

**A
Single
Petal**

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1: Bamboo Death

To bow three times before the Buddha felt wrong. With his faith destroyed because of what happened, it seemed as if he were trying to seek enlightenment from a lotus flower that has no strength, no *spirit* – a flower whose petals fall apart when opened. Such imperfection could lead nowhere. But a single petal? Surely a single, undamaged petal could achieve perfection.

At the very least, that should have happened, thought Teacher Feng, but it was his only consolation.

Empty of prayer, he turned from the effigy and from the smoke and the sickly smell of incense, whilst his mind lingered over the petals of a flower, travelling back to the day his daughter Feier came running in from the courtyard of their home in a village in what is now called Hunan Province, screaming at the top of her voice:

“*Baba!* Come quickly! Beside the path near the lotus lake. On the way to the Miao village! Hurry!”

Feng felt angered. He was preparing a lesson for the village children in the schoolroom, the only reasonably-sized room in their single-storey house built around an untidy courtyard littered with ‘useful’ junk.

Although he’d been the obvious choice, he still felt an immense pride at having been given the job of local teacher, albeit poorly-paid, by the Governor’s prefectural magistrate. His pride helped him overcome the shame of never having sat the civil service examination, about which all other local scholars were delighted. He simply hadn’t appeared for the examination on the day, but there was one thing the other candidates were all agreed upon: that Feng would not only have been successful but would have excelled himself, rapidly rising in rank to become a mandarin or even advisor to the emperor himself in the capital, Chang’an.

The emperor lived in a different world to his forty-odd million subjects. Although trained in matters of war, his true passion was for poetry, painting and calligraphy. He would spend days on end, brush in hand, recreating on yellowed paper a separated life in flowing characters and colourful images, unreceptive to the eunuchs who impatiently rubbed their delicate hands and fussed around in the imperial ante-chambers worrying about the state of the nation. War, he left to his generals, each of whom had his own military agenda. Their rivalry, a trivial annoyance for the emperor, had caused waves of unease to spread throughout China. Her enemies were beginning to cast greedy glances

over uncertain boundaries at the growing frailty of a country whose name was synonymous with the centre of the civilised world.

The emperor needed men of Feng's ability at court – men with brains – and the other young scholars knew this, but envy and jealousy are more natural companions to the human spirit than patriotism and humility. Even those who had failed the civil service examinations, or who couldn't afford to bribe the examiners (the majority), rejoiced in consoling Feng with the thought that there could be no greater act of faith in the throne than to pass wisdom down to the emperor's youngest subjects in the remote countryside. With Feng tucked away in a remote little village, his existence would no longer threaten to block their career paths.

Feng had good reason for not appearing before the examination board, one which the officials thankfully accepted, thereby saving him fifty blows with a thick rod. His wife, Meili, had died the day before he was due to leave for Houzicheng. She and Feier, their only child, had been stricken with the flux which spread like Yellow River flood waters across the province. Not he, the local doctor, nor prayers to the Boddhistsava, had been able to save the mother as her sick body, drained of all fluid, rapidly shrank to dried skin and bone. But, Buddha be praised, the girl survived. Now, eight years later, she was strong, healthy and would soon be fifteen and a child no longer. She'd inherited her mother's gentleness together with Feng's wit and desire for learning. In his early years as a teacher he'd practised his skills on little Feier, teaching her a hundred new characters between each passing of the full moon, educating her in the art of calligraphy and in the great Tang poems, explaining the works of the newer, radical poets, like Su Dongpo, of whom he possessed a valuable calligraphic scroll. He also instructed the child in the complexities of the glorious history of China, the central kingdom, and had read to her transcriptions of the enlightened master from Shandong, Kong Fuzi ¹.

