

Dragon Rising

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The jury foreman rose stiffly in the jury box and cleared his throat loudly.

"You have reached your verdict?" asked the white-haired judge from the bench.

"We have, your Honor," affirmed the foreman in the ritual language of the court. Adjusting his glasses, he read aloud, "We find no cause to hold the defendant over for trial. In the opinion of this jury, there are insufficient grounds for further prosecution." His announcement complete, the foreman sat down wearily. At no time had he looked in the direction of either the defense or the prosecution during the delivery of the jury's verdict.

The judge, on the other hand, turned toward the prosecutor's table and glared balefully. He caught and held the gaze of the prosecuting attorney for a heartbeat, two, stretching the silence of the courtroom out to a painful rush of stillness. Then he turned toward the defendant's table, his expression softening as he addressed the defendant. "Miss Tan, in light of the jury's decision, you are free to go. This Court apologizes for any distress or inconvenience these proceedings may have caused you."

"Thank you, your Honor," the lady replied softly, inclining her head toward him demurely.

The judge rapped the gavel and announced, "Court is dismissed." Suddenly the room was alive with sound, papers rustling, clothing swishing, voices raised in protest, voices raised in triumph, voices raised in surprise.

At the prosecution table, Peter Caine sat rigidly in his seat, staring around him in disbelief. That Tan's daughter could have confounded the legal system he believed in implicitly, astounded and infuriated him. That she had done so by insinuating misconduct on his part terrified him. The prosecutor was right-the jury had swallowed every lie she'd fed them, and he'd be lucky not to end up at the defendant's table in a sexual harassment case. At the very-least, he knew that Internal Affairs would be looking into the case, and his defense-that his father had known the murderer to be Tan's daughter-would never hold up in the harsh glare of conventional reality.

The prosecutor was slowly packing up his papers, placing them methodically in his briefcase. Shell-shocked, Peter turned to him in confusion, his face betraying the turmoil of emotion within him.

"Come to my office when you get some time. We'll talk about this," he told Peter. "I have a feeling this isn't the end of it, not for you, anyway."

Nodding dumbly, the detective sat back heavily in his chair, staring into the middle distance. A tall, slender figure resolved itself in his field of vision, and with an effort, he focused on it. Xia stood a few feet away from him, a sly smile on her face. She mouthed, "I'll be seeing you," to him and blew him a kiss. He knew that no one else had seen the challenging gesture; at the same time, he knew she'd make sure that everyone would see any response he might give her. With an effort of will, he turned away from her and concentrated on gathering up his own notes to leave the courtroom.

All too frequently, the courthouse beat was boring and slow, but the sensational testimony in the preliminary hearing of Xia Tan excited even the most jaded of reporters. As the lovely young woman timidly exited the courtroom, she was surrounded by reporters, microphones shoving into her face, flashes exploding like daggers of light, and voices demanding answers.

Holding her hand up to shield her eyes from the glare of the flashbulbs, Xia Tan shook her head helplessly, shying away from all the media attention. Her defense attorney, Garrison, shouldered his way through the throng, his hand protectively on Xia's arm. "Miss Tan has been through a tremendous ordeal," Garrison

called out as he continued to push his way toward the exit. "She needs time to recover"

"No," Xia said suddenly, pulling back against his hand. "No, I'll answer your questions, one at a time, please."

Impressed by both the delicacy of her good looks, and the courtesy with which she agreed to grant an impromptu press conference, the press subsided, waiting now for their cue to come from her.

"My attorney is correct. I have been through a terrible ordeal. But it is a...testament to our legal system that the jury saw through the lies to the truth," she announced, her voice trembling with emotion.

"Are you going to file suit against the police department? Against Detective Caine?" asked one supporter, holding her microphone toward Xia's face.

"I...I don't know. I mean, what chance does an average citizen have against the faceless machinery that our police department? Is it worth the effort and the pain to pursue? I don't know," she answered herself, lowering her eyes. Then she raised them again, sweeping them across the crowd. A slight narrowing of her eyes indicated she had found the audience she sought. "I think...! need to think about it, to determine t the best course of action is for my own peace of mind."

