

ROU BAO BU CHI ROU

REMNANTS
of FILTH 7

YUWU

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REMNANTS *of* FILTH

YUWU

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WRITTEN BY
Rou Bao Bu Chi Rou

ILLUSTRATED BY
St

TRANSLATED BY
Yu & Rui



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ADAPTATION: Neon Yang
LOGO & COVER DESIGN: M. A. Lewife
INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner
INTERIOR LAYOUT: Karis Page
PROOFREADER: Kate Kishi, Hnă
COPY EDITOR: Jehanne Bell
EDITOR: Kelly Quinn Chiu
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Chapter 190: Before the Flower Broke the Darkness

“**T**HIS CONVOLUTED TALE began when Hua Po’an first learned of his own identity.”

Jiang Fuli’s voice was brittle as crushed jade as he recounted those events from many centuries past.

Hundreds of years ago, Hua Po’an had been a slave in the academy. Even then, his personality was unyielding, and he refused to bow to the rules. Other slaves accepted their fate from the moment they were born, but when Hua Po’an saw those noble young masters in their splendid coats of brocade and plush furs, he had always silently asked himself: Why wasn’t *he* the one to enjoy such luxuries? Why was *he* born into poverty, while others wanted for nothing from the very first breath they drew?

As he grew older, Hua Po’an’s wild nature had become harder and harder to tame. He began to cultivate in secret. He discovered he could master in a day techniques those noble children couldn’t manage in weeks or months. In time, he discovered the reason behind his extraordinary talent: When Chonghua was founded, his own ancestor had been a step away from becoming emperor. But because his brother schemed against him, he had suffered a grievous defeat and lost everything.

At that moment, Hua Po’an realized with a start that this was what people meant when they said history was written by the victors. If his ancestor hadn’t been so soft-hearted, if he had killed his brother first, then wouldn’t Hua Po’an be the one living in fathomless glory today? Wouldn’t he be someone who trampled carelessly over servants and slaves?

He, Hua Po’an, was not a slave. He had missed the throne by the thinnest of margins.

After learning these truths, Hua Po'an felt no more doubt in his heart when he looked at the noble young masters. He felt only hatred, scorn, and ridicule. He gazed upon those useless aristocrats with the eyes of a falcon, watching as those middling idiots tried and failed to reach heights he'd cleared with ease. His glory had been stolen from him, and his heart filled with a loathing that flourished like weeds.

But Hua Po'an was a clever man. He understood that rash use of brute force would end with his severed head rolling upon the ground. Even after he learned of his lineage, he feigned ignorance of it, pretending to be helpless and pitiable. He slithered like a snake through the underbrush, peering furtively at the grass rustling in the breeze. He hoped to find a legitimate opportunity to show himself before the emperor. Thus he slowly constructed the stairs that would take him up through the ranks.

The first step he placed his foot upon was the academy's purest and kindest grandmaster—Chen Tang, Preceptor Chen. Hua Po'an made a point of coming before Chen Tang from time to time, leaving the man with the impression that this slave was obedient and sensible. When the right moment arrived, he staged losing control of his spiritual core and managed to secure Chen Tang's compassion through a lie, just as expected.

"I've reported this incident to His Imperial Majesty and made an exception to take you as a disciple," Chen Tang told him gently. "Focus on resting. Once you recover, you may learn from me and move through the academy as you please."

Hua Po'an's first risky move had paid off. Of course that tender-hearted idiot Chen Tang didn't disappoint. From then on, Hua Po'an exploited Chen Tang's compassion, putting on a loveable and docile act by his side. As the days wore on, he successfully placed piece after piece on the chessboard of his ambitions, drawing ever nearer to realizing his goals.

Still, it was not as if he never knew guilt. As he yearned to reach the upper echelons of power, he cultivated with rash abandon. Once, after he fell unconscious from a high fever, he woke to find Chen Tang sitting wearily at the desk, cheek propped on his palm as he slept fitfully, a bowl of medicine ready by his hand. As he'd gazed upon Chen Tang's weary, elegant profile,

Hua Po'an's heart had indeed ached. He hadn't failed to notice the things Chen Tang had done for him throughout the years. He noticed how Chen Tang patiently taught him and guided him without a care for other's criticisms. He watched Chen Tang argue that slave-born people were as innately kind as anyone else, that there was nothing they couldn't be taught. He'd walked beneath Chen Tang's umbrella, eaten the rice porridge Chen Tang cooked him, and used the healing salve Chen Tang gifted him. His shizun had never remotely mistreated him because of his status. He gave him a name—Hua Po'an—signifying that even in the dead of night, a flower could bloom and break the darkness.

