

COPPER COINS

TONG QIAN KAN SHI

1

◦ Mu Su Li ◦

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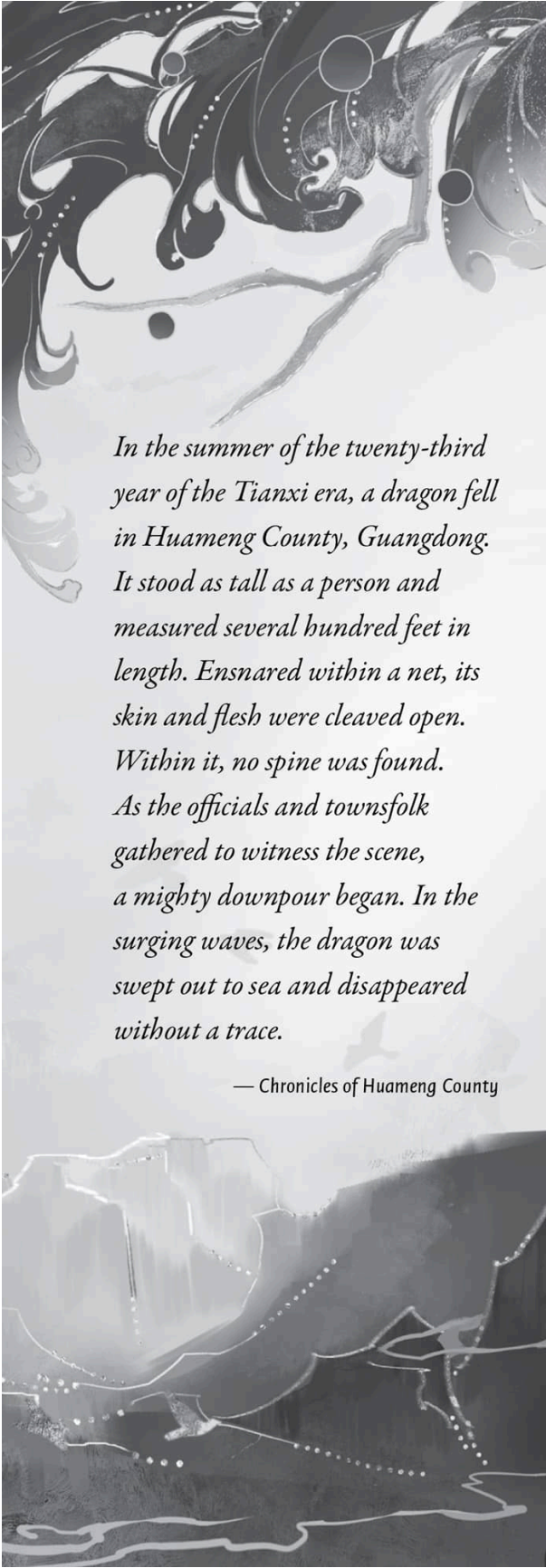
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ARC 1

SEEKING



*In the summer of the twenty-third
year of the Tianxi era, a dragon fell
in Huameng County, Guangdong.
It stood as tall as a person and
measured several hundred feet in
length. Ensnared within a net, its
skin and flesh were cleaved open.
Within it, no spine was found.
As the officials and townsfolk
gathered to witness the scene,
a mighty downpour began. In the
surging waves, the dragon was
swept out to sea and disappeared
without a trace.*

— Chronicles of Huameng County

Chapter 1: The Ghostly Scholar

DURING A WINTER MONTH that same year in Ningyang County, Huizhou Prefecture, a gong rang, heralding that dawn was near. The sky was still dark, but faint murmurs of activity were already drifting through Xingtang Street. A waiter from Jiuwei House carried out several large steamers of fresh buns to set up a breakfast stall in front of the building.

The night watchman jogged over, his head tucked against the cold as he rubbed his hands together. He bought three buns, wolfed one down in a few bites, and gulped before he winked at the waiter. “Hey! Did you prepare the order we talked about?”

“We did. It’s right here.” The waiter frowned as he patted the takeout box beside the steamers.

The night watchman was astonished. “You really did? What if he...*that thing* doesn’t show up today?”

“Oh, ancestors above, please don’t let him come,” the waiter said with a shudder.

