

HEROINE ADVENTURE MAGAZINE



PREVIEW - CHAPTER 1



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CHAPTER I

A Most Insincere Hospitality

Shanghai—April 1948

The desperate footfalls in the hallway were loud enough to rouse the most wistful of slumber, but even the repetitious sounds of gunfire and burned-out casings warming the ground did not unsettle the focused meditation of the one who waited in the dark.

Illuminated only by a few candles, the cold damp room had not yet felt the warm caress of the oncoming spring, leaving it a forgotten underworld within the dreary depths of Tilanqiao Prison.

The overhead pipes dripped with abandon like a salivating predator lurking in the darkness above, each droplet a splash of thunder atop the grate of a specialized cage that had been placed as far from the door as possible.

Emaciated shadows danced across the walls, given a hint of life by the candle's flame, and remained the only movement in the room as the light created a theater screen of silhouettes on the back wall – silhouettes composed of the cage, its bars, and the man within.

Zhou Tao Quan released a breath into the night air. Garbed only in a simple faded white with black, the clothing of a peasant kept him no warmer than the small candles that surrounded his steely prison. He was tall and lean of build – mostly due to the state of his affairs – with a long black braid of hair that touched his lower back.



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Thick arched brows rested upon the closed eyes of an angled, weathered face that gave way to the equally pitch-dark beard of a devil.

For long years and long hours, the daily routine had been the same – focused meditation which allowed him to continue looking into the darkness beyond, even if he could no longer feel its presence.

Most of the words had faded to memory, but he still recalled the gestures that would bring the shadows to the surface – shadows in the void that appeared as black against black, like smoke in the night – their appearance filling his mind with the sounds of disembodied voices and whispers from the beyond that emanated from all sides.

Reaching out with an intangible hand that passed through the smoky shadow, he envisioned the hand twisting the dark tendrils into various patterns, bending and guiding them until they formed the vague semblance of a hexagram.

The way he could before they took his arm.

On the day he was brought to Tilanqiao Prison, those in charge roughly ushered him directly to the open yard, held fast in chains and manacles, where he was certain to be on his way to a hasty execution. A storm gathered in the distance, lightning yawning across the sky, threatening to wash away anything that remained of him after that night.

The masked headsman waited patiently in the wind as though he had always been there, one hand atop the other and resting lightly on the less interesting end of a sword much too large to wield in battle, but not too clumsy to find its way to a motionless neck.

The Tibetan monk that watched him with interest, looking down his nose like a disappointed grandfather, was the only thing out of place for an execution.

One of the men in charge nodded, giving the command, and everyone moved at once. Two of the guards unshackled his left arm while the monk began to speak incantations, locking his hands between each thumb with the palms facing outward, while the executioner brought his sword to bear.

Struggling against his captors, he lunged to introduce the top of his head to the underside of one man's chin, but all the venom in his veins was not enough to prevent them from forcing him onto the block, with a third man arriving to grasp his wrist while they held him down. He turned his head away as the executioner raised his blade.

The sword made the sound of a woodwind instrument as it came down and didn't stop again until it met with steel.

It was the only time in his life that he ever remembered screaming. The guards tried to hold him, but he lurched upward anyway, fully rising to his feet, only to see his arm still resting on the block below before falling onto his back.

His life flowed freely from the armless shoulder, building up around him to form a macabre blood angel in the sand as laughter echoed through the yard.

As he felt the voices and whispers fade, he used the last of the connection to reshape his wounds and close them, spitting blood onto the sand as he uttered the words like a vile curse.

The Tibetan monk would show them the proper chalk circles and symbols to place around his cell that would serve as a ward to prevent him from sensing any lingering connection, but he committed to memory the hexagram he would forge from shadow if he ever felt the presence again.

His focus was nearly broken when the sound of machinegun fire

erupted just outside the doorway. A heavy key rattled in the iron door and it swung open, spilling two guards into the room, urgently slamming the door behind them.

Breathless, the guards stepped away from the door, each with their firearms at the ready.

“They’re everywhere!”

“Ghosts...” The other guard suppressed a coughing fit, turning around to give the cage behind them momentary regard.

More gunfire shook the halls, followed by the sounds of terrified men in their final moments, and the guards slowly backed away from the door, raising their weapons once again. Black boots scraped across the stone underfoot as they drew closer to the cell behind them, marring the symbols on the floor and kicking white chalk dust into the air before knocking over one of the candles.

The man in the cage opened his eyes and the intangible hand gripped shadow once again.

While the guards waited for terror to come through the door, it worked sinister machinations in the dark behind them. The man’s upper body swayed and rocked as though he were performing an awkward dance, then arched back while his right arm threw gestures into the air like it was working in cohesion with an arm he didn’t have.

For long moments, the anxiety of the guards remained the only sounds in the room, sweat beading on their faces as they nervously waited for the iron door to open.

Without warning, one of the guards spewed black ichor onto the other, projecting a dark mist that covered the man’s face. The horrified recipient clutched his eyes while his partner dropped to the floor like a marionette severed from the strings of life.

The guard wiped his eyes frantically, but the black fluid continued to run down his cheeks and he managed a voiceless scream when he realized it was his own eyes producing death's black tears, and then his scream abruptly ended.

The cage door unlocked to groan open like the sound of something awakened and The Sleeping Dragon stepped out to walk the daylight.

He moved over the guards with an effortless glide, floating to the iron door that had kept him secluded for so long, but now presented a new world beyond.

In the hallway, dark-clad figures with white faces emerged from the shadows, crawling on the ceilings and walls like skittering insects, and falling in around their master as he moved in a direct path with purpose.

Elsewhere beneath the depths of the prison, an arm with golden scales twitched and writhed, its clawed fingers moving as if playing a somber song on an organ in which each key produced the sound of a scream.

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