

The New Tales of Old Shanghai

Prologue

“So...how’s my fortune going? What does it say?”

The old man seemed quite troubled as he looked into the inky eyes of his customer --- a lad with a mole on his head. Clearing his throat, he quoted:

*Beware of the Bund in the midst of evening
Where there starts the time of suffering,
Unless there stands a long-haired mortal
As well as one that is rather bestial.*

“Hm...Okay then. That is one weird statement.”

“To believe or not to believe. That is the question.”
The man replied in a discerning manner.

“...Well then...um...”

Chapter 1

Feng, sitting in a rickshaw, was looking around. Everything in the Bund seemed pleasant in the pavement surrounding him. There were men in suits who just got out from a casino, shuffling their cash like poker cards, while queuing up to board English-style trams for a journey back to civilization. We had civilians having their butts on the benches, spontaneously gossiping either on how much they've just earned from their sweatshops or who the most eye-catching disco-lady was. And lastly, there was a young man just staring blankly towards the gloomy sky clouded in shades of grey, stroking his brown mole with absolutely no reason at all besides making him all the more like an imbecile.

Apparently, that dimwit's name was called Feng.

Feng, while daydreaming on the rickshaw, suddenly noticed something abnormal --- his left hand was shivering abnormally. He tried to clutch his trembling hand tightly, but to no avail.

When was the last time that his hand shook like a maniac?

Being paralyzed for a while, he shook his head. "No, this has never happened before," he thought.

For Feng, everything around him seems to be recognizable to those seven years ago --- people in the Bund were continuing their monotonous routine of hustling and bustling. At the pier, workers were lifting boxes of goods, pulling them along the streets while dodging incoming cars at the same time. Merchants were desperate to sell all their fruits and vegetables with their roaring and yelling, in the hope of getting a "silver dollar" or two.

For an ordinary person, there is nothing to be concerned about when

seeing his homeland being the same as before, so logically speaking, nothing could possibly go wrong, right?

“Right,” said Feng, muttering to himself, “j-just keep calm and stop being p-p-paranoid. The shaking is nothing t-to me and uh... of course I will be absolutely fine! Yes. Right. H-Hopefully.”

Or would he?

Meanwhile, a sudden, deaf-defying roar has blasted into sound waves, beating and tearing through Feng’s ear as drummers on steroids. It was only a matter of time before his eardrum started to rupture.

“HEY!”

Letting out a short gasp, Feng was frozen in place. His face, just turning pale, exposed his pink-red gums and gritted teeth. As he was struggling to come to his senses, his hand raised involuntarily to cover his buzzing, yet aching ear. Pain slowly grew in his ear as he moaned with his agonizing visage.

“Ouch ... what was that?”

“Are you boarding or not, airhead?!”

When Feng turned his head he could clearly see a muscular boor almost in his 40s, snarling and growling at him like a wild dog. With flashing eyes, flaring nostrils, and a quivering mouth, any man would break into a run after spotting some guy with a humanoid, canine-like appearance.

And of course, if any man would scamper away then what would happen if any woman saw that naked fiend with his torso covered with grease and sweat? In fact, this would be the worst-case scenario for Feng, not with an almost-fractured ear bothering him.

“Hope there won’t be anyone, or actually, NO ONE, is going to give me another hundred decibels as a mere surprise gift...” he grinned, reluctantly.

“Hey, answer me!!!” barked the puller, this time not as blaring as before. However, Feng felt that the pain in his ear got worse.

“Oh, um, yeah... I’m boarding. Ah! My ear hurts...”

“Just get on quickly! I’m in a hurry!”

“Uh, fine...”

Sigh... What a great day to begin with after returning to Shanghai.

Like seriously, why would someone blow a gasket because of a passenger just sitting right there doing absolutely nothing? Was everyone here a psycho or something?

“Probably yes,” Feng groaned, “If not, why on earth would he blast me like I’m his arch-nemesis?”

“Well, at least everything seems alright after all, aside from that stupid interlude and the fact that everyone is a psycho...” Feng murmured to himself, still trying to stay optimistic.

“AH! RUN AWAY!”