Ironically, moments before Feier had rushed screaming into the schoolroom, Feng's mind had wandered from the characters on the page in front of him as he sat squatting low before the teacher's table with its curved painted animal legs and scratched, pocked surface. He'd been thinking about the child... about his dread of losing her to the family of an unknown would-be groom. When she reached fifteen he'd have to approach the marriage maker, an old lady who'd always looked askance at his modern ways, his desire to include girls in his classes, his wish to bring knowledge to all the people regardless of sex, religion or status. Her disgust was so apparent she would cross the street to avoid rather than acknowledge him. She hated his eagerness for reform, his love of the villagers... his genius. Without wishing to, he had made her feel unimportant, for before he arrived with his

¹ Confucius

daughter she'd been highly respected in the village, second only to the *sun wu kong*² at the temple. Now they often questioned her authority and wisdom and fewer gifts came her way. The idea that this old hag would, out of sheer spite, marry the girl off to a spineless groom with a gorgon of a mother had plagued him for months. There were even women who beat their young daughters-in-law and nothing could have been more painful to Feng than the thought of anyone harming his child.

When Feier had rushed into the schoolroom that day it wasn't with *her* he felt angry. It was with himself. Her sudden presence reminded him that he loved her more than anything else in the world and yet had failed to come up with a solution to his dilemma. The pitifully small dowry he'd be able to offer meant other approaches to find a husband for the girl – sons of important officials, skilled trades-people, even merchants – were out of the question.

He'd even discussed it with his good friend, Li Yueloong, in the nearby Miao ethnic minority village. He'd have preferred a Miao son-in-law with a heart of gold and no prospects to a man with money and a mother-in-law from hell, but until recently there'd been more girls than boys in the Miao village. Resilience of girl babies and the endless drain on marriageable young men to the emperor's army throughout the prefecture meant that girls from families with little means, like Feier, would be left with the scrapings from the bottom of the rice pot: either witless young men, little more than puppets of devil mothers, or widowed old men seeking breeding machines to give them sons before their ghosts slipped away to face uncertain approval from ancestors.

If only I could have another few moons, Feng had been thinking when his daughter burst into the room, his calligraphy brush hovering over the paper.

"*Baba*³? What's the matter?" asked Feier as her father turned his worry-drawn face towards her.

"Nothing that should concern you, dear child." *Stupid man! Everything concerns Feier! And everything about Feier concerns me.* "But why the interruption? Can't you see I'm preparing for my class?" he added, trying without success to appear stern.

"*Baba...* there's a man on the path. On the way to the Miao village. He's lying there. I think he's..."

The child stopped mid-sentence, and Feng knew why. She didn't *have* to use the word that frightened her so much. Ever since her mother's death eight years back, the very mention of the dead would cause the girl's beautiful deer eyes to darken.

² head monk

³ father

“Where?” she’d once asked her father when he tried to reassure her that her mother, a good woman, would have been reincarnated into a higher existence, maybe as a princess or the daughter of one of the emperor’s favourite concubines. “But she’ll not know me,” the child had cried. “She’ll never want to hold me to her again, tell me stories, brush my hair and pin it up when I become of age to marry.”

Somehow the thought of seeing her reincarnated mother again and not being recognised by the woman had terrified the young Feier. If death could do that to people, what else might it hold in store? It would take forty-nine days, Feng had told the girl, before her mother’s karma finally decided her fate: god, spirit, human or animal? Every seven days they visited the temple, burned incense and prayed to the Buddha. Feier was sure her Mama would walk through the door of their home when the forty-nine days were over, and that life would resume as if nothing had happened. That she felt cheated when this didn’t occur was plain for Feng to see, but how else could he have described death to the child when he understood nothing of its mystery? Always, he would avoid the subjects of death and his wife’s short life on earth, but hardly ever did he stop thinking about them... until the spectre of Feier’s impending marriage loomed above the horizon of his own life and brushed aside all other thoughts.

“There’s a bamboo pole sticking out from his belly... and he smells like a pig’s bottom!” the girl explained.