Jiuwei House was a moderately famous eatery in Ningyang County with a head chef known as “Three-Specialties Liu.” His reputation and livelihood rested on his three signature dishes: peach-braised pork belly, clay-pot roast pheasant, and civet simmered with pears. The pork belly was skin-on and beautifully marbled; the pheasant, sourced from Lishan, was neither too fat nor too lean; and the civet could only be caught on days when fresh snow blanketed the ground.

Thanks to these dishes, Jiuwei House was always packed with customers. However, Three-Specialties Liu also loved to put on airs. He only

cooked ten pots of each dish per day and not one more. Those who wished to enjoy his food had to rush to the restaurant early. Still, to order such a hearty meal at the crack of dawn? Anyone who would do that couldn't be right in the head, and this mad fellow had already shown up two days in a row!

The first day, he'd appeared before the waiter and ordered the three dishes. After that, he fell silent, wasting not a single breath more—literally not a single breath. It was the dead of winter; whenever people opened their mouths, streams of white vapor poured forth. But the air before this man remained clear, devoid of the slightest hint of mist.

The next day, his demands increased. He wanted the clay-pot roast pheasant without the star anise and fennel, and also not served in a clay pot. Then he ordered the dish of civet and pears without the pears. These demands didn't sound like the requests of someone who'd come to genuinely enjoy the food. If anything, they seemed more like an attempt to ruin the restaurant's reputation.

However, the waiter hadn't thrown out the malicious customer. Instead, he'd faithfully and fearfully served him for two days. Today, he'd even prepared the takeout box in advance. He glanced at the sky, his legs quivering like a knock-kneed chicken's.

"It's almost time for him to arrive. Wh-why aren't *you* shaking?" he asked, craning his neck toward the watchman.

"I patrol the streets every night. Why would I be shaking?" The watchman dropped his voice. "Besides, it's been an unsettling year. A couple of ghostly encounters is no big deal. Did you hear about that incident in June where they sighted a real dragon in Guangdong? It was lying on the shore. They said someone had ripped out its bones! The dragon's *bones*! You tell me, what kind of omen is that? And just a few months ago, they said the state preceptor almost perished—"

The watchman was still speaking when the waiter weakly slid downward, practically vanishing beneath the stall. "He's here, he's here... H-h-he really came..."

A scholarly-looking man appeared in front of the stall. His appearance was unremarkable, but he wore an expression of deep fatigue. The skin of his cheeks also bore an unusual flush, as if they had been warmed for too long by a flame. He was wearing an ash-blue robe, and both the man and the clothes were thin and ephemeral, like a branch draped with fabric, ready to be swept away by the wind at any moment.

By the glow of his white paper lantern, the watchman stared at the scholar's face for a long time. So long, in fact, that the last bite of his bun grew cold in his mouth. The thought of swallowing had completely fled his mind.

"I'm here," muttered the scholar to himself. Then, he slowly raised his head. His midnight-black eyes stared, unblinking, at the waiter.

The stricken waiter squeezed his legs together, on the verge of wetting himself in terror.

"Excuse me, I'd like the peach-braised pork belly."

Now that he was speaking properly, the scholar's voice was surprisingly pleasant, refreshing as green bamboo or a burbling stream—a far cry from his earlier mumbling. However, the sound matched neither his face nor the movements of his mouth.

Seeing this, the waiter grew even more terrified. He avoided the scholar's gaze, picked up the takeout box with quivering hands, and shoved it at him. "I-it's all here. In a porcelain jar, and there's no lard, star anise, or fennel. Fresh from the pot, still steaming."

The scholar seemed to choke. He stared at the box for a moment before he slowly nodded and said, "Thank you." His voice bore a faint hoarseness this time.

When he took it, the takeout box seemed a bit heavy in the scholar's hands; it was as if a thousand-pound weight had been piled onto a branch. He left, walking much more slowly than when he'd arrived. After a very long time, his figure faded into the distance.

Returning to his senses, the watchman shivered.

The waiter's face was ashen as he whispered, "You saw him, right? His face—Hey, where are you rushing off to?"

"Toilet!" said the watchman.

The waiter watched the watchman go in silence, but he didn't get very far before he came running back, still holding his copper gong.

Before the waiter could speak, the watchman patted him on the shoulder, then winked at a spot not too far away. "Look over there!"

Across the street, a whisper-silent white silhouette materialized out of the night.