NO!”

Huh? What was that?

Without turning his head around he could see people glancing past his arms, not without a couple of huffs and pants as they went.

“GET OUT OF MY WAY!”

“HELP! THEY’RE COMING!”

“RUN!”

As the clouds in the sky were slowly becoming more overcast, so did the minds of the fleeing citizens that could not care less about bumping into others. The squawks of crows and innumerable cries and screams were tearing through the air. Knowing that his ear couldn't bear any longer, Feng knew that the odds were stacked against him. With his last bit of courage, he turned around and saw what was happening.

Alright...this was NOT going to smell good...

Chapter 2

When Feng was busy rubbing his ear, what he saw in front of him was a sight that may or may not spell the beginning of a crisis ----- it was a mob, each wearing a long face, stumping their way like wild cattle.

THUD! THUD! THUD!

It was unquestionable that the only non-black entities were nothing more than their skin and their “tools” in their hands, ranging from planks, steel tubes, and of course, the metallic grey arms which any living thing would recoil in fear when the infamous bang went off ----- the dreaded handguns. What’s worse, you could tell from their nasty sneers that they were ready and willing to give them a shot.

Acknowledging that running was the only way to save himself, Feng took to his heels and blasted off hastily. Through hurrying bikes, the swirling dust and dirt erupted relentlessly beneath his shoes as he picked up speed. Ruthless blasts of gusts kept whipping on his face relentlessly. Notwithstanding it was rather unpleasant, at least it was better than getting bludgeoned by something else.

“Just go fast...must go fast...got to go fast...need to go fast...” he chanted spontaneously, “I don’t need to be a fortune teller to see what’s going to happen if I ...uh, forget it. Just **don’t, look, back.**”

Did Feng actually know where he should be going? **Probably not.**

Faster and faster as his legs went, Feng was sprinting with all his might. At this moment, his mind had gone practically blank. He only knew he had to keep on running. The one thought of making a getaway permeated deep into his nerves.

It was just then when Feng perceived something unusual.

Wait...wasn't there a stench hovering around somewhere? So... if it's gone, then...

And the more he thought about it, the more he was sure that he had been free from the triad's grasp, temporarily.

Yes! Geez... my lucky day!

No longer sensing the trailing odor, he had a sense that he had outrun them in some sort. Much to his delight, he was eager to take a glimpse over his shoulder.

Big mistake!

In fact, he SHOULD NOT have looked backwards when someone was in hot pursuit, not with all the yelling taking place no more than a few meters away.

What happened in front of his eyes was nothing worse than just some grim-looking scene.

Beyond Feng was a land covered with stains of red where unthinkably many bodies, entirely riddled with bruises, were lying down. In spite of being apparently alive, every, single moan let out by each innocent soul was fusing bit by bit, into an elegy sung by some kind of banshee.

Sure --- all that wailing might be hurtful enough to his ear, but they were certainly nothing compared with the howling and helpless groaning of those frozen in place or lying on the ground.

Miserable as it may be, Feng had to shake himself from misery with all efforts. With the dreadful noises of thrashing being present once again, he

had to quickly distance himself from the gang fight.

Hardly a few minutes had passed than his ear began aching the second time --- this time the sounds of marching were multiplying drastically. The dark stampede proceeded farther like a mobile massive block, walling up Feng and other poor souls into a dead end, in which there was clearly no way out.

“And I th-thought I had escaped, but...” grumbled Feng, clenching his jaw hard, “grr...I jumped out of the frying pan, without a doubt. ”

THUD, THUD, THUD, THUD...

The gangs were closing in.

Chapter 3

Finding himself in a predicament he had never come across before, he

recognized that in a critical situation like this one, hiding was his only weapon to save himself.

“Hide, hide, I need to hide...” he whispered, pulling his hair frantically, “where should I go hiding...”

He hurriedly looked around to find a good hiding place, swinging his head as swiftly as a snake. While some might say that one could remain unseen with ease in any spot in such a far-reaching street, Feng would attest to the untruth. Right now, the only obstacle was that whether if it was actually feasible or not because **they, are, everywhere.**

“Well that was stupid, haha...” said Feng, laughing at himself for even considering such a case, “how and when, did I become such a fool to even think ab --- gasp!”