Alarmed, Feng threw down his calligraphy brush and ran from the schoolroom, grabbing Feier by the hand. Her hand felt so warm and alive in his grasp. Soon, with the girl gone, he’d have nothing left to remind him of the warmth of life; only his scrolls of dead poets’ playful words about some other life, and fading memories of his dead wife’s beautiful face.

Thanks to the Jade Emperor the child had acquired her looks from Meili, for his own fox eyes and panda jaws in a girl would have given the mean old marriage maker’s malice unimaginable opportunities for cruel revenge. Once she’d been asked to find a groom for the daughter of a local carpenter, and there was not a single redeeming feature in the young girl’s face. Everything about it was wrong; either too big or too small. The marriage maker suggested she find a pig in the next village, the Miao village, for she felt sure their pigs were uglier than the Han peoples’ pigs and might even find the girl attractive. At least, that was the story that went around whilst the girl hid herself away for weeks before being carted off in a covered rickshaw, dressed in red, to Houzicheng, the town on the other side of Three Monkey Mountain.

Feng stopped to catch his breath outside the village. He was less fit than his agile daughter. Too much sitting around in the schoolroom had put layers on his belly that would have horrified Meili, but he no longer cared about his appearance. Feier played the doting daughter whatever he

looked like. Stopping there, holding on to a post, panting and gasping whilst Feier stood quietly beside him as if she'd run no distance at all, he was again reminded of Meili. Like their daughter, she was quick and lithe in her movements, never tired and, for a woman, seemed so strong. Why, oh *why* had she died? And, thinking back, why hadn't he forced himself to sit the examination the following day? Had he done that, had he sprung straight back up like a blade of trampled grass, his mind wouldn't now be filled with the pain of losing Feier to some hard-edged peasant, for without a doubt if he had been given employ in Chang'an she would soon be wedded to a caring and educated court official.

"Sticking straight out of his belly? Like the branch of a tree?" Feng asked on recovering his breath.

"Yes, *baba*. And that smell! I had to cover my nose!"

What a pretty, sweet nose this was! But it was the girl's eyes he'd miss most of all. As with the eyes of her late mother, they shone like jewels. Never could he feel truly unhappy whilst still able to look into those eyes; soon, unable to see them, apart from on special visits, and then to see them filled with the pain of an unhappy coupling, he knew he could never again feel joy.

"No voice, no movement?"

"No, *baba*!"

A man killed by a bamboo stake so close to their village? It dawned on Feng that it could have been little Feier impaled by the bamboo, for doubtless the dead man would be a villager who'd surprised a roving villain. Perhaps he'd been visiting the lake for the very same reason as his daughter: to pick lotus flowers to bring his family harmony on the seventh day of the seventh moon.

"The man's face, Feier? Did you recognise it?"

"Half of it was gone, *baba*. He only had half a face!"

"Half a face? What do you mean?"

"Maybe an animal... perhaps a tiger or a bear... has taken it. What'll happen to him with only half a face after forty-nine days are over, *baba*? Will he come back as half a goat... half a person?"

"Face or half a face, he must have a name, Feier. *And* a spirit."

Feng took his daughter's hand again and they ran on, past the path that climbed to the temple on the hill, past the sumptuous residence of Chen Jiabiao, the mysterious nobleman who often travelled to the imperial city and the source of whose wealth was forever a fall-back topic for local gossip whenever items of news grew sparse. When they came to within sight of the lake, Feier pulled her hand free from Feng's and held back. The man saw why. From a distance, it looked like a mound of brown earth on the grass beside the path with a pole sticking out from it.

“Stay here, my child,” he said, for he saw raw fear in his daughter’s eyes.

After hastily surveying the scene for reassurance the perpetrator of the ugly crime wasn’t lurking in the undergrowth, about to snatch Feier from him, he approached the body. He needn’t have worried. The smell alone would have kept even the most hardened murderer away.