"Have you any ideas why you in particular were targeted by Detective Caine?" asked another reporter. "No, I'm afraid I don't. I'd never met him or his father before. There is, to my knowledge, no reason y they would be interested in me," Xia replied with a doubtful shake of her head. Her eyes slid once re toward the figure hanging back behind the crowd of reporters, and a small smile tickled her lips. "What about the murders in the area of the Ambrosia Club-any idea why you'd be considered in connection with those?" a third reporter, a man from the local daily, demanded.

Xia frowned in reply. "I have no idea. I go... I used to go there, almost every night. It.. .was a nice place hang out after a hard day at work. Perhaps I spoke to the men who were killed, I don't know. There are rays so many people there."

She glanced up at Garrison with a slightly pleading expression. In response, he announced, "That's all, iies and gentlemen. Miss Tan needs an opportunity to get over this experience."

"I will schedule a press conference in the next few days if that's all right with everyone," she offered.

Murmurs of approval fluttered through the crowd, approval for her forthrightness, for her courage, for willingness to share her experiences with the fourth estate, and especially for her quotable quote rding the abusive police machinery. The press were feeling kindly toward her, and she smiled her ks. "And now, if you'll excuse me ..."

As one body, the press corps parted to allow her passage. At the end of that corridor of people stood Kwai Chang Caine, his face grim. They made eye contact, and she smiled. He turned and walked away.

"Peter, I don't know if I can save you on this one," Captain Paul Blaisdell was saying. He leaned back in f chair, toying with his glasses. "A Metro Police detective accused in open court of sexual misconduct?"

"IA boys are going to have a field day on this one."

"Look, the accusation was that there was no police sting operation, that I was acting on my own to set up to...to rape her. None of if s true, and I can prove it," Peter Caine protested from Blaisdell's visitor

"Oh? You've got the authorization form? Signed in triplicate?" Blaisdell countered. "No. I've got Strenlich's verbal, and Nickie as a witness," Peter shot back, exasperated.

Blaisdell chewed on the earpiece of his glasses for a while, considering this. "Okay. Where does your father come in, hmm, Peter? IA's going to ask why a civilian was involved."

"She was beating the shit out of me, and he tried to stop her," Peter replied, still belligerent.

"Yeah? Where's your evidence?"

"How does a cracked tooth and a bruised jaw and throat grab you?"

"You got a physician's affidavit?"

"I got... I got bubkis on that. I didn't go to the doctor afterwards. My dad patched me up."

"A supposed co-conspirator. And a murder suspect. Won't wash. Anything else?"

"Hey, who's side are you, Paul?" Peter demanded, rising angrily from his chair.

"Down boy," Blaisdell told him, holding his hands up in a conciliatory gesture. "I'm not grilling you half as hard as the LA boys will when they get around to you. Let's just get the evidence straight, okay? Have you got anything else?"

"Well, there's the Ancient."

"Lo Si? What has he got to do with this?"

Peter blushed a little, fidgeting in his seat. "I went to him to get something to attract women. To attract Tan's daughter to be exact. He gave me these ancient love drops. I kind of overdid it, and when I got to the Ambrosia Club, the women were all over me. That's right," he added, his scowl transforming to a hopeful expression. "Why would I need to set her up when every woman in the place was falling all over me? A guy, too," Peter added defensively.

"A guy?"

"Yeah, he offered me his number," Peter muttered, embarrassed.

"And were there any unbiased witnesses to this?"

"Yeah. Terry—bartender at the Agrippa, moonlights at the Ambrosia. I told him I was there undercover, not to claim he knew me. He saw me come in, saw how the women reacted. He saw Xia come on to me." Peter's eyes widened excitedly. "Christ, Paul—he saw."

"Okay. See what happens when you put your thinking cap on? You've got unimpeachable witnesses to

"I didn't say you'd get off, Peter, so don't relax yet. You've got a chance. And that's more than you had when you walked in here."

The summons from Internal Affairs came later that afternoon, and it was a surly Peter Caine who presented himself for questioning. He entered the windowless room, standing in the doorway facing Lieutenants Mitchell and Wainright, who were seated behind a plain wooden table. Mitchell gestured toward the pair of chairs on the other side of the table, and Peter walked slowly toward them.

Sitting down, Peter crossed his arms over his chest and simply looked at the interrogators.

