

Chapter 1 - Reminiscence

As a boy, I remember my father telling me a bedtime story about the day my grandfather was decapitated. Sure, it seems like an odd tale to tell a young boy, but I was strong and my father knew I could handle it. He told me because he wanted me to know about our family, where we came from, the struggles we overcame and that started with my grandfather, who was in the fur trade like his father. Business boomed, but only because he made a deal with another man to help him with the money. When business got bad, the money decreased and when my grandfather couldn't pay his debt, he couldn't pay the man back, and it was in that moment that things changed forever. My father always said he knew not of the details of what happened entirely, but knew my grandfather got his head taken off because he could not pay the man back. He also told me there was a myth behind the cruel act, but swore to tell me when I got older. He never did after all. I always suspected it being due to something along the lines of my grandfather's head rolling down the top of a hill of the opium fields where he was killed...I always liked to mix my imagination together with the rumours.

Of course, I'd like to tell you that it was a different time and some things should stay in the past, but sometimes you can't control what may carry over into the present. It was 1885 when my grandfather was killed, that was thirty-five years ago. My father is now the same age my grandfather was when he was killed. I mention this because, well, I can't help it. I know he doesn't have a target on his head, nor does he carry my grandfather's blood money, but I cannot shake that feeling of dread. I guess in some ways my childhood memories have finally caught up to me and how I should have been scared back then, I am now. One memory I have as a child was an incident where I fell into

the Huangpu River after climbing a tree in the park. When I came out, I had a fish in my pants. My father and Liu thought it was hilarious, but I didn't and I still don't. Sometimes they still tell that story to people and burst out laughing every time, but I still don't find it funny. I mean, I was just a kid and that fish was creepy looking...and in my pants! Anyways, the city of Shanghai had come a long way since its dark days, but in a lot of ways, it was no different than it was then. It still had its crime right out in the open as any city does, but this also meant that if you were a kid scampering through the streets to run an errand for your dear mother, you'd better take the back streets wherever possible. I have been fortunate in both cases; for I grew up when it was safe to walk the streets and I have no child to fear for not making it back home. For the time being, the Tsang family tree ended with me.

Lately, things seemed strange within the community. Something just seemed off about the general public. There was no efficiency when it came to coming together or exchanging friendly greetings and gestures. Always in a hurry, or keeping to themselves in such a way that you thought maybe they all had deaths in their families and wished not to speak with anyone because of shock. Obviously, this wasn't the case, but I just couldn't understand it; me being a vibrant young man who kept to himself, I was curious and knew all too well how things could change out of nowhere. There has been small talk of something going on within the community as the cause of for its silent shake up, but I, for the life of me, could not figure out what that was or whether or not it was true. I first became suspicious of the town's activity after a day at the local market. Two men in business suits outside the market on a Wednesday just seemed a bit off. I would have looked the other way and carried on if it weren't for their suspicious demeanor. One guy seemed skittish. He stood

about 5'10" with a slender frame, slicked back black hair in a ponytail . On his side, he carried what appeared to be a weapon of some sort. I assumed it to be a gun at first, though, it may have been a small knife, I wasn't really sure. He was constantly whispering to his friend while he kept looking around. I remember grabbing an apple and just glancing over at their direction only to notice the other man's odd behavior. The other just stood there with his arms folded as if he was guarding something, yet there was nothing to guard.

He stood a bit taller than me at around 5'9"and also had the same black hair but shorter. He had a Fu-Manchu like mustache, but clearly looked like he was trying way too hard, what a wannabe. Like his friend, he too had a weapon strapped to his side. I myself stand at 5'7," a bit above the average height. I have short black hair with a good amount on top and a buzz look on the sides. I also have hazel eyes. My attention was diverted when a small boy about six years of age stole a good amount of fruits that he put in his small sack. When some man started chasing after him, I looked on with everyone else and then turned back to my own market goods. I then glanced over my right shoulder and noticed that the two men were gone and what was even stranger was that they were nowhere to be found. I remember the young boy being dragged back into the market store as the man who chased him had a firm grip on the boy's shirt.

"Please, please I just need food for my brothers and sisters," the boy said, clearly scared.