From where Feier still stood, frozen in fear, they could hear the monotonous hum of flies. Closer, the noise bore into his skull and the stench of rotting flesh was overpowering. Feng cupped a hand to his nose and mouth as he leaned over the corpse. His presence angered the flies whose hum rose in pitch and volume whilst he lowered his own face to within a few hand-breadths of what remained of the face of the murdered man. When he saw the exposed flesh alive with flies and maggots, a dead eye dangling from its socket on dried tissue stands, he turned and retched. With a mix of horror and relief, he saw Feier now standing only a few feet away. She’d followed him. Rushing forwards, she hugged her father.

“*Baba... I...*” she began, as if wishing to say something but unable to do so.

“Don’t look!” warned Feng.

“It’s *him*, isn’t it?”

Feng nodded. The brown tunic, the shoes and a belly that outstripped even Feng’s bulge, as well as the white tiger tattoo on the back of his right hand tightly gripped around the thick bamboo pole... they didn’t need a complete face to be sure it was Merchant Chang. And Feng felt sick not only at the gruesome sight and the stink emanating from the corpse, he felt sickened for having confided in his old friend; for having told him about the disappearing Miao girls.

2: Disappearing Girls

It was from Li Yueloong that Feng had first heard about the disappearing Miao girls just days before his daughter found the body.

He'd got to know Yueloong after he began weekly visits to the Miao village where he'd set up a small school. The emperor had recently decreed that all ethnic peoples have at least basic instruction in Mandarin, the language of the ruling Han people. Although hitherto there'd been little exchange between the Miao folk and the Han of his own village, this was due more to convenience rather than any antagonism between the separate communities. Each had a world of its own, although the beautiful embroidery of the Miao women was much admired by Feng's fellow villagers. And they not only understood Feng's reasoning, but also praised the teacher's altruism for spending his day off teaching Miao children. Feier would always accompany him, and her speed and skill with the calligraphy brush, for one so young, became an example for all to follow and later, for the more competitive Miao children, a challenge. After their day of toil in the schoolroom, Yueloong would feed Feng and his daughter before the twelve *li*⁴ hike back over the hill and past the lake to their own village.

Yueloong and Feng had two things in common. Each had lost a wife and each had a daughter. Xiaopeng, the Miao girl's Han name, was almost two years younger than Feier. A wary child and lacking Feier's sharpness of wit, she was also delightfully pretty. She had the softly-rounded cheeks, the small nose and the wide rabbit eyes of the Miao women, and she'd fix Feier with those timidly attentive eyes as the older child prattled on with Han tales of Nu Wa the creator goddess, the Jade Emperor and Chang-e the Moon Goddess, and as she expounded on the way of the all-encompassing Dao and talked non-stop about the goings-on in her own village. Xiaopeng would barely utter a word, but it was clear she adored the older girl. When it came to weaving, embroidery, and the culinary arts, Xiaopeng won hands down. Feier marvelled at the child's dexterity and the way she kept house for her father, putting to shame her own feeble efforts to maintain a tidy home, although many a time Feng would reassure his daughter that in modern China it was the mind and the calligraphy brush that mattered, not the loom and kitchen utensils. "Why," he would tell her, "there are women at court in Chang'an who can recite poetry and paint birds and bamboo groves with brush strokes as bold as any man's!"

⁴ One *li* equals a third of a British mile.

When Feng first heard that young wives and girls, even those of Xiaopeng's age, had gone missing, he racked his brains for a solution to the mystery, for through Yueloong and Xiaopeng he'd grown to love the Miao villagers as he loved his own people. He was most distressed, the week before Feier found Merchant Chang's body, when three of his brightest Miao girl pupils disappeared. From man-eating tigers to *gui*, the restless ghosts, from secret pacts and peer pressure to seek wider horizons to Tibetan bride thieves, Feng and his friend had discussed all possibilities. But they could come up with no sensible explanation.