"We all know why you're here, Caine. Some pretty unpleasant accusations were made about you in court this morning. They're splashed all over the front page of the afternoon edition, and the 12 o'clock news had your mug in living color and the caption, 'Tolice Brutality?' So...what really happened?" asked Mitchell.

"You *really* want to know?" Peter replied belligerently, then closed his eyes a moment and shook his head. "Sorry. This really pisses me off. I got a murder suspect in custody, she beats the crap out of me with some kung fu style I've never seen before, and she gets off and here I am. Hell of a way to do business."

"So, make your anger work for you," Mitchell suggested with a smile.

"What-you been talkin' to my father?"

"We'll get to that," Wainright put in. "Now, from the top," he prompted.

"Okay," Peter agreed. He explained about the murders at the Ambrosia Club, about his father's arrest, and the subsequent impromptu meeting with his father in the morgue.

"What reason did your father have to believe it was her?" queried Mitchell.

"How do threats grab you? C'mon, she was Tan's daughter," Peter told him, exasperated.

"Tan? As in the Tan you and he took down last year?" Mitchell and Wainright exchanged glances, the Leaning of which was lost on Peter. "So there was a grudge here," Mitchell suggested.

"You bet there was. She hates my father. The murders were to call him out because he refused to accept her challenge."

"No. I meant there's a grudge between you and her family," Mitchell elaborated in a grim voice.

"A grudge? I didn't even know she existed until my father told us in the morgue. And he didn't know until she showed up to challenge him. As for Tan, he held a grudge," Peter agreed, his thoughts flying back over the years. "He was a priest in my father's temple. He tried to subvert the temple, turn the priests into Mercenaries. Can you imagine? My father threw him out. He came back and destroyed the temple."

"So there's a long-standing hatred, between your two families."

"My father doesn't hate anyone. I don't think he's constitutionally capable. Preaches love and trust and gentleness and all that happy horseshit. He didn't want to fight this woman. He refused. So she killed those bro guys as a way to get to him."

"Killing total strangers would get to your father?"

"Killing a bug would get to my father. The Shaolin revere all life. He doesn't even eat meat."

Again, Mitchell and Wainright exchanged glances, this time amused. Peter's father was legendary throughout the police department, for entirely different reasons than Peter himself was. "All right. We've confirmed with Strenlich that this incident happened in the morgue. Ditto Elder. So, you were on assignment, undercover. Strenlich admits you had no description. Why this woman?"

Haltingly, Peter told them the story of the Ancient's love drops, his spectacular entrance into the Ambrosia Club, his conversation with Terry the bartender, and Xia coming on to him. He was forced to use now and again, not just for questions, but to wait for the two IA men to stop laughing.

"Look, if you guys are looking for comedy, check out the club on Magnolia. You want to hear what happened or not? I got things to do," he finally said in exasperation.

"Okay, okay," Mitchell replied, gasping for breath. "So, from your perspective, you felt you had reasonable cause for suspicion. It couldn't possibly be a natural attraction, so it had to be the Tove drops.' ^ the way, any chance I could get some of that stuff?"

"Not on your life. It's dangerous," Peter answered darkly.

"Okay. So she talks you into walking her home."

"Yeah. And we get to Hale Park, where the murders took place, and she kisses me -"

"Hot?"

"Hot," Peter agreed, blushing suddenly with the memory. "And I asked her if she kissed the guys she died like that."

"What a guy. Man, Caine, you sure do have a way with the women," Wainright commented, chuckling. "you identified yourself as a police officer?"

Peter shot him a quelling look, and resumed his story. "Of course I did. She made a big deal about how I was scaring her, and then suddenly, wham, she's wailing on me, and I'm half-conscious."

"And that's when...?"

"And that's when my father showed up." Peter winced slightly as he added, "He has this habit of following me whenever he thinks I might get in trouble."

"Must stick to you like glue, then," observed Mitchell.

"Yeah, right. Well, this is one time I was glad to see him. I mean, her moves were amazing. This mist comes out of nowhere, and the two of them are facing off...." Peter trailed off as he edited his memories to exclude his father's illusion.

"No problem about fighting a woman?" Wainright challenged.