I remember the man holding him, looking over at the owner of the small marketplace and shaking his head. He put the boy down and went to the owner to give him a renminbi, but it cost far more than that. I handed the man another four pieces to cover the price and the man shook

his head and smiled at me before he grinned at the boy. The boy thanked us and ran off. Before I handed the man the money, I overheard the boy say something to him as to why he stole the fruits.

It was in Chinese, but I know I heard him correctly; he said, “We have no money because of the Opi.”

Odd thing to say, and what did he mean by the Opi? As I was thinking about it, I paid the vendor for my goods and as I was walking away, I suddenly stopped and thought to myself, *what did the boy mean by that? I'm not sure what Opi means, but whatever it is, the young boy knows it well and it led him to steal.* I had long since forgotten about the incident...until now. I don't know why I'd forget such a thing, but it just popped back into my head.

With so much going on in this place, I decided to pay my old friend Liu a visit. I could always count on Liu to help me out with whatever, whether it be someone to hang out with or whether I needed a favor he was the man to see. More than likely, Liu was on top of his roof. He liked to go up there and tend to his pigeons and if he wasn't doing that, he was usually jumping from building to building. Sure, it seems like a crazy thing to do, but the buildings are close together and Liu knows what he's doing. He was like many of us growing up, always wanting to be a ninja; I grew out of that phase but not Liu. He was so determined to learn the way of the ninja that he once started a fight with a local gang from the block we used to live on. He went into that alley up against five guys and got his ass handed to him. I spotted him from my window and then ran down to see if he was alright. His lip was gushing blood and he was beyond repair, but he simply looked up at me and laughed. That's the type of guy Liu was.

I walked down the street Liu lived on, his apartment was the last one there. *Man, I thought, this place looks like*

crap since the last time I was here two weeks ago. A huge mound of garbage piled up against the building while the concrete blocks along the bottom were cracked, chipped, and broken off, mixing in with the trash. One of the railings along the sides of the building's stairs was off its hinges and dangling. I couldn't comprehend how a building could go from good condition to shambles in just two weeks. I went up the stairs and into the hall. I then made my way up the first set of stairs inside to the 2nd floor, where Liu's apartment was located. As I got to the 2nd floor, I noticed even more filth. The floor was covered in trash, debris, and whatever else one could possibly imagine. There was a small child playing in the doorway of the second apartment as I walked by. I got to the end of the floor and to the 6th apartment, Liu's home. As I was about to knock on the door, I realized it was already open just slightly ajar. I knocked on the door anyways and then slowly opened it. I found Liu's place almost completely devoid of things. All that was inside were a dirty white mat on which, I'm guessing, he slept, an old wooden chair with one of the back legs broken, a small dresser and a table side by side. On the table and floor were what looked like broken glass and rug burns. I slowly made my way over to the bathroom to see if Liu was there, but he wasn't, just the toilet, bathtub, and rusty, grim looking sink. On the sink were a broken piece of soap and a hash pipe.

That's strange, I thought, *Liu wouldn't do drugs; in fact, he's one of the most active people I know.* I then wondered if I had the right apartment. I walked outside and looked at the number on the door, which of course was in Chinese, and read the number 6. *Yeah, this is Liu's place, alright. Maybe he moved,* I thought. I decided to go up to the 5th floor and get to the roof. If he wasn't up there, then he surely must have moved. As I made my way up the

stairs, I again noticed the uncivilized and filthy looking appearance of the place. I truly thought I was going crazy. I know this was the place I was at two weeks ago. In fact, I walked the street to this place for a month straight when Liu first moved here. Yet in two weeks' time since the last time I had been here, the place had become a total disaster. The 3rd, 4th, and 5th floors were no different from the 2nd. Dirty looking floors, stuff all over the place, dents on the wall, and always at least one person hanging out in a doorway of their home.

As I got to the 5th floor, I went for the EXIT door, which brought me right to the roof. I made my way out and was immediately hit by the sun's rays just like every other time I went there. After retreating from the sun's ever so graceful stare, I looked over to the left and saw four empty cages and lying next to the cages curled up in a fetal position was a man who I immediately recognized as Liu.

“Liu!”

He slowly rolled over and awoke before speaking. “Hey man, how are you?”