"Other than the fact that they're all Miao girls!" suggested Feng.

"And pretty *because* of that," added Yueloong as if Feng needed to be aware of the fact. True, but in Feng's opinion no Miao woman came even close to the other worldly beauty of Han women from Hangzhou⁵. This was why he had always felt certain Meili's ancestors must have lived in Hangzhou.

Yueloong, a busy farmer, couldn't watch over Xiaopeng every second of the day. There was no-one else to keep house for him or prepare his meals when he was out in the fields with his solitary water buffalo, and Feng could see how worried the man was about his beloved daughter as they puzzled over the missing girls.

"I should tell the *sun wu kong* at the monastery and talk to Chen Jiabiao... even seek audience with the prefectural magistrate," he told his friend. "Someone *must* have some idea... *must* have seen or noticed something. A girl can't just vanish like the morning mist," he said.

His flights into poetic metaphor were always lost on the dour farmer.

"Bloody tearing us all apart in the village!" replied Yueloong. "And it's not only here that it's been happening. Many of our younger sisters in the Miao village on the road to Chang'an have also gone. But because we're Miao folk our Han rulers don't seem to care. Some of the men here, they say..."

Yueloong looked away, uncertain how to put this to his friend from the other side of the lake.

"...well, they blame the Han people. *And* last year's drought. Our women would be highly prized by the Tibetans and the Mongols. The cloth they weave, their embroidery - we fetch a good price for these things, get good money to help us through hard times. Some are saying you Han people have stolen our girls to sell on into slavery. Of course I'm not saying *I* believe in such stories..."

"I think I'd have noticed, my friend," interrupted Feng with a chuckle. "We pretty much live each others' lives in my village. You could hardly hide a chicken away without everyone knowing.

⁵ It is often said the most beautiful women in China are found in Hangzhou.

And there'd be talk if someone suddenly went around with strings of coins slung across his shoulder. No, Yueloong, there has to be another reason. Besides, how could an unhappy girl taken into slavery make beautiful cloth? She'd be of no value to her new masters. She'd be like a beautiful waterfall whose course has been altered by a landslide and has run dry."

"No poetry, please, friend Feng! I'm not in the mood. Of course I don't believe in those ridiculous rumours. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our men are just seeking scapegoats."

"Look, I'll do those things I said. Talk to these people. Then we'll put our heads together. We'll put a stop to this. Before Xiao..."

He checked himself. He knew nothing could be more painful for Yueloong than the thought of Xiaopeng being taken from him. The girl's mother had died in childbirth and the welfare of his quiet, loving daughter was his sole purpose in life. Feng couldn't imagine how his friend would be able to continue without her, and unlike Feier and himself, the child's marriage would not separate father from daughter for the Miao people lived in a very close-knit community. In all probability, she'd remain in the same small village, with no mean-minded marriage maker to send her far away.

When Feng and Feier had arrived back in their village that evening, the teacher had been delighted to find Merchant Chang waiting on his doorstep, his long-suffering black donkey tied to the plum tree with one weary hoof raised off the ground. The inn was full and Chang had called round to see if Feng could spare him a room for the night - as he *always* did when he came to their village.

"My friend, my humble house is yours whenever you need it!" welcomed Feng. "*Nǐ chīle ma?*"⁶ And your worthy companion... has *she* been fed?" He nodded at the donkey.

"Mimi? Fed and watered," replied the tubby merchant. "At least they did that at the inn. As for me, well, you know how I admire your daughter's cooking."

"Your baskets, Merchant Chang? May I help you in with them?" asked the girl, knowing full well it wasn't her cooking the merchant admired. She must have been the worst cook in the prefecture.

"You may indeed, my pretty one. My back's killing me these days. I need a wife to massage it twice a day, don't you think?"

Feier blushed. She went over to pat the donkey.

"Such a beautiful daughter you have, Feng. And her hair? When will it be pinned up⁷? Soon, I expect, judging from that figure of hers."

