

THE DEW

China

Chaozhou

1855

Huan Sen followed the sinuous path alongside the canal. Spring spread the essence of the renewed promise of the blossoming nature.

The ripples on the canal surface resembled dragon scales.

His spirit was always present to remind you to keep your vows otherwise his punishment would come swiftly. The bright orange of the lanterns in the streets announced that it was the hour of the demons. In the beginning of the night, Huan Sen felt the devilish calling of the opium pipe.

For two years, he had been addicted to the poisonous volutes.

When he entered the den, dozens of men were lying on the mats. Some smiled, others had their eyes closed.

Huan Sen looked in his pocket, it was the last coins he had.

He was heavily in debt. He argued everyday with his wife who begged him to bring more money to feed the children.

He did not care any more.

Huan Sen had made up his mind, he was going to kill himself tonight, after this last pipe.

He put his head on the pillow, and he inhaled with the whole capacity of his lungs.

The gates of paradise opened.

Why life could not be like that all the time?

Always there was this stinging pain which destroyed his spirit.

Huan Sen could not see any exit from this hell.

Death would solve all his problems and sufferings.

He was ashamed of himself. He had let everybody down. He had failed miserably. He waisted his potential with this satanic drug and the despair that ensued.

But ten years ago, his future seemed so bright, he was appointed by the governor of the province to be the chancellor of the prefecture.

When he tried opium for the first time, it was just an experience, a new pleasure.

All his friends were already hooked, so it could not be so bad.

It was elation, he could find a relief from the pressures of family life.

He had imagined that raising children would be more fulfilling, it was the ultimate act of creation, but he could barely relate to his son and daughter. He felt alienated.

He could not connect on a deeper level with his wife who constantly demanded more from him.

When Huan Sen smoked, the doors of infinity opened. It brightened his mood.

He needed to go the most often he could to the den.

He also drank more and more, and he went to see the concubines regularly.

To feed his lifestyle, he began to borrow money from his friends, but because he paid them back so late, at the end, they did not want to help him any more.

The prefect complained about the quality of his work.

Huan Sen was often late to the office.

He made more often mistakes because he could not concentrate like he used to before.

Sometimes he wept for hours at home.

He could not see an issue to his problems.

His wife scolded him everyday about the lack of resources; it was not the life she envisioned when she married him, she thought that Huan Sen was a promising young man with a bright future.

He was so desperate for money that he went to see shady characters to lend him more cash.

He made the mistake to not paying them back on time, and as warning, they went to ransack his home. They threatened to harm his family if he could not honour his debts.

Totally disgraced and ashamed, Huan Sen went to see his father who accepted to bail him out at the condition he stopped his addiction to opium.

His father also decided to pass on his wealth onto his younger brother even though Huan Sen was the first born ,and that he should inherit the majority of his father estate. He could not trust Huan Sen any more.

For three months, Huan Sen tried to stay sober, but the attraction of the opium was too strong.

The sensation of withdrawal was enormous.

He fell back again to his old habit.

He started to steal discreetly money from the prefect coffers.

When this was not enough, he re-contacted the shady people he had previously known. He proposed to help them corrupt the armed forces in the region.

It was an offence punishable by death.

Huan Sen was permanently fearing being caught.

These activities made rival gangs jealous.

To forget his worries, Huan Sen drowned deeper into the void of the opium and the promiscuity with the concubines.

Now his spirit was drained, he was tired of living.

Everything seemed vain.

Tonight, he was going to end it all.
He could not be a burden for his family and
community any longer.
The weight of the shame destroyed his soul.
Huan Sen went to the bridge where many jumped to
commit suicide.

A soft breeze infused the night. It was the time.
Huan Sen was at peace.

A shadow just behind him started to talk.
“It’s a beautiful night, spring takes all its meaning at
this hour.” said an old gentleman.
Huan Sen was surprised because he thought he was
alone. He turned back. The man looked like an old
monk.

“Yes it’s a beautiful night, but if you don’t mind, I’m
going back home, my family is waiting for me, so I
wish you a good night,” said Huan Sen.

“How many children do you have?” asked the old man
“I have one boy and a girl. The boy is eight year old
and the girl is six year old.” said Huan Sen.

“Oh I see, it reminds me a man I met on the same
bridge five years ago. He too had two children.

He was a very troubled when I met him.

He confessed to me that he was about to kill himself.
You probably know that this bridge is famous for the
number of people who ended their lives here.” said
the old man.

“Yes I know, you have quite of interesting stories to tell but I’m very sorry, I have to go now.” said Huan Sen irritated.

“You look sad, are you sure everything is fine?” asked the old man

“Why do you care, my life is none of your business!” said angrily Huan Sen.

