire...but quietly. He had save the Emperor from assassination many times, but he had repeatedly refused rewards and promotions. Head of the inner guards was a post grossly unworthy of his talent. Weird character."

Ma Cheng Tian stood before the two brothers; he slowly untied the bundle he carried round his shoulders and drop it to the floor. This bundle was probably the only belonging he had carried for the trip here. He rolled down his sleeves as the Shen brothers nervously circled him.

At this moment, the Shen brothers had lost all hope for any positive outcome for their venture; the rebellion was a non-starter, the powder storage had been destroyed which meant that they would suffer a painful death soon. Now with this 'worthy' opponent, they might suffer the first defeat they had in the past ten years...

But being a martial art enthusiast, they were more focus on the fight than all the setbacks they were facing, they were fascinated. For them, to be killed by such a worthy expert was much better than be killed by a bunch of mediocre Wuxias'. And the opportunity to witness first hand such martial art skill would have made everything worthwhile.

Meanwhile, the other two men who were with Ma Cheng Tian had easily captured the Prince of Liao. All the Wuxia who had been fighting the Prince's bodyguards had abandoned the task and had joined the spectacles on the lower platform. The battle that was a moment ago ragging in the room had been won by us, all the enemies had submitted to the inevitable. All except for the Shen brothers...

At this moment, fighters on both sides of the conflict had laid down their weapons and had instantaneously transformed themselves into spectators of this main event, even the captured Prince of Liao was leaning forward to try and get a better view below. The situation was infectious and comical.

I have to admit I was also carried away by the tension in the air.

## The Main Event

The brothers had wisely split up their attacks; Ma Cheng Tian countered this with swift movements. Even though both the brothers were very quick and nimble on their feet they were still out classed by the super-human speed of Ma Cheng Tian, his body seems to flow like water.

Ma Cheng Tian used his bare hands to block and redirect the two heavy weapons; he was incredibly precise in circumventing the cutting edge of the Crescent Blade and the spear. His strokes and strikes patterns were swift, sharp and extremely powerful.

Every powerful slash from the power Crescent Blade was dismissively brush aside by his rolled down sleeve, it was as though inside his sleeve he was carrying a weapon. But I knew it to be not so, he was redirecting the heavy weapon with his internal energy, the movement of the hands were just the medium to conduct the force. After my encounter with the Old Man from Chang Shan I had come to realize the power of such martial art.

Ma Cheng Tian had time and again pushed the two brothers to one side and forced them to be on the defensive, but after a while, he would slow down his strikes to allow the brothers some breathing space. I realized that he was trying to tire the Shen brothers, in order to capture them alive... those were the order from Dragonfly.

After toying with the brothers for a long while, he stepped up his tempo, up till now he had only used a fraction of his capability. He purposely left himself wide open to his opponent by standing with his back to them. The Shen brothers went for the kill.

Ma Cheng Tian slowly turned and held his palms outwards about four feet apart. As the deadly blades came closer with the tips within inches of his body they stopped. The two heavy weapons were held in place by an invisible force, the Shen brothers could not thrust them forward neither could they withdraw the weapons.

The whole room exclaimed in surprise, nobody had ever seen such a display of extreme power. While everybody started talking at the same time, nobody took their eyes off the fight. The Shen brothers were shocked beyond words; they struggled desperately to retrieve their weapon using their body weight.

Ma Cheng Tian took this momentum to release the weapons and redirect the force to propel the two weapons into the brothers' body. Both the spear and the Crescent Blade were thrust end-wise into the shoulders of the brothers. They stumbled several steps back before falling to the ground; they were both crippled by their own weapons.

By now the roar in the room was deafening, all these Wuxias' had for one moment forgotten about their impending doom, they were cheering like a bunch of little children. Perhaps, having witnessed this amazing display of martial art would have made their final days more palatable.