The waiter had just gone through a scare. When he thought he was seeing yet another malevolent entity, his legs almost buckled. Fortunately, upon giving the newcomer a proper look, the waiter realized he was a monk dressed in a thin acolyte's robe that was white with wide sleeves. From head to toe, his clothes carried not a hint of color, as though he were a man in mourning—an ominous sight so early in the morning.

The waiter was perplexed. "I see him. So? It's just a monk."

"When I passed by him earlier, I glanced at his waist," the watchman whispered. "He's got Wudi coins on him!"

Wudi coins were capable of warding off evil spirits and safeguarding one's home. It was said that the current state preceptor liked utilizing them and always carried a string of coins at his waist. Since then, these coins had become a staple of those in the business of dealing with the supernatural. While quite a few con artists walked among them, most who owned Wudi coins were the genuine article and knew a trick or two.

The waiter scrutinized the monk from afar. There seemed to be an indescribable aura about him, like he couldn't be a con artist. Besides, the

waiter hadn't the luxury to worry about that. He'd hit his limit after three days. If the scholar came back tomorrow, he really might not be able to stop himself from losing control of his bladder.

Thanks to the monk's leisurely pace, he quickly closed the distance between them. As he was about to pass the stall, the waiter hurriedly called out to him. "Master, please wait!"

The monk paused, the hem of his white robe swaying gently, picking up nary a speck of dust. He glanced at the waiter, his gaze tranquil but devoid of warmth, colder than the winter wind blowing on the latter's face. At these close quarters, the waiter became aware of how tall the monk was. He gazed down upon the waiter, who found himself taking a half step back—where he bumped into the watchman behind him who was doing the same.

This collision brought his courage back from where it'd been cowering. Throwing caution to the wind, the waiter spoke again. "I noticed that you're carrying Wudi coins, Master. Do you know anything about exorcising evil spirits?"

Expressionlessly, the monk swept his eyes down toward the copper coins at his waist, neither confirming nor denying that he did.

The waiter exchanged an awkward glance with the watchman. This monk's demeanor was colder than an arctic blast, freezing him until he couldn't even think straight, let alone speak.

Fortunately, the watchman was more resilient and spoke up for him. He succinctly described their scholarly-looking customer, then said to the monk, "We can't claim to know him exactly, but that face is unmistakable all the same. He's the son of the Jiang family, but...the Jiang family clinic caught fire three years ago. Other than their daughter who'd been married off to Anqing, everyone perished in the flames! As the saying goes, 'even ghosts have time on their hands right before sunrise.' A dead man has appeared three days in a row, always right before sunrise, during the witching hour! It's natural to be terrified!"

The monk scanned the sky and finally said something, though it was clipped and cold. "Where is he?"

At those words, the waiter thawed and sprang back to life. He pointed to where the wall curved away in the distance and sputtered, "He just left! He might not have gone inside yet! I know where the Jiang family's ruined clinic is. M-Master, I can take you there!"

Almost as soon as the waiter had offered to the go with the monk, he'd regretted his words and had wanted to slap himself. Why didn't he think before speaking? Who would want to accompany a walking ice statue in the dead of winter? Had he gone mad?

They'd only walked through a couple of alleys, and the waiter felt like he'd walked half his life away. From time to time, he stole glances at the young monk. He tried and failed several times to muster the courage to ask the man any questions. All the waiter had learned about the monk since meeting him was that he had a small mole at the base of his neck.

Before the waiter could freeze to death, they finally arrived at the street corner where the Jiang family clinic was located. As the waiter had suspected, that frail-looking scholar hadn't yet gone inside. He was making his way down the alley with aching slowness, box of food in hand. Bizarrely, he was muttering to himself as he walked, his voice at times clear and pleasant, at times low and hoarse.

"Did you personally go to Lishan to catch the pheasant for me or what? With how slowly you're walking, will you even make it back before the new year?" the clear voice asked.

"Better than not being able to walk at all," replied the hoarse one.

"Looks to me like you have a death wish."

"Well, my humble self has been dead for just over three years."

The scholar was playing the role of two characters—or a vivid portrayal of a man who was seriously not right in the head. Then, like a slip of paper, he slid through the crumbling wall of the Jiang residence.

Hidden behind the alley wall, the waiter witnessed all this and was so spooked he almost turned tail and ran. In fact, he had one foot raised to go when he remembered the ice statue of a monk still standing beside him. In his panic, he pulled out a purse full of money and shoved it into the monk's arms.