“I heard that many people these days get in heavy debt to go the opium den.” said the old man.

Huan Sen looked at he old man, he could see that his face was full of compassion.

An uncontrollable jolt of energy seized him. Huan Sen cried profusely.

“My house is just around the corner, come to drink a tea with me, and tell me about your story” said the old man.

Huan Sen told the old man how desperate he was, nothing could change his mind, He wanted to die.

“Do what you want to do, the only thing I will ask you, it’s to wait until tomorrow before you execute your plan. In the meantime, take this money for your family.” said the old man.

“Why do you do this, you don’t even know me” said Huan Sen.

“A long time ago I was as desperate as you.

Someone helped me to go through this difficult period of my life, and now I tried to do the same for other people. I will pray for your soul.” said the old man.

Huan Sen left the old man's house like he was in a dream.

He went to his home. He gave the money to his wife. Tomorrow, he would muster more courage to end his life.

But a little voice in his heart told him to see the old man before doing something definitive.

The day after when he went to visit the old man, he saw him practising kung fu with a great agility.

“Wow! you are in great shape for your age” said Huan Sen.

“I'm glad you have come back. What you saw is just about focus and discipline” said the old man.

“If you choose to live, I will give you more money to payback your debts, but in exchange you will have to work for me. the choice is yours.” added the old man.

“No, nothing can save me, some people are after me. Sooner or later, they will get me” said Huan Sen

“So you need to leave this city for a while, I can also help you with that.” said the old man.

“Everywhere I could go, they will find me, they have a very developed network of informants. For now, the persons I know can intervene to protect me but for I don't know for how long.” said Huan Sen.

“I know a village in the mountains where you could be safe with your family. I have a house there, you can use it.” said the old man.

This proposition made Huan Sen think. If the old man was truthful and sincere, it could be the beginning of a solution for him.

Han Sen investigated the old man with his contacts in the administration.

It turned out that he was the heir of great landowner in a different part of the empire.

The day after having met the old man, Huan Sen explained to his wife that they were going to move immediately to the mountains because it was too dangerous to remain in the city.

She had no choice but to accept even though she was deeply saddened to leave the persons she had known all her life.

They decided to go just before dawn to avoid too much attention.

They went to the old man's house. He provided a carriage for them.

It took five days to arrive in the village in the mountains.

Around two hundred people lived there, many of them were people that the old man helped.

When they arrived, the village head welcomed them.

He took Huan Sen aside.

“You need to get rid of the demon, after you could join your wife and children.” said the village head.

Huan Sen suffered severe withdrawal symptoms.

For two weeks, he drank a special tea.

He could only eat vegetables. He spent the first days screaming his pain in a secluded hut near the village.

When he felt better, they ordered him to meditate using prayers and visualizations specially designed for the addicts like him.

His boy and his girl complained because they did not understand why they had to live in small house in the mountain away from their friends.

Like everybody else, they had to work in the fields which provided the food they ate. They did not like it at all.

After his detoxification period, Huan Sen was allowed to return with his family.

Slowly, he started to recuperate his zest for life in the mountains. The fresh air was a great help.

With his administrative skills, Huan Sen reorganized the village to be run more efficiently.

He learned carpentry, fixing agriculture tools, and other competences the village needed.

His main project was to dig a new canal to irrigate the rice fields better.

He forgot the city life and its troubles completely. Near the village there was waterfall where he used to go to reenergise.

Everything seemed to go smoothly for six months, when out the blue, the village was attacked by brigands who used to pillage the peasants of the region.

The brigands considered that it was a yearly tax that was due for them. Most people were fatalistic about the situation.

“There is nothing we can do, if we don’t give them what they want, they are ready to even kill some of us.” said the village head.

Huan Sen loved the place, for him this could not go on any longer.

He proposed the village head to elaborate a plan to organize the resistance.

But the villagers were totally afraid to rebel.

One month later, the brigands came earlier than expected, this time one of them raped a young woman. When they left, they laughed.

The villagers were completely outraged, and they decided that it was finally time to fight back. Huan Sen convinced them that they had to set up trap to lure the brigands into it.

The villagers trained for two weeks to learn the rudiments of the art of war.

They transformed their tools into weapons.

When the brigands came back, the village seemed empty.

They found this strange. They were on their guard.

Suddenly, the windows opened. A swarm of arrows overwhelmed the brigands.

The villagers captured the survivors.

They put them on their horses with boards around their necks saying that the next time they would try to come, it would be worse.

The level of fear was even greater among the villagers because there was no turning back this time.

But they were determined, It was better to die fighting than to accept their previous plight.

It was decided that all the women and children would be send to safety somewhere in the mountains.