"Big problem. But this was no ordinary woman. She'd already killed twice-that we know of-and she plainly

planned to kill me. She even said that, 'We could have had some fun before I killed you.' A major fcsTje bitch, let me tell you. And a serious fighter."

"So you thought you had probable cause for an arrest."

"For assaulting a police officer, if nothing else."

"But no actual evidence that she had committed the murders," Mitchell pointed out.

Peter drew a deep breath, and shook his head. "Obviously not enough to hold up in court. I should've gone wired. She admitted it to me, damnit, but I didn't have a witness at that point."

"All right. That's all for now," Mitchell announced suddenly. "We're not through with you yet, Caine, but that's enough for today."

The Dragon Lady rocked gently in its berth at the marina, the sound of water lapping at its hull soothing in the silence. Xia sat with her back to the hatch, a sly smile playing about her lips as she scanned the pages of the book in her hand. There was no sound to betray the presence of the intruder, but she knew just the same. She lifted her head and spoke quietly. "I wondered how long it would take for you to come to me, priest."

"I wished to offer you an opportunity to reclaim your honor," Caine replied softly, stepping forward into the tiny pool of light cast by her reading lamp.

A bitter laugh erupted from her throat. "Honor? What need have I of honor? When I have something so much more precious?" She rose languidly, sinuously, the silk of her dressing gown flowing like water over the slender curves of her body.

Unimpressed by the animal attraction of the woman, Caine tilted his head to one side, frowning at her. "What could be more precious than a man's-or woman's-honor?"

In the dim light of the lamp, her face was cast in sharp relief. The smile she gave him was feral, predatory. "I have revenge, priest. And I have found your weakness."

Eyebrow arched inquiringly, Caine said nothing, content to let her continue.

"I know how to hurt you now. I know what means more to you than your precious honor."

Still Caine remained silent, hands clasped in front of him as he stood in an attitude of repose.

"Your son. Your son is more precious to you than your much-vaunted honor, Shaolin. And I have tarnished his honor this day," she told him triumphantly.

Caine smiled faintly. "You cast doubt, it is true. But doubt can be dispelled, like mist," he waived his hand as though to dismiss it. "Those who know my son know what is true. Truth is on his side."

'Truth!' She barked a laugh, an unpleasant sound from one so beautiful. "I have branded him, Caine. I have ruined him. And there's nothing you can do to help him."

"Perhaps not. Perhaps he does not need my help in this. It is a small thing. But you do."

"Me? Oh, come now, Shaolin. What can you offer me? You took away everything of value to me! Everything!"

"I did not take your honor. That you sold cheaply to wound another."

Again that unpleasant laugh. "I'd have killed him, but for your Shaolin tricks. As you killed my father, priest. As I shall yet kill you."

"You may try. But you will not succeed. You cannot succeed. Your anger blinds you, clouds your judgment. You must fail."

"Pretty words, priest. How do you reconcile murder, hmm? You killed my father in cold blood," she flung at him, her voice dropping to a husky whisper.

Caine dosed his eyes in remembered pain. He opened them again, and looked at her sadly. "Your father challenged me. He threatened the life of my son and the Ancient. But I refused to fight him. In the end, he

gave me no choice. In the end, I had no choice but to destroy the evil that had consumed the man named Tan," Caine told her solemnly.

"My father loved me," she breathed, her fingers digging into the back of her chair. "He loved me! As I loved him."

"Perhaps. But he did not love you enough to spare you the taint of his evil."

Her laugh this time was edging toward the hysterical as she wrapped her arms around herself and turned away from the light. "Evil? Because I crave justice for the wrong you have done me? Evil? Because I demand blood for blood?" She leaned back into the light, her eyes afire. "Your own ancestor paid death for death when his master was killed. By what right do you deny me the same?"

Shaking his head, Caine replied, "That is an old stain, wiped clean by absolution. Your father was beyond absolution...beyond redemption. His evil destroyed him."

"Absolution! Redemption! Spare me your religious mumbo-jumbo, priest! Evil did not destroy my father-you did. I do not absolve you of my father's death."

Bowing slightly, Caine said simply, "I do not require your absolution."

"Arrogance ill befits a Shaolin priest," she taunted.