Much to his relief, he spotted an empty car to his far right. With a leap of faith, Feng immediately flashed into the only option for hiding. All of a sudden, he discerned that something, cold and chilly, was gripping his torso tightly, although the car is shielding him completely. Through the amber windows, the scurrying ones, the collapsing people, footsteps, even the shouting...just anything in his vicinity was speeding up abruptly. On the other hand, he wanted to duck, but to no avail --- whatever inside the car was fixing his back in place. It was so suppressive that he couldn't even lift his finger.

Oh no... bad timing! This is totally not a good time to have ca---...nope, not in THIS particular position...

At this moment, Feng was in an equivalent of a covered-up wok. Little did he know that a being was accompanying him seconds after the door had shut, in which this being, most likely wearing a large heap of grey, seemed to be holing up for a purpose.

Oooooog...my limbs... can't... move... oof.

With his spare energy, Feng slowly covered his eyelids along his frame of mind, blacking out calmly as the Shanghai sky changed its clothing, pouring darkness over the souls, drop by drop.

SPLASH!

“GET UP! GET UP SUCKERS!!!”

Noise kept on banging throughout the night, where each bang enacted drove Feng further away from the deep trance. The buzzing happened to have a round of déjà vu surrounding it, pulling him back to the fogged pit of his subconsciousness.

The dashing... the hiding... the escape... um... gasp! The gangsters! They... they... why am I here? And why am I so wet?

Remembering his mission he squeezed his hazy eyes right open. Right before him were the gangsters, whose expression pictured ravenous ogres craving for their prey. Showing their palms, the people hurriedly grabbed a handful of coins from their torn pouches, to which they were snatched from their wrinkled hands in no time. It looked like that they were executing a convention of some sort, something that little Feng had never witnessed before, something that the suffered were fearful about not handing out their silver dollars fast enough.

“GIVE US THE MONEY IF YOU’RE NOT BRAIN DEAD!!!!”

“If not...**you know the drill, folks.**”

Guess I'll have to find out what's going on just now, given the fact that I

have completely no idea about my surroundings...

“Hey, uh... can you tell me what in the world is happening right now?”

The guy stared straight into his round eyes with a dropped-open mouth. From his point of view, he looks more like having a conversation with a silly-looking aberrant.

“You’re a foreigner?” “Look in front of you --- it... it is the **protection racket!**!”

“Pro-protection racket?” asked Feng, tipping his head to his side, “What’s that?”

“You dumb or something? They are... they are...”

And... he fainted, great. This doesn’t sound good.

“We could somehow guarantee your safety!!! Hahaha...” scoffed one of the gangsters, “...only if you pay the protection fees of course! Hahaha...”

Guarantee OUR safety?? I thought YOU guys are the ones beating us up to a pulp.

“Sob, sob, WAAAAAAHHHHH!!!!!!”

Chapter 4

Amid the rigid land of gangsters, there stood a child crouching down near the unlucky souls. Going weak at the knees, his first tear was set free, followed by a ceaseless stream. The toddler inclined forward where he

had previously crouched down, pressing his palms against the concrete, he let out a cry of sorrow that was worth a thousand words, more or less.

“You little...” a brute growled, grabbing his plank over his head at the same time.

Unbeknownst to this wretched little man, in the next couple of seconds he would be at the mercy of the brutes’ own hands.

Uh oh, not good... the boy is...

“Stop it!”

No matter how hard-hearted a person is, whenever a jingle or a sob from a kid floats towards his ears, it will certainly melt the iceberg within him.

Unless...that person is a gangster.

Ready, Feng? No, not yet. But there’s no time left! Arrrgh... just wait for a second. What if, what if the boy..... are... are they going to --- Okay, it’s no use daydreaming here, let’s do this! Heh heh.”

“Uh... g-guys...” “Ca-Can we talk about this? I mean...”

The gangsters looked at each other.

“Um...bwahahahaha!!!! What a funny kid!!”