“Liu what are you doing on the floor and why does your apartment look like crap?”

“Huh...oh, I just...I shipped most of my stuff to Hong Kong, Didn't I tell you? I got a job as a stunt performer.”

“No, you didn't tell me, if I had known I would have helped you.”

“Nah, it's fine, man, I got most of it out.”

“This entire building has deteriorated and your place looks nothing like it used to. I saw an opium pipe in your bathroom. What's going on? You don't smoke.”

“I don't know about the whole place, I never really noticed to be honest, been so busy. I told you I moved my stuff out so I haven't really been staying here too much and when I do, I'm usually up here jumping buildings. Had to

let the birds go, Maybe I'll take it up again in Hong Kong, you know?" "And the opium pipe?"

"Oh, a buddy that helped me move, that's his. Yeah, he introduced me to this stuff. Let me tell you, if you want to feel metaphoric, just disappear for a bit, that's what you do."

"You never do drugs Liu, you're one of the strongest guys I know."

"Psh...it's nothing man, it's not even a big deal. I'm fine, see?"

Liu got up and brushed himself off. His white shirt was covered in a bronze and light brown stain and was ripped at the right corner. We walked over to the other side of the roof and talked a little bit longer. I told him it was nice to see him and that I'd have to come visit him in Hong Kong first chance I get and he agreed. We said our goodbyes and as I headed for the door, Liu yelled to me.

"Just think, I'll be doing this for a living!" he said as he jumped the next building and ran off to the next.

I just laughed and shook my head, *Liu is active and vibrant, alright, but he is also one crazy son of a bitch.*

I made my way down the stairs and just kept on walking, not even acknowledging the people on each floor and the things I had noticed on my way out. I didn't know why it bothered me so much, the condition of the place, but I just didn't get how, in such a short period of time, it went from livable to utterly decayed. As I made my way outside, I walked back in the direction from which I came initially. *I have nothing to do for the day, so I may as well head back home.* As I walked past the small alley between some buildings, I heard a loud thud. I glanced over. *Oh, my god, Liu! Oh, dear god, I hope he didn't fall, holy shit, holy shit!* I rushed over to the alley and surveyed the area. Thank the heavens it wasn't Liu or anybody for that matter. It was just a bag of someone's trash that made the sound. The odor

permuting from the bag was atrocious. It smelled like a dead animal's carcass wrapped up in a moldy blanket of rotten eggs and body odor. I ran away from it as fast as I could and no sooner did I get away that I saw another bag of trash in mid-flight soar down to the ground hitting the other bag.

God the people who live here are inhuman! Are they too lazy to take their trash to the back and dispose of it properly? No, of course not, I thought people here are off, but this is past "off."

This was just part of what was wrong with this town. People just didn't seem to care anymore; they've gotten lazy and even the most simple of tasks seemed unbearable to them. I'm just glad I'm not like that, to think of how easy some of us have it only to think that even the easy is too hard. My father would call that Chinese wisdom, I called it an un-necessary paradox. As I walked the streets, I glanced over at Chao's Deli. *That's funny, the place looks packed.* Normally, old Chao was lucky if he had five people on a Monday afternoon and yet, there he was with a full house of people. *I sure am hungry, but I would hate to wait a while for food, but...eh...maybe it won't be so bad.* I crossed the street and stopped in front of the entrance. As I looked over an old woman giving me a glaring stare, I smiled politely and she then smiled back revealing no teeth. I slowly gazed back at the deli and opened the door. *Hmm...doesn't look too bad.*

As I approached the counter, I was stopped by a man in a suit. He had sleek black hair and wore a ponytail in the back and had what appeared to be a gun on his side. I suddenly remembered him as the man I saw at the market a few weeks back. *Hmm...funny seeing him here. I wonder if his trusty sidekick is with him.*

“Chao will be right with you, he’s currently taking care of some business,” he said.

“That’s alright, I’ll wait. Say haven’t I seen you somewhere before?”

“No, I can’t say I’ve seen you before. Please step back.”

“Yeah, sure I have, you were the guy I saw at the market with that other guy.”

“I think you’re mistaken, sir. Now, please step back.”

