

THE QUARRY

Caldonia O'Leary

Song For A Dragon

February 19, 2015. *Chinese New Year.*

The night was heated, humidity settling over the city like a blanket, leaching into all the cracks. Chinatown quarter was no exception. New Years festivities were still in full swing, and the sharp pops and cracks of illegal firecrackers could be heard from the rooftops, accentuating the din in the alley below. The sheer number of people bustling through Dixon Street's narrow walk created a pungent cloud of humanity, the tangy smell of sweat and skin mingling with Five Spice and Roman Candle smoke, like gunpowder. It was amongst this that Song found her anonymity.

She fingered the object concealed beneath her jacket as she weaved through the crowd.

There were three men leaning against the stone facade of the New Tai Yuen restaurant, red light from the two lanterns overhead glinting off their sleek black hair. They were immersed in a cloud of cigarette smoke, and were dressed head to toe in black, except for the Jade pendants each had pinned to their lapels, fashioned in the shape of curling dragons. The men watched Song emerge from the crowd.

'Ni Hao, Song-bird,' laughed one of the men. He had a K-Pop superstar's looks but an ugly smile, with teeth yellowed around the gums.

Song kept her head down as she passed under the lanterns into the foyer, her dark hair a sheet, shielding her face from the men.

Wei Ping watched her out of the corner of his eye, lazily blowing out a mouthful of smoke. He had always thought the girl was eerie and precocious. Deeply unnerving. He couldn't understand it. Wei Ping usually went for women with big tits and full pouts, the complete opposite to this slip of a girl. Before she passed out of sight, he caught a fleeting glimpse of her ivory neck between the strands of her hair. His eyes closed for a fraction of a second, just long enough.

Hao, the man who had spoken, dropped his cigarette butt to the ground and crushed it with the heel of his Armani loafer. 'Bitch must have a golden pussy' he muttered, elbowing Wei Ping in the ribs.

Wei Ping cracked a smile, wiping at a bead of sweat that had trickled down the side of his neck with the palm of his hand, and resumed watching the crowd a little uneasily.

Inside the foyer, Song had reached the top of the stairs. She stood silhouetted between two red marble pillars on the threshold of New Tai Yuen's cavernous main room. The restaurant was bursting with patrons, and Song was hit with the familiar roar of sound, dozens of conversations battling for precedence. A low cloud of greyish smoke had formed in the air, hovering over the round tables like pollution. Here and there through the haze, bejewelled tassels from the mammoth Chinese chandeliers hanging from the ceiling glinted, throwing strange red patterns on the white tablecloths and faces of the patrons.

Song's eyes darted across the floor, searching. She locked on her target. A group of men sat around one of the biggest tables, all dressed in suits and all disgustingly drunk, roaring *Gan Bei's* after every round of *Beijiu*, tiny porcelain cups enclosed in fat fists. As Song watched, one of the men at the table, laughing raucously, took his cup and hurled it toward the ground where it smashed into pieces on the decorative tiles. Song's black eyes narrowed infinitesimally. *Stinking dog*. The moonfaced man was known here as Pang Kudai. Kudai hadn't seen Song yet, but *Waipo Jiayi* had – New Tai's matronly owner.

Song's grandmother had spotted her with hawk-eyes from across the room, and was now making her way like the West Wind toward her, issuing all manner of Mandarin expletives along the way. Tiny in stature, but with a temper to rival her size, Jiayi's cheeks quivered with a pent-up rage. She reached Song and took the top of her arm in a grip of iron.

'*Tú láo de...ungrateful girl!*' Jiayi said, pulling Song away from the pillars, trying to steer her toward the back of the restaurant. '*Where have you been? On the New Year too, if Kudai sees you in this state it will be the end...out on the street...no qián to rub together...!*'

Song was hardly listening to her. She had her eyes glued to Pang Kudai's red, shining face, sitting there gesticulating wildly over some yarn or another. She looked at him, steeling herself.

Whipping the butterfly knife attached to her belt in an almost indistinguishable move with one hand, and throwing off Waipo Jiayi's grip with a well-placed elbow to the ribs - the force knocking the old woman to the ground - Song spun and crossed to the large table in three strides, where she flicked open the knife and released it by its intricate ivory handle, sending it spinning towards Pang Kudai's jugular vein.