⁶ Chinese greeting. Literally, "Have you had food?"

⁷ In Tang Dynasty China, marriageable girls pinned up their hair at the age of fifteen.

Chang had been looking at Feier as she stroked the animal and whispered softly in its ear. Feng felt ashamed to think it took another man to remind him the girl had acquired the curves and breasts of a woman. He'd only ever thought of her as his little girl with the beautiful eyes of his poor late wife.

"That's another thing!" he said, an image of the awful old marriage maker hovering at the back of his mind. "But first make yourself comfortable, friend. Treat my house as your own. Feier and I'll take care of your precious goods. Then whilst she's preparing something for you we must talk. I have so much to tell you since we last met... and you, doubtless, will repay me with your usual witty tales!"

Merchant Chang had gone on into the house whilst Feng approached his daughter.

"Feier! How can you be so rude? You turn your back on my friend without saying a word! He was paying you a compliment. You could have at least thanked him... and answered his question."

Feier flushed and continued to stroke the donkey's nose. She said nothing. Feng hated chiding the girl but, after Yueloong, Chang was his best friend.

"I... I had to pat Mimi," she said at last. "She... she looks so sad, the way she's holding her hoof up."

"Feier?"

"*Baba*, you won't force me to marry him, will you? Please say you won't."

She had looked up at her father. Her moist eyes melted the frost in his heart.

"Oh, my little child, that would be the very last thing on my mind! You and Merchant Chang? What on earth has got into that pretty head of yours?"

"The way he looks at me. And I heard what he said to you."

"Feier, you *are* a woman now. Not to me, but to other men you are. He was paying you a compliment and that's all."

"Well, I don't like it! And why doesn't he have a wife himself? At his age!"

"Shhh! He might hear you, child. Funny thing, now you mention it, but we've never spoken about that. S'pose I never thought it important. Anyway, as the wife of a merchant she'd hardly ever see her husband. Be more like a widow, ay? Now let's stop all this nonsense talk and relieve this poor dutiful beast of her burden. Then, my dear daughter, show our guest the respect he deserves. For my sake?"

"Yes, *baba*," the girl replied meekly, and together they set about un-strapping the laden bamboo baskets from the back of the donkey.

"Enough valuable stuff there to fill a prowler's chest with coins!" joked Merchant Chang as Feier staggered in from the courtyard with a basket of goods.

“We don’t have...” began the child, but she was interrupted by her father standing behind her with the other basket.

“Feier’s right,” he said. “Until today I’d have said we never have prowlers. Not like the streets of Chang’an. Nothing ever goes missing. But I have the most extraordinary story to tell you. Leave the basket there, Feier. Go and prepare food whilst I tell our guest all about the Miao girls.”

Feier had set the basket down and scurried off in the direction of the kitchen.

“The Miao girls?” Merchant Chang appeared intrigued.

“The Miao girls. From the village beyond the lake. Please, sit down, friend Chang. We’ll talk about it over a glass of wine. Feier!”

The girl reappeared in the kitchen doorway.

“Warm up some plum wine for Merchant Chang... with the food.”

“Yes, *baba*.”

Feng and Chang sat at a round stone table in the cluttered courtyard.

“You’ve been to that village?”

“Of course. Best Miao cloth in the whole province! And I should know. But what’s this nonsense about the Miao girls?”

“Before today I’d have said ‘leave everything outside... nothing ever goes missing in these parts for we’re not in Chang’an’. But now? And all because of the vanishing Miao girls.”

He called out to his daughter.

“Feier! Hurry! Our guest is thirsty and hungry!”

Feier returned a short while later with bowls of vegetables, rice and soup. She hesitated as she tried to work out how to place the food on the table without having to brush against the merchant, for the man’s size presented quite an obstacle. Detouring round to the opposite side, from beside the safety of her father, she reached across and placed the bowls in front of the merchant.