Hua Po'an had called him *Shizun* with feigned regard in the beginning. But by the end, his sincerity was real. Unfortunately, Hua Po'an's grudges and ambitions overruled all else. His sincerity changed nothing. He knew Chen Tang's clan was unfailingly loyal to the emperor—in fact, this clan had been foremost among the families who had once overthrown his ancestor.

Was this karmic retribution, or simply reaping what they had sown?

For all his guilt, Hua Po'an stayed his course. He pried into Chen Tang's secret techniques and furtively studied those forbidden black magic arts that everyone despised. He altered every single bright and honorable spell Chen Tang taught him, twisting them into dark and malevolent techniques. He raised an army and rebelled, hoping to overturn the imperial court of Chonghua. He led hundreds of thousands of troops and the Demonblood Beast Jingchen to besiege his motherland.

He marched forth, aglow with excitement and arrogance. He pictured how the nation would fall to its knees when he took the city, how the people would bow down before him, the slave no one had found worthy, and beg pathetically for their lives to be spared. How very satisfying this would be! Would he allow them to live, or doom them to die? Hua Po'an didn't care to think that far ahead. To him, these people were as significant as dead grass left in the fields at the end of autumn; they were beneath his consideration.

There was only one person whose fate he turned over again and again in the depths of his mind, unable to decide how he ought to dispose of him. That person was none other than the first step he'd used in his ascension—

his benevolent teacher, Chen Tang. Would he reduce him to a commoner? No no, that would be no fun. Let him continue teaching at the academy? Much too boring. Snap all the tendons in his limbs and throw him in prison? But why? After all, Chen Tang had shown him nothing but kindness. Hua Po'an had no grudges against him. Why would he lock him up?

And yet whenever that last thought crossed his mind, Hua Po'an felt a strange thrill, one that made him lick his lips as his eyes lit up. He didn't know the meaning of this impulse, but he had a vague inkling that a large part of his satisfaction in conquering Chonghua would come from the power he would wield over Preceptor Chen. He could control him, punish him, defile him...

His pupils contracted slightly, joy shining from his bold and youthful face.

Hua Po'an had plotted out the conclusion to this game of chess thousands of times, but never once had he anticipated that Chen Tang would die. Yet as Hua Po'an looked on, Chen Tang had raised his hands—the same hands that had once wiped Hua Po'an's fevered brow—and snuffed out the life of his cherished Demonblood Beast. With the same eyes that had once gazed warmly at him, Chen Tang fixed him with a cold stare. In that voice that had once patiently explained a difficult spell, Chen Tang spoke with a sharp viciousness: "It's over. Hua Po'an, your ambition ends here."

He was a schemer filled with wild ambition. He'd never put much stock in sentiment. But after Chen Tang's death, his sanity frayed, and his appetites grew increasingly depraved. It was fortunate that when Chen Tang sacrificed himself to kill the Demonblood Beast, he did not utter the words *I regret ever taking you on as a disciple*. Perhaps he had no opportunity before death claimed him—but it was a great stroke of luck nevertheless. Hua Po'an might have gone even more insane otherwise; he was already crazy enough.

Chen Tang perished, the Demonblood Beast was sealed, and the Liao Kingdom's army was defeated. Everyone knew the conclusion to that great battle. What they did not know was that, after Hua Po'an retreated with his troops to Liao, hatred and discontent roiled in his chest, joined by an

anguish he was unwilling to acknowledge. In this state of turmoil, he gathered all the soul-summoning methods in the Nine Provinces and summoned a fragment of Chen Tang's departed soul.

He was seized by a frantic need to ask Chen Tang a question: Why did he go to such lengths? Wasn't every emperor more or less the same?! Why couldn't *he*, Hua Po'an, sit upon that throne? Even if he'd killed everyone upon taking the city, he would have spared Chen Tang—

Why was it Chen Tang who had to die? The singular person he wanted to keep alive had perished with the demon beast to save the same useless masses Hua Po'an wished to cut down like weeds.