“Of course we can... but you need to pay first. Whoops!”

Feng couldn’t help seeing himself as a bare toy, getting sneered and jeered at by a bunch of bullies. He could hear the snickering ringing non-stop inside his ears again and again. He covered his ears, but it was useless --- they somehow merged into cacophony, which would drive him crazy yet again.

“Oh I see, so you don’t like loud stuff, DO YOU?!”

“Welp, you can’t help it bro! We’re just speaking loudly, not being rude to you. LITTLE, KID!!!”

Feng was feeling so furious and deeply humiliated at the same time he started to fall back away from the child. Worse still, he had to admit his own defeat. For each step he edged backwards, the battery of bullies advanced further close to his shaking legs.

Look at what an idiot I am, stepping forward blindly just to save a child. Besides, they won’t hurt him anyway, right?

“STOP!!!”

Huh?

Out came a man that even the average guy could already tell that he not just any man --- appropriately speaking, he was a beast accompanied with a chest shaped like a barrel and his mane dancing with a crimson headband by the wind on his head. Standing under the moonlight, the colour of his bright red vest shone onto the whole crossroad, like a star glittering in the gloom.

“Look! Look! Someone is going to rebel against them!”

“Wow! Now that’s what I call a fit one.”

“Oooooooh! He’s so... **boorish**. I mean, look at what he’s wearing! His outfit!”

“Man... he seems valiant... for this, I mean his hair.”

The boor was hemmed in by the gangsters in a split second, which resembled a pack of hungry wolves licking their lips at a helpless victim.

“That’s none of your business!!”

“What do you want?” One of the gangsters got ahold of an iron bar,

“Wanna fight?! **You will try.**”

Whoosh! Whoosh! The gangster charged at the boor with the iron bar upheld, bringing it down with a swing before going into a flurry. He was fierce, but the boor was quicker. As light as a feather, he whooshed and whooshed throughout the frenzy. “Just wait...whoosh! And wait, and whoosh! And...”

“... You’re...” the boor’s leg flashed upwards and struck with each word. “...DEAD! STOMP!!” The blow landed on the gangster’s Achilles tendon. “AH!”

“Woah...” Everyone gazed in astonishment. “How...” Feng spluttered, “...did he just...”

“Wait for a second... didn’t you say that he died? Why is he sti--- ”

“You aren’t bright, are you? Your actions prove that there’s no difference between you mobs and the dead!” The boor clasped his fists tightly. “Is it even right to turn a deaf ear to a proper job and go on a thug life?”

The boor had a far-away look in his flaming red eyes.

“If that’s the case, I guess you are causing this chaos for not having a proper job, right?” said the boor, clearing his throat, “Ahem, let me present you a song of mine so as to turn you back to the light side!”

♪ Today I am ♪

Honestly speaking, there’s nothing worse than listening to such a lovely tune during the tumultuous night. Why? The effect was instantaneous.

There were thousands of hisses and cries, from each victim and gangster alike. Just as if an apocalypse was about to initiate, each of them put

their hands on their heads, running around frantically while ramming into others in the process.

“AHHHHHHH!!!! RUN!!!!!!”

“THIS GUY IS PURE INSANITY!!!!!!”

All of them elapsed, leaving Feng and the boor behind, amidst the ruins of a past commotion in the Bund.

“Yo kiddo... you good?”

“I’m good.” replied Feng, “thanks for just now, but still, that ‘song’ was...”

“Forget about it, kid. Indeed, I should be the one thanking you --- after all, you gave up scampering away like the others...”

“Why the long face?”

“Well, it’s not my first time enduring such...”

“But how?” Feng asked, “how did... how did all of this happen? Like, wouldn’t the police do something to end this disorder?”

“You’re too young, kiddo,” The boor’s tone had gone all formal in a sudden, “there are many things in this world that are not what you think it would be. From the officials, the policemen you have heard of... By the way, what’s your name, fellow? You look like you’re going to make a difference at some point!”

“The name’s Feng.”

“Feng, eh? Dude, you know...” said Y with his voice deepened, “...the road to resistance against this tyranny is a long path to go...”