"It is not arrogance. It is truth."

With a twist of her hand, she turned the chair around and dropped into it, smiling. "Ah, truth again? You set high stock in the truth, don't you, Shaolin? Did you not see today how easily lies may be masked as the truth? Truth is what you want to believe. It is not some immutable cosmic law." She picked up the glass on the table beside her, and sipped casually at her drink.

"Lies weave a flimsy fabric, easily cut away by the sharp edge of truth." At her upraised eyebrow, the amused set of her mouth, he shook his head sadly. "You cannot see the truth. All is deception to you." Sighing deeply, he added, "You have no honor left to redeem." With that, he turned to go.

"Wait," she commanded.

Caine halted, still facing the hatch. He lifted his chin and glanced over his shoulder toward her. "Yes?"

"Fight me, accept my challenge, and I will retract my statement, clear your son's name."

"At the cost of your own? Is that not called...perjury? You would bring the law down upon you." He turned back to her as he spoke, his eyes grave, his expression concerned.

"I have all my father's wealth at my disposal. I am my father's daughter. I can buy another name. Can your son?" she asked lightly, running her finger along the rim of her glass.

"I will not fight you."

"Not even at the cost of your son's reputation? His honor?"

"Reputations can be mended. His honor is still intact-you do not have the power to take that away from him. You offer me nothing of value."

"Damn you, priest!"

"You dishonor the memory of your father, the man he once was, by your lust for revenge."

"My father lived for revenge on you, Caine!"

"And died for it, as well," he replied, bowing.

She glowered at him, fist pressed against her lips as her anger seethed. Caine waited patiently, silently.

Suddenly, she smiled. "It would amuse me to give your son back his reputation. Once given, I can take it away again. At my leisure. When it suits me."

"No," Caine said, not a request, but a statement of fact.

"Don't underestimate me, Shaolin."

"I...do not."

The words were simple, but she felt the insult in their simplicity. "I will have my revenge."

"You will try. You will not succeed. As your father did not succeed before you."

"You can't protect your son forever. I will be waiting."

"As will I," Caine answered, bowing deeply this time. As though she had given him leave to go, he turned and exited the boat, leaving her to glare into the empty space where he had stood.

The next morning, Peter Caine made a detour to his father's apartment on his way to the precinct. Folded under his arm was the morning edition of the local newspaper. Taking the stairs two at a time, Peter bounded into his father's workroom, skidding to a halt at the sight of his father. Seated in the center of the room, his father was again performing a purification ritual, weaving patterns in the air with his hands pausing to drop herbs into the tiny braziers to either side of him. Peter leaned against the wall, watching him.

"What brings you here in such haste, my son?" Caine asked without breaking the rhythm of his ritual.

"Morning paper. You're never going to believe this," he told his father, unfolding the paper and holding it up for him to see.

Without looking up, Caine replied, "No? What has happened?"

"Xia's boat blew up last night. After she called the DA and confessed to both murders and setting me up. Cleared me of the sexual misconduct charge. This'll probably kill the IA investigation, too. You didn't have anything to do with that, did you?"

"She is gone, but not dead," Caine answered. "This ritual cleanses the air of her contamination."

"You didn't answer me, Pop. Did you have anything to do with this?"

The expression Caine turned on his son was pained, and Caine shook his head. "No. I did not blow up her boat."

Tugging at his ear, Peter shook his head. "But you know something about this."

"I do not know...why she blew up her boat. But I have no doubt that she did it herself, to mask her escape."

"So after all the effort she went to to incriminate me, why'd she clear me?"

"It amused her to do so. She...did the unexpected. She did what she said she would do, believing I would not expect her to do so."

"You did speak to her."

"I...tried to reason with her. Tried to help her find her path. But her eyes are closed to all but vengeance. She is blind to the Tao." Caine unwound his legs and rose to his feet. "Tea?"

"Yeah, sure," Peter replied, amused. "She'll be back, though, won't she? She won't be satisfied until you're dead."

"Then she still will not be satisfied," Caine countered. "She may change her name, change her face, but she cannot change her soul. I will recognize her when the time comes. As you will, my son."

"Yeah. I kinda think I will," Peter agreed solemnly.

"And we will be ready, you and I."