“Such pretty hands, friend Feng!” the man said, his eyes fixed on the girl’s blossoming young breasts. “Not the hands of a working girl. You’re right to be teaching her calligraphy and opening her mind to our great poets.”

Feier quickly pulled her hands away, hiding them in her sleeves. She hurried off to fetch a jug of warm plum wine which she put on the table between the two men, together with their best glazed cups. After giving Merchant Chang a respectful bow, she requested permission from her father to leave.

“Be sure you can show me three more characters on your scroll for Merchant Chang to enjoy when he’s finished his meal!”

Feng chuckled and winked at Chang as Feier took a few steps backwards before turning and heading for the schoolroom.

“A delightful girl, Feng. You must be so proud of her. Soon she’ll make some lucky man very happy!”

“Oh friend Chang, if only I could be certain of finding a man who *will* make her happy. There are many who would resent an educated woman who can recite the sayings of Kong Fuzi. Have I been wrong to include girls in my classes? I know that would be the Emperor’s wish. He’s an enlightened man. But there are some who’d as soon put an end to his modern ways. Prefer to see women as the kow-towing servants of men.”

“Have you approached the marriage maker yet?”

“She wears her hair long, as you observed. I still call her my child.”

“A child with the body of a woman? Can’t go on much longer. Look, let me know before you approach the marriage maker. I may not have contacts at the court in Chang’an, but I’m widely travelled and know more people than you could count on your abacus. I’ll keep my ears open. Do what I can for an old friend, ay?”

“You’re very kind, but you’ve enough to concern you. Besides, I couldn’t bear it if my little Feier ended up in some distant prefecture. I’m a selfish man, Chang, a *very* selfish man. But my problems are as nothing compared to those of my Miao friends?”

“You teach in that Miao village on your day off and you call yourself selfish?”

“I enjoy it! That’s surely the epitome of selfishness... to do things you enjoy and wallow in the praise you get!”

Merchant Chang erupted into a hearty chuckle which caused him to choke on a mouthful of rice.

“Don’t do yourself down, Teacher Feng,” he said when the coughing had subsided. “So tell me, why should I feel so sorry for your Miao friends?”

“Their girls are disappearing!”

“It’s that diet of theirs. Not enough rice, too many vegetables. Look at me!” He patted his overflowing belly. “It would take a pretty bad famine to make *me* disappear!”

“This is serious, Chang. Their girls have simply vanished. Why, my three best Miao pupils, *all* girls, didn’t turn up last week. Their classmates shrugged their shoulders when I asked where they were. Disappeared like the others, they said.”

“Gone to seek their fortunes together, perhaps?”

“Miao girls of thirteen, fourteen? No way! Something’s up, Chang.”

“What about your friend the farmer?”

“Li Yueloong?”

“Is that his name? I believe you once said *he* had a daughter.”

“That’s what really brought this home to me. He dotes on Xiaopeng, and what worries me is she’s such a pretty child. Just thirteen years, but already has well-formed young breasts... and he told me it’s only the pretty ones that are vanishing.”

“Most Miao girls *are* pretty. I’ll say that for them, despite their meagre helpings of rice.”

“Li is terrified of losing the girl. Like me, he’s a single parent. She means everything to him. If Xiaopeng disappeared I don’t know how he would keep going.”

“He’ll lose her to a husband one day. Has he thought about that?”

“They’re different from us, the Miao people. Very close. He’d never lose her in his own village. And for them looks count far more than wealth. He’ll not be faced with the problems I have.”

“How many?”

“What?”

“How many of these girls are gone?”

“I don’t know. A lot, Farmer Li says. And the magistrate’s doing nothing.”

“And the other Miao villages... like the one on the road to Chang’an?”

“That’s just it. They, too, are suffering. Yet here, less than half a day’s walk away, not a single Han girl has been taken.”

“Taken?”

“It has to be, Chang. Someone is stealing these Miao girls.”