If Song's aim had been lower and slightly less harried, she would have succeeded in severing an artery. But as luck would have it, the steel blade lodged in the dead centre of Kudai's right cornea. Kudai's good eye remained frozen in an expression of pantomimic mirth, and in the few seconds that followed, a fat globule of blood formed on the inner rim of the pierced eye and balanced there, before dropping heavily onto the head of the jade dragon attached to the lapel of his jacket.

Song looked upon her handiwork with displeasure, frowning slightly. She hadn't expected to miss.

*

August 19, 2014. *Six Months Earlier.*

Kudai had an itch on his balls. If he could have gotten someone to scratch it for him, he would have. Instead, he shifted his arse back and forth on the wicker chair,

just enough to cause some friction and to better enjoy the ambiance of the headquarter complex's garden courtyard. A wanton smile played across his thin lips as he watched a crane stride slowly and purposefully through the shallow, lily pad covered waters of the artificial pond, only half listening to the idiot financial officer across the table from him, spouting some bullshit about the ATO.

Kudai tore his gaze away from the crane to regard the suited man, who was busy leafing through a pile of papers on the table between them. A lone cricket chirped solemnly from somewhere across the garden, the sound intermingling with that of running water, echoing softly from a remote corner of the courtyard. Kudai poured two cups of *beijiu*, pushing one toward the man, and taking one up for himself.

'Listen, *Péngyǒu*, let me act as teacher in the art of caution. I wouldn't be here,' he gestured around the courtyard, 'if I didn't possess the necessary brainpower to delude the taxation authorities in this country. Your job is a simple one - I need tabs kept on the seed money Wei Ping was able to cajole from the *chóngyáng mèiwài* down on Dixon. Let me take care of the laundering.'

Kudai could see the delicate china cup shaking in the officer's hand as he sipped. He had a pair of weak eyes, large and simpering. Women's eyes. They flicked to the jade pendant on Kudai's front.

Kudai tapped a fat finger against the dragon's hump. 'Never underestimate a Green Dragon, *Péngyǒu*. Rule number one of this organisation.'

'And rule number two,' came another voice, 'always share the *beijiu*.'

Wei Ping had stepped from a path leading into the garden from the complex proper, his all-black form almost invisible in those parts of the garden where the dusk stretched its shadowy fingers.

Here was a man to get Kudai's itches scratched. Kudai liked Ping, and had from the moment he had recruited him eight years ago, an independent and quick-to-anger boy of eighteen, hanging around the Dixon venues the Green Dragons frequented. Kudai had taken one look at him, with his stoic confidence, and decided that he would look good in a suit.

Kudai raised his cup in a mock salute. 'A wise man,' he said in an aside to the officer, before dismissing him to the interior complex. He sighed, finally reaching down to scratch his crotch. 'What's next, Ping?'

Ping had come to stand by the trunk of Kudai's Japanese Cherry Blossom, its branches stark and bare against the deepening skyline. Ping was fingering the bark absentmindedly. At Kudai's words he gestured lazily toward the direction from which he had come. 'I have the New Tai Yuen woman here with the granddaughter, if you would be so obliged.'

Kudai perked up. He had had some men chipping away at the Jiayi woman for weeks now, and he was finally convinced that he had spooked her enough to submit to the Green Dragon's protection. The men had gone in a couple of days ago with meat-cleavers and smashed up a couple of the Yuen's back windows, roughed around the cooks a little bit - basic scare tactics - but it was obviously the final straw for the old crone. The New Tai brought in money, and Kudai was not an idiot. He wanted a share, and he had the power to protect New Tai from his own organisation, for a fixed amount. The simplicity of these sorts of arrangements never failed to amuse him.

'Let them through.'

Wei Ping met his gaze, before muttering a short command into a virtually invisible wireless earpiece. After a moment the old woman and a younger girl, slight and with black hair that almost reached her waist, entered the garden. Jiayi wasted no time in approaching Kudai, the girl following slowly behind at her heels, and bowing in a gesture of respect, cupping her fist in her left hand. Her eyes were hard, shrewd.