Booby traps were placed all around the village.

The best snipers were given the two riffles they had.

The brigands arrived at night, they were strong of forty men. Huan Sen who was one of the sniper deliberately aimed at the chief of the brigands that the village head indicated him.

With all the booby traps in place, it was a carnage. Huan Sen managed to injure and to catch their chief "The next time you come, I will kill you." said Huan sen

The chief of the brigands saw that Huan Sen was serious and determined.

Huan Sen let him go.

After this episode the chief of the brigands thought that the village was not worth the trouble.

One month later, the old man showed up in the village.

He was amazed by Huan Sen's transformation

"I can see that you have done a great job.

They told me the way you dealt with brigands was exceptional." said the old man.

"I love the people here it's an honour to serve them." said the old man

"I have to show you something" said the old man.

"It's a pardon decree from the prefect. With the information you gave me, they arrested many people.

Huan Sen was overwhelmed by the news.

He went to bed early.

He woke up with the first rays of light.
He walked alongside the canal to start his day of work. He looked at the dew on the vegetation.
Never it had been so vibrant and luminous.
When he was an addict, he did not find the time to appreciate how wonderful and precious life was.

THE BRACELET

Angola
1977

The cloud shapes mirrored the undulations of the waves formed by the grasslands.

By the plane window, Christian contemplated the landscape.

He could see the elephants carving a path through the savannah. The zebras galloped feverishly across the land because they were probably chased down by a pack of lions but it was hard to see the scenes well due to the altitude the plane was flying.

Christian was part of a delegation of South African diplomats who were trying to broker a peace agreement between the different parties involved in the civil war ravaging the country.

The occupants of the plane were quite nervous because they did not know what to expect once they landed.

Suddenly, the plane started to shake in a strange manner.

“What’s going on, it does not seem normal.” said Christian anxiously.

“It’s probably nothing” answered the man next to him.

But less than thirty seconds after, a thick smoke spread inside the cabin. There were ten people on board, including the pilot who made an announcement.

“Guys, the plane is experiencing an engine failure, we will have to make an emergency landing. Put you in the position I showed you before take off and brace yourself, it’s going to be rough!” said the pilot.

Christian could not believe it.

He thought about his wife and children.

Was it the end of his life?

The plane banked to the left rapidly. The pilot tried to maintain the balance but the ground was approaching at a fast pace. We could see the top of the trees.

A loud noise followed, the plane was upside down.

The debris were flying everywhere inside the cabin.

For a couple of minutes, Christian passed out.

In his mind, a powerful light illuminated and surrounded his body.

A vision appeared.

A woman with clothes made of human bones was facing him, and she started to speak.

“I am the queen of the land of the dead. Are you ready to pass the test?” said the woman.

“What test? Asked Christian.

“It’s a test to know the weight of your soul.” said the woman.

“The weight of my soul? What do you mean?” asked Christian.

“I will put the bracelet of ages on your right wrist.

If you sink into the ground, it means that you are ready to be welcomed in the land of the dead, but if the bracelet disappears, you still have some work to do on earth. Your soul needs to complete its cycle to complete the purpose that the creator of all lives assigned to you when you were born.” said the woman.

Christian woke up from this vision.

He was fazed. He was upside down strapped into his chair, he could feel blood on his cheeks.

By miracle, nobody died when the plane crashed on the trees.

“It’s everybody OK?” shouted the pilot.

One by one, the passengers answered.

Some of them had broken legs but everybody managed to get out of the plane.

“Do you have an idea where we are?” asked Christian to the pilot.

“We were ten minutes away from a landing point.

I think if we go east following the sun we might be able to find a village” said the pilot.

He found the survival kit with the medical supplies to tend to the different wounds but some people needed more serious medical interventions.

The group decided to split in two.

Those who could walk would go to find help, and those who were more impaired would stay there. They divided the food and water that was in the plane. They also had two revolvers. After all, they were in the middle of the wilderness.

The heat was excruciating. They could hear the roars of the Lions nearby.

Christian, the pilot and another man departed to find help. They walked in this arid land with difficulty breathing. Every two hours they tried to find a shaded area to rest. They walked the whole day.

They thought that they would never find a living soul.

Nearly before sunset, they found a village of shepherds. The pilot who was from the southern part of Angola spoke with them and explained to them the situation. By sheer luck, one of them had a motorcycle. Christian went with him to the closest town.

There was a very rudimentary dispensary.

Christian met Nadiara. She was the doctor.

She could speak perfectly in English. She had been trained in England.

Christian noticed that she had a beautiful Bracelet on her wrist. He explained to her what happened.

Nadiara told him she could help.

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