“No, I’m sure I’m right, it was you and another guy outside the market-” We were interrupted by the other guy who was finished talking to Chao.

He grabbed his friend and they began walking towards the exit. I couldn’t help but watch them and I’m glad I did, because the guy I was talking to kept peering at me; clearly, what I had said spooked him, he couldn’t stop staring at me. If he stared any harder, I think he’d burn a hole through my skin. Luckily, Chao appeared when he was about to reach for his weapon. After they left, I turned back to the counter where I was greeted by Chao.

“Ryu! Nice to see you my friend, nice to see you.”

“Hey Chao, nice to see you too. Say, what were those two guys doing in here?”

“Oh, those guys? Just some business about the building, that’s all.”

“I’ve seen them around before, they seem a bit shady.”

“Oh...no...no, Ryu, they are just two men that work for the man who is trying to buy this building.”

I could tell that I was making the poor Chao nervous, so I decided not to ask him anything further.

“I’m sorry Chao, I didn’t know you were selling this place and I was just worried about you, that’s all.”

“Oh, no worries my boy, Chao is not in any danger and I’m not selling the joint. The man, Mr. Shaojin, just wants the building for his collection, he owns a few buildings on the block.”

I got the sense that Chao, for mentioning this Mr. Shaojin, was telling me more than he wanted to or was supposed to, so, again, I just let it go and decided to order something.

“Oh, alright, good to know you’re staying, cause where else am I gonna get the most tender Beef Sandwich?”

“Ha-ha, nowhere! And you got it, one Tender Beef Sandwich coming right up! I don’t suppose I could interest you in this new sandwich they got over in the States, could I? It’s called a Tomato and Bacon Sandwich”

“Sounds tempting Chao, but I’ll stick to the usual.”

“Alright, well, have a seat if you can find one. Oddest thing, I’m swamped today! Can you believe it?! Ha-ha! I’ll get your sandwich out to you.”

I thanked Chao and decided to sit over by the window, as a couple had just finished and left. As I placed my feet under the table, they scuffed against something. I leaned down under the table and picked up what appeared to be a card. I put it to the window for some light, so I could see what was written on it better. It read: *Don’t Wait. For A Better Future Today. Shin Shaojin, Shaojin Enterprises.*

I quickly hid the card underneath my arm when I saw Chao coming my way with my food.

“Here you are Ryu, Chao’s famous Tender Beef Sandwich and one cold beverage.”

“Thanks, Chao.”

“You’re welcome, you tell your father I said hello.”

I smiled and nodded. I couldn’t wrap my finger around it, but something wasn’t right. There was no way

that Chao met with Mr. Shaojin's associates because of the building. There must have been something more to it. What did the old man get himself into?

It was hard to believe that Chao could have gotten himself into some kind of trouble or suspicious activity. Aside from my mother's cuisine, I practically grew up on Chao's food. I've been coming here ever since I was a boy, my father accompanying me. Chao didn't change much over the years; he's always been a bit chubby, but now he had white hair and looked a bit like Confucius, if Confucius ran a Deli in the busy streets of Shanghai. I finished my sandwich and thanked Chao. He gave a quick wave goodbye, and I headed out. I looked across the street where I came from and noticed the woman that I had seen on that side of the street before I made my way into the deli. She was with a man who looked sickly thin. They were both sitting on the side of the house where they lived, I guess. As I looked closer, I realized that both of them had hash pipes in their hands and that they were smoking opium.

I crossed the street and slowly passed them and they looked up at me, but still continued to inhale the vapor of the opium. As I walked passed them, I stopped and shook my head. For at least the second time today, I found myself thinking about or seeing signs of opium. *I don't know if it's a coincidence or not, but I have a sudden feeling that perhaps my suspicions and observations of the town and opium are somehow connected together. Maybe, I'm just paranoid and it's really nothing, but then again, it just all seems so strange.* I took the card that I found at the deli out of my pocket. With everything else going on, I almost forgot I had it. I thought back on when I was at the deli and I then looked back at the card. *I wonder who this Shin Shaojin is and how is it that he knows Chao? Chao seemed way too nervous for an old guy talking with a regular at his own shop.*

Who are you Shin Shaojin and who are your associates?

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