"A token of my appreciation," the waiter muttered before fleeing. He was practically out of sight within seconds.

The monk frowned and glanced down at the purse in his hand. It'd clearly been a long time since it was last washed. He could no longer tell its original color, and the scent of rancid oil hung around it.

He raised his hand as if to toss this filthy object away, but as the string was about to slip from his hand, he hooked it back with a finger. Then, still wearing an expression of moderate disdain, he made his way to the entrance of the Jiang family clinic, purse in hand.

The waiter had rushed back to Jiuwei House and was now leaning against the wall, gasping for breath. It was a long time before he could tell the watchman what had happened—gesticulating the whole while.

When he was done, he pondered for a moment, then hissed softly, "I've suddenly realized the master looked a bit familiar."

"You sit at this stall all day, watching people from all over come and go," said the watchman, annoyed. "Everyone looks familiar to you."

Having caught his breath, the waiter straightened up and swept his gaze over the stretch of wall he'd been leaning against. Abruptly, he went stiff.

A wanted poster had been hung on the wall half a month ago. Unfortunately, heavy snow had fallen right after its posting, drenching and freezing it. By the second day, the poster had become mottled and wet, its original image indiscernible. Even the waiter had only caught a brief glimpse of the poster despite always setting out early, so his impression of it was vague.

Now, most of the poster had peeled away, leaving only the bottom half with the subject's neck. There, a tiny mole could be faintly seen—identical to the one on the monk's neck.

The waiter jolted in shock. That man was a wanted criminal with a hefty bounty on his head!

Chapter 2: Paper Doll

THE JIANG FAMILY CLINIC was in Yanchao Alley. Most of the wooden buildings had burned to ashes in the fire three years ago. Only the westernmost wing remained, offering meager shelter from the wind and rain. It wasn't fit for people to live in, but ghosts had no problem lurking there.

The son of the Jiang family, not yet twenty years old when he died, was now a ghost wandering his own family compound. After slipping into the courtyard through a crack in the wall, he loitered for a moment, though his mouth quickly went to work.

"Is there an ocean between the front gates and west wing or what?" That clear voice couldn't keep quiet any longer.

Jiang Shining raised his sickly face to the sky. For a moment he was silent, before he continued in a low, hoarse voice, "I'm inside the compound, but the box of food is stuck outside the wall."

He scoffed, then muttered to himself, "Amazing."

"You flatter me."

Jiang Shining went quiet. Beneath the moonlight, his expression turned livid, and it seemed he was unwilling to speak further.

The three walls of the dilapidated room had been blackened by smoke, and the window facing north was nothing more than a yawning hole. As it

was the early hours of the morning in winter, dawn's light was nowhere to be seen. The sky only held a smudge of the crescent moon, its light filtering in to illuminate a corner of the room. The man sitting by the ruins of the window was half cast in cold moonlight, while his other half remained shrouded in darkness. His black clothes melded into the night. Beneath his straight, beautiful brow pooled two shadows, and the pitch-black irises within reflected a faint glimmer. Even from his silhouette, it was clear he possessed a striking appearance. However, the half of his face illuminated by moonlight was unnaturally pale, and the harsh bony jut of the wrist supporting his chin spoke of a long sickness.

In truth, he really was ill. He could neither stand nor walk. As for *why*? Even a ghost wouldn't know. He'd been staying in the Jiang residence for four days, but Jiang Shining knew nothing about him, beyond that his name was Xue Xian.

"Please improve your terrible sitting posture," Jiang Shining pleaded. He'd pressed the overflowing box of food into Xue Xian's hands right after entering the room. "If you keep slouching to the side, your upper body might become paralyzed too." While alive, he'd spent well over a dozen years reading the classics, and Xue Xian's indolent posture made his eyes ache.

As Jiang Shining turned away, unable to bear the sight any longer, he found his mouth moving as that clear voice rang out of his lips. "Slouching a little will paralyze me? Do you think I'm like you?"

Jiang Shining was thoroughly unhappy now, and he gazed at Xue Xian with a face full of despair. "I'm already here, Wise One. Use your own mouth to speak, won't you?"

Xue Xian pried open the lid of the box, squinting as he sniffed at it, inhaling the aroma of hot food. Finally, he spoke with his own mouth. "All right. Since you've brought me meat, I'll suffer this hardship for your sake. Want a piece?"