Kudai had the feeling that things were going to go in his favour, especially when he caught sight of Jiayi's girl. Looking at her tiny body, ripe with adolescence and all the sweet things that girls on the cusp of womanhood entailed, he felt a stirring in his crotch that was quite separate to the itch – crabs he suspected was contracted from one of the Thai whores from the weekend before.

Wei Ping looked from the girl, standing resolute and silent next to the old lady, to Kudai's raging tumescence. He felt an inexplicable pang of rage ignite in his heart. Quick, immediate. The girl was watching him out of eyes that seemed to reflect the first stars that had emerged in the fading sky. He bit the inside of his cheek and tasted blood. She looked away.

Jiyai was in the middle of conversation. She was gesturing to the girl, then back to Kudai, who had a very interested, almost hungry expression on his face.

'I'll be prepared to offer you this compromise if you agree to a lower rate. The economy isn't what it used to be here, and I'm getting old. But it does not, by any stretch, mean that I am getting dimmer,' Jiyai admonished, fixing a beady eye on Kudai's grin. A magpie warbled from over the courtyard walls, a last call before evening, punctuating the silence that followed.

Kudai leant back in his chair, his jacket tight across a burgeoning belly. 'Bring her forward.'

Jiyai took hold of the girl she called *Song* and forced her in front of Kudai's chair, close enough to touch. Ping could detect no hint of fear in her bearing.

'You mean to say,' Kudai started, licking his lips, "that you will give this girl to me in exchange for softer payments?'

The woman nodded. Once, briskly.

Kudai reached out a paw and took hold of the girl's thigh, right in the small triangle where her crotch and leg met. Only then did Song look down at Kudai. The expression was unfathomable. Ping doubted Kudai could detect the danger floating beneath the surface, mercury in water.

This had turned into a *very good* evening indeed for Pang Kudai.

Wei Ping watched, sentinel, from his station by the tree.

*

February 19, 2015. *Chinese New Year*.

'*Ái!* Get her, you fucking lapdogs!' Kudai roared, smashing the table in front of him in an aimless fury, his hands flying up to his face, fluttering uselessly around the knife still lodged in his eye. Pieces of ginger fish and chopsticks went flying in all directions, some of the patrons on nearby tables issuing yelps of confused terror at the commotion.

Kudai could see the little bitch with his good eye through a red haze of pain and bloodlust, Jiayi sitting in a heap behind her, her face stricken. The girl had demons inside her, he knew for sure now. Even if he couldn't detect it the times that he had taken her inert and passive body, they had always been there, waiting to destroy him. In that second, Kudai swore he could detect a demonic tongue flicking over the girl's bared teeth. He vomited spectacularly, crumpling from his chair onto the ground.

Chaoxiang was the first to respond, springing out of his seat with the agility of a monkey, despite his inebriation. Song saw the goon flying toward her, knocking aside people sitting in their chairs, and she took a few steps back, stumbling where the tiles on the ground met the carpet of the foyer. He was almost on her, she could smell the rank waft of his breath on the furious exhalation before his hands closed around her throat...but before they could find their grip or before she could even think of defending herself the man's teeth were knocked from his mouth in a shock of spittle and blood spray from a fist that had appeared from somewhere over Song's right shoulder.

Wei Ping shoved Song to the side before launching into his colleague Chaoxiang, who had doubled over, reeling. In a flurry of movement, he pulled an ivory-handled butterfly knife - the twin of the one lodged in Kudai's eye - from under his jacket and had sliced two deep gashes into Chaoxiang's neck. The skin opened like gills and gushed forth a torrent of red, splashing onto the tiles.

The restaurant was in absolute uproar, screams reaching a deafening pitch with patrons fleeing in all directions or taking cover under the tables, making it hard to distinguish friend from foe. Amidst the madness, Kudai lay floundering in his vomit like a carp plucked from the water, more men stepping over him and starting toward the fight.

Wei Ping looked back at Song, who had paused by the entrance pillars and was watching him. She seemed to be waiting for something. He thought he understood. He opened his mouth in a grin before he felt the sting of cold steel sink between his shoulder blades.

The last thing Wei Ping saw before the men converged was the black whip of Song's hair as she rounded the corner out of sight.