Over and over again, using all sorts of spells, he attempted to piece together the remaining scraps of Chen Tang's soul. With each failure, the hatred in his heart festered by degrees. Chen Tang was indeed a lapdog of Chonghua's emperor, Hua Po'an thought—he had foiled Hua Po'an's revolt, and now he wanted to destroy his heart as well. Tormenting him like this was his retaliation, was it not?

Still Hua Po'an was undeterred. No one could turn him from his course.

Finally, there came a day when he captured one of Chen Tang's cousins. Using this blood connection, he succeeded with a soul-summoning method that had previously failed. Hua Po'an triumphantly poured Chen Tang's soul into that living body and revived Preceptor Chen.

Deep within the Liao palace, within a golden bed canopy, countless thoughts had surged through Hua Po'an's mind as he faced the man he'd lost and regained, his teacher who had died and been resurrected. But what he did was something even he himself hadn't expected.

He plundered Chen Tang's newly awakened body.

It seemed a cruel joke—had he gone to such pains to bring a dead man back to life solely for the pleasure he could get off his body? Yet that night, he devoured without restraint the man he'd snatched back from the depths

of the underworld, like a traveler dying of thirst drinking from a sweet spring.

When the exhausted Preceptor Chen passed out, Hua Po'an held him, gazing at the pale tears of humiliation that had gathered in the corners of his eyes. *Forget it*, he thought—he no longer wanted to ask. He no longer wanted to ask Chen Tang why he had sacrificed himself with the Demonblood Beast, why he had died for the sake of his country. None of it mattered anymore; it was all in the past. At that moment, Hua Po'an felt a profound sense of peace. As though he'd always yearned to have Chen Tang like this, and had finally awoken to his desire today.

At last, he was satisfied. But he was the only one who felt satisfaction. Chen Tang, whom he'd hauled out of death, lived in horrific agony, facing the consequences of his own actions every single day. He was a once-powerful man, yet he had no choice but to lie beneath his own disciple in submission. He was trapped in a cage, and the people in the world who knew he was still alive could be counted on a single hand.

His greatest source of terror was the fact that he had no idea when these days would end. After Hua Po'an resurrected him, he lost interest in conquering more lands and fervently turned his attention to the arts of immortality, as if he wished to keep living like this for centuries.

Hua Po'an would not give him a chance to die again. In all absurdity, having experienced Chen Tang's previous death, Hua Po'an's mad whims only grew madder. He believed Chen Tang chose to die with the Demonblood Beast because he cared too much for the lives of those irrelevant people. Chen Tang, he thought, should never care for others ever again—to this end, he devised all sorts of ghastly methods to sunder what connections Chen Tang retained with the outside world, one after another. He concocted medicines that made him forget his family and devised poisonous curses that excised all his fond feelings; there was nothing he wouldn't put to use. When he discovered a dark art that could sever Chen Tang's fated connections in every cycle of reincarnation to come, he gleefully cast the curse—no more would his teacher form bonds of marriage, family, or friendship.

Only after Hua Po'an had ensured Chen Tang would live beneath a lonely star forevermore did he feel at ease. Only then could he be certain Chen Tang wouldn't ever sacrifice his life for someone else again.

But perhaps because a trace of Chen Tang's innate goodness still remained, or because he so stubbornly refused to surrender, the Liao Kingdom's high priestess, who was in charge of his care in the palace, fell for him in tender-hearted love.

This priestess was none other than Su Yurou. Throughout the years, she saw Chen Tang struggling as he tried to resist Hua Po'an's malevolent spells, saw him subjected to suffering that defied the will of heaven, saw him forced to live a life worse than death. She admired his strength, but increasingly struggled to witness his plight in silence. One day, she decided to act. While Hua Po'an was away on a long campaign in the northwest, she took Chen Tang and fled the palace. After fighting their way through myriad dangers and obstacles, the two of them finally escaped the borders of the Liao Kingdom.

Her aid wasn't purely selfless: She had fallen in love with Chen Tang and intended to marry him. But Chen Tang's fated bonds had been irreversibly severed by Hua Po'an; all of Su Yurou's efforts and sincerity were in vain. And more critically, the torture and dark spells Chen Tang had been subjected to at Hua Po'an's hands continued to scramble his memories and deepen his pain.