I too was stunted beyond words; I was trying hard to close my wide opened mouth when Ma Cheng Tian walked over to us. He respectfully bowed to Dragonfly



and said, "Sire, I hope this is to your satisfaction. Would there be anything else that you need done? If not, I would like to go back to my Master's side." He was referring to the Emperor.

Dragonfly replied, "You have done well, you saved our life. I thank you for that. The southern army would be arriving soon, when they are here, you can leave."

Dragonfly had explained to me later that the Second Prince had ordered the army from the South to come in to help us. The Jiangnan army had been totally compromised by the Shen brothers; it would be a long process to repair the damages done.

Before excusing himself Ma Cheng Tian turned to me and said, "You must be Mister Yan Ching, I have heard of your exploits in Huang Long city, I would like to meet the Old Men from Chang Shan, if you could arrange that I would be very grateful." He turned and walked away, he was clearly a man of few words.

The Imperial agents we brought along began clearing up the remnants of the resistance from the Dragon gate Agency, none of them really had much will to resist. Abacus and I left the place leaving Dragonfly and his agents to tie up the loose ends.

By the next morning, the Southern army had arrived; they took control of the city, when I met Dragonfly I asked him, "What do you intend to do with the Shen brothers and the Prince of Liao?"

He said, "What do you suggest?"

I replied, "I would like to see all three executed. For the misery they had caused, they deserve to die a hundred times."

He thought for a moment and said, "Things might not be as simple as you think, to kill a Liao Prince in Song territory could be more costly than you imagine."

I said, "Are we just going to release him? How are we to answer to the people who had been harmed by him? If you are afraid to touch him, let me do it, I am bounded by my duties to revenge my teacher."

I was upset.

Dragonfly replied, "Let me think about it."

### **Dragonfly Flew off again**

By night fall, Dragonfly had disappeared, he left me a letter.

It said, "Yan Ching and Abacus, I am sorry that I had slipped off again just like the last time. I have to escort the Liao Prince to the Imperial Palace; he will be treated as our honoured guest in the Capital.

I knew you would be furious at this development, you would feel that I had betrayed you once again.

Let me explain, we cannot execute the Prince, because our entire army from Jiangnan to the northern frontiers had been compromised by this evil Dragon Mist. Seven out of the ten Generals in the region had been a victim of the Special Invitation.

Some of the troops that are presently facing the enemy had become addicts; they could not be trusted at all. In a few days time when their supply of Dragon

Mist runs out, the whole northern army will collapse. The only thing standing in the way of an all out invasion from the Liao Kingdom was the Prince that we are holding.

Yan Ching, now you understand why we are treating the Prince so well. I had told you before; I am working for the people of the Empire, but I do not have the luxury that you do, often times my hands are bounded by many issues. I envy your carefree life style where you could do as you please or as your Wulin duties dictate, I do not have that leeway.

Farewell my friends  
Dragonfly”

I was disappointed, but I was not angry, I began to understand Dragonfly better. I knew if he had an option, he would not have taken the Prince away from us.

But unfortunately, we were the only two people who knew the truth and we could not tell this to anyone else as it was a military secret. Therefore Dragonfly would forever be looked upon as the traitor who had taken the Prince of Liao away from the people of Suzhou, away from his rightful punishment. He had risked his life to fulfill his mission, but in the end all he got was a reputation of a traitor...

### **The Addicts paid the ultimate price**

For the next few months, everyday there were a few funerals that I was invited to, the victims of the Special Invitation were dying, they were paying the ultimate price. In a way I was the one that had killed them as I was the one who spearheaded the destruction of the Dragon Mist plot.

But none of the families blamed me; instead I was an honoured guest at all the funerals. Such was the mindset of a Wuxia; an honourable death was always preferred over a shameful existence, many of the sons and daughters of the deceased thanked me for giving honour back to the family.

As usual, the fight between Ma Cheng Tian and the Shen brothers was the talk of the city for many months to come; I was glad that by now my Huang Long City adventure was slowly being forgotten...

[**Note:** Obviously poor translation.]