“For?”

“That’s the thing. Pretty girls. All with breasts... old enough to bear children. Young wives, too. The ones still with fine features, smooth skin and sleek, glossy hair. Why, there are many children now without mothers as well as parents who have lost daughters.”

“And your friend and the other Miao people... they have no suspicions about who’s responsible? Maybe someone in their village angered a high-up government official. Could be his retribution?”

“It’s us Han people some of them are suspecting. Not my friend Li, of course. But he warned me, and I fear rivalry between our communities. We’re both peace-loving peoples, but this business...”

“Which is why you’re telling me!”

“You’d have heard in time, anyway. But as you say, all those people you meet. Someone must’ve noticed something, heard whisperings... or seen a Miao girl where one shouldn’t be seen?”

“So the prefectural magistrate knows? And who else?”

“Oh, the Miao folk prefer to keep themselves to themselves.”

“The *sun wu kong* at your monastery? Has *he* been told?”

“I haven’t... I don’t... you know... since Meili died...”

“I’m seeing him tomorrow! Next port of call!”

“I would’ve myself, but you know how it is with Feier... the temple... the things they say there. She never could forgive them for not reincarnating Meili as herself again in our village.”

“Children! They’re a total mystery to me, my friend. But I understand. You steer clear of the temple. Say your prayers in private, ay? Let the Buddha find his own money.”

“Praying’s nothing to do with money. That’s what’s so nice about people like Yueloong. They’re far closer to ways of the Buddha than most of those overfed monks.”

Merchant Chang peered wistfully at his belly then roared with laughter.

“So you think I’d make a good monk?”

“Yes... but not because of your belly.”

“I’d be delighted to ask the *sun wu kong*. Make enquiries. Of Chen Jiabiao, too. I have some spices for him from the west. Something from the land of the Buddha that can burn holes in the roof of your mouth, they say. Can’t think why anyone would want to ruin food with that stuff, but Chen goes into a state of ecstasy just thinking about it! Perhaps the real pleasure comes when the fire finally goes out!”

“At least Chen could put pressure on the local magistrate, maybe the Governor. About time that man showed a bit of responsibility.”

The merchant’s grin vanished.

“Be careful what you say, Teacher Feng. He’s a man with a memory as long as a leopard’s tail... and a bite to go with it.”

“Only between friends, Chang. But he really must know. So many Miao girls in this prefecture have vanished. Maybe more elsewhere.”

“He’ll not care a damn so long as he gets his taxes. Funny how he and Chen never seem to get on. But you’re right. He’s got to know. Why, if those girls continue to disappear...”

“That would destroy the Miao people. *And* us if they raid our village in search of evidence.”

“I’ll report back to you after tomorrow, friend. It’s the least I can do. And now let’s enjoy your daughter’s wine whilst I tell you about the rest of the world. You live like a silkworm in a cocoon here, Teacher Feng. That poor beautiful daughter of yours, she’ll know nothing of the latest fashions for the women of Chang’an, ay?”

When they finally snuffed out their lamps and dragged themselves off to their beds, with Chang in the guest room made up by Feier, both men were so disconnected from their surroundings by virtue of three jugs of wine they even questioned how many beds they were looking at and wondered whether their legs were still attached to their bodies. Feier hated it when her father got drunk, and it only happened when Merchant Chang stayed the night. Once, she'd diluted the wine in an attempt to keep her father sober. The merchant sussed out her plan immediately and, because of his fury, she'd been beaten. The following day when Chang was gone, Feng crumpled. Tears streamed his cheeks as he hugged his daughter and begged her forgiveness.

Feier had many reasons to dislike Chang, but she said nothing to her father for she knew he held the merchant in high regard, and perhaps the man *could* help solve the mystery of the disappearing Miao girls. Those three pupils of her father's were all good friends, and what if Xiaopeng were to be taken? Xiaopeng was everyone's darling.