Su Yurou couldn't bear to see him suffer so grievously. She therefore made a decision. Before she'd fled the palace, Su Yurou had stolen one of the most precious treasures of the Liao Kingdom: an ancient heirloom Hua Po'an had taken from the Chen Clan, the holy artifact called the Reversal Stone. It had long been said this stone was capable of changing the past, but Chen Tang's clan had only guarded it, never putting it to use. Hua Po'an had tried to pry its secrets from Chen Tang's lips to no avail.

Regardless, immense power resided within this stone—enough, Su Yurou believed, to alter the course of fate. She created an array with the stone in its center, casting a spell that sealed away all of Chen Tang's

memories and curses, thus giving him a new life. Preceptor Chen disappeared, and the man who rose from the sickbed was Jiang Fuli.

Spells cast with the Reversal Stone carried a heavy price—the backlash devoured half of Su Yurou’s lovely face. One half retained its peerless beauty, while the other became warped and demonic. She had no choice but to hide her face behind a veil from then on. When she had finished, she secretly embedded the Reversal Stone in Jiang Fuli’s left eye. The stone had a unique property: It absorbed spiritual energy from the surrounding world each night and entered a temporary resting state. This was the reason Jiang Fuli couldn’t see clearly through his left eye after nightfall.

Su Yurou and Jiang Fuli continued to travel as a pair. Gradually, Su Yurou discovered the terrifying depth of the mark Hua Po’an had left on Chen Tang’s mind. Jiang Fuli barely remembered anything from before the Reversal Stone’s spell, but every so often he’d ask without warning, “Did I once have a loveable and clever little disciple?”

One balmy afternoon, when the peach blossoms were first beginning to bloom, Jiang Fuli sat by the window and silently copied out a sword manual. “What are you working on?” Su Yurou asked curiously.

Jiang Fuli was placid and mostly affectless: such was his usual demeanor after being sealed by the Reversal Stone. He often reminded her of a walking corpse, yet this was the only way he could live in relative ease, rather than being trapped in sleepless agony. “I don’t know either,” he said. “This just came to mind, so I scribbled it down. They look like decent sword forms.”

A closer look left her speechless—it was the *Water-Parting Sword Manual*. These were the sword forms Hua Po’an had most favored when he practiced in the Liao palace. *A sword of five years turns the seasons, a sword of ten years turns back time. This sword’s edge sharp enough to part the waters, this life too short to part my heart from yours.* This Water-Parting Sword was the first set of sword forms Chen Tang had taught Hua Po’an after taking him as a student. Chen Tang had reportedly developed them specifically for Hua Po’an’s martial strengths and weaknesses.

Whenever Hua Po'an had spoken of this, his face had become suffused with crazed glee, though sorrow still lurked in the shadows.

Hua Po'an had later learned countless formidable sword techniques; the Water-Parting Sword was by no means the strongest. Chen Tang, too, had developed many excellent techniques in his life; the Water-Parting Sword was hardly his most noteworthy creation.

And yet, despite having lost all of his memories, Jiang Fuli still had the ability to serenely write out each of the sword forms. As Su Yurou watched his brush move across the paper, she didn't know what to feel.

Jiang Fuli looked up. "What is it? Do you know the origins of this sword manual?"

She lowered her lashes in panic. "No. I—I don't know either..."

The two of them hid in the depths of a nameless forest in the mountains for many years. In the palace of Liao, Hua Po'an had studied the forbidden techniques of immortality and dosed both Jiang Fuli and Su Yurou with those arcane medicines. In order to let Jiang Fuli rest and recover, and because she was afraid of Hua Po'an chasing them down, Su Yurou concealed them within a barrier. As the years slipped by, she lost track of events in the outside world. By the time she felt it was time to venture out of the mountains and speak to others, centuries had passed.

She realized with some astonishment that Hua Po'an's secret forays into immortality had actually succeeded. Upon asking about the state of each country, she learned that many small nations had fallen and been replaced, and that Chonghua had seen several generations of rulers. As for the Liao Kingdom, its ruler Hua Po'an had been too hasty in seeking immortality and conducted black magic experiments on a large scale, making many enemies. In the end, his work backfired: He died of spell backlash after he was attacked by assassins. The Liao Kingdom had since had quite a few different rulers, but their king was a puppet. The real monarch was the guoshi of the Liao Kingdom who hid in the shadows.